

JOHN HICK

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Obituary

JOHN HICK

Professor John Harwood Hick, MA, DPhil, DLitt died on 9 February 2012 at the age of 90. He was probably one of the most influential philosophers of religion of the twentieth century. His reputation as a formidable and pioneering thinker was established in the late 1950s and was sustained throughout a distinguished career that continued long into his retirement. Some indication of this influence is revealed by the fact that his name is known by a far broader group than just a close circle of practitioners in the field. It is a name familiar to a young new generation of students as well as tenured academics, and many of his works are still in print decades after their first publication. This is not because Hick deliberately sought to popularize his thinking; rather it reflects his inherent ability to communicate lucidly and his instinctive aversion to obfuscation.

If he had a gift for clarity it was also matched by an ability to advance provocative ideas that have become part of the currency of the philosophy of religion across a range of classic problems in the field. Terms like ‘experiencing-as’, ‘eschatological verification’, ‘the soul-making theodicy’, ‘the “replica” theory’, ‘the myth of God incarnate’, and ‘the Real’ have all become notions that are used as reference points in the debate. However, it is important to note that these ideas emerged gradually over an intellectual career that covers half a century. Critics of Hick’s work sometimes make the mistake of imagining that his manifold contributions are to be viewed as a tightly conceived whole or that his ideas are carefully calibrated components of a worked-out system. While it is true that certain elements seem constant in his work – a basic philosophical commitment to critical realism, the influence of Kant – Hick himself related a story of a personal journey that began with an evangelical type of Christianity but eventually ended up with an open liberal pluralism. He was an empirical philosopher who preferred provisionality to dogmatism and sought to take account of increasing knowledge and new experiences. Moreover, there is also a *comprehensive* approach in evidence in his major writings – writings that seek to offer as full an account as possible of their respective topics before offering new hypotheses.

Following early studies in Law at Hull University, Hick took a First in Philosophy from Edinburgh University before going to Oxford University to study for a

doctorate under the supervision of the philosopher H. H. Price. Following successful completion of his doctorate, he held a number of academic appointments including early positions at Princeton and Cornell universities in the United States and Cambridge University in the UK. In the last twenty years of his working life, he occupied two distinguished positions. He was the H. G. Wood Professor of Theology at the University of Birmingham, UK and the Danforth Professor of Philosophy of Religion at Claremont Graduate University in the United States. He delivered the Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh in 1986–1987 and he was given the Grawemeyer Award for Religion in 1991. He retired in 1993 to live in Selly Oak, Birmingham where he was a Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Research in Arts and the Social Sciences at the University of Birmingham.

Although it is probably not entirely accurate to make a sharp distinction between the 'early' and the 'later' Hick, it is the case that the works he penned in his early career were located within a traditional Christian world-view and it was in the 1970s that he began to evolve his thinking so that the works written during and after this period are more syncretistic and pluralist. His first book, *Faith and Knowledge* (1957), was based on his doctoral studies at Oxford and it was in this work that he developed his contribution to epistemological debates in Christian philosophy: religion as 'experiencing-as' and the idea of eschatological verification. In his next major work, *Evil and the God of Love* (1966), he took a critical stance towards the more traditional Augustinian view and defended the so-called Irenaean 'soul-making' theodicy by arguing that God permits evil and suffering in order to create the conditions for the spiritual development and maturity of humans. The direction of his intellectual viewpoints started to change when he moved from Cambridge to Birmingham in 1967. Birmingham is a diverse city with many different religious and cultural traditions and it was this context, in addition to research visits to India and Sri Lanka, which had a profound influence on his thinking. During this time he wrote *Death and Eternal Life* (1976), which was a highly speculative, syncretistic, and multi-disciplinary work that inhabited a spiritual landscape which had clearly moved beyond the traditional Christian horizon that characterized his earlier work. He also generated considerable controversy when he edited a volume that contested traditional views on the person of Christ, *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977). Rejecting an 'inclusivist' strategy, Hick started to advance a pluralistic hypothesis, according to which all the world's religions are to be seen as equally valid (though not the same) responses to a trans-categorical object that he conceived especially for his hypothesis, 'the Real'. This idea found its full articulation in a work that was published when he was approaching retirement, *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989). Hick's pluralism does not sit easily with the claim that Christ was God Incarnate, so in *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (1993) he argued that the divinity of Christ should be envisaged as a metaphor rather than being literally true.

Just days before John Hick passed away he was still meeting up with colleagues and postgraduates to discuss philosophical problems. The sharpness of his mind and wit had hardly diminished, and students were keen to ask him questions about most of the key problems in the philosophy of religion: religious language, the problem of evil, life after death, religious diversity. The fact that during his long career he did not pause to stay with just one of these problems is an indication of his appetite for intellectual adventure and his philosophical ambition. Some of what he produced is controversial and highly contested, but the intellectual honesty and integrity displayed in his work should demonstrate that he did not just seek out controversy in order to establish a reputation. Whether or not we agree with his conclusions, it is his intellectual provocation and his generous lucidity that will ensure that his works will continue to have an influence and stir up a whole new generation of thinkers and critics.

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