

Paradox and Paradigms: defending the case for a revolution in theology of religions

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In a recent article in *New Blackfriars*, Gavin D'Costa argued that Professor John Hick's call for a Copernican revolution in the Christian theology of religions is both unnecessary and incoherent.¹ It is unnecessary because the paradox it is intended to resolve can be met without radically changing Christianity's traditional self-understanding; and incoherent because it assumes a premise denied by its conclusion, namely the Christian conception of an all-loving God definitively revealed in Jesus Christ. Thus Hick has shown little reason to change the traditional Christian paradigm of the world religions from a Ptolemaic to a Copernican model of the universe of faiths; from a system with Christ and his church at the centre, around which the other religions revolve, to a Copernican model with all the religions, including Christianity, revolving around the central mystery of ultimate reality.² It must be said that D'Costa's critique is both powerful and ingenious. But is it correct?

In order to answer our question we must first assess whether or not Hick's argument has been adequately represented. For we will be in danger of wrongly dismissing Hick's call for a Copernican revolution if we have not rightly understood the reasons which have led him to make it. And it is precisely at this point that we may suspect several of Hick's commentators and critics, including D'Costa, of misunderstanding the nature and force of the considerations that weigh with Hick—and should be weighed by us when considering his proposal.

What does D'Costa put on the scales? On one side he places the assertion that for Hick, Ptolemaic theology 'consigns the majority of mankind to "everlasting fire"'³ because it proclaims that 'all men, of whatever race or culture, must become Christians if they are to be saved'.⁴ This is the traditional teaching of the Christian Church, enshrined in the axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.⁵ But this teaching is paradoxical, since, because most people do not become Christian, it conflicts with the Christian belief in an all-loving God and his universal salvific will. This is the paradox of the axiom. To overcome it Hick proposes abandoning Christian exclusivity, and embracing a new paradigm of the world religions. 'The main argument used by

Hick for this important shift is that a “God of love who seeks to save all mankind” could not have, as the Christian teaching implies, “ordained that men must be saved in such a way that only a small minority can in fact receive this salvation”.⁶ Hick confronts us with an ‘either/or choice between the Ptolemaic and Copernican views’.⁷

Against Hick’s proposal, on the other side of the scales, D’Costa argues for a middle way between the Scylla and Charybdis of Ptolemaic absolutism and Copernican relativism—a Catholic inclusivism, best typified by Karl Rahner’s notion of the anonymous Christian. The basic idea is to disarm the traditional axiom by extending the meaning of ‘church’ to include all those people who, while not explicit members of the Christian church, are of ‘goodwill’. D’Costa argues that such an inclusivist interpretation of the axiom has a long and venerable history within the tradition of Ptolemaic Christianity. He charges Hick with neglecting the ‘development and context’ of this history and of thereby distorting its meaning.⁸

Thus stated, D’Costa’s argument must carry weight with us. For clearly, Rahnerian inclusivism, or any other of several varieties, overcomes the paradox of the axiom which is said to be the central reason for Hick’s proposed Copernican revolution, and without sacrificing the traditional understanding of Christ’s definitive salvific status.⁹ But has D’Costa placed the correct weights on the scale? Does Hick set up a paradox and then insist that we resolve it by choosing between two extremes?

Hick certainly appears to do this when he writes that ‘the whole problem of religious pluralism has arisen, for Western thinkers, from recognising the prohibitive cost of the old Christian presumption of a monopoly of saving truth. This presumption generated the paradox of a God of universal love who has ordained that only the Christian minority of the human race can be saved. It is precisely this paradox that has called for a “Copernican revolution” in our Christian theology of religions’.¹⁰ But this short passage must be read in the light of Hick’s more carefully considered and extended statements of his position, and not apart from them. When this is done it is evident that, for Hick, the paradox of the axiom only arises for exclusivist, and not inclusivist, interpretations of the axiom.¹¹ The latter resolve the paradox of the former. They modify exclusivist interpretations of the axiom by enlarging the enclosure of the exclusive/inclusive term—the church. These inclusivist modifications Hick calls Ptolemaic epicycles, because they maintain a Christocentric paradigm of the universe of faiths in much the same way as Ptolemaic planetary theory was maintained by an increasingly elaborate system of deferents, excentrics, and epicycles. Examples of such Ptolemaic epicycles are the appeal to invincible ignorance; the appeal to ‘implicit faith’ and ‘baptism by desire’; Karl Rahner’s notion of the

