ACCOUNTING FOR RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

JOHN HICK’S PLURALISTIC HYPOTHESIS
AND JOHN COBB’S PROCESS PLURALISM

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In the face of multiplicity, there is both the strangeness and the resonance to honour.

(Alan Race, *Interfaith Encounter* 2001, p.4)

The unity of humankind’s religious history is obvious, once one sees it.

(Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology* 1981, p. 6)
Abstract

This study brings John Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis into engagement with the process pluralism position developed by John B. Cobb Jr. and David Ray Griffin in the ongoing attempt to adequately account for the reality of religious truth-claim diversity. Despite numerous criticisms, Hick’s position remains viable in its explanatory intentions, whereas Cobb’s and Griffin’s position is not, contrary to its self-perception, an improvement upon Hick’s hypothesis. Moreover, Cobb’s and Griffin’s position is not properly pluralistic and is better modified for greater alignment with the lived traditions. The primary issue is one of coherence in relation to the positing of multiple ultimacy to account for truth divergence. However, a Whiteheadian epistemology offers a potentially fruitful way of understanding and arguing, not for the veracity of multiple ultimacy, but for the veracity of religious experience per se.

Résumé

Cette étude compare l’hypothèse pluraliste de John Hick avec la position pluraliste du “process” développée par John B. Cobb Jr. et David Ray Griffin, dans le but de tenir compte de la réalité en regard de la diversité religieuse. En dépit de nombreuses critiques, la position de Hick demeure viable, alors que celle du “process” n’est pas, contrairement à la prétention de ses représentants les plus connus, une amélioration de l’hypothèse de Hick. En outre, la position du “process” n’est pas vraiment pluraliste et devrait être modifiée en vue d’un meilleur alignement avec les traditions vivantes. La question principale en est une de cohérence par rapport à l’ultime multiple susceptible de rendre compte de la divergence quant à la question de la vérité. Toutefois, une épistémologie whiteheadienne pourrait offrir un moyen fructueux de compréhension et d’argumentation, non pas de la véracité de l’ultime multiple, mais de la véracité de l’expérience religieuse comme telle.
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Abbreviations*

AAT  Meacock, Anthropological Approach to Theology, 2000
BCD  Schmidt-Leukel, Buddhism & Christianity in Dialogue, 2005c
BeDi  Cobb, Beyond Dialogue, 1982
ChRP  Race, Christians and Religious Pluralism, 1983
ChTR  Hick, Christian Theology of Religions, 1995
ChUR  D’Costa, Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered, 1990
CWPW Cobb, Christian Witness in a Plural World, 1985
DeR  Heim, Depths of the Riches, 2001
DiR  Hartshorne, Divine Relativity, 1964
DPDS  Kaplan, Different Paths, Different Summits, 2002
DPR  Hick, Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion, 2001
DQT  Hick, Disputed Questions in Theology, 1993
DRP  Griffin, Deep Religious Pluralism, 2005
EPR  Stewart, Exploring Philosophy of Religion, 2001
ERD  Hick & Askari, Experience of Religious Diversity, 1985
ExIP  Schmidt-Leukel, Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism, 2005b
GoC  Franklin, God and Creativity, 2000
GoG  Schmidt-Leukel, Gott ohne Grenzen, 2005a
IE  Race, Interfaith Encounter, 2001
IRe  Hick, Interpretation of Religion, 2004
ITR  Knitter, Introducing Theologies of Religions, 2002
K  Kärkkäinen, Trinity and Religious Pluralism, 2004
MCU  Hick & Knitter, Myth of Christian Uniqueness, 1987
MyRS  Knitter, Myth of Religious Superiority, 2005
NFRS  Hick, New Frontier of Religion and Science, 2006
NON  Knitter, No Other Name?, 1985
PeG  Alston, Perceiving God, 1991
PhI  Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 1989
PRD  Schmidt-Leukel, Pluralisms...Religious Diversity, 2008
PRP  Byrne, Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism, 1995
PrR  Whitehead, Process and Reality, 1978
PrT  Griffin & Smith, Primordial Truth and Postmodern Theology, 1989
ReM  Whitehead, Religion in the Making, 1960
RePI  Hick, The Real & Its Personae & Impersonae, 2004
ReSN  Griffin, Religion and Scientific Naturalism, 2000
RwS  Griffin, Reenchantment without Supernaturalism, 2001
SpD  Franklin, Speaking from the Depths, 1990
STDR  Heim, Salvations: Truth & Difference in Religion, 1995
TCW  Cobb, Transforming Christianity & the World, 1999
TI  Schmidt-Leukel, Transformation by Integration, 2009

* See also bibliography. – Other abbreviations are indicated in Siegfried M. Schwertner, International Glossary of Abbreviations for Theology and Related Subjects. Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1992.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Title and Author</th>
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<tr>
<td>TUR</td>
<td>Schuon, Transcendent Unity of Religions</td>
<td>1993</td>
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<td>TUTR</td>
<td>Swidler, Toward a Universal Theology of Religion</td>
<td>1987</td>
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<td>WOM</td>
<td>Neville, Whitehead on the One and the Many</td>
<td>1983</td>
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INTRODUCTION

This study is both a defense of John Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis and a critique of the process pluralism alternative advocated by John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin. More generally it is a defense of ‘identist’ as opposed to ‘differentialist’ pluralism in the theology/philosophy of the religions and in the interpretation of religious truth diversity. It might be asked: Why another study of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis? Surely plenty (enough?) has been said already, especially by way of critique. But animated conversation around Hick’s hypothesis, and more broadly the status of pluralism as an interpretive orientation continues—although in other forms, such as the debate between proponents of a comparative theology vs. theology of religions approach to religious diversity. It is part of our task to show that, contra many current views, a comprehensive and convincing argument against an identist, particularly Hickian, interpretation of religious truth diversity has yet to be offered. Hick’s theory has in fact garnered the appreciation of new voices in the dialogue. Part of the strategy is to show that his position becomes even more plausible when we examine his ‘differentialist’ competitors, specifically Cobb and Griffin. Here we borrow Robert C. Neville’s following line of reasoning in a discussion of competing epistemologies: “If the empiricist sensibility cannot be ‘proved,’ perhaps it can at least make itself dialectically persuasive through considering the alternative” (Neville 1995, 47). Until now, there has been no sustained critique of the process position vis-à-vis what it perceives as its main—and inferior—alternative, namely Hick’s hypothesis. What we shall see is that process differentialism, along with other
interpretive models with similar presuppositions and take on the data suffers primarily from incoherence and ironically the same ‘sins’ which it accuses Hick’s position and other identist positions of committing.

One of the subsidiary concerns of this study is to call into question continuing emphases in the academy, or in the humanities at least, on what one might call static alterity: in response to a caricature of universalist thinking construed as totalizing, indiscriminate, and hegemonic or uniformist, there has arisen the post-liberal championing of radical difference, but a difference that tends to unnaturally etch and calcify what are actually otherwise very porous, fluid boundaries among and within the traditions. Although quite different, the process position’s intended outcome too etches the other, almost as if overemphasis on difference will then set the conditions for a more dramatic and compelling multi-tradition synthesis. Perry Schmidt-Leukel writes, “There is a trend in academic writing to emphasize a supposedly radical difference between religious traditions, or even an incommensurability, so that any idea of receiving or appropriating something from a different tradition into one’s own would seem to be impossible, and any openness to transformation as an act of infidelity or, in a sense, apostasy” (TI 2). Schmidt-Leukel is echoing Peter Byrne, who writes that contemporary fashions tend toward stressing the point that the so-called ‘religions’ are incommensurable and radically affected by their unique cultural settings. Pluralism then is seen to commit the sin of traducing ‘the “otherness” of the Other’ (Surin)...that is, of falsely assimilating systems of belief and practice, of making them fit a common, Western-inspired mold...such charges ignore, among other things: the extent to which religions can transcend and cross cultural boundaries, the ability of religions to affect and inter-mingle with one another and the extent to which formal and structural similarities between the religions can be established. (Byrne 1990, 73-74)
We distinguish here between, on the one hand, the mere proffering of an interpretation of global religious truth diversity, and on the other a dialogical program engaging that diversity. The task of this study is to address the former, while noting the often close relationship, both theoretically and in practice, with the latter. We remain open to the dialogical transformative vision of process pluralism, with certain caveats, while contesting its theoretical basis and interpretation of the global religious truth situation.

This study proceeds in the following way. Chapter one situates the discussion in the broader context of the theology/philosophy of the religions. This involves a close analysis of Perry Schmidt-Leukel’s reconstruction and defense of the common ‘exclusivist-inclusivist-pluralist’ typology in the theology of religions. This material is an important propaedeutic for the subsequent discussion. The main positions under consideration in this work are commonly classified as ‘pluralist’ in orientation. Although we shall argue against that designation for the process view, it is first necessary to argue simply for the legitimacy of these positions qua held positions in religious truth diversity interpretation. The very possibility of holding a genuinely pluralist position, for instance, has come under attack in recent years, and it is the purpose of chapter one to meet that charge.

Chapter two outlines John Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis, distinguishing between the epistemological, and the ethical-theological routes in the formation of his theory. This presentation will reveal the under-acknowledged nuances and multi-stranded weave of Hick’s hypothesis, resulting in what is, perhaps surprisingly, a hardy fabric.
We also engage the numerous and varied criticisms leveled against Hick’s position, again distinguishing and thematically grouping the criticisms into two sections. We however save the more specifically process critiques of Hick’s hypothesis as put forward by John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin for chapter four.

Chapter three outlines the process-differentialist form of religious pluralism as advocated primarily by Cobb and Griffin. Therein we introduce and elucidate the key distinctions between God, creativity, and world as developed by Alfred North Whitehead in his ‘philosophy of organism,’ and the critical role this conception plays in the subsequent development of religious truth diversity interpretation as initially put forward by Cobb. In this chapter we also begin our critique of the process model by examining Stephen T. Franklin’s reworking of the relation between God and creativity, which is offered as a constructive process alternative to the way Whitehead’s conception is predominantly understood. We also briefly touch upon Rem B. Edwards’ advocacy of accepting creatio ex nihilo in a process context.

