

Philip Tachin

A Critique of John Hick's Christology and Reaffirmation of the Exclusiveness of Christ

Abstract

This article is a critique of John Hick's Christology. He denies the divinity and resurrection and consequently the exclusivity of Christ. This means Christ is not the only way of salvation. All Christian truth claims are myth and therefore relative. His hermeneutics is a reinterpretation of the biblical account of Christ following old liberalism. This liberal approach rejects not only the confessional position of the Christian church but also the very claims of Scripture itself. By this Hick intends to open the door to pluralism so that God adopts all human invented ways towards him. But while he disputes the claims of the Christian Scripture, he endorses the claims of the Hindu Scripture which betrays objectivity of his scholarship. However, his argument is inherently inconsistent and ambiguous, and his unjustifiable discriminatory appeal to Scriptural passages that fit his agenda leads to erroneous conclusions. His denial of the Gospels' accounts for the divinity of Christ has been proved by recent scholarship to be untenable. This article refutes his method of argument and conclusion and reasserts the exclusiveness of Christ.

THE AUTHOR



Rev. Philip Tachin, PhD is a Senior Lecturer at Theological College of Northern Nigeria in Jos

Keywords

Hick, critique, pluralism, Christ, exclusiveness, myth, hermeneutic, pre-existence.

Since the beginning of the 21st century some scholars have mounted a forceful revolution against orthodox Christian traditions in favor of religious pluralism that seeks to not only recognize the existence of other religions but to also argue the equality of all religions. Prominent among the proponents of this pluralism is John Hick. He disputes the absolute claims of Christianity that have always set it above other religions. Christianity cannot claim to be the only way by which salvation is given to humanity. This involves denial of the literal divinity and physical resurrection of Christ. He overlooks certain portions of Scripture and appeals to ones that suit the agenda for religious pluralism. In this essay, I hope to demonstrate the error that is characteristic of his method and reassert the exclusiveness of Christ.

In the "Preface" of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* Knitter argues that "Christian uniqueness" is a myth because Christian truth "lies not in its literal surface but within its ever-changing historical and personal meaning."¹ The problem with this logic is the disconnect that underlies the "literal surface" and the deeper meaning. It destroys objectivity and upholds subjectivism. Therefore the truth that they claim to present in a new way collapses because its meaning turns vague. But it is natural that there should be a connection between the literal and the deeper so that one becomes the ground upon which the other is sustained. If what lies at the deeper level is true and is expressed at the literal surface, then the latter must also be true unless the former is false. Truth must be consistent whether at the literal surface or at the deeper surface. The revealed truth must correspond to the essential truth. For instance, what God reveals about himself cannot be in contradiction to his essential nature, so that truth never changes at whatever form it takes. Hodge maintains this fact: "The true is that in which the reality exactly corresponds to the manifestation. God is true, because He really is what He declares Himself to be; because He is what He commands us to believe Him to be; and because all his declarations correspond to what really is."²

¹ Paul F. Knitter, "Preface," *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, eds. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), vii.

² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols., 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 437.

The stated facts must agree with the actual state of affairs irrespective of the distinction in the sphere of existence of the essential truth and its manifestation, whether at the deeper or literal surface. This means there must be circularity in truth itself as well as in our knowledge of the truth as we depend on biblical revelation so that the essential truth cannot be contradictory at its starting point to its manifestation.³

But with such a conclusion as Knitter draws, it sets the agenda for the authors of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* who seek to offer “a new interpretation,” which requires a deconstruction and reconstruction of the Christian Gospel expression that has been held for the past twenty centuries. Be that as it may, the necessary question that follows this agenda is what constitutes the basis and justification for such enterprise. What is the guarantee that this new interpretation is reliable and will not be abandoned in the coming centuries just as they are trying to do what has been passed down through the ages past? This agenda stands against the “unique definitiveness, absoluteness, normativeness, superiority of Christianity in comparison with other religions of the world.”⁴

Stepping from that point of view, Hick sees nothing unique in Christianity that is not found in other religions. It seems that one of the major factors that has driven Hick and his colleagues to this expedition to reduce Christianity to be on the par with other religions is the “connection between Christian absolutism” and “historical evils,” which depicts “fallen human nature that Christianity has been largely powerless to redeem.”⁵ It means Christian claims have not only resulted in some of the evils in human history but Christianity has also failed in transforming fallen human nature and all its consequences. This point seems to be very critical in Hick’s view. He argues: “The picture would be very different if Christianity, commensurate with its claim to absolute truth and unique validity, has shown a unique capacity to transform human nature for the better.”⁶ This assertion against the capacity of the Gospel to change lives certainly stands against numerous practical individual claims of transformed lives in the history of Christianity.

³ This argument was solidly expounded by Van Til in his *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 1-10 and Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetics* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1998), 161-170.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ John Hick, “The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity,” *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, 17.

⁶ Ibid.

