SOPHIA (2015) 54:181–200
DOI 10.1007/s11841-015-0459-z

Hick and Radhakrishnan on Religious Diversity: Back to the Kantian Noumenon

Ankur Barua

Published online: 30 April 2015

Abstract We shall examine some conceptual tensions in Hick's 'pluralism' in the light of S. Radhakrishnan's reformulation of classical Advaita. Hick himself often quoted Radhakrishnan's translations from the Hindu scriptures in support of his own claims about divine ineffability, transformative experience and religious pluralism. However, while Hick developed these themes partly through an adaptation of Kantian epistemology, Radhakrishnan derived them ultimately from Śaṁkara (c.800 CE), and these two distinctive points of origin lead to somewhat different types of reconstruction of the diversity of world religions. Our argument will highlight the point that Radhakrishnan is not a 'pluralist' in terms of Hick's understanding of the Real. The Advaitin ultimate, while it too like Hick's Real cannot be encapsulated by human categories, is, however, not strongly ineffable, because some substantive descriptions, according to the Advaitic tradition, are more accurate than others. Our comparative analysis will reveal that they differ because they are located in two somewhat divergent metaphysical schemes. In turn, we will be able to revisit, through this dialogue between Hick and Radhakrishnan, the intensely vexed question of whether Hick's version of pluralism is in fact a form of covert exclusivism.

Keywords Pluralism · John Hick · S. Radhakrishnan

The ongoing debates over the religious pluralism of John Hick have highlighted what are, in effect, the two primary modes of visualizing doctrinal and experiential diversity across the world's religious traditions. The traditional strategy, that spans the options labelled as 'exclusivism' and 'inclusivism' in the literature, is centred on the concrete focus of Christ, with other religions placed at varying distances of spiritual efficacy with respect to this foundational truth. The 'pluralist' strategy associated with Hick consists of reimagining these religions, each with its distinctive focus such as Allah, Brahman, or Vishnu, as charged with transformational capacity not because they are literally accurate descriptions of the ultimate but because they are capable of metaphorically gesturing

A. Barua (✉)
Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK
e-mail: ab309@cam.ac.uk

towards this ultimate. A vital debate emerges at this point between the defenders of this pluralist hypothesis and its detractors over whether these foci are metaphysically real or unreal. Hick's pluralism faces the following dilemma—if these foci are taken as absolutely real, their specific characterizations would be attributed to the ultimate which he argues is ineffable, but if they are taken as absolutely unreal, he would have accepted a naturalist interpretation of religious discourse which he otherwise rejects.

With this conceptual background in mind, we shall pursue three primary objectives in this essay. Firstly, we shall examine certain conceptual instabilities in Hick's pluralism in the light of S. Radhakrishnan's approach to religious diversity which is based on a reformulation of classical Advaita. Second, our analysis of Hick's and Radhakrishnan's views will illuminate the significance of ontology in certain proposed typologies of religious pluralism. Third, we will be able to revisit, through this dialogue between Hick and Radhakrishnan, the intensely vexed question of whether Hick's version of pluralism is in fact a form of covert exclusivism. The comparative perspective that we shall explore here would seem promising on at least three accounts. First, Hick himself often quoted Radhakrishnan's translations from the Upaniṣads in support of his own claims about divine ineffability, transformative experience and religious pluralism. Indeed, Radhakrishnan's statements on the relation between the ultimate and the world's religions can often sound Hickian. For instance, emphasising that the religious traditions are diverse culturally-shaped attempts on the part of human beings to respond to the ultimate, he argued: 'Religious experience is not the pure unvarnished presentment of the real in itself, but is the presentment of the real already influenced by the ideas and prepossessions of the perceiving mind' (Radhakrishnan 1927, p. 24). Secondly, both Hick and Radhakrishnan operated with an appearance–reality distinction in developing their views on the significance of religious diversity. Thirdly, and crucially, while Hick adapted this distinction from Kant, Radhakrishnan derived it ultimately from Śaṁkara (c.800 CE), and these two distinctive points of origin lead to somewhat different types of reconstructions of the diversity of world religions. Our argument in the following sections will highlight the point that Radhakrishnan is not a 'pluralist' in terms of Hick's understanding of the Real. The Advaitin ultimate, while it too like Hick's Real cannot be encapsulated by human categories, is, however, not strongly ineffable, because some substantive descriptions, according to the Advaitin tradition, are more accurate than others. Our comparative analysis will reveal that these reconstructions differ because they are located in two somewhat divergent metaphysical schemes.

Religious Pluralism: The Contemporary Debate

In a classic statement of Christian approaches to religious diversity, Alan Race classified John Hick as a pluralist (Race 1983). With an appeal to the Kantian distinction between the *noumenon* and the *phenomenal* world, Hick positions the major religious traditions of the world as authentic responses to the *noumenal* Real. This implies that the (phenomenal) *personae* and *impersonae* attributed to the divine in the different religions such as Sunyata in Buddhism, Allah in Islam and the triune God in Christianity do not apply to the (noumenal) Real *an sich* (in itself). A variation on this pluralism is the soteriocentrism of Paul Knitter who wishes to highlight the

soteriological emphasis that is present in many religious traditions (Knitter 1987). At the same time, however, some thinkers grappling with the philosophical implications of religious diversity have noted that terms such as 'exclusivism', 'inclusivism' and 'pluralism' are often not sharply defined. For instance, pointing out that sometimes the same theologian has been described as an exclusivist and as an inclusivist, Paul Hedges (2008, p. 21) notes that these categories should be seen not as closed essences but as fluid approaches with permeable boundaries. For an instance of how a theologian can straddle the boundary between 'inclusivism' and 'pluralism', we may consider S. Mark Heim who argues, on the one hand, for the plurality of distinct religious ends, and claims, on the other hand, that Christian salvation is more inclusive, valuable and truth-filled than the goals postulated in the other religions. The variety of religious ends is grounded in the mystery of divine providence, so that these should not be labelled as incorrect or anonymous versions of the Christian goal. Instead, one should speak of a plenitude of salvations (in the plural) which would lead a dialogue of difference across religious traditions. However, while these religious ends other than salvation are real, Heim affirms that Christians in fact 'hope to be saved from them, and believe that God has offered greater, more inclusive gifts' (Heim 2001, p. 19). Therefore, not all of these ends are equally valuable, and those who realise ends other than salvation, that is communion with the Triune God, have achieved 'a lesser good' (Heim 2001, p. 44). The contemporary debates over defining 'pluralism' indicate that the vital question often is not 'whether pluralism' but 'which pluralism'?—a question which involves the specific metaphysical-epistemological presuppositions undergirding a theologian's pluralism. As we will see, these presuppositions play a crucial role in structuring Hick's and Radhakrishnan's reconstructions of the world's religious traditions.

The Two Strands of Hick's Pluralism

Hick postulates the noumenal Real, which is not experienced as it is in itself, in order to integrate two facets of his understanding of religious experience in a world of religious diversity. The first realist strand contains a top-bottom emphasis on the noumenal Real which is mediated through human cultural contexts, and the second neo-Wittgensteinian strand a bottom-up emphasis on the creative attempts of human minds to elaborate historically-contextualised religious responses of overcoming absorption in self and becoming centred in the Real. These two emphases lead to a conceptual tension in Hick's pluralism. The first suggests a radical incommensurability between human concepts and the trans-categoreal Real, thereby underscoring the point that the latter is the ontologically independent ground which cannot be encapsulated by tradition-specific categories. The second, however, suggests that human contexts of ego-negation and the Real are minimally analogous, for in the absence of any such correlation, there would be no means of indicating that it is these contexts, and not contexts of ego-affirmation, that are authentic expressions of the Real. To ease this tension, Hick proposes his hypothesis of religious pluralism which works from both ends: working with the view from below, he inductively gathers the religious traditions which cultivate ego-transcendence and provides a view from above in which these traditions are oriented towards the un-conceptualizable Real. The tension persists, however, precisely because no substantive predicates can be applied to the Real; a

tension that, as we will note in subsequent sections, emerges for a different reason in Advaitin contexts as well.