Chapter four explicitly brings Hick’s ‘identist’ and Cobb and Griffin’s ‘differentialist’ hypotheses into debate. First, responses to differential charges against Hick’s position are given. Next, charges are leveled against the process view, along with S. Mark Heim’s ‘salvations’ position—which many differentialists consider to be a decisive rebuttal of Hick’s hypothesis—for the purpose of neutralizing the foil utilized by Griffin in his critique of identism. The remainder of the critique centers on issues of coherence, faithfulness to tradition-internal conception, and overall plausibility. We also address the role of Whitehead’s epistemology and its relation to religious experience, arguing that it is a potentially fruitful resource for understanding
religious knowledge acquisition generally, but not a conceptuality that favours the
positing of multiple ultimacy any more than more traditional views of the ultimate.
The chapter concludes with a brief examination of a recent alternative differentialist
model, namely Stephen Kaplan’s holographic theory, in order to highlight the
comprehensive inadequacy of any extant forms of differentialism, or radical
pluralism, in accounting for the reality of religious truth diversity.

Chapter five continues the exposition of the multifarious difficulties in the Cobb-
Griffin process position, focusing on what is its key distinctive feature and stumbling
block, namely the aforementioned positing of multiple ultimacy, or a plurality of
ultimate realities. Next we turn to a perennialist critique of the process position—a
position insufficiently appreciated, or lesser heard, in the current debates on religious
diversity theory. We then address the further specific substantial difficulties or issues
centering on conceptions of eschatology/individual end-states, interfaith dialogue, and
relativism—all difficulties endemic to broadly pluralist orientations. We end the
chapter with a brief examination of an aspectival conception of ultimacy, understood
as closer to Whitehead’s rich schematic than is Cobb’s polycentric perspective, and
more adequate to conceptual coherence and alignment with the majority trans-cultural
or simply human report.

The conclusion reiterates the most significant difficulties in the Cobb-Griffin-
differentialist position, and indicates in contrast the continued viability of Hick’s
hypothesis, as well as the need from within process pluralism for a greater
consideration of Whitehead’s category of the ultimate.
CHAPTER ONE

THE EXCLUSIVIST-INCLUSIVIST-PLURALIST THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS TYPOLOGY

In the ongoing challenge of delineating the various theological responses to religious diversity, there has been in recent years numerous criticisms leveled against Alan Race’s predominant tripartite model of exclusivism/inclusivism/pluralism. However, this model has also recently received reaffirmation, particularly in the writings of Perry Schmidt-Leukel, an advocate of the work of John Hick (Richard 2002, 28). Following Schmidt-Leukel, we will identify the numerous criticisms of this typology, clarify his reconstrual, and consider the various proffered responses in reaffirmation of this model. This will allow us to better understand and situate the two main theoretical positions under consideration in this study, and to see more clearly the complexity and instability of the Cobb-Griffin process-differential view.

Let us first get a sense of the discontent with Race’s model in the following statement by S. Wesley Ariarajah:

Useful as it was to classify positions within the theology of religions, it appears to me that the threefold paradigm…has since increasingly become one of the stumbling blocks to progress in the discussion on how Christians should understand and relate to religious plurality…people have begun to box in persons and theological explorations as belonging to one or another of the three positions. The debate on the theology of religions needs to be much more nuanced than these positions would allow. (Ariarajah 1997, 30)

As well, Gavin D’Costa, who originally defended this model against its critics, now considers it “unteachable,” and “a faulty typology.” (D’Costa 1996, 233)
1.1 Objections

Perry Schmidt-Leukel identifies eight major objections to the tripolar typology. These will be enumerated, followed by brief corroboration:

1. *The typology has an inconsistent structure, because the positions are not of the same genre and do not address the same questions* (ExIP 14). According to Terrence W. Tilley, “To take these views as constituting a typology or trajectory unhappily conflates these different, and possibly incommensurable, positions, as if they were all of the same genre, had the same origins, and addressed the same questions. The ‘exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism’ typology creates the illusion that proponents of the three types are arguing about the same issues, whereas they are not.” (Tilley 1999, 324-5) Similarly, Ian Markham claims that “[t]he underlying problem with the traditional classification results from the conflation of three matters: 1) The conditions for salvation; 2) Whether the major world religions are all worshipping the same God; 3) The truth about the human situation.” (Markham 1993, 34)

2. *The typology is misleading, because it obscures or misses the real issues of a theology of religions* (ExIP 14). Joseph A. DiNoia states that “[s]uch typologizing obscures the more basic issue posed by current circumstances of religious interaction: how to affirm the universality of the Christian dispensation without sacrificing its particularity.” (DiNoia 1992, 180) DiNoia also writes:

Rather than ask whether non-Christians can obtain salvation or whether their religions aim at salvation, Christian theology of religions might ask: How do the soteriological programs of other religious communities promote the pursuit and enjoyment of the distinctive overall aims they propose for human life? Questions about salvation would continue on the menu, so to speak, but they would take second place to questions about the varieties of aims
proposed by religious communities and the patterns of dispositions and actions they elicit. (DiNoia 1992, 55)

Tilley states that “the typology…obscures another basic issue: the need to recognize the religious other as other, not as a mere outsider to, reflection of, extension of, or unwitting member of one’s own tradition (e.g. ‘non-Christian’)” (Tilley 1999, 323). And D’Costa claims that the typology is misleading because it does “not really focus on the important questions that are at stake when theologians and philosophers of religion argue about the status of other religions in regard to Christianity.” (D’Costa 1996, 233)

3. The typology is too narrow. There are more than three options (ExIP 14). This is a particularly common criticism. Yet as Schmidt-Leukel notes, “the critics offer no consistent alternative typology; rather, there are various individual proposals to expand the options to more than three” (Ibid.). Some examples include Schubert M. Ogden’s kind of modal construal, or “potential pluralism,” by claiming of pluralism in particular that we should only affirm its possibility: “What one needs to assert…is not that there actually are many true religions, but only that there can be…One could hold, in other words, that religions other than Christianity can also be formally true even if, in point of fact, none of them actually is true or has as yet been shown to be so in a reasoned way” (Ogden 1992, 83). There is also the proposal of Andreas Grüenschloss who argues that “in order to be really comprehensive, the tripolar typology needs to be enlarged by a fourth option [called] ‘inferiorism/exoticism,’ that is, viewing other religions as superior to one’s own” (ExIP 15). Paul Knitter also argues for a renaming of the typology with the addition of a fourth option, thus arriving at “replacement” (exclusivism), “fulfillment” (inclusivism), “mutuality”
(pluralism), and “acceptance,” the latter being instantiated in approaches given by Francis X. Clooney, James Fredericks, and S. Mark Heim. In navigating the balance between the universal and the particular, the acceptance position “does so not by holding up the superiority of any one religion, nor by searching for that common something that makes them all valid, but by accepting the real diversity of all faiths. The religious traditions of the world are really different, and we have to accept those differences…” (Knitter 2002, 173)

Richard Plantinga has also initially proposed an additional option, namely ‘universalism,’ being another term for the classical apokatastasis position, which holds that ultimately all will be saved. Yet, according to Schmidt-Leukel, “at the end of his deliberations Plantinga reckons with only two options, because ‘just as inclusivism is best understood as a variant of exclusivism, so universalism can best be understood as a variant of pluralism’” (ExIP 15). Thus:

4. The typology is too broad. There are not really three options but only one (ExIP 15). A further reduction of options is asserted by Plantinga when he defends exclusivism, understanding this term to mean, in the general epistemological sense, any truth claim or particular view necessarily excluding any truth claim or view incompatible with it. He considers exclusivism “wholly unavoidable, given our human condition” (Plantinga in Quinn & Meeker 2000, 174). Similarly, D’Costa asserts that the only real option is exclusivism, with inclusivism and pluralism being subtypes. That is, they each follow “the logic of exclusivism” insofar as “there are certain claims to truth and those other claims that do not conform to these initial claims, explicitly or implicitly, are false” (ExIP 15). But D’Costa also claims that
pluralism and exclusivism might be best understood as subtypes of inclusivism, which seems more accurate to his own position. Schmidt-Leukel notes also the positions of Reinhold Bernhardt and Michael von Brück who both assert that “hermeneutically, inclusivism is inevitable and therefore propose reconstructing pluralism as a form of ‘mutual’ or ‘reciprocal’ inclusivism.” (Ibid., 15-16)

5. The typology is too coarse or abstract. It does not do justice to the more complex and nuanced reality of real theologies (ExIP 16). This objection takes two different forms. First, it is claimed that the positions of individual theologians are too variegated or complex to fit into any one of the types. Second, it is held that “within a differentiated evaluation of the non-Christian religions a theologian might assess various elements within them differently, that is, seeing some aspects of other religions as being entirely wrong, others as inferior, some as equal, and again others even as superior.” (ExIP 16)

6. The typology is misleading, because it does not do justice to the radical diversity of religions (ExIP 16). This objection has been propounded, among others, by DiNoia and Heim. For example, Heim states that, while serving some purposes, the threefold typology nonetheless seriously mislead[s] us as the definitive map of our options. The typology is fully coherent only on the assumption that salvation is an unequivocal, single reality. Given that assumption, it distinguishes between the limitation of salvation to one group, its qualified availability to all, or its full achievement by parallel, distinct paths. This a priori limitation of the religious possibilities is dubious, and the usefulness of the typology hinges on that limitation. (Heim 1995, 4)

This questioning of soteriological uniformity, particularly as advocated by pluralists, has been voiced by DiNoia as well:
Pluralist theology of religions tends to homogenize cross-religious variations in doctrines of salvation in the direction of an indeterminate common goal, nonspecific conditions of insufficiency and limitation, and an undefined program for transcending them. What Philip Almond has called pluralism’s “principle of soteriological equality” yields an undifferentiated concept of salvation to which no religious community could finally lay claim...In effect, pluralists visualize the...typology as a trajectory away from exclusivism. (DiNoia 1992, 48-9 & 50).