What should be understood about regeneration of the Christian life is that it does not involve a change of substance as Hick expects, but it involves primarily a possession of a new principle of life. It marks a transfer from a state of wrath to a state of grace and then inner renovation (Eph. 2:1-6; Col. 3:1-7). This new principle is oriented towards the things of God so that the sinner's perception of God, Christ, sin, holiness, the world and all revealed truths that pertain to salvation are grasped in a new way. This change is in "those immanent dispositions, principles, tastes, or habits which underlie all conscious exercises, and determine the character of the man and of all his acts."⁷ Paul's conversion involved the knowledge of Christ by which he considered other things that he had possessed as rubbish (Gal. 1:16; Phil. 3:8). The fall requires renewal of the image of God in the knowledge of its maker (Col. 3:10). Again Paul says this renewal is of the mind that turns from the world to the discernment of what is approved of God (Rom. 12:2).

Hick does not seem to understand the distinctions in the past, present and future reality of Christian eschatology and Christian life which shows that we experience a movement from our old nature to our present life of struggle against sin, which does not necessarily mean perfection, to our striving forward to the set goal of the Christian life which is not guaranteed in this life but in the life to come. The Christian gospel nowhere promises perfection in this life for believers in Christ but rather urges them to work towards it because the God who calls them in Christ is holy, so they must also be holy (Phil. 3:12-15; 2Tim. 1:9; 2:21; 1Pet. 1:15). Nevertheless, it is Christ that is the righteousness of his people and is also interceding for them before the Father.

Hick's Hermeneutic

Hick's hermeneutic can be understood from one of his early publications titled: "Jesus and the World Religions," in *The Myth of God Incarnate* which was first published in 1977. His hermeneutic does not draw so much from personal exegesis of Scripture but dwells heavily upon New Testament scholarship and most obviously that of critical or old liberal scholarship.⁸ Coming from that angle he argues "how fragmentary and ambiguous are the data available to us as we try to look back across nineteen and a half centuries, and at the same time how large and how variable is the

⁷ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, 35.

⁸ See Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1950), 1-12.

contribution of the imagination to our 'pictures' of Jesus."⁹ This tells us so much about Hick's view of the New Testament. Indeed his view implies a denial of the inspiration and absolute authority of Scripture. First, it shows the suspicion that Hick holds against the New Testament writings. He posits that the integrity of the New Testament suffers fragmentation and ambiguity. Second, the conclusions of critical scholarship are more trustworthy than the self attestation of the New Testament. Third, the various external perspectives and representations of Jesus have largely informed the opinion of Hick rather than based on the testimony of Scripture and his independent exegesis. To his understanding there is a sharp difference between the historical Jesus and the Christ of theological postulation especially as exhibited in the Nicene definition. At that point Hick would argue that "the Nicene definition of God – the Son – incarnate is only one way of conceptualizing the lordship of Jesus, the way taken by the Graeco-Roman world of which we are heirs, and that in the new age of world ecumenism which we are entering it is proper for Christians to become conscious of both the optional and the mythological character of this traditional language."¹⁰

Hick's conclusion that the Nicene definition is one interpretation and a mere conceptualization unveils his suspicion against the fact of historical reality that traditional Christian theology expresses. It therefore means that the biblical testimony cannot be literally true which is subject to a number of interpretations. Any historical fact should have only one interpretation. Hick denies this to be the case with the Christ of Scripture. His method is a philosophical interpretation of religious claims rather than theological.¹¹

Hick also argues that there is disconnect between the strong monotheism of the Jews and their sudden change to polytheism if the metaphysics of the Trinity is to be taken on its face value. The early Christians considered Jesus only to be a man attested by God for a special task as in Acts 2:22 but later the Gospels of Mark and John introduced divinity in Jesus.¹² The Christ of Hick is one who was not *literally* God but who was "overwhelmingly" conscious of God and it was possible for one to feel the presence of God through being in the presence of Jesus.¹³

⁹ Hick, "Jesus and the World Religions," *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 167.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 168.

¹¹ *Ibid*, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, 34.

¹² *Ibid*, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 173.

¹³ *Ibid*, 171-173. There is a clear line of development from Schleiermacher who interpreted the divinity of Christ, not as Christ's person being literally God-incarnate

He appeals to Goulder and Young who argue that in the ancient world it was common “ideas of divinity embodied in human life, so that there is nothing in the least surprising in the deification of Jesus in the cultural environment.”¹⁴ Similarly, the title of the Son of God was used in the Old Testament of ordinary men (Ps. 2:7). Accordingly, such titles were used metaphorically, not literally and when it connects Yahweh to ordinary men, it becomes mythological. Hick seeks to draw this Old Testament understanding into the New Testament so that the meaning does not change from metaphor or mythology to literal.