anonymous Christian; Hans Küng's ordinary and extra-ordinary ways of salvation; and the idea of eschatological evangelisation.¹² These are all *inclusivist* Ptolemaic theologies, and they all resolve the paradox of axiom.

But then how can Hick argue for a Copernican revolution, as the resolution of the paradox of the axiom, if the paradox is equally well resolved by *inclusivist* Ptolemaic theology? The simple answer is that he does not, since the paradox is not the basis of his argument. It can do no more than point toward, or call for, a Copernican revolution. Other considerations lead beyond *exclusivist* and *inclusivist* theology to the new Copernican paradigm of the universe of faiths.

Hick does not present a single decisive argument in favour of a Copernican revolution, but rather a number of phenomenological considerations.¹³ These considerations are the observed similarity, and the cultural specificity, of the world religions. Hick points to his own experience of different religious communities and their worship. In mosque, synagogue, temple and gurdwara, he 'came to see as evident that essentially the same activity takes place in them as in a Christian church: human beings meet, within the framework of a particular religious culture, to open their spirits to a higher reality which is regarded both as being the source of all their good and as making a total claim upon the living of their lives'.¹⁴ Further, the world religions are perceived as culturally specific. 'That is to say, if someone is born to Muslim parents in Egypt or Pakistan, he or she is very likely to be a Muslim; if to Buddhist parents in Sri Lanka or Burma, a Buddhist; if to Hindu parents in India, a Hindu; if to Christian parents in Europe, North America or Australasia, he or she is very likely to be a Christian'.¹⁵ Thus the forms of religious faith are relative to cultural context. And it is not possible, without begging the question, to evaluate between the world religions, considered as distinct totalities and perceived as separate relativities, on the basis of one particular religious tradition.¹⁶ It is the failure of Ptolemaic theology, whether *exclusivist* or *inclusivist*, to do justice to the phenomena of the world religions, which suggests the need for a new paradigm of the universe of faiths.

Two points may be made about the phenomenological considerations which weigh with Hick in his call for a Copernican revolution, and the conclusions which he draws from them. First, it is presupposed that the world religions are all genuine responses to authentic experience of ultimate reality. This presupposition is what Hick calls the 'basic religious conviction', by which he means the 'conviction that the realm of religious experience and belief is our human response to a transcendent divine reality or realities. It is the conviction, in other words, that religion is not, as a totality, illusion and self-deception'.¹⁷ Secondly, there is no contradiction in holding,

on the one hand, that the world religions are phenomenologically similar (and have a common reference) and, on the other hand, that they are culturally specific relativities. For the latter perception does not rule out the former comparison. To say that the world religions are relative, is not to say that they are incomparable. It is only to say that they cannot be compared within a single neutral framework, and that no one religion can be established as the basis of such a framework.¹⁸

Thus what is for Hick the evident similarity, in form and function, of the world's religious traditions, constitutes a phenomenological imperative for an adequate theory of world religion. And for Hick this imperative is better met by a Copernican, than by a Ptolemaic theology. It might be said that a Copernican theology is the more elegant, Ptolemaic theologies being complex and messy.¹⁹

But if Hick's argument for a Copernican revolution in the Christian theology of religions stands on other ground than D'Costa has supposed, what of D'Costa's other criticisms, that Hick is less than just in his treatment of the Ptolemaic tradition, and that his argument is incoherent? Let us take the historical issue first.