First, against naturalistic interpretations of religious discourse, Hick speaks of the 'basic faith' that phenomenal religious experiences are not mere human projections but are grounded in a transcendental reality. Therefore, the Real *an sich* is postulated 'as the presupposition of the veridical character of this range of religious experience' (Hick 2004, p. 249). Since without the noumenon, the various culturally shaped divine *personae* and *impersonae* that constitute the religious history of humankind would be illusory, Hick suggests that the Real to which different characteristics are attributed by the religious traditions is 'the noumenal ground of these characteristics' (Hick 2004, p. 247). While the Real is beyond all human categorical dualities such as personal versus impersonal, substantial versus insubstantial and so on, the Real is not a nothing or a blank but a 'reality lying outside the scope of our human conceptual systems' (Hick 1995, p. 28). In this strongly realist strand of Hick's thought, the noumenal Real, which is experienced and thought by different human beings from within their specific cultural milieus, 'exists independently of our perception of it and the phenomenal world is that same world as its appears to our human consciousness …' (Hick 2004, p. 241). Hick argues that human transformations from ego-affirmation to ego-denial are taking place more or less to the same extent in different religious systems with their distinctive deities and absolutes, and suggests that we explain these patterns by regarding them as 'different manifestations to humanity of yet a more ultimate ground of salvific transformation' (Hick 2000, pp. 58–9). Hick applies the principle of credulity, which states that it is rational to suppose that one's experiences are veridical in the absence of strong defeating conditions such as abnormal physiology or environmental features, to religious contexts to argue that religious experiences, which are seemingly of the divine, can be taken as veridical. Hick argues that 'if it is rational for the Christian to believe in God on the basis of his or her distinctively Christian experience, it must by the same argument be rational for the Muslim … for the Hindu and the Buddhist … on the basis of their own distinctive forms of experience' (Hick 1985, p. 103). The ontologically independent status of the Real is further emphasised by Hick when he speaks of the noumenal Real as the source of the informational input whose influence, through collaboration with the human mind, produces the phenomenal diversity of religious experiences (Hick 2004, p. 243).

Second, against traditional interpretations of religious doctrine as possessing literal truth, Hick emphasises the creative dimensions of human culture, history and myth in shaping religious traditions with distinctive types of belief, practice, liturgy, poetry and so on. Unlike Kant who operated with 12 trans-culturally valid categories of the understanding, Hick argues that the Real is apprehended not only through certain universally shared forms and categories but also by variations shaped by linguistic structures, cultural styles, symbolic patterns and so on. Hick emphasises the human side of the contribution when he argues that whether divine Reality is experienced as personal or impersonal depends on the mode, whether I–Thou encounter or non-personal awareness, in which individuals seek to relate themselves to the Real (Hick 2004, p. 245). To be oriented towards the Real, it is not essential that individuals accept the doctrinal statements of religious orthodoxy, such as the divine Incarnation in Christianity or reincarnation in Hinduism, as literal truths. Rather, these should be understood as mythical evocations of attitudes and forms of behaviour which are

conducive to transformations away from self-centredness to Real-centredness (Hick 2004, p. 248). In such passages, Hick emphasises the active constructing dimensions of the mind which imagines various symbolic descriptions of the divine. All such linguistic devices are partial attempts to capture aspects of the ultimate, and these human descriptions do not properly apply to divine existence (Hick 2004, p. 246).

At this juncture, the two strands discussed above begin to pull apart. The realist strand emphasises the ontological independence of the Real, the unexperienceable ground of concrete religious responses. However, the constructivist strand raises the possibility that the Real, about which nothing substantial can be known, can be regarded as a mere conceptual fiction. Since no substantive properties can be attributed to the Real, Hick's pluralism seems to provide no means of determining why all conceptual structures should not be viewed as elaborations of a humanly projected Real. As Alvin Plantinga argues: 'If we know nothing about the Real, we have no reason to pick the *personae* Hick picks as authentic manifestations of it. The main point is that if the Real has no positive non-formal properties of which we have a grasp, then, for all we can see, any department of human life is as revelatory of the Real as any other' (Plantinga 2000, p. 59). Plantinga is here discussing Hick's distinction between formal and substantial properties, such that only the former, for instance, the property of 'being able to be referred to', apply to the Real, and not the latter, for instance, Christ, Vishnu, Buddha and so on (Hick 2004, p. 239). However, a close examination of Hick's understanding of the Real, highlighted in the realist strand above, shows that he does attribute substantive properties to the Real, because the Real is that which is real in the fullest sense—ontologically independent, fully existent and unlimited (Ward 1990, p. 9). Hick argues that he employs the term 'Real' in the singular, when there is no a priori reason why ultimate reality cannot consist of an 'orderly federation or a feuding multitude or an unrelated plurality' (Hick 2004, p. 248). His response reveals that he regards the Real to be that which is unsurpassably real: 'we affirm the true ultimacy of the Real by referring to it in the singular' (Hick 2004, p. 249). Further, in order to affirm that contexts of transition from ego-affirmation to ego-negation are oriented towards the Real while contexts of transition from ego-negation to ego-affirmation are not, Hick's Real would minimally have to be the ground of the former and not the latter. Therefore, given that the Real is postulated as the ontological support of only those traditions within which the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness is taking place, and not vice versa, a Hickian could supply such a description as a substantive property of the Real and argue that not just any aspect of human activity is revelatory of the Real after all (Hick 2004, p. 240). Hick himself, of course, would have resisted such a move, for it brings the Real within the fray of the competing divine *personae* and *impersonae* with which the Real should not, according to him, be confused.

Hick and the Kantian Noumenon

At this stage of the argument, we can see that a key debate between Hick and his critics is over whether the Real *an sich* should be regarded as an ontological category that is radically distinct from or partly continuous with its phenomenal manifestations, a question that will also emerge in our discussion of Radhakrishnan. The former option

allows Hick to affirm the ontological independence of the Real and reject projectivist interpretations of religious discourse offered by figures such as Freud, Marx and Nietzsche. He argues that the various ways in which human beings have been striving to effect ego-negation are all rooted in the noumenal ground, 'rich in content', which transcends all these experiences (Hick 2004, p. 247). The emphasis on the ineffable Real, however, can become a form of 'transcendental agnosticism': because no positive descriptions of the Real are accessible to us, the Real threatens to become a limiting idea with no content (D'Costa 1991). Therefore, in response to Feuerbach's challenge that the denial of all positive predicates to the divine nature is, in effect, a denial of religious discourse, Hick would have to supply some substantive properties of the divine (Eddy 1994, pp. 472–3). The second option allows Hick to highlight only certain contexts, namely, those effecting a reversal of egotism, as rooted in the Real, though at the cost that the numerous seemingly incompatible properties of divine *personae* and *impersonae* would have to be attributed to a unitary referent (Netland 1986, pp. 258–61). Hick seeks to address this problem by invoking the wave-particle duality of quantum physics to suggest that the noumenal Real which is beyond all human conceptualisations is somehow continuous with the expressions of the Real. Just as depending on the experimental conditions, light has been found to demonstrate wave-like or particle-like properties, likewise the Real, which cannot be known directly, can be experienced in various contexts as personal or impersonal (Hick 1995, p. 25).