In the case of Jesus, since he came from the royal Davidic line, Mark accorded him Son of God which subsequent development turned it to God the Son as exemplified in the Gospel of John. So the deification of Jesus resulted from believers’ experience of divine forgiveness, love and reconciliation with God which they thought the death of Jesus was a sacrifice to achieve in view of human sin and would have made him divine.¹⁵

But some Old Testament authorities have argued that a similar development was evident in the parallel religious practice between Israel and Ancient Near Eastern religions, yet the material difference was that it was not an intentional promulgation of the Eastern religions but Israel was more concerned “to promote the exclusive worship of Yahweh over the other nonexistent gods and goddesses of the Ancient Near East.”¹⁶ This argument also stands strong against Hick’s allusion to the nonexclusive application of the Old Testament titles to Christ which were already used of other men but without special elevation. Orthodox Christian traditions have held that the Old Testament usage of titles like “son of God” were *types* and heralds of the *archetype* which is Christ. Christ explicitly stated that the Old Testament anticipated him when he said: “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Lk. 24:44). Other great authorities have concurred that

but by his “absolute” sense of divine consciousness of Jesus which made him to be a unique example to believers.

¹⁴ Ibid, 174. See also Michael Goulder, “The Two Roots of the Christian Myth,” *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 64-86; Frances Young, “Two Roots or a Tangled Mass,” *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 87-121.

¹⁵ Ibid, 176.

¹⁶ Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 232-233.

the Psalms and indeed the entire Old Testament were cited in the New Testament to “establish the identity of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God.”¹⁷

Traditional Christian theology has argued that Jesus Christ was truly human and the applicability of those titles Old Testament to him in respect of his humanity on the one hand like other ordinary human beings is appropriate. Perhaps that alone could not have made a difference between Christ and those Old Testament figures. However, what makes the fundamental difference between Christ and his Old Testament counterparts which are called his *types* is the unique life and work that he lived and did which are unequalled. The New Testament affirms his holiness which is not said of any other person, unless Hick argues that this too falls under metaphor or myth. In fact the New Testament does not attest to its accounts as myth and so it is unwarranted to call it as such. On the contrary, it wants us to take its accounts as literally true.

Hick attacks the fundamental doctrines of the church, namely, the trinity, incarnation and atonement and accuses both the church and Anselm who framed that “Jesus had to be God.”¹⁸ Furthermore, the church tagged Jesus, “son of God” and began to find ways of inserting two natures into the person of Christ. This is a false and forged accusation because the church never taught that Jesus *had* to be God but that Jesus Christ *was* God in human form. The Church understands the concept of Immanuel as testified by the Gospels and apostolic writings in light of its exegetical labors.

A Critical Analysis of Hick’s Position

Hick shows some inconsistencies and ambiguities in his method. On the one hand, he does not dispute the fact of a literal resurrection of others in the New Testament particularly those that Christ raised from the dead. “For the raising of the dead to life, understood in the most literal sense, did not at that time and in those circles seem so utterly earth-shaking and well nigh incredible as it does to the modern mind.”¹⁹ This argument implies that the resurrection was not a miracle or “earth-shaking,” perhaps because it happened anyway. This conclusion denies the miracles in

¹⁷ Ibid, 233; see also A. Harman, “Paul’s Use of the Psalms,” [Th.D. dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1961]; S. Kistemaker, *The Psalms Citations in the Epistle of the Hebrews* (Amsterdam: 1961); Tremper Longman III, “The Divine Warrior: The Old Testament Use of a New Testament Motif,” *WTJ* 44 (1982): 290-307; G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson, “Introduction,” *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), xxiii-xxviii.

¹⁸ John Hick, “The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity,” *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, 31.

¹⁹ Ibid, “Jesus and the World Religions,” *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 170.

Scripture but Scripture calls them miracles because they were not common occurrences as Hick might assume. Despite that agreement, “the claim that Jesus had been raised from the dead did not automatically put him in a quite unique category.”²⁰ But on the other hand, he doubts the fact of Jesus’ resurrection and even entirely of physical resurrection that he previously implied.

From our point of view today it is less easy to accept stories of a physical resurrection, particularly when they refer to an event nearly twenty centuries ago and when the written evidence is in detail so conflicting and so hard to interpret. But nevertheless if we imagine a physical resurrection taking place today it is still far from evident that we should necessarily regard it as proof of divinity.²¹

First, that the point of denial is not because the resurrection did not take place but simply because the story is too far away for us to believe is too flimsy excuse for a scholar like Hick to dwell on. He is probably following Hume who argued that one can have more confidence in his immediate sense experience than in the apostles’ testimony concerning miracles.²² The goal of the grand agenda of pluralists who depends on critical liberal scholarship is that if miracles, in the sense that orthodox tradition holds, do not exist then Christianity has nothing extraordinary that other religions do not have. Inasmuch as Hick doubts the resurrection, he has not given proof or evidence that the resurrection did not take place. Hick does no more than mere assertion. Irrespective of the so-called discrepancies in the Gospels, if the resurrection was not literal then the argument begs the question of the Passion narrative which the Last Supper, the arrest and trial of Jesus by the High Priest and Pilate and the crucifixion would also have been non-literal or metaphorical which critical scholarship has endorsed their literal or historical occurrence.²³ The resurrection is the final point of the literal, historical narrative, so it is rather illogical to grant one side of the same historical event literal meaning while the other metaphorical.