Both DiNoia and Heim emphasize difference to the point of incommensurability, to the exclusion of any soteriological or ultimate end commonality, “so that each religion constitutes an exclusive path to its own specific fulfillment” (Schmidt-Leukel, 17). More will be said about this in chapter four. We also note that Heim nevertheless continues to employ the typology, and describes himself as a “convinced inclusivist.” (see DeR 8)

7. The typology is offensive (ExIP 17). The view of Gerd Neuhaus is similar to DiNoia’s implicit assertion that the typology is advocated primarily by pluralists and construed so as to reveal the greater attractiveness of their position. So Schmidt-Leukel writes: “According to Neuhaus, the terms inclusivism and exclusivism in particular do not do justice to the self-understanding of those who hold these positions and serve only as polemical instruments in the hands of the pluralists.” (ExIP 17)

8. The typology is pointless, because we are not in a position to choose any of these options and therefore have to refrain from all of them (ExIP 17.). Typically, this objection comes from those who espouse a ‘comparative theology’ orientation, arguing variously that the theology of religions should undergo a temporary moratorium, or that the whole project is impossible and misguided, based on

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1 For an overview of this perspective, see Knitter 2002, 202-15.
epistemological reasons, “or primarily for reasons of faithfulness to whatever is conceived as the unchangeable identity of one’s own religious tradition.” (ExIP 17)

Further, the typology is not always understood or employed in the same way, thus not infrequently generating some confusion and dissatisfaction; for this reason it should be abandoned. All of these criticisms together might make a persuasive cumulative case against the tripolar typology. Nevertheless, Schmidt-Leukel believes that with a more accurate reinterpretation, this threefold classification can be quite relevant in revealing the theological options in response to the diversity of religions. To this end, he changes the schema from its usual descriptive, phenomenological orientation to that of a classification that is logically precise and comprehensive. This is achieved in a number of steps.

1.2 Reinterpretation

First, Schmidt-Leukel states a set of critical presuppositions informing the typology:

1. It is impossible to achieve a universally acceptable definition of religion.
2. Nevertheless, it can be asserted that religions, while acknowledging their multifarious, complex nature, all affirm certain beliefs, the most central and pertinent belief or notion being that of ‘ultimate or highest importance.’ As William Christian observes, the religious mentality holds that there is “something more important than anything else in the universe” (ExIP 18). A worth determination is made, ranking the greater and the lesser.
3. That which is of greatest importance is typically affirmed as a transcendent reality.²

4. Each of the religions claim some access to or knowledge of this transcendent reality, and the proper conduct for right relation to, or right reflection of this reality. This “proper orientation of life and the further eschatological hopes connected with such a life” is deemed, while realizing that no word is perfectly transcultural, “salvation” (Schmidt-Leukel 2009, 93). So it is asserted that “religions, at least the traditional ones, claim—each in its own way—to mediate a salvific knowledge or revelation of a transcendent reality.” (ExIP 18).

With these presuppositions in place, Schmidt-Leukel then assigns a variable, namely $P$: $P$ is the mediation of a salvific knowledge of ultimate/transcendent reality. Further, $P$ is a property of a religious tradition if the tradition claims to be in possession of $P$, and if this possession is deemed veridical (this assertion is not yet the point of the debate—it is just a formality of the argument). Given these premises, if we then ask if $P$ is a property of the religions, we arrive, according to Schmidt-Leukel, at four possible answers:

1. $P$ is not given among the religions.

2. $P$ is given among the religions, but only once.

3. $P$ is given among the religions more than once, but with only one singular maximum.

² This is the case even in Buddhism, where it is sometimes claimed that the emphasis on immanence precludes any transcendent dimension to reality (the Mahayana equation of $samsara=\text{nirvana}$ for example). Schmidt-Leukel claims (2005b, 18) that, starting with the Pali Canon in the original Theravada tradition, and later in the Lotus Sutra from the Mahayana tradition, there is the affirmation of “the existence of an ‘unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned’ reality as the condition of ultimate liberation (see Udana VIII, 3; Ittivutaka 43).” It is also emphasized that nirvana is not simply a mental state, but rather a transcendent ($lokottara$) reality “whose existence is the condition of the possibility of salvation” (Schmidt-Leukel 2005c, 155-6). This point is also made by writers such as Moti Lal Pandit, John Makransky, and Peter Harvey. See Schmidt-Leukel 2005c, 155-59.
4. $P$ is given among the religions more than once and without a singular maximum (ExIP 19).

Moreover, these four answers are comprehensive, since they are fully disjunctive:

“Either $P$ is given or not. If $P$ is given, it is given only once or more than once. And if $P$ is given more than once, it is either with or without a singular maximum form” (Ibid.).

These four possible answers to the question of $P$ being a property of religions thus translate to four options in the theology of religions:

0. *Atheism/Naturalism*: Salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality is mediated by none of the religions (because a transcendent reality does not exist).

1. *Exclusivism*: Salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality is mediated by only one religion (which naturally will be one’s own).

2. *Inclusivism*: Salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality is mediated by more than one religion (not necessarily by all of them), but only one of these mediates it in a uniquely superior way (which again will naturally be one’s own).

3. *Pluralism*: Salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality is mediated by more than one religion (not necessarily by all of them), and there is none among them whose mediation of that knowledge is superior to all the rest. (ExIP 20)

It is emphasized that this classification is fully comprehensive due to its full disjunction; given the opening query into $P$, “[t]here is no further option” (20). However, the options are so defined as to allow for a number of sub-forms. For example, inclusivism can maintain the gradation of the existence of $P$ in the religions, while also holding to an exclusivist stance toward some religions. But its essential or defining feature is the allowance of only one maximum instantiation of $P$. In a similar manner, pluralism can and does take a number of forms: some positions can accept a
maximum instantiation of $P$ in only some religions (but more than one), or in a larger set, such as only the theistic or non-theistic traditions, or even all of the major and minor world religions. But to stress, in counterpoint to statements by D’Costa and others, the stated complete equality of all the traditions in relation to $P$ is not the only pluralist option. There can be and there are exclusivist and inclusivist stances toward certain religions or spiritual movements within the pluralist orientation. As Schmidt-Leukel notes, “These are not purely abstract possibilities. John Hick, clearly one of the most prominent representatives of the pluralist approach, takes an exclusivist stance toward certain destructive cults or sects and an inclusivist one toward (quasi-religious) humanism” (ExIP 20). But amidst this variety, the essential or defining feature of pluralism is its claim that there is no single superior instantiation of $P$, but rather more than one.

This reinterpreted typology also allows for a variety of how the maximum instantiation of $P$ is to be understood: “Some may be inclined to understand the ‘maximum’ in an absolute sense so that it does not permit any further potential increase, while others might feel that ‘mediation of salvific knowledge’ allows for future improvement of, for example, quality, depth, width, and would perhaps argue that, precisely through constructive interreligious encounter, religions can grow with regard to $P$.” (ExIP 20)

Regarding option 0—Atheism/Naturalism: this is of course a legitimate response in the debate of the assessment of the religions and their veracity/efficacy, but because it denies the existence of a transcendent reality, it is not, practically speaking, a religious or theological option. The same can be said, although perhaps more
debatably, with regard to the further (quasi) option of skepticism or strong agnosticism. While the denial of knowing in any sense the way things stand among the multiple faith traditions and their relation to an ultimate or transcendent reality can be asserted, it is not a meaningful response. Rather, it is a non-answer and again, practically speaking, it is not a religious or theological option. We can thus return to the remaining options of the more common tripolar typology.

It should also be made clear that this tri-set is applicable to every religion’s assessment of the other religious traditions. While this typology has been devised and utilized primarily by theologians in the Christian tradition, it is not exclusive to this tradition. Nevertheless, since the theology of religions has been a predominantly Christian enterprise, Schmidt-Leukel comments upon its Christian-specific instantiation: “Christian exclusivism would mean that saving revelation is found only within Christianity and not within any other religion” (ExIP 21). He notes that this does not necessarily entail that individuals of other faiths are lost or damned. Qua individuals, there are theological conceptions that allow for their eventual salvation, such as a post-mortem encounter with Christ and conversion;³ but other faith structures are to be rejected as false. Individuals are eventually saved, if they are saved at all, in spite of their non-Christian faiths, not because of them. Christian inclusivism, on the other hand, holds that “non-Christian religions sometimes entail elements of revelation and grace that are capable of supporting a salvific life. But since… all salvation is finally through Christ, the revelation to which Christianity testifies is in a unique sense superior to any other form of knowledge of God,

³ Even this allowance runs against traditional/orthodox teaching. See for example John Hick’s citation of St. Augustine, The Council of Florence, and John Calvin on the unacceptability of initial post-mortem acceptance of God’s grace through Christ (ChTR 21-22).
which…remains necessarily fragmentary, incomplete, implicit, obscure” (ExIP 21.). Lastly, Christian pluralism entails that other religions—as little as one, and as many as all—have soteriological parity. Here we can note Alan Race’s comment on the perspective of theologian Roger Haight: “He demonstrates how it is *qua theologian* that Christianity can conceive of itself as one religion among many without either sacrificing its normative significance as a universal Way or downgrading other religions as penultimate versions of Christian faith. ‘The primary argument for the truth and authentic saving power of other religions,’ he writes, ‘comes from the witness of Jesus Christ’” (Race 2001, 79). There are other good evidential reasons a Christian can affirm the truth of pluralism; this example is offered simply to illustrate the reality of a specifically christocentric pluralist perspective.

We also need to offer an additional distinction to the following statement by Schmidt-Leukel: “According to Christian pluralism these other religions testify to the same ultimate transcendent reality despite the different forms this testimony takes” (ExIP 21). We shall see that Hick’s form of pluralism argues this position, but Christian process pluralists contest it: they hold that not all forms of pluralism, Christian and otherwise, do affirm the same ultimate.

This specific instantiation of the reconstrued typology evinces increased precision and comprehensiveness. The latter is achieved in part by accounting or allowing for sub-forms and covering all practical options. But before responding to the major objections to this schema, a few further noted clarifications of terminology need to be addressed.
1.3 Terminological Clarification

Each of these terms—exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, especially the last one—is used also in other contexts; they all contain numerous connotations and indicate positions quite different from their use in the theology of religions. Hence there can arise a fair amount of confusion and inexact application. Here however, they are used in specific denotation and the following obtains:

Regarding *exclusivism*, Schmidt-Leukel observes that the term “does not denote any kind of exclusivist claims. Every truth-claim is in a sense exclusive, for it excludes the truth of its logical opposite. To criticize such an exclusivism would amount to intellectual suicide, for a proposition that would not exclude anything would no longer have any specific meaning and would therefore become unintelligible.” (ExIP 21-22)

*Inclusivism* should not be understood primarily in the obvious but cautionary interpretive/hermeneutical sense that all understandings of other religions are located and shaped to a variable extent by the concepts and terms of one’s own tradition. Indeed, it “seems an inevitable hermeneutical law that in every process of understanding something new has to start from one’s own conceptual framework.” (ExIP 22) Yet, inclusivism is understood as more specific to the issue at hand, as previously defined (p.13).

