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Comparative Religions

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Finding Common Ground in the Ineffable

With estimates of up to 4,200 religions in the world and roughly 84% of the world's population —about 5.8 billion people— identifying as having some sort of religious belief, it is no small wonder that religion is an inescapable part of life on earth (Pew Research Center). This rich diversity could be a celebrated point in human history, yet, almost every single one claims to hold the key to unlocking genuine truth and attempts to disprove anyone that says likewise. In this world, it would be enough to make one feel completely overwhelmed and want to cover one's ears until all the shouting stops. However, there is hope for those who would like to believe that these competing religious traditions can all be reconciled. The answer can be found in the philosophical theory of pluralism, “a condition or system in which two or more states, groups, principles, sources of authority, etc., coexist” (New Oxford American Dictionary). For religious study, this is an attempt to find the unifying link between all religions and allow each one space to be correct in some way. Yet, with all of the competing discourse and vehement adherents of each religion, where does the common ground exist? One scholar, John Hick, believes that the answer to this question can be found through his theory on ineffability (i.e. that which cannot be accurately expressed with words). With it he hopes to encourage dialogue between all faith communities and provide the pluralistic solution to the problem of competing religious narratives.

Hick's Theory: The Real *as such*

When presenting his theory of finding commonality with ineffability, Hick begins with the same issue plaguing all pluralists: “If there were only one religious tradition...an epistemology of religion could come to rest at this point. But in fact there are a number of different such traditions and families of traditions witnessing to many different personal deities and non-personal ultimates” (Hick 233). He begs the question on whether or not all of these religions can possibly be mutually exclusive. He asserts that by following the “intellectual Golden Rule” (i.e. considering others’ traditions to be just as valid as one’s own traditions) it is necessary to allow that each religion is taken for what it claims to be and do if we are to find the common ground between all systems of belief in the world (235). Hick then goes on to explain his theory of ineffability as a way to reconcile diverse religious faiths with each other, while still accounting for the differences each religion has from the others.

Hick recognizes that each religion seems to have their own conception of an Ultimate being or reality. The Abrahamic religions have God, Hinduism has Brahman, Taoism has the Tao, and the list goes on. Much of the conflict between religions comes from these beliefs in separate and “true” Ultimates, however Hick believes that commonality can be developed from them (Hick 238). To this end, he takes a somewhat Kantian approach to find the common ground between ineffable ultimates. He separates the idea of Ultimate beings and/or realities into two distinct sections, the noumenon and the phenomenal. The noumenon is what he calls the Real *as such*, or the Ultimate that “exists independently of our perception of it.” How we experience, perceive, or think of the Real *as such* is the phenomenal (241). Hick goes on to say that, “the Real (*as such*) is postulated by us as a pre-supposition, not of the moral life, but of religious experience and the religious life whilst the gods (and ultimate realities)...are phenomenal manifestations of the Real occurring within the realm of religious experience” (243). Essentially

the Real *as such* is the Ultimate of all Ultimates. It is utterly ineffable in the sense that it cannot be known completely by our own mortal faculties. Because no one is able to effectively “know” the Real as it truly exists, religions instead approach the Real through its phenomena (i.e. gods, Brahman, Tao, etc.). Hick believes that this accounts for the differences in practice and beliefs between religions because the way a person would experience or think of the Real is dependent on his/her own culture, heritage, past experience, etc. (248). For Hick it is ok, and highly logical, for Jews to believe that Elohim is the Real, Buddhists to believe that Dharma is the Real, and Hindus to believe that Brahman is the Real. Each religion was born from differing backgrounds, locations, and histories. None of them actually have the “true” conception of the Real because it is impossible for anyone to do so, however each pursues it in their own way having their own conception of the Real as experienced and thought. This distinction is highly important to his pluralist theory, as it allows for each religion to exist cohesively together, while still maintaining each individual religion’s own validity within the broader spectrum.

So, the problem is set—in a world full of diverse religions, can only one really be *the* correct one?— and the potential solution is given in the form of pluralism, more specifically Hick’s theory of ineffability linking all religions together. But, how does this work in real practice? Why does Hick believe that the concept of ineffability and Ultimate realities/beings can do this? Is it truly possible to get everyone to sit at the proverbial dinner table and have a civil discussion on religion? The rest of this essay will be concerned with answering these questions. First, by delving a little deeper into the concept of ineffability and why it is so important. Second, by testing Hick’s hypothesis by comparing the two different traditions of Advaita Vedanta Hinduism and Christian mysticism, and their concepts of the ineffable. Lastly, Hick’s theory of the Real *as such* and how it is experienced and thought will be evaluated by its

feasibility and validity to the integral problem for all pluralists: can all the religions of the world really be reconciled together?