Second, the New Testament unanimously testifies to the resurrection of Christ, and so it is outright false that the written evidence is in conflict with itself on the fact of the story. Even if we were to grant that there is

²⁰ Ibid, 171.

²¹ Ibid.

²² David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Eric Steinberg (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1977), 73. Hume’s argument is drawn from Newtonian physics; Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 45-56, 158-164; see also C.F.D. Moule, ed. *Miracles* (London: A.R Mowbray & Co., 1966), 3-17.

²³ Howard Clark Kee, Franklin W. Young and Karlfried Froehlich, *Understanding the New Testament* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 130-144.

conflict in the details basically no Scriptural account disowns the fact of the resurrection and basically Scripture complements itself. And the inability of Hick to harmonize such supposed conflicting accounts cannot be the final conclusion for everyone else. Concerning the harmony of the Gospels on the person of Christ, other authorities opine thus:

The writers of the Gospels make no attempt to develop the life of Christ historically or chronologically. They make no attempt to provide a biography of Christ. The writers, using the same extant material, select and arrange according to their individual emphasis and interpretation that which presents the particular portrait of Christ they desire to convey. The Gospels present the life of Christ thematically and thus are to be viewed as complementary and supplementary rather than contradictory.²⁴

The above view is more tenable than what liberal scholarship of Hick offers because the purpose and goal of the Gospels' accounts is not to discredit themselves or cancel one another but to present the authentic account of Christ as much as possible.

But given that the resurrection of Christ has no significance in Hick's thinking he does not see any connection between incarnation and atonement. He argues: "There is no suggestion in Jesus' teaching that during his ministry his heavenly Father was unloving, alienated, angry, unforgiving or condemnatory towards mankind at large but that this situation was to be dramatically changed by his own death."²⁵ Like the old liberal scholarship, this view puts a sharp division between the teachings of Christ himself on the one hand and between Christ and his disciples on the other. Hick wrongly places the concept of salvation in Christian experience rather than on what God has accomplished through the death and resurrection of Christ and the promise of eternal life by faith union with Christ. He doesn't quite seem to follow the testimony of Scripture. When the angel announced the birth of Jesus, he explained his name and mission: "you shall call his name Jesus, for he will *save* his people from their *sins*" (Matt. 1:21). An angel also said at another place "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk. 2:11). Here then is a necessary connection between salvation and sin and between incarnation and redemption. Without sin the incarnation would not be necessary. The Nicene Creed states thus: "who for us men and for our salvation came down and was incarnate, becoming human..."²⁶ This

²⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 23. He is citing J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ: A Study of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 24.

²⁵ Hick, "Incarnation and Atonement: Evil and Incarnation," *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued*, ed. Michael Goulder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 77.

²⁶ John H. Leith, ed. *Creeds of the Churches* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1973), 31.

necessity is hypothetical; it is a necessity of justice against sin.²⁷ The nature of salvation here is not merely of the physical dimension such as freedom from the Roman bondage which the Jews were anticipating but it was of a greater magnitude, the spiritual which is of eternal weight. The sins in view are obviously of human degeneration and violation of divine glory. The additional name that was given to Jesus, Immanuel, points to the fact that the one who came to save his people is no ordinary human being but God himself.

The procedure for this deliverance involves sacrifice of life for others. Jesus explained that his mission was to pay a ransom (lutron) on behalf of others (Matt. 20:28; Mk. 10:45), which certainly implies that the lives of his people were in danger of condemnation and alienation because of their sins. In other words, Jesus' realization of his divine mission was not a forced opinion of others but what he himself fully knew. The main mission of Christ was not to announce God's wrath upon the sins of mankind but to announce God's love for mankind despite its sins. Paul, the apostle of Christ also taught that we were alienated from God by our sins but in Christ God has reconciled us to himself (Eph. 2: 1-6, 12-16). The prophets and especially John the Baptist had already announced the wrath of God upon Israel for their sins (Matt. 3:7-8; Lk. 3:7-8). But even so, Christ minces no words in saying that those who do not accept him stand under the wrath of God (Jn. 3:36). He also came not to announce about himself since that was the economic function of the Father, which the Father did at his baptism and his transfiguration on the mountain (Matt. 3:16-17; Mk. 1:10-11; Lk. 3:21-22; Jn. 1:32-33; Matt. 17:5; Mk. 9:7; Lk. 9:35). Rather he came to reveal the Father and do the will of the Father as his own economic function (Matt. 18:14; 26:42; Lk. 22:42; Jn. 6:39; 10:17, 18, 28).

The authors of *The Myth of God Incarnate* hinge their overall argument on Acts 2:22.²⁸ Hick argues that the need to reinterpret Christology "arises from growing knowledge of Christian origins, and involves a recognition that Jesus was (as he is presented in Acts 2:22) 'a man approved by God' for a special role within the divine purpose, and that the later conception of him as God incarnate, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity living a human life, is a mythological or poetic way of expressing his significance for us."²⁹

²⁷ See Francis Turretin's argument on this in the *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 2, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1994), 13.III, 300-301.