As to *pluralism*, it is used in multifarious ways, most of which do not apply here. In its specific usage, it does not denote the simple fact of religious plurality—this we deem ‘religious diversity.’ Nor should it be confused with pluralism as a socio-political theory, one that “conceptualizes and calls for societies that can accommodate
ideological, religious, and cultural diversity” (ExIP 22). There is no necessary connection between this socio-political orientation and its twin term in the theology of religions. The pluralist ideal in politics does not need to uphold a pluralist theology of religions. Rather, its basis lies in appropriate political mechanisms, and according to Schmidt-Leukel (ExIP 22), “on the acceptance of human rights and the virtue of tolerance…tolerance does not require a pluralist theology of religions. On the contrary, tolerance is required for what we disapprove of, while the pluralist option within a theology of religions is not about tolerating what we don’t like but about giving due theological recognition to what we appreciate.” The pluralist position is thus more accurately understood as manifesting appreciation rather than toleration.4

Furthermore, pluralism does not imply the abandonment of judgement toward all religious/ethical/ideological systems or worldviews characterized by a relativistic stance that holds all as necessarily being equally good or bad and therefore denies the possibility of genuine discrimination and distinction. From this perspective, no universal judgements are possible or legitimate at all. In contrast, the pluralist position in the theology of religions allows precisely that judgements are made on the world religions, and it determines, based on certain criteria, that they—or at least more than one—are independent, authentic, and equal mediators of salvific knowledge and practice.

The pluralist position should also not simply be equated with the championing of interfaith dialogue. While typically acknowledged as relevant by pluralists, interfaith dialogue is not exclusive to their position. Admittedly, the purpose or motive of dialogue comes into greater question by those who hold an exclusivist, and to a lesser

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4 For a discussion of this distinction and dynamic, see TI 14-45.
extent inclusivist and even naturalist position, where the orientation is not to learn and potentially be changed by the other but to convert the other to one’s own substantive theological position. Regarding motive indeed, theologians of an exclusivist or inclusivist orientation tend to switch from theological argumentation to the call for dialogue “when they come up against an insoluble aspect of the theological response to plurality. If the going gets tough in theology, switch to dialogue!” (Race below p. 35 and 2001, xi). There are other connotations to the term ‘pluralism’ in more common parlance. But the aforementioned are the main senses of the term typically associated or confused with its denotation as a specific response in the theology of religions.

1.4 Defense

On the basis of these terminological clarifications, let us examine Schmidt-Leukel’s response to the main criticisms of the threefold typology.

1. The typology has an inconsistent structure because the positions are not of the same genre and do not address the same questions (ExIP 23). Terrence Tilley, for instance, argues that each of the three perspectives has a different understanding of the variable relation between truth and salvation, and he is critical in particular of pluralism’s more ‘philosophical’ as opposed to ‘theological’ orientation, as evidenced in its allegedly lesser regard for the essentiality of salvation with regard to the Truth. Tilley states:

The root issue that the “pluralist” hypothesis addresses is not the issue of salvation, but of designating a universal religious truth on religiosity presumed to be common to all (valid) religions…This is not to say that questions of truth and salvation are not linked: it is not to say that pluralisms
do not have a concern with “salvation” in some form. Rather, it is to insist that the concepts of truth and salvation are linked very differently in each of these approaches. (Tilley 1999, 324)

How are they differently linked? Tilley continues:

Exclusivism takes salvation as consequent upon one explicitly accepting the Truth; inclusivisms take salvation as not directly related to knowing the Truth, but to being in some way “in” the Truth; pluralisms take salvation as effected despite our human inability to know the Truth…Hence, the typology effaces important differences between these positions and treats a position developed in the philosophy of religion as if it had the same logical status as positions developed in theology proper. (Tilley 1999, 325)

There are indeed different construals of the relation between truth and salvation. Defenders of the tripolar typology typically agree (and so does Tilley, it would seem) that, according to John Hick, “the truth-claim and the salvation-claim cohere closely together and should be treated as a single package” (ExIP 23). However, the mechanics of their relationship is a separate issue. How precisely they are related, and to what extent that matters for salvation does not negate the fact that they are still talking about the common issue of whether other traditions are salvific mediators: not ‘how’ or even ‘why,’ but whether. We see here a confusion or conflation of the actual issue and the form that the issue takes. Further, it is not clear why Tilley believes a position developed in the philosophy of religion should have a different “logical status” from that developed in theology proper. The “philosophy of religion” and “theology proper” are more intimately linked than Tilley would wish to allow. A pluralist position is not the exclusive product of the philosophy of religion. In any event, it is unclear why this should matter when engaged in rational reflection on religious issues.
The objection that this typology wrongly conflates relevant but separate issues and is inconsistent in that it actually addresses different questions has also been put forward by Ian Markham in “Creating Options: Shattering the ‘Exclusivist, Inclusivist, and Pluralist’ Paradigm,” (1993). Markham complains that the typology conflates the questions of 1) “The conditions for salvation;” 2) “Whether the major world religions are all worshipping the same God;” and 3) “The truth about the human situation” (Markham 1993, 34). In “Creating Confusion: A Response to Markham,” Gavin D’Costa asks:

Are these categories so defined by their defenders? It seems odd that the charge that the categories conflate three different questions is not carefully substantiated from the texts of those who employ these categories. Hick’s…definition does not imply these three categories. In fact, the one text Markham cites in the notes when criticizing this alleged ‘conflation’ clearly states that the categories are primarily employed to address the question “whether salvation is possible outside Christianity.” (D’Costa 1993, 42)

Contrary to what Markham and others intimate, the question has already been adequately defined by Hick and other pluralists. D’Costa continues, then addressing question two:

This is a strictly a priori theological question, whereas the question as to whether the major world religions are all worshipping the same God will in part depend on the answer to the conditions for salvation, and in part will depend on a complex a posteriori examination of the historical particularities of the religion being examined. This latter investigation…should not be conflated with the first, exclusively theological question. Markham misleads in suggesting that those who use these classifications do not recognize the different order of tasks. (Ibid.)

We thus have a reiteration that the focus of this typology is on question one, with the status of question two being secondary and variable among the three types. D’Costa further emphasizes the soteriological focus of the typology: “The paradigm is concerned to address the question if God is salvifically present outside explicit
Christianity, then how can we theologically recognize, articulate and explain this reality. Concomitant to this question is that if God is not salvifically present outside explicit Christianity, then what is the fate of those ‘outside.’” (D’Costa 1993, 43)

Regarding Markham’s third question, D’Costa rightly notes, along with those that still defend the typology, that the truth about the human situation “is surely intrinsic to the question of the conditions of salvation and is not strictly a different question or of a different order…Soteriology and anthropology cannot properly be divorced” (Ibid.). The charge of conflation, then, is inaccurate, because these questions are not originally separate in theological thinking. Further, “Markham’s discussion of the manner in which truth is appropriated and lived (i.e. propositionally, experientially, or in the practice of love) is actually a second order question and does not basically undermine the connection between truth and soteriology in itself” (D’Costa 1993, 44). Like Tilley, Markham complains of a conflation or ‘duopoly’ of truth and salvation, and then proceeds to claim that the proper question is how these are related, not whether. The theology of religions begins with the a priori question of whether salvific truth exists outside of one’s tradition; subsequently there arises the question of how this might be so (if affirmed) or not be so (if denied). Thus the threefold typology remains focused on its mandated question of the possibility of salvific truth in other traditions, and the appropriate domain of debate resides precisely in how this might or might not be so.

Nonetheless, other than claiming that this typology is off base, Markham indicates that it is too limited when he proposes an alternative option. In affirming the uniqueness of the Christian gospel, and also the universal salvific efficacy of the
practice of love (the ‘how’ question), Markham arrives at what he calls a “Christian pluralism”: “In affirming the incarnation of God in Jesus it is exclusivist (for in that respect Christianity has a truth not found in other traditions), but in affirming the importance of actions it is pluralist. If one insists on a label this option can be described as a ‘Christian pluralism’” (Markham 1993, 39). This position, however, does not exactly “shatter” the tripolar typology. It can be subsumed in one of the three positions, but not without first rectifying its own internal confusion, or incompleteness. D’Costa notes that Markham’s position “hovers between pluralism and inclusivism, not because he transcends these categories, but because there are certain unanswered questions” (D’Costa 1993, 45). Specifically, is Markham’s theology Pelagian in its assertion of the priority of action for salvation? And is there a difference between the love present among the Christian Trinity and the love operative in other faith traditions? Depending on the clarification of these variables, Markham’s view will result in an instantiation of one of the three forms, while again noting the variation of details within each. Thus D’Costa concludes that “the usefulness of the three categories of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism allows us to see more clearly what type of questions he [Markham] leaves unanswered and thereby justify themselves heuristically in providing a basis for criticizing those who question their viability” (D’Costa 1993, 41). Not the typology is confused, incoherent, or unfocused; rather, certain articulated positions within the theology of religions have not been fully worked through and tend to confuse the relevant issues. When these positions are analyzed from the perspective of the tripolar schema, they
can make the schema itself appear inaccurate, confused, or incomplete. As Schmidt-Leukel claims,

The typology has a consistent structure and a single focus. All of the four definitions refer to religions or religious traditions, not to individuals or the fate of individuals within these religions or religious traditions. The single focus rests on the religions’ claim to mediate salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality. This claim combines a soteriological (salvific) and an epistemological (knowledge) element. But if this combination is understood in the broad sense in which it was introduced above, then it seems to be typical for religious claims.

(ExIP 23)

2. The typology is misleading, because it obscures or misses the real issues of a theology of religions (ExIP 23). This criticism is closely tied to the first, in that the claim of inaccuracy or obscuration is put forward. For DiNoia, this typology will necessarily mislead, since he denies a common aim or profound commonality among the religions, as when he states that it is more accurate to ask “questions about the varieties of aims proposed by religious communities” (DiNoia 1992, 14). He adds that Christians in particular should direct their consideration to the more internal question of “how to affirm the universality of the Christian dispensation without sacrificing its particularity.” This challenge, however, is inextricably related to the assessment of other traditions. One cannot claim particularity without first determining whether other traditions diverge from a discerned common ultimate aim, however diversely manifested. In a similar manner, Tilley claims “the typology...obscures another basic issue: the need to recognize the religious other as other...” (Tilley 1999, 14). This need or caution is wise. But there is no necessary opposition between a proffered interpretive scheme of global religious phenomena and the full recognition of difference or alterity/otherness. In fact, as will be discussed further in subsequent
chapters, we could not affirm deep diversity without the recognition of a concomitant commonality. This is signaled in a comment by Race: “In the face of multiplicity, there is both the ‘strangeness’ and the ‘resonance’ to honour” (Race 2001, 4). The concern, it seems, is with the potential minimization of the uniqueness, and therefore relevance, of the Christian faith (as well as every other faith) by the artificial conformation of the traditions into a single interpretive scheme. This is a large issue, which will be discussed further in objection #6 and in more detail in chapter two. But for now, it should be acknowledged that, while religions, or the ‘Ways’ as some prefer to call them, are all doing many things very differently, they are also all doing something that is definitionally and crucially similar, namely mediating salvific knowledge of ultimacy, however defined or named. Thus Schmidt-Leukel thinks that “if one takes the claims of other religions seriously, and if these claims amount in one or the other way to the mediation of a salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality, then the typology in its reinterpreted form is not only not misleading but directly touches the core of a theology of religions” (ExIP 24). If this be the case, it is difficult to understand D’Costa’s later claim that the typology is misleading because it does “not really focus on the important questions that are at stake when theologians and philosophers of religion argue about the status of other religions in regard to Christianity” (D’Costa 1993, 14). By doing so, the important question, which is directly addressed by the typology, is being isolated.