The Real, it would seem, is both ontologically different from and continuous with its phenomenal expressions, in different parts of Hick's system. The oscillation between these two poles is also a notable feature, according to some Kant scholars, in Kant's own views about the relation between the noumenon and phenomenal experience. While Hick himself claims that questions concerning Kant exegesis are not relevant to his application of certain Kantian insights to the epistemology of religion, debates over the noumenon, in fact, impinge on the conceptual tension we have highlighted in the preceding section (Hick 1995, p. 240). According to Kant, the passive faculty of sensibility receives intuitions through the forms of time and space, and the active faculty of understanding classifies them through the categories into a law-governed world. Thus, everyday objects of experience are, in his words, transcendentally ideal and empirically real, which is his famous doctrine of transcendental idealism. However, Kant's division between the phenomenal objects of everyday cognition and the noumenal ground of these objects has been read in two ways. According to the first 'two-worlds' interpretation, the appearances and the things in themselves are metaphysically distinct, and according to the second 'two-aspects' interpretation, the appearances and the things in themselves are numerically identical entities considered respectively from an empirical and an transcendental perspective. According to the first, appearances and things in themselves are numerically distinct entities which are related through a process for which Kant uses terms such as affection or grounding (A19/B33). That is, everyday experience involves the things in themselves 'affecting' the mental representations structured by the forms and categories of the mind. For textual support, proponents of this interpretation appeal to statements such as the following: 'beings of understanding certainly correspond to the beings of sense' (B 308–309) (Kant 1997, p. 361), 'cognition reaches appearances only, leaving the thing in itself as something actual for itself but uncognized by us' (Bxx) (Kant 1997, p. 112) and so on (Gardner 1999, p. 271). In contrast, Henry Allison, a prominent defender of the second, argues

that this division is used by Kant not to draw a distinction between two realms of beings, one consisting of appearances and the other of suprasensible entities, but to highlight the limitations of our cognitive powers (Allison 1983). Proponents of this interpretation appeal to the following type of statements from Kant: 'The conception of a noumenon is therefore merely a boundary concept, in order to limit the pretension of sensibility, and therefore only of negative use' (A255/ B311) (Kant 1997, p. 350). In other words, while we encounter objects which are always already shaped and structured by our cognitive faculties, we can consider, and not cognize, those same objects apart from any determinate relationship to these faculties. That is, the noumena are purely mental entities which are posited by the understanding and have no mind-independent being (Janz 2004, p. 141).

In light of these interpretive disputes, some scholars have argued that Kant formulates his doctrine of transcendental idealism in a variety of ways and it is not immediately obvious whether, and how, his statements can be reconciled into a self-consistent doctrine (Wood 2005, pp. 63–64). For instance, Karl Ameriks notes that while the view that noumena and phenomena are ontologically identical has the advantage of not hypostatizing another world, it does not completely explain why Kant often speaks of the unknowability of things in themselves, or about distinguishing things in themselves from appearances (Ameriks 1982). For some interpreters of Kant, the strongest argument for the view that noumena are ontologically real is derived not from Kant's epistemology but from his moral philosophy, for, according to Kant, we have grounds to believe in a free noumenal self which is not an object of experience necessarily subject to complete causal determination (Adams 1997). As Merold Westphal notes, summarising these debates: 'The thing in itself has always been a thorn in the flesh to those who would read Kant carefully and sympathetically at the same time … But the thing in itself lies at the heart of Kant's great achievement. Without it the distinction between transcendental ideality and empirical reality is vacuous … Without it the purported orginality of the Copernican Revolution is reduced to the giving of fancy names to familiar distinctions' (Westphal 1968, p. 119). Our purpose, however, is not to settle these fine points of Kant exegesis but to indicate how some of the ambiguities reappear in the Hickian system.

On the one hand, as we have noted, Hick argues that the Real *an sich* is the ontological ground of its numerous phenomenal manifestations and speaks of the Real as providing inputs into these historical formations. In such passages, which seem to echo the 'two-worlds' view, Hick shares a Kantian concern to explain the diversity of objects of experience, whether sensory or religious (Palmquist 1993, p. 178). The noumenon therefore highlights the passivity of the faculty of sensibility—since what is structured by the understanding is *given* through intuition, the latter input in our cognitive experience is supplied by the noumena. As we have seen, Hick too emphasises that the divine *personae* or *impersonae* are not merely human projections but are responses to the divine information that shapes them. Therefore, the Real *an sich* exercises some measure of external constraint on the religious gods and absolutes. Further, in the manner of Kant who argues that while we cannot cognize noumena we can think about them, Hick often emphasises that his Real *an sich* is a hypothetical ground that is posited, and not directly cognized, to meet certain explanatory needs of his religious pluralism. While this postulation prevents his system from moving in the direction of a radical subjectivism, it arguably attributes to the Real *an sich* the

substantive property of producing the phenomenal religious expressions. Indeed, Kant struggled with a similar problem of speaking about the noumenon without using any descriptions derived from the 12 categories of the understanding which according to him have only empirical employment. Therefore, regarding Kant's description of noumena as the 'ground' of phenomenal experience, Allen Wood writes that Kant uses it 'perhaps because it seems to him more abstract and metaphysically non-committal, better suited to express a relation that can never be cognized empirically but only thought through the pure understanding' (Wood 2005, p. 64).

On the other hand, Hick in fact rejects the 'two-world' interpretation of Kant which would suggest that in addition to phenomenal particulars such as leaves, pencils and horses there exist discrete noumenal correlates. He reads Kant as saying that the sensory manifold is structured by the mind's innate forms and categories to appear in one unitary consciousness, such that 'the phenomenal world is that same noumenal world as it appears to our human consciousness' (Hick 2004, p. 241). The analogy that he prefers is that of unbroken sunlight which is refracted by the atmospheric particles into a rainbow, and the Real which is categorised by numerous human cultures into their gods and absolutes (Hasker 2011, p. 199). Another analogy that he uses is that of a table which is apprehended by us in everyday life as a solid, hard, brown and enduring three-dimensional object and which is described by physicists by using the vocabulary of quantum events (Hick 1997, p. 285). Just as Martians, with sensory capacities and processing systems different from those of ours, would perceive the 'table' in different ways, different spiritual practices—some characterised as I-thou prayer and others as non-I-thou meditation—would be structured around alternative awarenesses of the transcendent. His 'two-aspect' interpretation therefore allows him to argue, closely echoing Kantian vocabulary, that the divine phenomenal manifestations 'are not illusory but are empirically, that is experientially, real as authentic manifestations of the Real' (Hick 1995, p. 242).

Hick and 'Polytheism'

The dilemma that Kant faces seems to be this: the metaphysical interpretation gives rise to an inconsistency in utilising the phenomenal category of cause to speak of the noumenon affecting the phenomenon, whereas the epistemic interpretation which rejects the ontological independence of the noumenon pushes his doctrine in the direction of Berkeleyan phenomenalistic idealism (Wilkerson 1976, p. 195). In importing the Kantian noumenon–phenomenon distinction to his religious epistemology, Hick faces a similar dilemma with respect to the relation between the Real *an sich* and the phenomenal gods and absolutes. While Hick needs a metaphysical reading of this distinction to the extent that he wishes to affirm that the divine *personae* and *impersonae* are not purely human projections but are rooted in the Real which is external to them, this reading attributes to the Real the substantive property of influencing these manifestations. An epistemic reading of the distinction, which he explicitly favours, on the other hand, could imply that the personal deities and the transpersonal ultimates of the religious traditions are purely human imaginary constructs which are superimposed onto a limiting idea, substantivally vacant, called 'the Real.' The presence of both these readings of the Kantian apparatus in Hick's system leads to a tension

between, on the one hand, his combination of transcendental idealism and empirical realism and, on the other hand, his symbolic expressivist view that doctrinal statements are not factual truths but evocative myths. Regarding the former, William Alston argues that in the manner of Kant who restricted theoretical knowledge to the phenomenal world, Hick argues that the divine *personae* and *impersonae* have phenomenal reality and that we cannot have any substantive knowledge about the transcendental Real. On the other hand, Hick argues that the real content of doctrinal statements in the world religions should be understood in terms of their symbolic-expressive capacity to evoke appropriate dispositional attitudes. Therefore, the *personae* and *impersonae* should not be located in the Real (Alston 1995, pp. 42–3).