²⁸ John Hick, ed. "Preface," *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ix. The book erroneously cites Acts 2:21 instead of Acts 2:22.

²⁹ *Ibid*, ix.

The question that follows this view is whether they actually understand the point of Peter here or they make a deliberate misrepresentation of Peter's intention to suit their goal. First, the statement of Scripture in view does not necessarily contradict the divinity of Christ as taught elsewhere in Scripture. By making specific reference to the humanity of Christ in Acts 2:22, Peter has a different interest rather than to undermine the literal divinity of Christ. Peter is addressing a misunderstanding here as the Jews thought that Jesus stood against their interest. The interest of Peter here was to stress the solidaric union that exists between Christ and the people who crucified him. This followed a long tread of historical prophecy and promise of redemption from the Old Testament. And even though he shared in their humanity and its predicament in order to bring redemption to them they misunderstood him and crucified him. This concurs with the same point that Paul emphasizes in 1Tim. 2:5 when he says "there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."

Prior to this occasion in Acts where Peter makes reference to the humanity of Christ, he had made a classic attestation of Christ saying "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16; Mk. 8:29; LK. 9:20). Jesus accepted this confession as authentic and pointed out that Peter's source of knowledge was divine revelation. Given this confession of Peter who also spoke in the Acts passage in view it is curious why the authors of *The Myth of God Incarnate* overlook the account in the Gospels and chose the one in Acts which indeed does not even contradict the Gospels. The questions following these authors' way of appealing to certain passages in Scripture to buttress their points are numerous. First, if the testimony of Peter in one instance can be acceptable, why can't the testimony of the same Peter in another be acceptable? The same Peter who alludes to the humanity of Christ in Acts is also the same Peter who testifies to the divinity of Christ in Matthew. And if the account in Acts is to be understood literally as Hick and his colleagues do why not the account in Matthew be taken so? Hick disintegrates Peter's statement in Acts which is not a helpful exegetical method. He accepts Peter's statement of Jesus as a man approved by God as literal but does not accept his resurrection as such. What then is the basis and justification for such methodology? Second, if the testimony of one person, namely, Peter can be accepted as in Acts, why can't the testimony of another person such as the centurion who confessed: "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matt. 27:54; Mk. 15:39) be accepted? To be sure, Scripture does not account for all that Jesus did and say (Jn. 21: 25) but we can take the accusations of those who mocked Jesus while he was on the cross to be of true substance. By saying: "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross" and "For he said, 'I am the Son of

God" (Matt. 27:40, 43) it implies that Christ had made that claim public which is why it offended the Jews as blasphemous.

Again if Peter's testimony is reliable to Hick and his team, then they should also hear Peter's disavowal of mythology in the entire Christian message:

For we did not follow cleverly devised *myths* when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were *eyewitnesses* of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,' we ourselves *heard* this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain (2Pet. 1:16-18).

It is clear that whatever the disciples confessed about Christ was not mythological as scholars of pluralism aver. To be sure, what they said about Christ were similar but not identical with myths of their own time of which Peter must have been aware. It is in line with this that Peter makes a distinction between their claims about Christ and mythological stories. Peter presents a contrast between what is mythological and historical. The historical has eyewitnesses of the extraordinary in a historical setting. They saw; they heard and these are not mythological markers but real historical indices. The majesty in view here is with respect to Christ's divinity which warrants the defense against counter allegations.

Here then comes the question of whether we trust the apostolic witnesses or not. All of us who were not eyewitnesses of Christ only depend on the witness of the biblical writers. This requires trust. However, the problem with Hick is lack of trust in all Scriptural testimony of Christ as the Son of God especially as found in the Johannean and Pauline writings. Now if there is no such trust, the agenda for deconstruction and reconstruction of the Gospel message may not be a surprise. But testimony by "its very nature demands trust" and that "We have no reason to suppose that the perceptions of others, given us in testimony, are less worthy of belief than our own."³⁰

Reasserting the Exclusive Christ

Bauckham rightly argues the historical and theological connection of what God did in the person of Christ which together forms the authentic witness of the biblical writers that demands our trust. "For in the case of the history of Jesus, as these witnesses perceived it, the 'unique uniqueness' of the events is properly theological. That is, it demands reference to God. There is no adequate way of telling the story without

³⁰ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 478.

reference to God, for the uniqueness of what God does in this history is what makes it the unique and particular history it is.”³¹ I take this statement as important because divorcing the historical truth from its divine dimension denies the incarnation as Hick does. The history of Jesus is the history of God’s personal presence with his people. Hence Immanuel!