3. The typology is too narrow. There are more than three options (ExIP 24). Those who hold this view basically accept the threefold model or at least its premises/orientation, but recommend its augmentation, usually with one additional
position. However, all of the proffered additions thus far are really just variations of one of the three types, whether it be Ogden’s pluralism in potentia, Knitter’s ‘post-liberal’ hyper pluralism defined as the “acceptance model,” Richard Plantinga’s pluralism framed as an apokatastasis “universalism,” Grünschloss’ “inferiorism,” which is inclusivism seen from a different angle, or some other less developed positions, such as Markham’s attempt to negotiate the claims of inclusivism and pluralism, but remaining vague because of unanswered relevant theological questions.

Schmidt-Leukel responds to the objection that this typology is too narrow by stating boldly: “Due to the comprehensiveness of the logical reconstruction of the typology, there is no further option. Any ‘further option’ would turn out either to fall under one of the four classified options…or to repeat one of these options in a different mode…or it turns out to entail no answer to the basic question of a theology of religions at all, so that there is nothing to be classified” (ExIP 24). More options can arise only if we loosen the focus of the theology of religions. This however would confuse the discussion and lay the typology open to the opposite objection, namely that—

4. The typology is too broad. There are not really three options but only one or two (ExIP 24). This criticism is based on a kind of category mistake resulting from an ill-defined use of terms; or rather, it involves invoking certain of numerous connotations of terms and inappropriately transposing them in the attempt to refute their intended usage or denotation in this typology. Specifically, D’Costa and Plantinga argue the trivial fact that any truth claim necessarily excludes the truth of the exactly opposite claim, and then illegitimately proceed to conclude that we are therefore all necessarily
exclusivists in truth-claim assertion and that this applies no less to positions in the theology of religions. Of course, every position definitionally excludes what it is not, but this logical fact does not thereby transform substantive theological pluralists or inclusivists into exclusivists. As Schmidt-Leukel avers, the recognition of logical truth-claim exclusion “does not entail that position (0), (1), (2), and (3)—as defined above [see #1.2]—would collapse into option (1)” (ExIP 24). David Basinger addresses this issue as well:

The phrase “religious exclusivist” is sometimes used by philosophers such as Peter van Inwagen as a label for anyone who claims that her perspective on a religious issue is true (and, thus, that any incompatible perspective is false)… Looked at in this way, “religious pluralism,” however it is defined, is not a competing position. Rather, an individual is either a religious exclusivist or not…However, this is not normally the way in which “religious exclusivism” is defined in the literature…In short, given [the standard] definition of exclusivism, it is not simply the affirmation of a religious truth claim that makes one a religious exclusivist. It is, rather, the nature of this truth claim. (Basinger 2002, 4-5)

A similar form of classification mistake is present in von Brück and Bernhardt’s assertion that, given our necessary situatedness, we always interpret the other from our tradition’s conceptuality, and therefore a hermeneutical inclusivism is inevitable. Thus, the other positions are better understood as ‘mutual’ or ‘reciprocal’ inclusivism. But again, this hermeneutical inclusivism does not by any means entail the collapse of the four options into option (2). And so Schmidt-Leukel writes:

Therefore, it is indeed possible to state something like a ‘mutual inclusivism’ in a hermeneutical sense (which is, in fact, a good description of what is actually the case between the religions), but it would not be possible to claim a ‘mutual inclusivism’ in the sense of option (2) as defined above. It is logically impossible that of two religions each is objectively superior to the other in precisely the same respect—as it is impossible of two siblings that each is one year older than the other. That religions mutually claim their superiority is the problem for the theology of religions, not a valid solution. (ExIP 25)
There might also be the temptation to simplify the typology by, for example, removing inclusivism, since some consider this position as a kind of halfway house situated between the pulls of exclusivism and pluralism. When pressed to clarify or remove its vagueness, inclusivism falls prey to seemingly insuperable difficulties; if committed to coherence and plausibility, inclusivism usually collapses into one option or the other. For instance, when speaking of the Christian inclusivist necessity of going beyond the historical Jesus of Nazareth in attempting to account for the ultimate universality of salvation, John Hick writes that

in order to make sense of the idea that the great world religions are all inspired and made salvific by the same transcendent influence we have to go beyond the historical figure of Jesus to a universal source of all salvific transformation. Christians may call this the cosmic Christ [as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin does] or the eternal Logos; Hindus and Buddhists may call it the Dharma; Muslims may call it Allah; Taoists may call it the Tao and so on. But what we then have is no longer (to put it paradoxically) an exclusively Christian inclusivism, but a plurality of mutually inclusive inclusivisms which is close to the kind of pluralism that I want to recommend. (Hick 1995, 23)

Inclusivism does indeed have elements of both exclusivism and pluralism, in that it wishes to maintain the dialectical tension between the universal and the particular. Exclusivism attempts to eradicate this tension by making the particular the only legitimate universal, as it were—a subsumption of one into the other. And it is argued that pluralism compromises particularity by allotting greater pull to the universal, although pluralism by definition asserts genuine diversity. The extent or depth of this diversity is the rightful focus of much debate (more on this in #4). In any event, given Schmidt-Leukel’s reinterpretation of the typology, each position is clearly differentiated and legitimate.
5. *The typology is too abstract and sterile. It does not do justice to the more complex reality of the living theologian* (ExIP 25). Typologies and classifications have a tendency to be abstract and sterile. But this is no liability. Only the question of all-round adequacy should be considered when judging a classifying system. Be that as it may, this criticism contains two separate issues. The first involves a misunderstanding of its intention. This typology, at least as Schmidt-Leukel reinterprets it, is designed to be a formal, logically comprehensive *classification*, not a phenomenological *description* of individual theological approaches. The former “does neither purport nor intend to represent an exact description of the opinions of certain theologians, but to clarify which in principle possible options we have with regard to a particular problem” (ExIP 25). If a theologian’s position cannot fit within one of the types, it is, rather than being a fault of the schema, the result of not addressing the specific question. If the specific question is addressed, the answer can be placed in one of the three (or four) positions. As Hick observes, “I sometimes hear people say that they do not fit into any of these three categories. I then ask them what their own theology of religions is, and invariably it turns out either that they do not have one, so that naturally it does not exemplify any of the three types, or else they *do* have one and it is manifestly a variation of one or other of the three!” (ChTR 19) Again, it should be remembered that the typology as it is so constructed allows for a number of variations within each option.

The other issue involves claiming different stances with regard to the theoretical distinction between soteriology and epistemology. That is, a theologian could take one of the three positions toward the salvation status in the religions, and another of
the three positions toward the truth-carrying status in the religions. They are not necessarily related. For instance, noting the ubiquitous admixture of good and bad in the religions, M.M. Thomas writes:

> It seems to me that since all religions and ideologies have within them spiritualities which are not of God, described in the Bible as forces of darkness, of idolatry, or of anti-Christ, the discernment of spirits must lead inescapably to an approach which would be a mixture of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Therefore, there cannot be a classification of Christian positions as solely exclusivist, inclusivist, or pluralist.” (Thomas 1990, 58)

There is greater force, however, in the argument that truth or knowledge (gnosis) and salvation operate as a unit in the religions, as we see paradigmatically in the statement in the gospel of John 8:32: “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” According to Hick (ChTR 19), the separation of the two seems a forced abstraction; “in fact the truth-claim and the salvation-claim cohere closely together and should be treated as a single package.” [quoted above #1.4, item 1 p. 20]

There are of course many other practices and beliefs in all the religions that we will assess with varying degrees of approval. But when it comes to the primary issue of salvational truth, the typology is accurate and sufficiently comprehensive. Yet if one somehow remains with a conflicting set of options in response to this specific issue, then, as Schmidt-Leukel suggests, “one has to see whether in the end this does not amount to an overall assessment that is either pluralist, or inclusivist, or exclusivist—or whether the different choices may eventually lead to inconsistent conclusions.” (ExIP 25-6)

6. The typology is misleading, because it does not do justice to the radical diversity of the religions (ExIP 26). This is another critique based on a confusion: in this case, the
question of the existence of salvific knowledge in the religions is scrambled with or
reduced to a question of the nature of salvific knowledge, its whatness. The nature of
salvific knowledge is a critical question in the theology of religions, but the typology
rightly does not pass judgement on its whatness. Rather, the typology “rests on the
fact that the religions themselves make claims to a salvific knowledge of
transcendence. The typology does not prejudge how these claims—and thus the
nature of salvific—are understood and evaluated. This is precisely the point of
difference and controversy among the defenders of an exclusivist, inclusivist, and
pluralist approach” (ExIP 26). That religions make such claims, and our response
therewith, is the issue that this schema addresses. Thus, it is “not the typology that is
misleading, but rather Heim’s submission that it rests on an ‘unequivocal’ concept of
salvation (ExIP 26). A similar response can be given to the objection of DiNoia,
wherein he retains the typological terms in his argumentation (see #1.4, item 2),
indicating that for him the real issue is with the pluralist assessment of pan-religious
soteriology (which sees greater commonality than he does)—not with the typology
itself.