Why Ineffability?

Using differing religious outlooks on ineffability seems to be logical step to make in pluralism, as many religions, if not all, have some sort of concept of the Ultimate. However, why ineffability so prevalent in the religious world and how is it helpful to Hick? Christopher Janke, a poet and artist, offers an interesting answer to this in his talk on poetry and ineffability, “Using a Net to Catch the Air: Poetry, Ineffability, and Small Stones in a Shoe.” In it, he begins with the premise that language and words themselves have boundaries, whether we like them to or not. Everything —description, definition, vocabulary— has its limits. According to Janke, it is virtually impossible to accurately define what something is, even a chair (10)! Furthermore, there are things that could even *lose* meaning, if we had the words to completely define it. Janke, uses love as an example, “I’d better love you too much to say how much I love you. If I don’t, would You still call it love? If I can actually count and elucidate the precise ways? If it becomes a finite list” (10). He questions whether even having the language to completely say everything we would want, could possibly even be worthwhile. The ability to quantify feelings like love, anger, sadness, etc. may then be worthless. So, because language is inherently limiting, ineffability can be found all over the place, even when we are not looking for it. If words are so limiting and unable to completely describe anything, then the concept of ineffability must be valid and something we all encounter in some way everyday.

Is it because Janke can find ineffability in the everyday that it is so useful to religious study of the ineffable and Hick’s theory? Partially, but not completely. This does not account for

the mystery of the Ultimate and Hick's Real *as such*. However, Janke does offer somewhat of a solution to this as well when he goes on later to talk about the concept of wonder and vastness.

In the end, wonder is about vastness, and description does not have to deny vastness – what denies vastness is our own mental models... we allow description to stand in for the experience of the real thing – we have to in order to function – but we accept that as fact rather than as metaphor – we accept it as actual rather than literal...the poets know that just zooming in or zooming out changes everything, renders description inadequate, shifts the laws by which we calculate: Newtonian to quantum mechanics...so though cause and effect should always be held in strange relation, and though much of the world can be encountered with adequate description, the vastness and our relation to it are always present. (Janke 14-15)

Janke believes that we, as human beings, cannot possibly comprehend everything in the world. Words do not suffice to adequately or completely describe the world. Thus, there is a “vastness” to some things in the world that we cannot pretend to understand, rather we can only wonder at it all. He does allow that most things in life can be sufficiently described with words (most people are satisfied to define a “chair” as a chair and move on with their lives), however there are still things that are just too big or too far beyond our capabilities of thought and language. Janke asserts that poets and writers have the ability to shift the “linguistic ground we stand on” and challenge our conceptions of what is and is not (13). They acknowledge the vastness and our wonder, but are willing to prod at the boundaries of where language can take us in wrestling with the ineffable. Religions can do much of the same, by acknowledging that there is something larger than ourselves that we have an inkling of knowledge toward and are willing to pursue within a religious system of belief. This is where Hick's concept of the Real and the ineffable

comes into play. Janke's vastness is like Hick's Real *as such*. It is something beyond our understanding that we will never be able to fully grasp. However, religions still try by labeling it God, the Tao, Brahman, etc. Like a poet or writer, religions have the distinct ability to shift the ground we stand on and attempt to reach towards the Real, while never quite reaching it. So, how does the exploration of the ineffable Real function in actual religions and does it allow for Hick's theory to work?

Advaita Vedanta Hinduism

In order to consider Hick's hypothesis as a plausible solution to the pluralist problem, it is necessary to test it against at least two differing religions, in this case Advaita Vedanta Hinduism and Christian Mysticism. We will first begin by examining what, if anything is ineffable in Advaita Vedanta, do the same with Christian Mysticism, and then compare the two in light of Hick's theory.

The Advaita Vedanta tradition is a small sect within many in the religion of Hinduism. It was largely influenced by the work of the Hindu scholar, Shankara, and focuses on the study of the Hindu holy texts, the Vedas (especially the latter section known as the Upanishads). For Advaita Vedanta, the Upanishads are of the highest religious teachings containing the true way to find complete knowledge and awareness of the Hindu's ineffable being, Brahman. The general goal of Hinduism is to break out of the cycle of death and rebirth (samsara), for practitioners of Advaita Vedanta this can only be done once a person comes into full realization and awareness of the Ultimate, Brahman. This done by liberating the undying self, or Atman, from one's mind and body, which, once done is realized to really be Brahman. Thus, the two can be one and the same, and are both ineffable (Koller 145).