Hick denies that the synoptic Gospels attest to Christ’s self consciousness of his own divinity, just as Gautama, the Buddha made no claim to divinity.³² If the assertion that Buddha “made no claim to be divine” is correct, then the difference between Christ and Buddha stands out very clear as the Gospels attest that Christ made such claims himself. Perhaps, one of the strongest accents to Christ’s divine self consciousness is embedded in the epistemic relationship between him and his Father when he says: “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and *no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son* and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matt. 11:27). The basic exegetical issues that underlie this passage are: First, “all things” here is without exception and refers to the whole creation. The universality of this claim is quite clear from Jesus’ mouth, so that his sovereignty cannot properly be limited to only what happens in the Church. The claim is divine in nature. This idea of all things being handed over to Jesus runs through the New Testament. Christ restates this in terms of authority and his disciples also acknowledged thus (Matt. 28:18; Jn. 3:35; 13:3; 17:2; Acts 2:36; Rom. 14:9; 1Cor. 15:27; Eph. 1:10, 20-22; Phil. 2:9,10; Col. 2:10; Heb. 1:2; 2:8; 1Pet. 3:22). Second, the mutual knowledge between the Father and the Son is the exclusive prerogative of the divine persons as pertains to their ontic nature which is not communicable to humanity. The difference between our knowledge of God and Christ’s knowledge of God is grounded in our ontic distinctions. While Christ as the Son of God possesses that knowledge by divine right and originally as the Son of God, we possess it only by revelation and privilege as creatures, with whom it pleases God to have a relationship which begins by knowledge. Therefore, humanity can know God only by revelation and indeed in a saving way only by special revelation. Christ did not possess the knowledge of the Father by revelation even as the Father’s knowledge of the Son too was not by revelation but by the necessity of their

³¹ Ibid, 507.

³² Hick, “Is there a Doctrine of Incarnation?” *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued*, 48; See also Hick, “Jesus and the World Religions,” *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 168. See also “Whatever Path Men Choose is Mine,” *Christianity and Other Religions*, ed. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 184-185 where he makes a similar denial.

ontological par. The neglect of the Gospel accounts, by the authors of pluralism, which are at harmony with the Acts statement certainly depicts a discriminatory appeal to Scripture and is unfortunate.

In a more recent study, Gathercole has produced a great exegetical work showing evidence for the self-consciousness of Christ as the pre-existent Son of God who came to redeem what was lost. He shows extensive awareness of the arguments against the divine claims of Christ in the Gospels which are basically driven by erroneous philosophical presuppositions and consequently false conclusions. He successfully engages great critical scholars who hold such false conclusions and stresses the most often ignored markers in the Gospels that point to the divinity of Christ especially the “I have come’ + purpose formula” in the synoptic Gospels.³³ He sums up: “So preexistence in the Gospels is an important aspect of the characterization of the Son and functions to highlight the inexplicable mystery of Jesus’ execution on the cross and its atoning function.”³⁴

A critical observation of Hick’s scholarship in deconstructing the Christian Gospel shows that there is a deliberate agenda to destroy the Gospel in order to make way for other religions. This is done by trying to destroy the validity of all of Scriptural testimony. Hick seems to take accounts of other religions’ theologies as authentic. He makes a comparison between “Buddhology and Christology” in which Gautama is the “incarnation of the transcendent, pre-existent Buddha” just as Jesus was thought to be the “pre-existent Logos or divine Son.”³⁵ So Christ and Gautama are equal in the claims that their people imposed upon them. To further reduce the higher claims about Christ “it must be doubted whether the resurrection – event whatever its nature – was seen by Jesus’ contemporaries as guaranteeing his divinity.”³⁶ And if Christ’s resurrection has no relation to his divinity even as Hick has denied his works to attest to his divinity or prior existence, then there is nothing left to point to the divinity of Christ.

The Christian Scripture portrays Christ as the Lord of all history. Augustine, a churchman of vast learning who probably was aware of the prevalence of other religious leaders in his time placed no one on the par with Christ: *tantumque sentiebam de domino Christo meo, quantum de*

³³ Simon J. Gathercole, *The Pre-existent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 83-176. Lane G. Tipton has also proffered a similar argument on the pre-existence of the Son in “Christology in Colossians 1: 15-20 and Hebrews 1:1-4,” *Resurrection and Eschatology*, ed. Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008), 177-202.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 295.

³⁵ *Ibid*, “Jesus and the World Religions,” *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 169.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 170.

*excellentis sapientiae viro, cui nullus posset aequari...*³⁷ Stott argues that “principal contributors to the New Testament believed in the centrality of the cross of Christ and believed that their conviction was derived from the mind of the Master himself.”³⁸ Christ is incomparable to other religious leaders and great personalities of the world because he is the influence of those great personalities in history which in his eternal glory continues to challenge us.³⁹ To be sure, Christ influenced Muhammad and Gandhi even though they did not become his converts. Muhammad certainly came under the influence of Christianity through his contacts with many Christian who were already in Arabia and Mecca, and especially Waraqah ibn Nawfal “who knew the Scriptures of the Hebrews and the Christians.”⁴⁰ This testimony bears out in the Quran as

many a page of the Koran proves that he [Muhammad] learned to admire the morals of the Christians, the monotheism of the Jews, and the strong support given to Christianity and Judaism by the profession of Scriptures believed to be a revelation from God. Compared with these faiths the polytheistic idolatry, loose morality, tribal warfare, and political disunity of Arabia may have seemed to him shamefully primitive. He felt the need of a new religion – perhaps of one that would unify all these factious groups into a virile and healthy nation; a religion that would give them a morality not earth – bound to the Bedouin law of violence and revenge, but based upon commandments of divine origin and therefore of indisputable force.⁴¹

Candidly, “Many Arabs had been influenced by the Messianic expectations of the Jews; they, too, eagerly awaited a messenger from God.”⁴² From India, Gandhi acknowledged Christ as a martyr and a divine teacher whose

³⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, 2 vols. Ed. G. P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), vii.xix, 388.