The vital question that emerges is this: how real are the divine *personae* and *impersonae*? To the extent that they are affected by the Real, they are not illusory, while to the extent that they are human responses to the Real they are, in fact, only penultimate metaphorical pointers to the Real. Indeed, as George Mavrodes puts it, the gods and absolutes of the religious traditions in Hick's pluralism seem to have 'at best a very tenuous and weak reality' (Mavrodes 1997, p. 290). Mavrodes' observation seems to be supported by Hick's own claim that someone who accepts his neo-Kantian distinction between the Real, on the one hand, and the experienced god-figures and the non-personal absolutes, on the other hand, is 'at one level a poly-something, though not precisely a poly-theist, and at another level a mono-something, though not precisely a monotheist' (Hick 1997, p. 283). More precisely, Hick argues that the 'experienced Thou' should be seen as analogous to the Hindu *devas* (gods) or Abrahamic angels which are 'intermediate beings' between devotees and the trans-categorical Real (Hick 2004, xxx). In other words, the multiple gods are not distinct ultimates, ontologically independent noumena but are phenomenal, culturally-shaped manifestations. Therefore, while *personae* such as Amida, Yahweh, Vishnu and others are real persons, they should not be regarded as an infinitely supreme Being but as finite intermediate figures which are human projections in response to the universal presence of the Real (Hick 2004, p. 275). William Hasker therefore argues that we should speak of the relation between the *noumenon* and the phenomenal appearances not in terms of identity but of manifestation: the various *personae* and *impersonae* are multiple modes in which the Real is manifested to us in specific cultural matrices, and these modes possess the properties that are attributed to them. In other words, a specific locus of worship in a religious tradition is not the Real in itself but is related to the Real insofar as it is the Real as manifested in the context of that tradition (Hasker 2011, p. 191).

Radhakrishnan and the Kantian Noumenon

When we move from Hick's pluralism to Radhakrishnan's reconstruction of religious diversity, a few parallels between the two viewpoints stand out immediately. The similarities have sometimes been noticed by commentators on Hick's pluralism. For instance, L.P. Barnes argues that 'Hick's teaching on the nature of the Absolute, and his conviction that there is one essential truth underlying all religion, is strikingly similar to the teaching of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. This is noteworthy when we consider that Radhakrishnan was a Hindu who wrote from a Vedantic monistic perspective' (Barnes 1983, pp. 227–28). We find a similar Hickian emphasis in Radhakrishnan on the

rejection of religious orthodoxy which is associated with dogmatism, persecution and intolerance; the affirmation of interreligious conversation, dialogue and harmony and the aspiration to build a world-community grounded in the transcendent which surpasses the denominational differences across the religious traditions. Equally crucially for our purposes, Radhakrishnan's articulations of these themes resonate with Hick's neo-Kantian emphasis on the creative dynamic activity of human minds in their specific contextual backgrounds. For instance, Radhakrishnan argues that the differences across world religions are legitimized by the fact that they are partly a product of an individual's temperament, one's location in a finite cultural environment, and one's daily experiences—and out of this crucible there emerge different religions with distinct emphases. Therefore, Radhakrishnan emphasizes at several places in his writings that the different religions of the world, with the specific impulses and values that they embody, should come together in a relationship of mutual friendship so that they are regarded 'not as incompatibles but as complementaries, and so indispensable to each other for the realization of the common end' (Radhakrishnan 1927, p. 46). What he envisioned was not a 'featureless unity of religions' but a rich harmony that will preserve the integrity of each (Radhakrishnan 1967, p. 134). In this context, Hinduism is marked out by its 'catholic' vision that accepts all the different ideas of the supreme reality and recognizes that different human beings have attained different stages of spiritual perfection and, consequently, seek the ultimate in different ways and in different directions: 'By accepting the significance of the different intuitions of reality and the different scriptures of the peoples living in India, Hinduism has come to be a tapestry of the most variegated tissues and almost endless diversity of hues' (Radhakrishnan 1927, p. 20).

A closer inspection of Radhakrishnan's reconstruction of the Advaita of Śaṁkara, however, reveals that his standpoint of religious diversity diverges at a significant point from Hick's pluralism. Unlike Hick who viewed the *personae* and the *impersonae* of the world's religious traditions as human projections in response to the Real, Radhakrishnan regarded only the transpersonal descriptions of the Real provided by the Advaitic tradition as ultimately reflecting the nature of the Real. While Hick maintained that his pluralism should be seen not be as a conclusive 'meta-theory' about religious diversity but as a conditional hypothesis (Hick 1995, p. 42), Radhakrishnan did not view Advaita as a hypothetical reflection on the world religions. That is, while Hick argued that the ineffable Real did not have any substantive properties, Radhakrishnan affirmed that certain descriptions of the transcendent, namely, those which indicated its nature to be transpersonal were ultimately more accurate than those which indicated its nature to be personal. As we examine this divergence in greater detail in the subsequent sections, we will note that it can be traced also to a fundamental difference between Hick and Radhakrishnan regarding their views over the Kantian noumenon. Radhakrishnan affirms the possibility that Hick disallows—that human beings can, in some sense, know the noumenon.

Advaita and the Metaphysical Status of the Phenomenon

As we saw earlier, Hick's views on whether the *personae* and the *impersonae* were real or unreal have been read in various ways. In an article which started the discussion on

this specific topic, Mavrodes (1997) took these divinities and absolutes to be full-bloodedly real and called Hick the most distinguished exponent of polytheism. Hick's response, which lies in characterising them as 'intermediate beings' between the Real and human cognizers, has suggestive parallels in the neo-Advaita understanding of the phenomenal world as not absolutely Real, and not absolutely unreal either.