There is good reason to think that Hick is less cavalier in his treatment of the Ptolemaic tradition than his detractors have suggested. It is true that in quoting strict interpretations of the axiom from Pope Boniface VIII's bull *Unam Sanctum* and from the Council of Florence, classic texts of rigorous Ptolemaic exclusivism, Hick does not refer to the earlier history of the axiom's interpretation. But then it is not clear why the 'original intention and meaning'²⁰ of the axiom is pertinent to the meaning it had for Boniface VIII and the Council of Florence. It is not evident that the only correct interpretation of the axiom is that attained by a recognitive hermeneutic (*à la* Schleiermacher), as if it had one single, identifiable meaning. To say what the axiom meant in the second to fifth centuries, as D'Costa is concerned to do,²¹ is not to say what it meant in subsequent centuries. It is not to say what it meant for the church from the Middle Ages, and especially from the sixteenth century onwards, when the relationship of Christianity to non-Christian religion and culture was becoming ever more problematic. Further, there is no reason to suppose that Hick's short survey of the axiom's interpretation does not accord with D'Costa's account of the intention and use of the axiom in the second to fifth centuries; either with the claim that the axiom was formulated in faithfulness to the central idea that there is no salvation except through Christ, or that it was directly used in controversy with schismatics.

One cannot help suspect the reduction of what is, when all is said and done, the axiom's defining distinction between the saved and the

damned, namely those within and without the church, of being an attempt to suggest a greater degree of consistency and coherence between the axiom's earlier and later interpretations. But such a suggestion is not felicitous. What the axiom meant for Cyprian is something very different from what it meant for someone like Karl Rahner or Jacques Maritain. For Cyprian it meant that salvation was only for baptised members of the institutional church. Whereas, in a creative and extensive re-interpretation, all it meant for Maritain 'is that there is no salvation outside the Truth. ...every man of good faith and right will, provided he does not sin against the light and does not refuse the grace interiorly offered to him, belongs ... to the Soul of the Church'.²² The hermeneutical history of the axiom is illustrative of the fact that, as George Tyrrell noted, 'the dogmas of the Church ... change their sense, if not necessarily their expression, with the ages to which they are addressed'.²³

With regard to the charge that Hick's argument is incoherent D'Costa adduces two reasons. The first is that 'the decisive argument justifying the Copernican shift requires an all-loving God'²⁴—a requirement which can only be grounded in a Christian Ptolemaic theology. Hick's argument assumes what it later denies. But as we have seen above, Hick does not advance the argument with which D'Costa credits him. So it is not evident that Hick's argument does require a Christian conception of God. And in fact it does not, as we shall see below.

The second reason for incoherence is that Hick's Copernican eschatology only makes sense on the basis of a Christian Ptolemaic theology. According to D'Costa, Hick's eschatology describes a Christian God at the centre of the universe of faiths, thus maintaining the very Christocentrism which a Copernican revolution is intended to replace!²⁵ But this criticism rests upon a dubious reading of Hick's texts. It overlooks an important distinction between Hick's Ptolemaic Christian Irenaean Theodicy and his Copernican Global Theology of Death and Eternal Life.²⁶ The Ptolemaic theodicy and the Copernican eschatology are distinct and self-contained eschatological theories, both having a common hypothetical status. Developed at different times, and in response to different problematics, they are legitimately viewed as separate entities. Consequently, it is illegitimate, without due notice and warrant, to confuse propositions from one with those from the other. If this distinction is observed, evidence from the Christian theodicy cannot be imported into the global eschatology and then criticised for being incompatible with other parts of the eschatology. It would be like importing Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* into the *Investigations*, and then criticising the latter while citing the former.²⁷ It is thus necessary to show that the Copernican eschatology, and not the Ptolemaic theodicy, assumes a Christian God at the centre

