

Book Review: Philosophy of Religion by John Hick

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Religion has been an intriguing part of social science and more specifically for the discipline of Philosophy. The book by John Hick is introductory in nature to students of theology as well as philosophy. Hick explores the fundamentals of religion from a philosophical point of view. For him philosophy of religion is related to the particular religions and theologies of the world. Here he sets the foundation to explore geographic expansion, formation and spread of religions like Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism and Judea-Christianity. He draws sociological references from sociologists like Talcott Parsons and Emile Durkheim as well as parapsychology.

Hick encompasses the ideas of Wittgenstein and Thomas Aquinas along with Kant to analyze religion. Several of Hick's ideas draw from Kantian concepts like the distinction between noumenon and phenomena and the idea that the mind is active in shaping perception.

He provides a classification of religions in the form of pantheism, monotheism, henotheism and polytheism. Hick concedes that for every mental event there is a corresponding physical event in the brain, but he argues that proving a brain/mind correlation is a far cry from proving brain/mind identity. He further concedes that brain stimulation through drugs, epileptic seizures, and brain surgery may produce non-veridical religious experiences, but he argues that the ability to cause religious hallucinations does nothing to rule out the possibility of authentic religious experiences. In response to the naturalist objection from neuroscience, Hick takes a brief foray into the philosophy of mind. He argues first that mind/brain identity is extremely implausible. As he states, "The basic problem is that not even the most complete account of brain function reaches the actual conscious experience with which it is associated". Because many philosophers of mind presuppose a materialist view of persons, they simply beg the question by assuming that mental events are identical to brain events. But for

Hick this is simply “an article of naturalistic faith”. Despite the ingenuity of naturalist philosophers of mind, consciousness continues to elude a strictly materialist description. Hick next argues that the varieties of epiphenomenalism in which consciousness is a non-causal byproduct of brain function—fare no better than identity views. If epiphenomenalism is true, then consciousness serves no biological role, and “its emergence would be inexplicable”. He argues that developments in artificial intelligence, which are often used to support materialism, actually provide an argument against materialism. For if it is possible to program computers to perform complex functions akin to human behavior without being conscious, then again “consciousness becomes functionless and inexplicable”. Assuming that it is more likely that consciousness would emerge if it offered an evolutionary advantage of some kind, he judges epiphenomenalism to be nearly as implausible as mind/brain identity. After rejecting materialist views of the mind, Hick posits a “non-Cartesian dualism” in which the mind “exists as a non-physical reality in continual interaction with the brain”.

He believes that this kind of dualism better accounts for nondeterministic or libertarian free will, which he finds entirely more philosophically defensible than compatibilist freedom the latter of which Hick considers to be self-defeating at best and “an example of philosophical spin doctoring” at worst. Hick summarizes his argument for the possibility of religious experience, stating, “The human person is more than a physical organism, and it cannot be excluded a priori that there may be a non-physical supra-natural reality, perhaps of the limitless significance that the religions claim, and also an answering non-physical aspect of our own nature”.

He thus invokes the principle of critical trust, in which we take our experiences to be veridical unless and until there is reason to reject their veridicality. He notes that we all live by the principle of critical trust in our everyday experience of the natural world. And since he has argued that there is no a priori reason to rule out the possibility of a supra-natural reality, he concludes that we should apply the same principle of critical trust to our religious experience. One who has a religious experience can take that religious experience to be veridical unless and until there is reason for rejecting its veridicality.

Hick believed that people have genuine experiences of spiritual things and the Real accounts for the diverse spiritual experiences of people in different faiths. He accepted that people may have very different spiritual experience (e.g. they may experience a monotheistic God, a pantheon of gods and goddesses or animistic nature spirits). Although these experiences are very different, they still (according to Hick) came from the same thing. Hick explained that the differences in the ways that people experience 'the Real' are accounted for by the fact that people exist in different cultures and this shapes their experience. When Hick says that cultural context is the 'lens' through which the divine is experienced he is alluding to the way a lens can bend the light or add a color tint to the experience. Cultural differences account for the differences between the different experiences of the divine and explain why different religions teach different things about God. For Hick, human projection shapes (and sometimes distorts) the experience of the divine, but it does not cause the experience. The cause of the experience is the divine itself. Hick is a critical realist (as opposed to a non-realist). He does not go as far as Cupitt who challenges not just specific doctrines about God but the very existence of God.

Hick's pluralism is sometimes called 'transcendental pluralism' because it is built on the idea that the Real is beyond our experience of it and 'transcends' theological categories and descriptions. The book ends with Hinduism's concept of karma and reincarnation where he explores Prakrit and maya.