Radhakrishnan's elaboration of the distinction between personal deities and Brahman, the Advaitic transpersonal ultimate, is woven into his reconstruction of classical Advaita in which he sought to highlight the life-affirming dimensions of the *Upaniṣads*. Radhakrishnan shares this concern with many other neo-Hindu figures who have struggled with the exegetical question of what Śaṁkara himself said about the status of the empirical world (Singh 1966, p. 24). The basic question that the Advaitin tradition has struggled with is this: 'Truth, knowledge, infinitude is *Brahman*. Mutable, non-intelligent, finite and perishing is the world. *Brahman* is pure attributeless, impartite and immutable. The world is a manifold of changing phenomena, fleeting events and finite things … The problem for the Advaitin is to solve how from the pure *Brahman* the impure world of men [*sic*] and things came into existence' (Mahadevan 1957, p. 227). There are passages in Śaṁkara which seem to suggest that the empirical world (*māyā*) is merely a human projection of the individual subject, which is itself an illusory manifestation of the real Brahman, and others that the world has some measure of objective reality independently of the human subject. A famous couplet which is said to summarise the meaning of Advaita would seem to lend itself more readily to the former reading: 'The non-duality of *Brahman*, the non-reality of the world, and the non-difference of the soul from *Brahman* – these constitute the teaching of Advaita'. In other words, the sole reality Brahman appears as the empirical universe characterised by the diversity of names and forms, which are, however, mere limitations superimposed by human subjectivity onto the indivisible Brahman (Hiriyanna 1973, p. 158). While the first reading, in other words, has a distinctive Berkeleyean flavour, Śaṁkara in some passages clearly rejects a certain Buddhist view that 'external' objects are merely aggregates of psychic phenomena. While the Buddhist claims, by appealing to dreams, that the systematicity of our experience can be explained without appealing to external mind-objects objects, Śaṁkara seeks to show that no such coherent account can be provided. Roughly, Śaṁkara argues that dreams are not self-contained experiences, because it is possible to invalidate dreams only from the perspective of the content of waking experience (Ram-Prasad 1993). Some contemporary scholars therefore accept the second more realist interpretation of Śaṁkara and point to passages where he argues that if the world were annihilated at the attainment of liberation, it would have been destroyed by the first person who attained liberation. Therefore, the so-called annihilation of the insubstantial world is to be understood not in terms of a real change, since, as Śaṁkara argues, nobody can annihilate the world with all its entities, but as the dissolution of the names and forms that are mistakenly superimposed onto Brahman. In other words, liberation is a transfigured vision of the plurality of the world's beings as grounded in the foundational unity of Brahman, so that the negation of the world 'is more a transformation, re-organisation and revaluation than wholesale annihilation' (Datta 1963, p. 345). D.R. Satapathy brings together these emphases when he argues that Advaita does not 'denounce distinction at all in favour of a blind monism', but rather 'seeks to grant and uphold distinction through limiting conditions or *upādhis* as recognition of water bubbles, foam and waves in relation to the sea and

thus drives the basic point home that though distinct, the world which is the enjoyed object is non-different from its ultimate unitary ground, *Brahman*' (Satapathy 1992, p. 41).

In light of Śaṁkara's affirmation of the transpersonal Real and his rejection of Buddhist versions of idealism, one could therefore almost attribute to his system a Kantian combination of transcendental idealism and empirical realism. That is, external objects such as pots are 'empirically real', and not merely mirages or dreams, but the condition of possibility for human cognition is the 'transcendentally ideal' foundation of Brahman. However, a crucial difference between the two systems of thought needs to be highlighted at this juncture: while Kant repeatedly restricts the employment of the 12 categories of the understanding to the phenomenal world, the Advaitic tradition argues that the human subject can 'realise' its true noumenal depths. Radhakrishnan's criticism of Kant underscores this crucial difference between their respective systems of idealism. Radhakrishnan argues that Kant imposed 'arbitrary limits' on the scope of human knowledge when he restricted the mind's ability to know things as they are: 'If Kant denied this privilege of intuitive understanding to man it is due to his intellectualism…' (Radhakrishnan 1932, p. 131). He argues that unity and interconnection are not subjectively constituted aspects of the world, but are true of objects as they are in themselves. The point about 'arbitrary limits' takes us back to the thorny question of the noumenon which Kant, in one passage, characterised both negatively and positively: 'If by a noumenon we understand a thing insofar as it is not an object of our sensible intuition, because we abstract from the manner of our intuition of it, then this is a noumenon in the negative sense. But if we understand by that an object of a non-sensible intuition, then we assume a special kind of intuition, namely intellectual intuition, which, however, is not our own, and the possibility of which we cannot understand, and this would be the noumenon in a positive sense' (Kant 1997, pp. 360–61). Kant argues that this intellectual intuition is reserved for God, a restriction that Radhakrishnan views as arbitrary: the noumenon for the Advaitic tradition is the objectively Real, transcendent ultimate and human beings can realise their essential non-difference from the unitary Real.

Radhakrishnan and Hick—via Kant

The crucial disagreement between Radhakrishnan and Kant over the epistemic powers of the mind is therefore related to their alternate ontologies. While both Radhakrishnan and Hick work with 'two-aspect' interpretations of the relation between the Real and the phenomenal in their readings of Śaṁkara and Kant, respectively, their divergent metaphysical schemes lead to distinctive reconstructions of religious diversity.

Radhakrishnan elaborates the realist interpretation of Śaṁkara referred to above and views the phenomenal world (*māyā*) as possessing some measure of reality, because it is grounded in the underlying supreme Reality (Radhakrishnan 1960, p. 156). While the imperfect transient world is not as Real as Brahman, Radhakrishnan insists that it is not 'a mere mirage' (Radhakrishnan 1923, p. 463). However, while the empirical world is always grounded in the transcendent Reality, unenlightened human beings see it as unmoored from its true ground and as splintered into numerous disconnected objects. The separative consciousness is the ignorance (*avidyā*) that must be overcome in the

manner in which one's illusory experience of a snake is overcome when its true ground, the rope, is cognized. The ultimate Reality Brahman underlies all finite reality, and 'the appearance of plurality is due to the intellect which works according to the laws of space, time and causality' (Radhakrishnan 1923, p. 574).

Radhakrishnan's understanding of the relationship between the transcendent and the phenomenal world can therefore be characterised as 'two-aspect': the same ultimate Reality appears under human conditions of imperfection as split into many. Radhakrishnan argues: 'The pluralistic universe is an error of judgement. Correction of the error means change of opinion. The rope appears as a snake, and when the illusion is over, the snake returns to the rope. So does the world of experience become transfigured in the intuition of Brahman. The world is not so much negated as reinterpreted' (Radhakrishnan 1923, p. 583). Furthermore, for Radhakrishnan, in line with Advaitic thought, the empirical world includes the gods of personal theistic traditions which are human imaginative constructs superimposed onto the highest Reality, the qualityless ultimate (Raju 1985, p. 395). Therefore, while the God of personal theism is not completely unrelated to the Absolute, in that the former is grounded in the latter, nevertheless 'God is the Absolute from the human end. When we limit down the absolute to its relation with the actual possibility [of the universe], the Absolute appears as supreme Wisdom, Love and Goodness' (Radhakrishnan 1932, p. 273). Employing the Advaitic notion of degrees of reality, Radhakrishnan argues that the world, which is an effect of Brahman, the transcendent cause, is less real than Brahman. Here, he follows the post-Śaṁkara Advaita definition of the Real as 'unsublatable throughout the three times (i.e., past, present and future)' (Potter 1963, p. 221). God, an inhabitant of the phenomenal world, is therefore less real than the transpersonal Real which is beyond all human experiences structured by dualities. Consequently, Radhakrishnan affirmed that there is a graduated scale of interpreting the religious experiences of humanity with the theistic notions at a lower level than the transpersonal or the monistic: 'The assumption of a personal God as the ground of being and creator of the universe is the first stage of the obscuring and restriction of the vision which immediately perceives the great illumination of Reality' (Radhakrishnan 1967, p. 122).

Brahman and the empirical world of personal theism are therefore not two different *kinds* of entities—the latter, derivatively real, remains ontologically parasitic on the former, the foundational ground of being. The Advaitic doctrine of degrees of being thus enables Radhakrishnan to place the God of theism in a domain that is neither absolutely real, nor absolutely unreal, namely, the phenomenal world (*māyā*). However, because his Kantian strictures on the noumenon do not allow him to operate with such a metaphysic, Hick has to grapple with the dilemma of consigning the *personae* and the *impersonae* to sheer unreality (which would push his system in the direction of non-cognitivist interpretations of religious discourse) and locating them in the Real *an sich* (which would import substantive properties to the Real). His views about the status of the *personae* have therefore been read in widely divergent ways. As we noted above, while Mavrodes once took Hick to be a polytheist, in his reponse to Hick's rejoinder he argued that the *personae* seem to have 'at best a very tenuous and weak reality' (Mavrodes 1997, p. 290). From Radhakrishnan's point of view, the *personae* would have precisely such a 'weak reality', because they belong to the conventionally real domain of everyday waking experience structured by norms and conventions, which

should not be viewed as completely unreal (*tucchika*) because it is rooted in the ultimately real (Shastri 1936, p. 18).