³⁸ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 45.

³⁹ Ibid, *The Incomparable Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001). The whole book in its four parts is devoted to the incomparability of other world religious leaders to Christ because Christ is par excellent.

⁴⁰ Will Durant, *The Age of Faith: A History of Medieval Civilization – Christian, Islamic, and Judaic – from Constantine to Dante: A.D. 325 – 1300* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1950), 163. See also Tor Andrae K. Ahrens, *Mohammed, the Man and his Faith* (1936); William Thomson, “Muhammad: Life and Work,” *Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge : The New Schaff – Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. Lefferts A. Loetscher (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1955), 758-763.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

death on the cross “was a great example to the world...”⁴³ and that Jesus influenced him so profoundly.⁴⁴

I am highly constrained to say that the testimonies of Scripture which are contested by the authors of pluralism and Christian mythology are beyond mere intellectual apprehension, though they do not contradict it. They are deeply spiritual and can only be truly discerned spiritually by those who are led by the Spirit of God (1Cor. 2:14).

The curious thing in this scholarship is that Hick does not contend against the claims of Buddhists upon Buddha but he contests the Christian claims about Christ. He also finds a compelling instruction in the Hindu Scripture which should relativize the claims of Christianity. He cites the Hindu Scripture thus: “Howsoever man may approach me, even so do I accept them; for, on all sides, whatever path they may choose is mine.”⁴⁵ This means God accepts all human approaches to him irrespective of what may characterize them. It also means there is no objective standard by which the authenticity of those “paths” may be assessed. If this is to be taken literally as Hick would want us to without doubts while the biblical view is not accorded the same faith, then Hick’s sense of judgment is surely lopsided. He argues that “the same kind of thing” that is happening in Christianity is also happening in other religions, which means we can affirm salvation in Christianity as well as in other religions. A denial of the factuality of the incarnation is a denial of the uniqueness and exclusive claims of Christianity in order to make room for other faiths. This conclusion of sameness of Christianity and other religions assumes too much as it seems to overlook the quantitative difference between original and counterfeit despite their similarities.

There is a problem with the kind of pluralism that Hick advocates towards God. By the very nature of that pluralism, conflict and tension are bound to theoretically and practically characterize it. Every human invention seeks to cancel one another. In Christianity, there is plurality or better put diversity of language, worship style, confessional theology and ethnicity of people yet all under one Lord and Savior which is expected to maintain a form of unity. Where this diversity results in contradiction, contention, tension and disharmony, God expressly disowns them (1Cor. 3:1-9; Gal.

⁴³ Mahatma Gandhi, *An Autobiography* (1948; reprint, London: Jonathan Cape, 1966), 113.

⁴⁴ Ibid, *What Jesus Means to Me*, compiled by R.K. Prabhu (Ahmedabad: Navajivan pub. House, 1959), 9-10.

⁴⁵ John Hick, “Whatever Path Men Choose is Mine,” *Christianity and Plurality*, ed. Richard J. Plantinga (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 334. This article also appears in *Christianity and Other Religions*, ed. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 171-190.

5:19-21; Jas. 2:1f). The plurality that holds negative character is opposed to the character of the Christian God who is plurality and oneness of persons at the same time without contradiction, contention, tension and disharmony. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one in life, purpose and will (Jn. 10:30; 17:11, 22).

Furthermore, there is no starting point for the “whatever path,” and this cannot be a sure guarantee of its goal. Hick’s agitation for pluralism stands on nothing, so it falls for anything. The Christian position insists on divine order given that God is self sufficient, and he sets the standard for all mankind both in ethical and religious conduct because he is not the God of confusion or disturbance (avkatastasi,aj) but of peace (1Cor. 14:33, 40). Hick insists in that article that exclusive claims of religions such as with Christianity should be given up because God accepts all human ways to him as testified in the Hindu Scripture. But the problem with his advocacy lies at that very demand because he seeks to replace the Christian point of view with the Hindu point of view which clearly forces upon the Christian the Hindu perspective. What is the justification for making the Hindu position the standard for developing an authentic religious view?

Pannenberg ably disputes scholars who allege mythology of the Christian gospel and offers that the eschatology of Christ is a unique and exclusive feature that is not found in the claims of other faiths: “But the claim to uniqueness concerning the person of Jesus is bound up with his own eschatological message, especially with the eschatological finality of God’s kingdom as becoming present in his activity.”⁴⁶ This eschatological finality has its definition in the resurrection of Christ and the final return of Christ. This is an exclusive feature of the Christian gospel.