of the universe of faiths.²⁸

The claim that Hick's Copernican eschatology assumes, even requires, a Christian Ptolemaic conception of God as personal Lord, is *prima facie* suspect. For Hick's global eschatology is explicitly hypothetical, the projection of a possibility. As such it is open to clarification, revision, and even dismissal. In *Death and Eternal Life* Hick puts forward a Hindu/Christian conception of God as personal Lord, distinct from his creation. But he states that he does not there wish to argue for such a conception of ultimate reality, he only wishes to suggest that the eschaton will be the 'unity of mankind in a state in which the ego-aspect of individual consciousness has been left behind and the relational aspect has developed into a total community which is one-in-many and many-in-one'.²⁹ Since this vague suggestion, which contains both personal and non-personal elements, is only a hypothetical possibility, it is difficult to see that it is either avowedly Christian, or assumed by a Copernican paradigm for the universe of faith. Thus it is not evident that Hick's argument for a Copernican revolution is incoherent.

In conclusion, we may observe that Hick's phenomenological approach to world religion requires distance from any and all particular religious traditions. It demands that no *a priori* judgement be brought from within one religious tradition to the observation of all the others. In adopting a phenomenological approach to the world religions, Hick rejects the prejudgement that a Christian cannot legitimately entertain the possibility that the truth may be larger than the Christian Christ and his church. With Maurice Wiles, he finds 'something badly amiss with an approach that involves such a prejudgement of the issue'.³⁰

Hick notes that any religious tradition may constitute a Ptolemaic system, and that each such system is culture-specific and historically relative. Acknowledgement of this, Hick believes, renders problematic the conviction that any one Ptolemaic system can provide an adequate basis for the assessment of all other such systems.³¹ This relativist perception provides further authority for a phenomenological approach to world religion.

In short, the related perceptions that Ptolemaic theologies and religious systems are culture-specific and historically relative have led Hick to call for a Copernican revolution in the Christian theology of religions.³² Christian exclusivist Ptolemaic theology generates the paradox of the axiom, which inclusivist Ptolemaic theology resolves, but neither is adequate to the phenomena of world religion. 'It remains possible to retain the Ptolemaic point of view; but when we are conscious of its historical relativity we may well feel the need for a more sophisticated, comprehensive and globally valid theory'.³³