The Ineffable in Hick and Advaita

Given the distinctive metaphysical foundations of the intellectual systems of Hick and Radhakrishnan, it follows that while both of them speak of the transcendent reality with negative qualifiers such as 'indescribable,' 'ineffable,' 'inexpressible,' 'incommunicable' and so on, they operate with somewhat divergent notions of ineffability. A pointer to this difference is provided by Hick's attempt to incorporate the distinction between Brahman as personal (*saguṇa Brahman*) and Brahman as transpersonal (*nirguṇa Brahman*) into his pluralist hypothesis: 'Theologically, the Hindu distinction between Nirguna Brahman and Saguna Brahman is important and should be adopted into western religious thought. Detaching the distinction … from its Hindu context we may say that Nirguna Brahman is the eternal self-existent divine reality, beyond the scope of all human categories, including personality; and Saguna God is God in relation to his [*sic*] creation and with the attributes which express this relationship, such as personality, omnipotence, goodness, love and omniscience' (Hick 1973, p. 144). As we have seen, Radhakrishnan can strike a similar note when he argues that God is the Absolute from the human point of view; however, Radhakrishnan also affirms that God, who is within the sway of human cognitive and spiritual experience, occupies a lower mode of reality than the trans-categoreal Absolute.

A key question that the Advaitic tradition therefore has struggled with is how to speak about the transpersonal Absolute to which no human categories apply. As some philosophers have pointed out, a strong doctrine of ineffability which states that absolutely nothing can be said about the transcendent is in danger of becoming self-referentially incoherent in seemingly asserting that the transcendent is beyond all human categories. In response to this problem, Chien-Hsing Ho argues that when we state that the Real is 'unsayable' this word does not, on the one hand, touch the Real, for no words can encompass or circumscribe the Real, and, on the other hand, does indeed affirm its unsayability (Ho 2006). Ho's argument can be strengthened by noting how religious traditions such as Roman Catholicism and Advaita Vedānta both argue that the Real cannot be touched by human concepts and identify the Real from within a metaphysical system which provides patterns of argumentation as to why the Real is ineffable. For instance, according to Aquinas, simplicity is an ontological property of God; that is, we do know that God is in fact such that the divine nature which is infinite contains no parts, no distinctions and no complexities (Ward 1990, p. 6). Therefore, when Aquinas speaks of God as ineffable, he claims not that nothing whatsoever can be said about God—rather, terms that denote positive perfections do apply to God provided that they are applied analogically, given the utter simplicity of the divine nature. The doctrines of simplicity and infinity of God in the Christian tradition should therefore be understood to mean that we cannot know all of the divine and not that there is such a radical incommensurability between human concepts and the divine that we can never know anything of the divine (Eddy 1994, p. 471).

The view that there is some analogy between human concepts and the ultimate Real appears also in the Advaitic tradition which has to grapple with a tension between, on

the one hand, texts from the Upaniṣads which state that Brahman is the ineffable ultimate from which all words turn back (*Taittirīya Upaniṣad* II.7.1) and, on the other hand, the tradition's understanding that scripture points toward the Real. A classic instance of how Śaṁkara deals with these exegetical strands is his interpretation of the text 'Brahman is reality (*satyam*), knowledge (*jñānam*), infinite (*anantam*)' (*Taittirīya Upaniṣad* II.1.1). Julius Lipner argues that Śaṁkara's interpretation should be taken as providing both a definition of Brahman and also facilitating an 'oblique predication' (*lakṣaṇā*) about the nature of Brahman (Lipner 1997). Śaṁkara's key exegetical move depends on distinguishing between the role of adjectival qualifiers (*viśeṣaṇa*) in ordinary discourse which is to distinguish between members of the same class (for instance, a red lotus and not a blue one) and their role in definitions which is to distinguish the subject from everything else (so 'reality', 'knowledge' and 'infinite' applied to Brahman have primarily an excluding function). Therefore, in the definition, 'reality' indicates that Brahman is the originary unchanging cause and not a phenomenal entity, and 'knowledge' that Brahman is not an unconscious first cause of everything. Thirdly, the definition supplies 'infinite' to highlight the point that the 'knowledge' in question relates not to everyday cognition which involve a finite knower and an object known, but to the foundational ground of Brahman in which there are no internal divisions between being and knowing. In short, the positive qualifiers 'reality' and 'knowledge' retain their proper meanings (*svārtha*) and can be applied to Brahman provided their empirical meanings are carefully purified through the use of the term *anantam* which cautions us that Brahman is beyond all empirical finitude. As Lipner concludes, in Śaṁkara's exegesis, Brahman emerges as 'utterly transcendent yet not as utterly unknowable' (Lipner 1997, p. 314).

Śaṁkara's solution to the dilemma of speaking 'about' an ineffable Brahman is rooted, therefore, in his understanding of a definition as functioning in two ways: a positive function of indicating the proper form (*svarūpa*) of the definiendum and a negative function of distinguishing it from everything else. We now return to a point that we highlighted earlier about the substantial property of ultimacy that implicitly characterises the Real *an sich*, in spite of Hick's emphasis that only formal properties can be attributed to the Real. Since various religious traditions such as Roman Catholicism, Advaita Vedānta, Islam and so on speak of the ultimate as ineffable, we are faced with the question of whether we are dealing with one or many such ultimates. Hick's affirmation that all these ultimates proposed from within diverse religious traditions are centred in one originative ground, the Real *an sich*, suggests that the Real is a self-existing ultimate principle. Such a suggestion is reinforced by his view that while the Real is not a 'thing', it is not nothing either, and is the 'blessed unselfcentred state which is our highest good' (Hick 1995, p. 60). In fact, in certain places, Hick's comments on the ineffable Real suggest that he does allow some measure of analogy between the phenomenal expressions of the Real and the Real *an sich*. He argues, for instance, that the Real is good in the sense that the sun, from our human point of view, is good, friendly, and life-giving. Likewise, the Real, because it is the necessary condition of our existence and flourishing, can be said to be good, mythologically and not literally, in relation to us (Hick 1995, p. 63). In other words, the attempts of Hick and Śaṁkara to approach the ineffable show that in both their conceptual systems, apophaticism is densely woven into a pattern of metaphysical–epistemological arguments that enable us to somehow identify the ultimate.

Hick and Radhakrishnan on Religious Diversity

Our discussion in preceding sections has highlighted both certain parallels and divergences between the theological-philosophical reconstructions of religious diversity in Hick and Radhakrishnan. Both speak of the need to overcome religious 'exclusivism' which is associated with violence, intolerance and persecution of dissent, and seek to foster interreligious cooperation by orienting the world's religions around a transcendent source. However, as our discussion of the views of Hick and Radhakrishnan on the Kantian noumenon–phenomenon distinction reveals, their respective reconstructions of religious diversity originate in two distinctive traditions—one an attempt to combine neo-Kantian insights with the phenomenology of religion and the other a reconstruction of classical Advaita.

The crucial differences between Hick and Radhakrishnan can now be summarized. Following a 'two-aspect' interpretation of Kant, Hick argues that human beings develop, through the employment of their cultural categories, their distinctive responses to the Real *an sich* of which they cannot have unmediated knowledge. Radhakrishnan's metaphysics is ultimately drawn from Śaṁkara and he argues that in spiritual experience, the phenomenal human subject recovers its true non-duality with the noumenal Brahman. Therefore, Hendrik Vroom rightly points out that Hick's 'pluralist hypothesis entails a radical reinterpretation of the Advaita Vedānta evaluation of the personal Brahman, which considers saguna Brahman as lower than the impersonal nirguna Brahman …' (Vroom 1990, p. 81). Hick himself noted that his pluralist hypothesis is 'significantly different' from Advaita with which it has 'partial resemblance' (Hick 1980, p. 110).