If Brahman is said to be ineffable, how then is Brahman ineffable and how do we know? Herein lies the issue, “the nature and existence of Brahman cannot be proved from perception or reasoning” (146). The essence of Brahman is non-dual, meaning Brahman cannot be put into the usual categories of “either/or.” Brahman is neither being or non-being, neither good nor bad, etc. Brahman simply is and is not all things at the same time. Because of this facet of Brahman’s nature, it is not possible to apply language to Brahman and claim that it is an accurate definition or description. “*Brahman*, the self, is not an object and cannot be known through the senses. Without data from our senses, inferences about *brahman* are essentially groundless” (Rambachan 62). Because Brahman is non-dual and transcends the mortal senses and language, Brahman cannot be objectified and is thus ineffable.

How then do we know of Brahman and can say that Brahman exists? Are practitioners to merely accept, as Shankara says, that Brahman is the only true “real,” while the world is just an illusion provided by our perceptions (Koller 146)? For Advaita Vedanta, there are ways of knowing Brahman that preclude the use of language from interfering and attempting to make the ineffable, effable. These ways require one to pursue “true” or “valid” knowledge through getting to know the Upanishads, practicing the meditative technique of “om,” and the *neti-neti* approach (Rambachan 61). The latter is an approach of negative theology in which concepts are applied to Brahman and then negated, one by one, until all that is left is nothing, but the essence of Brahman. Because Brahman cannot be an object of knowledge, it transcends all applied concepts. Through this negative theology and the search for pure, unadulterated knowledge in the Vedas allows a person to eventually come into full knowledge and true awareness of Brahman, breaking the cycle of samsara and allow one’s perceived Atman to be a part of Brahman.

Christian Mysticism

We now move towards the more Western religious tradition, Christian Mysticism. This, too, is a small sect within the larger framework of the Christian religion. It originated from the Greco-Roman mystery religious cults and, like Christianity from Judaism, it also draws roots from the Jewish mystic sects. The mystery religions focused on the keeping of high secrets within a small, closed group of people, while pursuing ways to come into contact with various deities. In a similar manner, Jewish mystics often would seclude themselves away in small monastic communities, often “characterized by speculation about ascent into heaven and gaining a transforming vision of the *kavod* [Glory of God]” (Fanning 6-7, 10-12).

Informed by these traditions, Christian mystics kept the focus on the personal focus of the monastic life and the desire to have an experience of divine contact with God. The message Jesus brought about the kingdom of God was central to the origins of Christian mysticism. One interpretation of the coming kingdom of God is the “power and presence of God himself, that is, the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit” (15). It is this indwelling of the Holy Spirit above all else that Jesus stresses in his teachings. He teaches that it is more important to have the Holy Spirit inside oneself than to blindly follow Mosaic law or donating to charity. It was the internal, more than the external that was important to Jesus (16). It is from this belief that Christian mystics derive their desire to encounter the wonder and glory of God. To them, if one was truly in tune with the Holy Spirit working inside, as Jesus teaches, one would then have the ability to have such a divine encounter.

It is this encounter with the divine and God as the trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) that is ineffable for Christian mysticism. One ancient Christian mystic, Pseudo-Dionysius, begins his short work, “The Mystical Theology,” with a prayer “Trinity!! Higher than any being, any

divinity, any goodness... lead us beyond unknowing and light, up to the farthest, highest peak of mystic scripture... amid the wholly incensed and unseen they completely fill our sightless minds with treasures beyond all beauty” (135). Dionysius’ prayer illuminates the essence of the ineffable God for Christian mysticism. God is so completely more divine or ultimate that God is beyond all human comprehension and language (“beyond unknowing and light”). Yet, even in the human’s inability to know the essence of God there is still a desire to pursue it for Dionysius and other Christian mystics (“lead us,” “fill our sightless minds”).

The pursuit of the divine is highly important for Christian mystics and they take certain steps in order to do so. Because God exists outside the realm of language, Christian mystics put more faith in pursuing genuine encounters with the divine, than they do in the actual holy texts —i.e. the Bible. One leader in the early Christian mysticism movement, Maximus the Confessor, believed that one must “give priority to the experience of the word of God in mysticism over the reading of the word of God in Scriptures” (Fanning 38). It is in this same vein of thought that Pseudo-Dionysius advocates for a negative theological approach to describing (or more accurately, not describing) God. He advocates that Christians must first begin with those things that are furthest from the character of God (i.e. drunkenness, evil) and negating them, and work their way up to those things most often associated with God (i.e. the Trinity, extreme goodness) and negating them as well (Pseudo-Dionysius 139-40). At the end of it, all that is left is a vast nothingness where the essence of God resides. With this understanding in mind the Christian mystic must “plunge into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing” (Fanning 36). In order to accomplish this Christian mystics generally practice extreme asceticism, unceasing prayer, and meditative practices. These practices allow the Christian mystic to become pure of mind, strip away the limits of human conception and language, and plunge into the “mysterious darkness of

unknowing.” It is in this unknowing darkness that the ultimately ineffable essence of God resides and where true encounters with the divine lie in wait for those prepared for the journey.