- 1 Gavin D'Costa, 'John Hick's Copernican Revolution: Ten Years After', *New Blackfriars*, 65 (July/August 1984), 323—331.
- 2 The analogy of Ptolemaic and Copernican planetary theories with traditional and revisionary paradigms of the world religions is presented in John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, second revised edition (London, 1977), pp. 124—125; the notion of a paradigm is borrowed from Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, second enlarged edition (Chicago, 1970).
- 3 D'Costa, p.324.
- 4 John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, p. 120.
- 5 The axiom derives from 1 Peter 3:20; and its history may be traced in the texts of Ignatius of Antioch (*Philadelphians* 3:2), Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* III, 24, 1), and Clement of Alexandria (*Paedagogus* I, 6). It was given its first complete negative formulation by Origen (*In Jesu Nave* 3, 5), and asserted with juridical force by Cyprian (*De Unitate Ecclesiae* 6).
- 6 D'Costa, p. 323.
- 7 D'Costa, p. 324. For a similar reading of Hick's argument see J. J. Lipner, 'Does Copernicus Help? Reflections for a Christian Theology of Religions', *Religious Studies*, 13 (1977), 243—258 (pp. 250—252).
- 8 D'Costa, p. 325. For a similar assessment of Hick's reading of the Ptolemaic traditions see Duncan B. Forrester, 'Professor Hick and the Universe of Faiths', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 29 (1976), 65—72 (pp. 66—69).
- 9 For Hick's Copernican understanding of Jesus Christ see 'Jesus and the World Religions', in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, edited by John Hick (London, 1977), pp. 167—185.
- 10 John Hick, 'The Theology of Religious Pluralism', *Theology*, 86 (1983), 335—340 (p. 338). See also 'Is There Only One Way to God?', *Theology*, 85 (1982), 4—7, where it might be thought that Hick poses an either/or choice between Ptolemaic and Copernican paradigms of the universe of faiths. But such would be an over-reading of the text: Copernican theology is opposed to exclusivist, not inclusivist, Ptolemaic theology; and the general argument rests on phenomenological considerations.
- 11 This point is often overlooked or obscured by Hick's critics. See, for example, how D'Costa (p. 323) and Lipner (p. 250) read the text in which Hick discloses a 'paradox of gigantic proportions' in holding an exclusivist interpretation of the axiom with the concept of an all-loving God, as is held in evangelical Christianity (*God and the Universe of Faiths*, pp. 121—122). According to D'Costa, Hick charges Karl Rahner's inclusivist Christology with the implications that the experience of grace and salvation in other faiths is illusory (D'Costa, p. 326). But the text cited in evidence against Hick is concerned with just such an exclusivist Christology as Rahner rejects.
- 12 *God and the Universe of Faiths*, pp. 123—130. For the appeal to invincible ignorance see *The Church Teaches: Documents of the Church in English Translation* (St. Louis/London, 1955), p. 174; for the notions of 'implicit faith' and 'baptism by desire' see *The World Teaches*, pp. 274—275, and Charles Journet, *The Church of the Word Incarnate: An Essay in Speculative Theology*, edited by A.H.C. Downes (London/New York, 1955), pp. 31—40; for Karl Rahner and the notion of the 'anonymous Christian' see *Theological Investigations*, 20 vols (London, 1961—1984), V (1966), pp. 115—134; for Hans Küng see 'The World Religions in God's Plan of Salvation', in *Christian Revelation and World Religions*, edited by Joseph Neuner (London, 1967), pp. 25—66; and for Küng's notion of Christianity as 'critical catalyst' see *On Being a Christian*, translated by Edward Quinn (London, 1977), pp. 89—116; for eschatological evangelisation see Yves Congar, *The World My Parish: Salvation and its Problems*, translated by Donald Attwater, (London, 1961), p. 136.