We have indicated, via our discussion of the status of the Kantian noumenon, that this significant difference ultimately stems from their competing metaphysical schemes, which imply two distinct notions of religious experience. Hick's interpretation of religion starts not from the Advaitic Absolute but from his claim that there is a rough salvific parity, understood in terms of moral and spiritual progress, across the religious traditions (Hick 1995, p. 48). His hypothesis is developed 'inductively, from ground level' by examining the world's religious traditions, and observing that they are roughly at par so far as their moral and spiritual fruits are concerned (Hick 1995, p. 50). Interestingly, Radhakrishnan too invoked a similar moral criterion in arguing that religious traditions are to be judged in terms not of their theological affirmations, social structures or ritual practices but of their ability to foster transforming experiences of self-realization. However, for Radhakrishnan, the experience in question is one in which the sense of a duality between the knower and the known dissolves in the realisation of their deeper identity. At the core of all religious traditions lies this mystical experience (*anubhava*) consisting of an undifferentiated non-duality between the finite self and the transpersonal Brahman (Radhakrishnan 1927, p. 13). The religious traditions of the world indirectly suggest, through their linguistic apparatus, cultural formations and symbolic mechanisms, this integrative experience in which all dualities are sublated. Therefore, all views of the one reality are not on an epistemic par, and he outlines a scale starting from animistic notions to the Advaita Vedānta conception of the Absolute. In his famous words, 'The worshippers of the Absolute are the highest in rank; second to them are the worshippers of the personal God; then come the worshippers of the incarnations like Rama…; below them are those who worship

ancestors, deities and sages, and the lowest of all are the worshippers of the petty forces and spirits' (Radhakrishnan 1927, p. 32).

Conclusion

Our comparative discussion of Hick and Radhakrishnan reveals the gains and the losses, from an epistemic point of view, of two divergent reconstructions of religious diversity. Hick's hypothesis is more capacious in that no metaphysical description developed from within the world's major religious traditions is accepted as an accurate representation of the Real, and all these traditions are at par so far as they are contexts promoting the negation of self-absorption. For Hick, even in unitive mysticism of the type intimated by Advaita, what is encountered is not the Real *an sich* but a certain manifestation of the Real. However, precisely because this Real is substantially vacuous, Hick's hypothesis is riddled with various instabilities relating to the metaphysical status of the *personae* and the *impersonae*, the opposing pulls between a realist strand and a constructivist strand and so on. Radhakrishnan's response to religious diversity, in contrast, is more adequately characterised not as a philosophical hypothesis but a theologically-grounded reflection on the significance of this diversity. Because the Kantian strictures that regulate Hick's hypothesis do not operate in his conceptual system, Radhakrishnan is able to employ an Advaitin doctrine of degrees of being to characterise the *personae* as constituents of the derivatively real phenomenal world. While the personal gods of the theistic traditions are human constructs, they are rooted in the transpersonal Real. Further, the claim that spiritual experience, understood in distinctively Advaitic terms, is at the centre of all the world's religious traditions provides Radhakrishnan with a much 'thicker' criterion than Hick's substantially empty Real through which to view religious diversity.

While Radhakrishnan's conceptual system, centred around the Advaitic transpersonal Absolute, is not structured by the same set of tensions that riddle Hick's pluralism, it has to deal, of course, with precisely the question that Hick could sidestep by postulating his ineffable Real—how to establish the cognitive superiority of the Advaita standpoint over its competitors, namely, personal theistic faiths such as Christianity, Islam and so on. A crucial question that we need to raise at this point is the hermeneutical distance between Śaṁkara and Radhakrishnan, who is widely viewed as a representative of *modern* Hinduism. In some presentations of Radhakrishnan's thought, he is regarded as having excised the world-negating aspects of Śaṁkara and given Advaita a this-worldly orientation. However, several scholars have interrogated the view that Śaṁkara denies the empirical reality of the phenomenal world: they have pointed out that Śaṁkara himself criticised certain forms of Buddhist subjective idealism and that Śaṁkara emphasised that the world is an insubstantial illusion (*māyā*) only from the perspective of transcendental realization (Grant 1999; Malkovsky 2000). In fact, the difference between the two figures revolves around the question not of the empirical reality of the phenomenal world, but of whether 'religious experience' needs to be located on a scriptural horizon. While Radhakrishnan suggests that all human beings can have access, unmediated by their cultural backgrounds, to the liberating experience of Advaita, Śaṁkara located the possibility of liberating knowledge within a specific culture that was constituted by scripture, reliable authorities,

performance of one's caste-duties and so on. It is this interwoven texture of teacher, tradition and text that provides the 'external circuitry' for mental cultivation which is a necessary antecedent to enlightenment. Modern Advaitins such Radhakrishnan sometimes invert this order of priority by suggesting that there is a pre-linguistic 'experience' which is universally accessible to all individuals and is not inflected by any cultural moorings (Forsthoefel 2002). In this vein, Swami Vivekananda sometimes claimed that the Vedas were a repository of the spiritual experiences (*anubhava*) of gifted human beings, who are able to verify these laws through a direct apprehension and not a mere study of the scriptural texts (Rambachan 1994, p. 60). Similarly, Radhakrishnan's own understanding of 'experience' seems to have been drawn not only from *Upaniṣadic* sources but also thinkers as widely varied as F.H. Bradley and Baron von Hügel (Halbfass 1988, p. 398). However, while Radhakrishnan believed that the Vedas are the records of the experiences of the sages who were the 'pioneer researchers' in the realm of the spirit, Wilhelm Halbfass (1988, p. 388) has argued that in classical Indian thought the Vedas are viewed not as a summary of personal experiences but as an objective structure within which reason, exegesis and meditation played specific roles.

Further, Radhakrishnan's claim that the Advaitic intuitive experience of non-duality with the ultimate is the underlying unity across religious traditions has been criticized on the grounds that he inflicted interpretive violence on the traditions by focusing specifically on only those strands that seem to fit into his vision of a non-dualistic spiritual experience as the vital core of religion (Yandell 1993, pp. 18–21). More importantly for our purposes, Radhakrishnan's selective appropriation of texts in which he discerns glimmerings of Advaitic thought has also been critiqued from the neo-Kantianism of Stephen Katz, which is based on the epistemological principle that all experience is conditioned by cultural and mental patterns so that the process of differentiating patterns of experience into their various symbolic and institutional forms takes place not after but during the experience itself. However, in spite of Katz's intention of being faithful to 'the richness of the experiential and conceptual data' (Katz 1978, p. 66) in question, it has been argued that his primary assumption that there can be no non-conceptual pure experience denies the particularity of the truth-claims of a number of Indic traditions such as Hindu yoga and Buddhism. Without trying to settle this debate, it is important to note in this context that, while Radhakrishnan argued that such a supra-conceptual experience is the vital reality of the world religions, in one sense his position does accept the Kantian dichotomy between the ineffable noumenal reality and its phenomenal manifestations. He emphasized the importance of cultural traditions in shaping human ideas about reality and held, in Kantian style, that religious experience is the 'presentment of the real already influenced by the ideas and prepossessions of the perceiving mind' (Radhakrishnan 1927, p. 19). Nevertheless, the difference between Radhakrishnan and Kant emerges when he goes on to affirm that the 'prepossessions' that lead certain individuals to interpret this experience through theistic categories are ultimately distortive of the nature of noumenal reality, which, unlike Kant, Radhakrishnan held to be accessible to the enlightened seers of humanity (Radhakrishnan 1932, pp. 130–34). In short, Radhakrishnan's view that the intuitive experience that he indicated was available to figures such as the Buddha, Plato, Philo, Hillel, and the medieval mystics of Islam was based on a very specific conceptualization of such experience as leading to a nondual realization of one's unity with the ultimate reality that has no distinctions.