A Short Comparison

Now that a general understanding of what is ineffable for both Advaita Vedanta Hinduism and Christian mysticism has been established, a comparison of the two can be done in the hopes that Hick’s theory can finally be evaluated. At the surface level, the two religious traditions could not be anything further apart. Hinduism is a tradition of the East, while Christianity that of the West, and the impersonal nature of Brahman is much different from the personal nature of the Christian God. This is just looking the religions as a whole; examining Advaita Vedanta and Christian mysticism specifically brings up further differences. The non-dual nature of Brahman is in stark contrast to the unity, yet separate identities found in God’s trinity. Advaita Vedanta also allows human language in the form of the Vedas to be valid knowledge and an avenue through which a Hindu can reach awareness of Brahman. However, Christian mystics tend to take a half-step away from scriptures in favor of practicing personal methods of prayer and meditation as a means to encounter God.

Yet, as different as these two religious traditions are, at a closer look, they have much in common. Both take the ineffability of their respective ultimate being seriously, recognizing the importance of finding a way to know their ultimate being without giving into the temptation of merely paring it all down into human words anyway. Advaita Vedanta and Christian mysticism also have both found similar methods in which to deal with this issue of knowing Brahman or God without the use of words. Both use a form of negative theology to avoid objectifying the ineffable ultimate whilst getting closer to the heart of who/what it is. Most importantly, both pursue an encounter with the divine as the only means of becoming genuinely aware of their

respective ineffable being. In order for a Hindu following Advaita Vedanta to break from birth-rebirth, he must first come to full awareness of his Atman as Brahman and all that Brahman is. Only with this experience is the cycle of samsara broken and the person set free. For a Christian mystic to help Jesus' cause of bringing the kingdom of God to earth, she must first be in complete harmony with the Holy Spirit inside and come into contact with the essence of God. It is through this contact that a person is more fully aware of who God is and the holy plans God has for that person. All in all, although the two traditions are very distinct from each other, when examining the ineffable of each parallels and similarities can be drawn between Advaita Vedanta Hinduism and Christian mysticism.

Conclusion

So then, does Hick's theory of ineffability as a means of solving the pluralist problem succeed? Yes... and no. Because he allows each religion to pursue the Real *as such* on its own terms, then comparing ineffability can be avenue through which differing religions can find common ground. This was useful in the examination of the differing religions of Advaita Vedanta Hinduism and Christian mysticism. Two religions that, seemingly by all accounts, should exist at the opposite ends of the religious spectrum, had more similarities in the end than a person may have guessed. This is thanks to the prompting of Hick's theory to examine ineffability as a means of comparison and the flexibility he provides with allowing each religion to have their own take on the Real as experience and thought.

However, his theory does not completely work. Because each religion asserts that it has *the* true knowledge of the Real, Hick would be hard pressed to convince each one to have a little room for self-doubt and acknowledge that it was wrong. Though he allows each religion breathing room to be somewhat right, he also asserts that none can be totally correct. Each may

have its own conception of the Real as experienced and thought effected by its history, culture, and background, but no one truly grasps Hick's Real *as such*. The Real *as such* is the only truly ineffable thing. Each religion desires to lay claim to having the right answer to what the Real *as such* is, but cannot because no one is capable of accurately defining that which is truly ineffable.

In the end, that which is ineffable surrounds us everyday. Whether that is in the sheer vastness of the world, in inexplicable emotion, or it is in the belief in some sort of ultimate being or reality, we all come into contact with the ineffable. Because of this Hick opens the door wide open for anyone interested in finding common ground in terms of ineffability and the pursuit of the Real. Not everyone is capable of wholeheartedly believing all that he implies with his concept of the Real *as such* versus the Real as experienced and thought. This open invitation is an important step towards creating a better world in which people of differing beliefs and backgrounds can exist in harmony together. It is not the perfect solution, but it is a start. A start that is well-needed in this increasingly chaotic world.

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