Nevertheless, because of its deeper or more generic commonality, the pluralist
perception is typically accused of ignoring or not acknowledging real difference
among the traditions. D’Costa says for instance that “‘pluralistic theology’ ironically
often seems to hinder rather than aid a proper recognition of religious plurality,
despite its literal intention” (D’Costa 1990, xi). Similar statements can be found by
DiNoia, Heim, and others. Conversely, theologians of a non- or ‘post-’ pluralist
persuasion are now usually perceived as being more sensitive to or aware of real
difference. But there is no necessary connection between non-pluralist, i.e. inclusivist or exclusivist, perspectives and sensitivity to difference. Historically at least, it has tended to be quite the opposite: exceptional sensitivity to difference is inherent to or axiomatic of the pluralist perspective. A Christian exclusivist, for example, who denies the salvational efficacy of the various paths of Hinduism or Buddhism—because they do not espouse Christian teaching—is no better informed, all else being equal, of difference than a Christian pluralist who claims soteriological parity. Schmidt-Leukel asks (ExIP 26): “Would such an exclusivist exhibit a clearer acknowledgment of or higher esteem for difference than a Christian pluralist who also believes that the Buddhist path is different but nevertheless also leads to salvation, not despite being different, but simply in its difference?” More precisely, he adds: “Why should only those count as accepting real otherness who identify otherness with falsity? Not the acknowledgment of otherness is at stake but its evaluation.” (ExIP 26)

We will be looking more closely at the position of S. Mark Heim in chapter four, but for now we note the following. Heim argues that religions are profoundly diverse, to the point that each is a path to a completely different eschatological end. Hence he uses the term ‘salvations’ in the plural. If this be the case, it would seem that the typology doesn’t do justice to this theological view and the radical diversity it espouses. But again, the typology addresses the claim that salvation is offered in all of the traditions, not the nature of such—whether it is fundamentally singular or diverse—and its assessment (accuracy, efficacy, legitimacy). This is the proper locus of debate, and it only reflects and validates the schema.
Contrary to appearance, Heim’s real issue, along with other critics such as DiNoia, is with the pluralist position in the theology of religions, not with the schema per se. Heim’s radically differentiated soteriological and eschatological position thus does not exist outside of the tripolar typology, since, as Schmidt-Leukel says,

the crucial question is still, how—as in the case of Heim—the Christian theologian would assess these different salvations and their correlative fulfillments in relation to the Christian goal. For Heim these salvations are by no means all of the same rank—not even some of them...despite being real, the soteriological goals of the other religions remain deficient and inferior, being at best related to some particular aspects of the comprehensive reality of the Trinity. While the Christian way thus leads to the highest heaven, other religious paths lead only to inferior ends [see e.g., Heim 2001, 271-96], or even to a hell-like state [see e.g. Heim 1995, 163]. And thereby Heim implicitly reaffirms the tripolar typology. (ExIP 26)

Indeed, Heim explicitly considers himself a “convinced inclusivist” (Heim 2001, 8), with the conclusion being the rejection of pluralism and exclusivism, and the acceptance of the typology.

7. The typology is offensive (ExIP 27). We have seen Gerd Neuhaus’ claim that these terms—especially ‘exclusivism’ and ‘inclusivism’—do not accurately represent the self-understanding of those who hold these positions, and “serve only as polemical instruments in the hands of the pluralists” (quoted in #1.1, item 7). Conversely, Race notes that “the critic’s dismissal of it is often a rhetorical device for reinstating more conservative proposals” (Race 2001, 22). Put another way, some theologians complain that the typology is biased in favour of one or other of the positions, usually the pluralist option. In response, it has been argued that, given the comprehensiveness and specificity of the typology, inaccurate representations of self-understandings are the result of a not-fully-worked-through theology of religions. These descriptions are accurate and appropriate when the individual theologian’s positions are clear.
If it is merely the terminology that is at issue, then, by all means, names can be changed to more accurately reflect self-understanding or sense of a position—as for example the preference of ‘particularism’ in place of ‘exclusivism.’ But as Schmidt-Leukel says, “I think that none of the names is in itself offensive. In common language each of them can have positive overtones (as, for example, in ‘exclusive shops,’ or ‘exclusive service;’ ‘inclusiveness’ can mean a welcoming openness). Some exclusivists are therefore quite happy to accept the typology together with its usual labels.” (ExIP 27)

However, the real objection or concern is not located merely in a nomenclature dispute. The question of how exactly the typology might be biased in favour of the pluralist position betrays an understandable discomfort based on holding the positions of exclusivism or inclusivism, be they inspired by perspectives that are self-aggrandizing and generally ethically unsavoury, among other sociological, ontological, epistemological, and theological objections. The name of inclusivism or exclusivism is in itself not offensive; rather, the substantive claim behind the name is. Theologians who espouse the claims of these positions might wish for a different, more magnanimous descriptor and position, but they should accept such seemingly negative-sounding terms if their positions are in fact inclusivistic or exclusivistic. If however it is still objected that these descriptors do not do justice to the self-understandings of those who hold these positions, then it must be asked: what exactly are those self-understandings regarding the issue at hand? And the issue at hand is how one responds to the claim of mediated salvational knowledge indigenous to other traditions.
8. The typology is pointless, because we cannot make any of these judgements and therefore have to refrain from all of these positions (ExIP 27). There will always be a certain force in arguments that advocate fideism, or alternately simple agnosticism, for instance when theologians and philosophers of religion readily acknowledge ultimate mystery and our own cognitive limitations. As Knitter observes about Francis Clooney, “When Clooney felt the clash and contradiction between his own belief in Jesus as the only savoir and the Hindu belief in the experience of Brahman as bearer of salvation, all he could do was ‘patiently defer’ the complexity of this contradiction. It’s a question that can’t be solved now, if it can ever be solved.” (Knitter 2002, 237)

But the flip-side of the fideistic or agnostic stance is sheer avoidance of the issue, whether that be for the reason that working out a theology of religions is too involved and arduous, or for the reason that the implications, if fully worked out, would be too disturbing or challenging to one’s own worldview or faith commitment. Sooner or later, even after all questions of proper methodological approach have been raised and answered, a theology of religions must still answer these basic questions: “Are the central claims of other religions true? Do they really mediate salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality, as they claim?” (ExIP 27) Refusal to pronounce upon the knowledge claims of other traditions would suggest, on pain of contradiction, an equivalent hard agnosticism toward the claims of one’s own tradition, and thus its de-centering or relativization. Unless one holds to a post-liberal strong incommensurability between the traditions. Such a view effectively isolates each, and hinders a more comprehensive understanding.
On the other hand, some thinkers who consider grappling with the issues in the theology of religions to be premature or ill-advised, advocate a comparative religion approach in replacement, with a dialogue-based increase in understanding the other, while typically also adhering to the salvific superiority of their own faith (Race—when the theological going gets tough, *dialogue!*—see #1.3). They question the legitimacy of pronouncing upon the salvific truth claims of other traditions without first, in the very least, properly engaging those traditions and achieving greater understanding of their views and ways. Of course, proper engagement and understanding is critical. But as Stephen J. Duffy notes, theology and dialogue “are two essential and interrelated moments of a single undertaking” (quoted in ITR 225). Knitter reminds the “comparativists to balance their program and recognize that one’s theology is already present in the way one gathers [the data], or in the way one takes up the dialogue” (ITR 235). More pointedly, he avers that “the call from some comparative theologians to proclaim a moratorium on the theology of religions is a call for the impossible. That’s because we cannot entirely abandon our own given perspectives or take off our theological glasses” (ITR 236). Our inescapable situatedness is a point that is usually readily acknowledged by all concerned—including, it should be emphasized, by pluralists that otherwise get accused of claiming a neutral or objective perspective on traditional inter-relation and assessment. This must be and is recognized, while yet continuing to engage in critical reflection and decision.

Knitter attempts to further clarify a related misconception. It is not that one is trying to work out one’s theology of religions “before encountering persons of other
faiths, as it appears to comparative theologians. For many Christians, it is precisely because they have already engaged in dialogue, because they have been shaken up by their friends in other religions, that they are trying to rearrange their theological baggage and work out new models for understanding other religions. What the comparativists are calling for has been taking place” (ITR 236). We already have a very solid scholarly and interactive foundation to proceed to the next level of assessing the global religious situation.

Comparative religion and comparative theology research, including awareness of methodological variety within that research, is very important for any thinker aspiring to be informed and informative of a sound theology of religions. However, that work does not legitimately replace the task at hand. Contra theologians such as Clooney and James L. Fredericks, it is not sufficient for the theology of religions to stop at the comparative religion and theology work of making plain conflicting truth claims among the traditions. At root here is that concession and change be perceived as decadence. For instance, Clooney acknowledges that comparative theology “is a theology deeply changed by its attention to the details of multiple religions,” and yet “the comparativist remains rooted in one tradition,” which, as Schmidt-Leukel writes, “sets strong and narrow limits to any possible transformation or revision of that tradition.” And, as Fredericks acknowledges, expresses the “demanding and transforming truths of other religions” and their welcome fonts of insight” (TI 97-98). Schmidt-Leukel adds that Fredericks warns against the danger of ‘losing our commitment to the Christian tradition’ and recommends like Clooney ‘to remain rooted’ in it. Fredericks’ advice is to live with the ‘tension between commitment to
Christianity and openness to other religious truth’ and to ‘resist the temptation to overcome this tension.’” It is difficult to see how this recommendation could be an advance in the discussion over the work of the theology of religions. We inevitably encounter fundamental conflicting truth claims between the traditions. If we choose to enter into a discussion of whether such claims are actually conflicting, or are rather complementary and how they might be so, we move past the comparative mode and into assessment—i.e., the theology of religions. So Schmidt-Leukel writes:

If she [the comparativist] attempts to avoid the kinds of questions that arise in the theology of religions (because ‘comparative theology’ is claimed to be the viable alternative), she must regard her work as complete whenever conflicting, or apparently conflicting, claims are laid bare. If that is the case, then she has not proceeded beyond the classical aim of ‘comparative religion,’ namely, a purely phenomenological comparison without pursuing the issue of truth. (TI 100)

Comparative theology cannot really be such if it avoids its theological work and instead attempts to remain in the other half of its purported project. It would either revert back to comparative religion proper, or eventually reaffirm an overt confessional stance. Thus the theology of religions is a legitimate and necessary next step in the understanding of global religious phenomena. It is significant that even Clooney affirms that “comparative theology best eventuates in the inclusivist position” (TI 101). This would seem to belie an underlying resistance to the theology of religions—namely the danger of eventuating in a pluralist position, which is perceived as compromising the integrity of one’s tradition. Similarly, Schmidt-Leukel writes: “I cannot avoid the impression that Fredericks’ suggestion that we should live with the unsolved tension between confessional commitment and inter-religious openness is nothing more than advice to nestle in and make oneself complacent at the
very dead end of this impasse” (TI 100). There is an implied resistance to potential transformation, which ultimately calls into question “the seriousness of their endeavors as a pursuit of truth” (TI 103). Schmidt-Leukel summarizes the issue as follows:

I cannot see how those who are propagating comparative theology as an alternative to the theology of religions are able to enter genuine theological comparison (as distinct from a purely phenomenological one) without arriving at exactly the types of questions that are treated in the theology of religions. Doing comparative theology is not an alternative to the theology of religions but should be an integral part of it, preventing us from aprioristic and apodictic judgments so that we arrive at our various positions cautiously and tentatively, always open to critical objections and potential revision. (ExIP 27)

1.5 Conclusion

When focusing on the issue of mediated salvational truth of a transcendent or ultimate reality, there is no more compelling and useful extant typology. It lets us focus back on the cogency of the various positions—where the conversation should centre—not on terminology and typing. Those critical of the typology, for the reason that it somehow slants the debate in favour of the pluralist position, should see that there is no structurally unjust advantage. Any held ‘advantage’ in the debate would be substantive—not formal or structural. The typology is descriptive rather than prescriptive; as such, the question of its potentially favouring one position over the others does not apply. Further, when the key issue—possession of mediated salvational truth—is not clearly addressed, other theology of religions approaches can ambigu ate rather than enlighten, and at worst, in the case of the exclusivist and inclusivist orientations, enable a pussyfooting around the unsavoury and theologically questionable stance of triumphalism or tradition specific, aprioristic/apodictic
superiority and inferiorizing or damning otherness. And yet, to emphasize, this
typology should not be seen as just a form of pluralist polemic, since there are
theologians who do not identify as ‘pluralist’ and who nevertheless embrace this
typology. Of course, its cogency does not depend just on its acceptance by certain
thinkers; rather, its cogency rests on the extent to which its schematization of the
options is accurate. Given Schmidt-Leukel’s clarification, it is now fairly precise.
Other approaches to the theology of religions—whether primarily dialogical,
comparative, or historical—while helpfully offering a potentially larger orienting
context and providing specific important data, nonetheless still have to come to terms
with this central issue.

One point of correction/clarification should be noted. Schmidt-Leukel rightly
construes the central issue as each religion claiming to mediate salvific knowledge or
revelation of a transcendent or ultimate reality. That is, each tradition has typically
taught alignment with or realization of a singular ultimate—not ultimates in the
plural. This view however has not been universal, as we shall see in the development
of a multiple ultimate theory in the process theology of religions inspired primarily by
the thought of Alfred North Whitehead, who in turn was inspired in this line of
thinking by Plato and William James. Thus, when speaking of a specifically
Christian pluralism, it is inaccurate for Schmidt-Leukel to claim that “[a]ccording to
Christian pluralism these other religions testify to the same ultimate transcendent
reality despite the different forms this testimony takes” (ExIP 21). Rather, there are
forms of pluralism that, while emphasizing soteriological equality, nonetheless posit

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5 See in particular Plato’s *Timaeus*, and James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (London: Longman’s, Green &
Co., 1916). Parallels can also be drawn with the Hindu *Nyaya-Vaisesika* school of thought.
ontological diversity—different traditions are oriented toward different ultimates. However, while this distinction should be noted, it does not invalidate the typology. As long as the indefinite article *a*—as in a transcendent or ultimate reality—is operative, the schema is applicable. The focus is soteriological; the ontological referent, while important, is secondary.

The prioritization of the soteriological should be kept in mind when considering another potentially needed correction or clarification, namely the nature of ultimacy in Mahayana Buddhism. Schmidt-Leukel avers that the ‘something’ all religions claim as the most important is a “transcendent reality, that is, not one of the finite realities of this world” (ExIP 18). He notes that this is “also true for Theravada Buddhism, which affirms the existence of an ‘unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned’ reality as the condition of ultimate liberation.” It therefore makes sense to speak of transcendence as pertaining even to Theravada Buddhism, with its otherwise religiously unusual assertions of *anatman* and non-theism. In the Mahayana traditions, however, there is a greater emphasis on immanence, to an end point of folding the immanent/transcendent dichotomy, and equating or making identical this samsaric world with the ‘other’ nirvanic ‘world.’ It thus arguably becomes problematic for this typology to speak of orientation to a transcendent reality as the basis for salvation or liberation.

There are two points in response. First, Schmidt Leukel writes: “One needs to bear in mind that according to the traditional Buddhist view *nirvana* is not merely a mental state, the state of the enlightened one. Nirvana is rather understood as an ‘unconditioned’ (asamskrta), ‘transcendent’ (lokottara) reality, whose existence is the
condition of the possibility of salvation” (BCD 155-6). Given that samsaric existence, including every mental state, is conditioned, we must refer to the unconditioned as more than just immanent, and more than just a mental state. We accordingly ascribe to it a transcendent status; and this is arguably affirmed in Mahayana teachings as well, as can be seen in the influential Lotus Sutra. (see note 2 above). Put another way, the Mahayana realization of sunyata (emptiness), or ‘suchness’ can be understood as the awakening to totality or the interdependent web of existence, and in this sense not just as a conditioned mental state, but as that which transcends the usual subject/object dichotomization and egocentric point of view.

Second, even if the Mahayana tradition (or any other tradition for that matter) rejected any notion of transcendence, we still observe the critical and ubiquitous soteriological component in the Mahayana, and all of the great ‘vehicles.’ A salvific/liberative shift is the common aspect that this typology identifies. The ontological nature of the referent toward which this shift is oriented, or that which is realized by means of this shift, is of course conceived differently by the various traditions and remains open to debate. But the important point is that there is a salvific/liberative act that the religions facilitate. The Mahayana traditions are as equally engaged in this act as all the other traditions. Whether each religion’s liberative knowledge activity is equivalent to all the others is precisely the debate in the theology of religions that the threefold typology attempts to map.

But the terminology can be modified if there are ineradicable distorting connotations that render it too problematic. To exchange ‘transcendent’ for ‘ultimate’ as the conditions specify is a minimal distortion, and therefore deemed reasonable.
After all, the emphasis is on ultimate importance, rather than on any particular conception of ontology, while also acknowledging the traditional convergence of the two and their relevance to each other. Either the terms ‘ultimate’ and ‘transcendent’ can be used interchangeably, as Schmidt-Leukel sometimes does, or they could be more accurately employed as a dyadic set, similar to the way John Hick describes the transformative religious act as ‘salvation/liberation.’ This enables the terminology to be fruitfully employed, while yet still being responsibly debated, as for example the problematic nature of hyphenated descriptions, since this implies an unnatural bonding of two or more irreducible phenomena. On the other hand, this can be ascribed to the inherent limitations of language, particularly when the attempt is made to span diverse cultural expressions. The language employed will continue to be debated, but the more important issue is of course what the language signifies—the positions behind the terms. If the focus of the typology is correct, namely mapping responses to the question of salvational efficacy in the world’s religious traditions, then the discussion can once again proceed to the accuracy of each position.

We have emphasized the validity of the typology because it counters those that question the legitimacy and very possibility of a pluralist position—of which the two views under consideration in this study are ostensibly a part. Broadly, as the typology is reaffirmed, so is the viability of each of its three positions. We will now proceed to discuss these two important competing alternatives that are typically placed in the pluralist fold. But before they are viewed in comparison, each will be addressed in turn, beginning with what is the most influential, and criticized, pluralist position in the theology of religions, namely John Hick’s “pluralistic hypothesis.”
CHAPTER TWO

JOHN HICK’S PLURALISTIC HYPOTHESIS

John Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis is currently the predominant explanatory theory in the pluralist stream of the theology of religions. No other position has received a greater amount of attention, given its apparent coherence and bold attempt at comprehensiveness. It is also the most criticized extant position since, among other reasons, many theologians and philosophers of religion believe its explanatory net is cast too wide and stretched too thin, resulting in claimed superficiality or inadequacy. And yet Hick’s hypothesis has not received a sufficient amount of proper consideration; its dismissal is often due to misunderstandings of its orientation, intention, and structural complexity, as well as failures to recognize the paucity of fully formed and compelling proffered alternatives. This chapter argues against the common perception that this hypothesis is irredeemably problematic, first by clarifying the components of his argument, then by addressing the voluminous criticism it has generated, leaving the position viable, but open to potential improvement. As Hick readily acknowledges, his hypothesis is just that, with the implication that improvements are possible, and also welcome. Possible adjustments to this position are considered in chapters four and five, as the pluralistic hypothesis is brought into dialogue with process pluralism.

When examining John Hick’s position on religious diversity, it is important to consider the problem or question he is attempting to solve or answer; otherwise, an
evaluation will veer off track. How do we account, from a non-reductionistic/non-materialistic perspective, or from a global religious perspective, for the reality of multiple faith traditions with their seemingly conflicting truth and thus salvation claims? Hick’s hypothesis is that all the great religious traditions are different, but equally veridical responses to a transcategorial ultimate he calls the ‘Real’—echoing a designation of the divine in a number of traditions.¹ In other words, every great tradition is responding to manifestations of the same ultimate reality that goes beyond our comprehension and yet partial apprehension, but in very different modes and guises according to our diverse cultural contexts. These different responses to the Real are on the whole legitimate and accurate, based upon a pragmatic criterion (more on this in #2.2).

Hick’s hypothesis is the product of years of consideration and experience of the concrete reality of religious diversity with its attendant conflicting truth claims, and is an answer that is in part the product of sustained dialogue. It should not be understood as an aprioristic positing that was not first informed by experienced empirical realities. This point is raised in order to correct a misperception of Hick’s hypothesis as claiming a fully detached, and therefore neutral perspective on the traditions, and one that is moreover perceived as being divorced from their held ideals and practices (more on this in #2.4.2). How and why does Hick arrive at his hypothesis?

The components of Hick’s position are constructed in two different but complementary ways. The first can be described as the epistemic religious experience/knowledge argument located primarily in *An Interpretation of Religion*

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¹ Hick notes for instance that one of the names of God in Islam is “al-Haqq”—translated as “the Real;” or *sat* in the Vedantic Hindu traditions, translated as “truth” or “being” or “reality”—that which is (alone ultimately) real.
(1989); the second is the empirically based ethical-theological argument located primarily in *A Christian Theology of Religions* (1995).