Therefore, while Hick's and Radhakrishnan's reimaginings of the religious traditions are ones that their adherents would usually reject, their revisions are structured by alternate metaphysical schemes (Netland 1986, p 255). For Hick, this is the 'thin' combination of a Kantian ineffable Real and a moral criterion of self-negation; Radhakrishnan uses a similar moral criterion which is, however, located within the relatively 'thicker' framework of anti-Kantian Advaitin metaphysics. The analysis of their revisions, structured by two ultimately divergent criteria, reinforces a point that some scholars have emphasised, namely, that Hick's pluralism is built around specific, and often highly contested, metaphysical–epistemological normative presuppositions. However, the presence of these presuppositions in itself does not imply that Hick is an 'exclusivist', for Hick's 'thin' ontology denies what Radhakrishnan's relatively 'thicker' ontology affirms, that one specific conceptualisation of the ultimate has greater salvific/liberative efficacy than the others. Our analysis therefore shows that future builders of systems of religious pluralism would have to balance the epistemic costs and benefits of 'thick' and 'thin' ontologies, and since such balances are usually of the finer types, debates over the conceptual plausibility of such pluralisms are unlikely to arrive at knock-down resolutions.

References

Adams, R. M. (1997). Things in Themselves. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 57*, 801–825.

Allison, H. (1983). *Kant's transcendental idealism*. Connecticut: Yale University Press.

Alston, W. (1995). Realism and the Christian Faith. *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion, 38*, 37–60.

Ameriks, K. (1982). Recent Work on Kant's Theoretical Philosophy. *American Philosophical Quarterly, 19*, 1–24.

Barnes, L. P. (1983). Towards a Theology of World Religions: An Outline and Assessment of the work of John Hick. *Churchman, 97*, 216–231.

D'Costa, G. (1991). John Hick and Religious Pluralism: Yet another Revolution. In H. Hewitt (Ed.), *Problems in the Philosophy of Religion: Critical Studies of the Work of John Hick* (pp. 3–18). New York: St Martin's.

Datta, D. M. (1963). *Some Realistic Aspects of the Philosophy of Śaṁkara. In Kalidas Bhattacharya (Ed.), Recent Indian Philosophy (pp. 341–50) vol. 1*. Calcutta: Progressive Publishers.

Eddy, P. R. (1994). Religious pluralism and the divine: Another look at John Hick's Neo-Kantian Proposal. *Religious Studies, 30*, 467–478.

Forsthoefel, T. A. (2002). *Knowing beyond knowledge*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Gardner, S. (1999). *Kant and the critique of pure reason*. London: Routledge.

Grant, S. (1999). *Śaṁkarācārya's concept of relation*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Halbfass, W. (1988). *India and Europe: an essay in understanding*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Hasker, W. (2011). *The Many Gods of Hick and Mavrodes. In Kelly James Clark and Raymond J. VanArragon (Eds), Evidence and Religious Belief. (pp. 186–98)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hedges, P. (2008). A reflection on typologies: Negotiating a fast-moving discussion. In P. Hedges & A. Race (Eds.), *Christian approaches to other faiths* (pp. 17–33). London: SCM.

Heim, S. M. (2001). *The depth of the riches*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans.

Hick, J. (1973). *God and the Universe of Faiths*. London: Macmillan.

Hick, J. (1980). *God has many names*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.

Hick, J. (1985). *Problems of religious pluralism*. New York: St. Martin's.

Hick, J. (1995). *The rainbow of faiths: Critical dialogues on religious pluralism*. London: SCM Press.

Hick, J. (1997). The epistemological challenge of religious pluralism. *Faith and Philosophy, 14*, 277–286.

Hick, J. (2000). Religious pluralism and salvation. In P. L. Quinn & K. Meeker (Eds.), *The philosophical challenge of religious diversity* (pp. 54–66). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hick, J. (2004). *An Interpretation of religion: Human responses to the transcendent*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
Hiriyanna, M. (1973). *Essentials of Indian philosophy*. Bombay: Blackie & Son.
Ho, C.-H. (2006). Saying the unsayable. *Philosophy East and West, 56*, 409–427.
Janz, P. D. (2004). *God, the mind's desire: Reference, reason and Christian thinking*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Kant, I. (1997). *The critique of pure reason, translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Katz, S. (Ed.). (1978). *Mysticism and philosophical Analysis*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Knitter, P. F. (1987). Toward a liberation theology of religions. In J. Hick & P. F. Knitter (Eds.), *The myth of Christian uniqueness* (pp. 178–200). London: SCM.
Lipner, J. (1997). Śaṁkara on *Satyam Jñānam Anantam Brahma*. In P. Bilimoria & J. N. Mohanty (Eds.), *Relativism, suffering and beyond: Essays in memory of Bimal K. Matilal* (pp. 301–318). Delhi: Oxford University Press.
Mahadevan, T. M. P. (1957). *The philosophy of Advaita*. London: Luzac and Co.
Malkovsky, B. (Ed.). (2000). *New perspectives on Advaita Vedanta*. Leiden: Brill.
Mavrodes, G. (1997). A response to John Hick. *Faith and Philosophy, 14*, 289–294.
Netland, H. A. (1986). Professor Hick on Religious Pluralism. *Religious Studies, 22*, 249–261.
Palmquist, S. R. (1993). *Kant's system of perspectives: an architectonic interpretation of the critical philosophy*. Lanham: University Press of America.
Plantinga, A. (2000). *Warranted Christian belief*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Potter, K. H. (1963). *Presuppositions of India's philosophies*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
Race, A. (1983). *Christians and religious pluralism*. London: SCM.
Radhakrishnan, S. (1923). *Indian philosophy* (Vol. 2). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Radhakrishnan, S. (1927). *The Hindu view of life*. London: Unwin Paperbacks.
Radhakrishnan, S. (1932). *An Idealist view of life*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
Radhakrishnan, S. (1960). *The Brahma Sutra: the philosophy of spiritual life*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
Radhakrishnan, S. (1967). *Religion in a changing world*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.
Raju, P. T. (1985). *Structural depths of Indian thought*. Delhi: South Asian Publishers.
Rambachan, A. (1994). *The limits of scripture*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
Ram-Prasad, C. (1993). Dreams and reality: The Śaṅkarite Critique of Vijñānavada. *Philosophy East and West, 43*, 405–455.
Satapathy, D. R. (1992). *The Doctrine of Māyā in Advaita Vedānta*. Calcutta: Punthi Pustak.
Shastri, A. B. (1936). *Post- Śaṁkara Dialectics*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta.
Singh, R. S. (1966). Radhakrishnan's substantial reconstruction of the Vedānta of Śaṁkara. *Philosophy East and West, 16*, 5–32.
Vroom, H. M. (1990). Do all religious traditions worship the same God? *Religious Studies, 26*, 73–90.
Ward, K. (1990). Truth and the diversity of religions. *Religious Studies, 26*, 1–18.
Westphal, M. (1968). In defence of the thing in itself. *Kant-Studien, 59*, 118–141.
Wilkerson, T. E. (1976). *Kant's critique of pure reason*. Oxford: Clarendon.
Wood, A. (2005). *Kant*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing.
Yandell, K. E. (1993). *The epistemology of religious experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.