The globalization of theology must not be set on the contours of other religions but on the ability of the gospel to penetrate all nations by its inherent effectiveness to convince and convict by a gentle appeal through the Holy Spirit, not by coercion or persecution as it is done in other religions. When Christ instructed that the gospel be preached to all nations (Matt. 24:14; 28:19-20; Acts 1: 8), he had in view a global Christology and Soteriology that are not to be compromised in the encounter with other religions. In fact, he stated this within the context of the existing religions in his time. The conflict between the systems of the Christian and non-Christian belief cannot be resolved by forcing the Christian message to lose its absolute claims. The conflict is real and can never come to a compromise since our Christian mandate is to convert and make disciples

⁴⁶ Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Religious Pluralism and Conflicting Truth Claims,” *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, 101.

of all nations which means the unbeliever has to give up his system and embrace Christ.

We admit that all religions hold to their views without forcing a compromise, and we respect people of other faiths but to insist that Christianity must give up its exclusive claims is arbitrary.

A number of pressing questions arise against the position of Hick. On what or whose basis do we make conclusions about whether or not the Christian Gospel is exclusive? Hick argues that on the basis of similarity of practices in Christianity and other religions. But does similarity necessarily annul exclusivity? Does similarity cancel the distinction between originality and counterfeit? Does similarity of practices necessarily imply qualitative indifference? Since the Christian gospel claims that "salvation is not found in any other name" apart from the name of Christ, and Hick insists that that cannot be the case, he implies that Christians tear out or rather close those passages that teach such exclusive claims. Can we also ask other faiths to tear out or close passages that are central to their faiths? Why do people of other faiths find it offensive that Christians make exclusive claims? Why do Christians not find offense with the claims of other religions? If Christ is not exclusive to adherents of other faiths, he is to us Christians, and this we cannot give up because it is an integral part of our faith. But if Hick insists that we give up our absolute claims, then for whose sake should we give up our faith and how will this impact people of other faiths and achieve the purpose of the Christian Gospel? If other faiths do not throw away their own exclusive claims, and we bow down to Hick's demand, is this not a way of deceiving us to give up our own treasure and thus become empty while they keep theirs?

We recognize in the Christian religion God's holy standards to which he requires that we all must conform. We recognize that human beings are morally bankrupt and incapable of meeting the set standards of God even in the holiest of our acts. We also recognize that Christ has performed perfect obedience to God and has met all the requirements of righteousness by his finished work through his death and resurrection for us and by believing in his work, it shall be counted to us as righteousness. The work that we are required to do is by putting faith in Christ. "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (John 6:29).

Conclusion

Liberalism has tried to demonstrate that the Bible is not the inspired word of God and that all its claims especially about the divinity of Christ are either not intended to be taken literally or are myths. If we are to accept the verdict of liberalism then we would have no *evangelium* to proclaim to others.

But we take the self authenticating evidences internal to Scripture itself as the inspired word of God to be true which means accepting its claims that Jesus Christ was the incarnate Son of God. The Gospel of John 1:14 states thus: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." John underpins something of the exclusivity of Christ. The glory that Christ possessed was not common to ordinary human beings but exclusively "as of the only Son." This glory is unique to the Son of God. It is only the Son of God who can possess such glory.

By this statement John also alludes to the pre-incarnation and the incarnation of Christ as the frame within which the glory of Christ is referenced. The reference to "the Word became flesh" clearly presupposes the *personal* pre-existence of the Son and the present state of incarnation which he became in time. Tipton's argument on Col 1:15 concurs with this view when he says the passage refers to "the eternal dignity of the Son's *person* and his role in creation."⁴⁷ Again, the "only Son from the Father" points to his divine origin prior to his incarnation. The incarnation does not totally quench the glory of the Son, though it veils his full glory. This glory was made accessible to human eyes at the mount of transfiguration (Matt. 17:2; Mk. 9:2-3; Lk. 9:29; cf. 2Cor. 3:18). The testimony of our Christian Scripture cannot be broken.

The concept of Christ's glory also pertains to all his mighty deeds such as changing of water into wine, healing the sick, raising the dead, calming the storm, walking on the water, feeding the multitude and the greatest of all, his resurrection from the dead. All these loudly proclaim his exclusivity which no other human being has claimed. Christ told those who disputed his divinity that the works that he did showed his origin as from above. "For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me" (Jn. 5:36).

⁴⁷ Tipton, "Christology in Colossians 1: 15-20 and Hebrews 1:1-4," *Resurrection and Eschatology*, ed. Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008), 187 [Emphasis mine].

The point is that founders of other religions have never disproved the exclusive work of redemption that Christ has accomplished. If this is the case, then it amounts to attempted robbery against the Christian Gospel when scholars of pluralism try to diminish the exclusive claims of the Gospel in order to make room for equality with other religions when those religions hold to their own claims.