- 13 The distinction between a decisive deductive argument and the weight of considerations is to be noted in the light of Kuhn's account of the rationality of paradigm change, which is not a matter of proof, but of *persuasion* and *conversion*. See Kuhn, pp. 148, 151—152. For pertinent and relevant discussion of Kuhn's notion of paradigm change see Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 51—71.
- 14 John Hick, 'Pluralism and the Reality of the Transcendent', *Christian Century*, 98 (1981), 45—48 (p. 46). See also 'Whatever Path Men Choose is Mine' in *God Has Many Names: Britain's New Religious Pluralism* (London, 1980), pp. 43—58 (p. 45).
- 15 John Hick, *The Second Christianity* (London, 1983), pp. 78—79.
- 16 John Hick, 'On Grading Religions', *Religious Studies*, 17 (1981), 451—467. Paul Griffiths and Delmas Lewis seriously misunderstand and misrepresent this article in their response, 'On Grading Religions, Seeking Truth, and Being Nice to People—A Reply to Professor Hick'. *Religious Studies*, 19 (1983), 75—80. Their article should be read with critical caution. See Hick's reply, 'On Conflicting Religious Truth-Claims', *Religious Studies*, 19 (1983), 485—492.
- 17 John Hick, 'Towards a Philosophy of Religious Pluralism', *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, 22 (1980), 131—149 (p. 132). Alan Race, in a careful and sympathetic exposition of Hick's argument, does not refer to the paradox of the axiom as its basis, but notes that the 'foundation of Hick's hypothesis is that religious experience represents a *genuine* encounter with the one ultimate divine reality'. See Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London, 1983), pp. 82—90 (p. 83).
- 18 This understanding of the relativist perception of the world religions is similar to Kuhn's notion of incommensurability as interpreted by Gerald Doppelt and Richard J. Bernstein. See Gerald Doppelt, 'Kuhn's Epistemological Relativism: An Interpretation and Defense', *Inquiry*, 21 (1978), 33—86; Bernstein, pp. 79—93. The comparability of incommensurabilities reminds us that the relativist perception need not be debilitating if it is recognised that its truth and 'the tolerance founded on it is ... to be sought in relationality'. see Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, translated by Margaret Kohl (London, 1977), pp. 150—163 (p. 156).
- 19 Of course, the value of elegance or simplicity may be credited differently by different people. 'There is no neutral algorithm for theory-choice, no systematic decision procedure which, properly applied, must lead each individual in the group to the same decision'. Kuhn, pp. 199—200. Kuhn's group is the scientific community, but equally it may be the theological or ecclesiastical.
- 20 D'Costa, p. 324.
- 21 D'Costa, pp. 324—325.
- 22 Jacques Maritain, *Redeeming the Time*, translated by Harry Lorin Binsse (London, 1943), pp. 105—106. See Maurice Wiles, 'Christian Theology in an Age of Religious Studies', in *Explorations in Theology 4* (London, 1979), pp. 28—40 (pp. 32—33).
- 23 George Tyrrell, *Medievalism: A Reply to Cardinal Mercier* (London, 1908), p. 10.
- 24 D'Costa, p. 327.
- 25 D'Costa, p. 328. A similar criticism is advanced by Lesslie Newbigin in *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (London, 1978), pp. 184—185.
- 26 For Hick's theodicy and eschatology see respectively, *Evil and the God of Love* (London, 1966) and *Death and Eternal Life* (London, 1976).
- 27 D'Costa's use of Hick's essay 'An Irenaean Theodicy' (in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, edited by Stephen T. Davis (Edinburgh, 1981), pp.

- 39—52) is thus illegitimate (p. 328). In the essay Hick explicitly states that he is ‘discussing the project of a specifically Christian theodicy’ (p. 39).
- 28 D’Costa, p. 329.
- 29 *Death and Eternal Life*, p. 464.
- 30 Maurice Wiles, *Explorations in Theology 4*, pp. 32—33.
- 31 *God and the Universe of Faiths*, p. 132. The point of this perception is not that a particular Ptolemaic theology or system is false or invalid, but that the truth or validity of such a system cannot be judged by external criteria. It can only be true or valid *for us*. Relativism calls the believer to faith. See Ernst Troeltsch, ‘The Place of Christianity Among the World Religions’ (1932), reprinted in *Christianity and Other Religions*, edited by John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (London, 1980), pp. 11—31 (p. 25).
- 32 Precisely the same considerations—historical relativity and phenomenological similarity—are adduced by Troeltsch. Sarah Coakley identifies Hick as ‘the major exponent of the Troeltschian position in Britain today’. ‘Theology and Cultural Relativism: What is the Problem?’, *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, 21 (1979), 223—243 (p. 243).
- 33 *God and the Universe of Faiths*, p. 132.

An Answer to Mr Loughlin

Gavin D’Costa

I thank Mr. Loughlin for opening up further areas of debate in the important task of formulating a viable Christian theology of religions.

I believe his defence of Hick follows two lines of argument. The *first line* states that Hick’s Copernican revolution does not depend upon theological considerations but “rather a number of phenomenological considerations”. Briefly summarised, the initial consideration is that religions exhibit a similarity of “form and function” and have “common reference”. This apparently is empirically observable (cf. footnote 14 and the quotation to which this refers). The second consideration accounts for the similarly observable phenomenon that, generally, one’s religion is determined by one’s place of birth. Accordingly, to then judge other religions by one’s own is manifestly unsatisfactory. Due to the two previous points, the conclusion seems that the “failure of Ptolemaic theology, whether exclusivist or inclusivist, to do justice to the phenomenon of the world religions ... suggests the need for a new paradigm of the