### 2.1 The Epistemological Route

The epistemic argument begins with a sustained emphasis on the religious ambiguity of the universe, since the universe may be legitimately experienced both religiously and naturalistically—i.e., holding to atheism and materialism. For most of human existence and history, multifarious religious belief has been almost entirely affirmed and unquestioned. This belief has usually been that of a transcendent dimension of existence, and a god or gods creating, influencing, and directing the hierarchically structured universe. According to Arthur Lovejoy, this view has, in one form or another, been “the dominant official philosophy of the larger part of civilized mankind through most of its history” (Lovejoy 1964, 26). But with the modern era, we have the seemingly popular alternative of atheism/skepticism. As Hick states,

> with the western Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, stimulated by the rapid development of the modern scientific method and outlook, a scepticism that has hitherto hovered in the background as a mere logical possibility now became psychologically present and plausible within the more educated circles of Europe and North America, and the old religious certainties began to crumble…And in the post-Enlightenment age of doubt we have realized that the universe is religiously ambiguous. It evokes and sustains non-religious as well as religious responses. (IRe 74)

And yet, the religious ambiguity is not universally acknowledged. Therefore Hick proceeds to make a case for the inconclusiveness and lack of cogency of the philosophical arguments on both sides. His case starts with the arguments for a religious interpretation and proceeds as follows.
2.1.1 The Ontological Argument

This classic and perennial argument for God’s existence is deemed invalid because of its illegitimate conflation of logical and factual or ontological necessity. The concept of God’s existence cannot be certified by the concept itself: “a concept, as such, is simply a thought that may or may not have an instance” (IRe 75). Put another way, “logical necessity has no purchase on matters of fact and existence. There cannot be a logically necessarily existent being. Nor indeed has classical theism generally supposed that there could” (IRe 76). Nor, furthermore, have the modal logic reconfigurations of a modern theologian such as Charles Hartshorne made this argument any more valid: he illicitly transmuted the valid insight that the concept of an ontologically necessary being must be instantiated either always or never into the quite different claim that God’s existence is either logically necessary or logically impossible…For it cannot be logically necessary that there is a reality corresponding to the concept of an ontologically necessary being—or indeed to any other concept. (IRe 77)

Hick concludes that the reasoning involved in the ontological argument “looks suspiciously like an attempt to prove divine existence (or, in this formulation, necessary divine existence) by definitional fiat.” (IRe 78)

2.1.2 The Cosmological Argument

The claim that the universe must have had a beginning does ultimately beg the question. The theistic notion of God as the causeless First Cause cannot refute the possibility that the universe itself may be the ultimate uncaused reality. It can legitimately be understood as a sheer unexplained fact, echoing Bertrand Russell when he says, “The universe is just there, and that is all.” (IRe 80)
2.1.3 The Design or Teleological Argument

While not implausible, the idea that the complexity of the universe indicates an intelligent creator is far from irrefutable. Particularly as emphasized by David Hume, it has been argued that 1) organized, self-sustaining complexity can result from sufficient random atomic interaction and permutation through unlimited time, and 2) even if there is a higher intelligence ‘behind’ this activity, there is no necessary reason that it be anything like the Christian Trinitarian God. Another facet of the design argument is the seemingly startling improbability or an organized intelligence-generating universe (e.g., the ‘anthropic principle’). Hick replies: “we have no reason to think of all this as being a priori either probable or improbable except in relation to our own preferences and prejudices…there is no objective sense in which this is either more or less probable than any other possible universe” (IRe 87; see 90). More specifically to the anthropic principle: the universe is indeed such as to have produced human beings. But it is illegitimate to argue that this is such so as to have had to produce human beings—we cannot objectively make that claim—we have no reference point otherwise.

2.1.4 The Arguments from Morality

Aside from these traditional philosophical arguments, much stock has been given to arguments from morality, and from religious experience (more on this in #2.1.5). It has often been claimed that felt moral obligation, as well as general ethical ideals, indicates a divine source that grounds, authorizes, and legitimizes these phenomena. Without such grounding, there would be no purchase on our sense of the ideal, and our sense of the ought. In other words, there must be a supremely ethical and
transcendental source to our human ideals and obligations. This source is in part what we mean by the term ‘God.’ But a problem quickly follows if we consent to the notion of moral authorization or decree as being sourced in or given by God. What is the relationship between the decree and the source? If we understand these ideals and commands as external to divine and human being—as imperatives requiring assent—then we encounter the difficulty that was famously articulated by Plato in his *Euthyphro*: is an imperative right because God commands it, or does God command it because it is right? If the former, we are left with the uncomfortable presence of the arbitrary—imperatives are not intrinsically good or right, but only contingently so—God decrees simply in one way rather than another. If, on the other hand, we believe moral actions to be intrinsically good, as we typically deeply sense that they are, then this implies that their legitimacy or sense of rightness is not based upon divine command. And divine commands will then in turn be judged as properly moral or not. But this turn would result in taking away the notion of God as legitimizing ground of our morality and concomitant ideals. Process philosophy attempts to bypass this quandary by identifying God with our highest ideals, and as being the ideal determining observer in matters applied axiological. See for instance RwS 313-19. In response to this dilemma, Hick argues that morality is a function of human nature. Our ideals, morality, and laws are the result of our inherently social being, and the pragmatic necessity of instituting and inculcating these laws and ideals for the purpose of our survival and flourishing as a species, and arguably, custodians of the planet. Further, Hick claims that this “network of law merges upwards into morality” (IRE 97): the realm of social *person*hood functions not just legally, but also morally.
Moral obligation, in other words, is realized to the extent that we are aware of our inter-personal embeddedness. Thus ethics “is grounded in this de facto character of human nature as essentially inter-personal, in virtue of which we have a deep need for one another and feel (in many different degrees) a natural tendency to mutual sympathy” (IRe 98). Hence morality is a function of interpersonal relation. What, then, is the relation between ideals, morality or ethics generally, and God? According to Hick, ethics ultimately does indeed derive from God, but not in the sense that it is divinely commanded but in the sense that the personal realm, of which it is a function, is God’s creation. Ethics is autonomous and would hold if there were no God; but in fact, according to theistic faith, the whole realm of human existence, including our inter-personal nature, is an aspect of the divine creation. In this way faith in the reality of God is combined with the acceptance of the autonomy of the moral life...But of course the cost of this solution is that we can no longer argue from morality to God. For the view of ethics as grounded in the structure of human nature is capable of being incorporated into either a religious or a naturalistic worldview. (IRe 98)

The solution to this dilemma is the realistic affirmation of an inherent ambiguity, which grants the legitimacy of each interpretation, but does not disprove the other. We return to our religious or naturalistic stances, respectively.

2.1.5 Arguments Based upon Religious Experience

Here, Hick distinguishes between public (collective) and private (individual) religious experience. Regarding public religious experience related to events considered as foundational for a given religion—for instance the parting of the Red Sea for Judaism or the ascension of Jesus for Christianity—Hick concludes that “we do not have an instance, acceptable by normal historical canons, of a publicly observed divine action” (IRe 102). These events remain indeed ambiguous, and it is impossible to exclude a naturalistic interpretation.
The naturalistic interpretation is plausible also with regard to private or personal religious experience. Unusual but not unnatural functioning of brain chemistry, as well as breakthroughs of unconscious mental activity into consciousness can lead to their misinterpretation and mislabeling as supernatural religious experience. The fact that religious experiences occur does not refute plausible naturalistic interpretation. Thomas Hobbes has concisely articulated this point: “To say [God] hath spoken to [someone] in a dream, is no more to say he dreamed that God spake to him!” (quoted in IRe 96) The difficulty of religious explanation is increased by the fact that religious experiences differ markedly among the traditions, with passionately held but completely incongruous finalistic claims about divine/ultimate reality.

For a very different approach to religious interpretation, Hick examines Richard Swinburne’s probability argument for the existence of God. In an applied or designated quantification, assigning values to various phenomena, Swinburne argues that the probability of traditional theism is greater than one half, primarily based upon the fact that there is something rather than nothing. Hick notes however that the quantification of certain factors such as the problem of evil leads to “no more than a personal assessment of the outcome of conflicting considerations” (IRe 108). In other words, given personal assessment (e.g., some would assign the reality of evil more negative points than others), Swinburne is, not surprisingly, unable to overcome the impossibility of precise quantification, leading to Hick’s critique that “a theorem which requires numerical proportions for its operation is here being used without any exact values” (IRe 108). Swinburne does acknowledge the impossibility of exact value assignation, resulting in the necessity of using terms such as ‘low’ and ‘high.’
Ultimately, Swinburne illegitimately makes qualitative assessments based upon ineffectually broad and questionable value assignments. Hick concludes that “the universe does not permit probability logic to dispel its religious ambiguity” (IRe 109).

A similar lack of cogency surrounds purely naturalistic interpretations of the universe. Here again Hick distinguishes two broad kinds: negatively, those that render religious interpretations otiose given the explanatory efficacy of science; and positively, those that claim religious interpretation to be fully inaccurate given hostile or non-human life promoting phenomena. Regarding the former, there are a number of classic reductionistic interpretations, such as in the works of Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, and Durkheim. All attempt an explanation of religion that does not rely on any supernatural or divine cause. Hick discusses Freud’s approach of ‘illusion removal’—inferring the unreality of God by showing religious belief/practice to be merely a psychological crutch—as being inferentially mistaken: “The mere fact that a religious message comes as good news does not entail that it is not true: this must be established on other grounds. Nor of course is it the case that religion always offers consolation. It also offers challenge” (IRe 113). Indeed, many held views of the afterlife, for instance, have not been something one would look forward to, such as Hades or Sheol, making untenable Freud’s simplistic theory of wish fulfillment, while yet acknowledging some important plausible psychoanalytic insights on religious belief formation.

The simplistic nature of the wish-fulfillment theory is also seen in a broader sociological level. Here too there is trouble squaring the dark side of existence as partial genuinely religious response to the human condition. The converse of wishful
thinking in religion goes against “a sociological theory of the origin of such [wishful thinking] beliefs as instruments of social control, reconciling the toiling masses to their present lot by the thought of a reversal of fortunes hereafter. For when there was thought to be social distinction beyond the grave this merely reproduced the earthly distinctions” (IRe 114), thus offering no final justice and consolation for the believer. Rather than simple wish fulfillment, the divine has been construed as merely a “figurative expression of the society” (Durkheim quoted in IRe 115), or as the ultimate symbol of human ideals. This again simplifies too far, and it cannot properly account for the society-challenging words of the prophets or the more implicit societal critique with its attendant ideals, as can be found in individualistic mysticism.

One of the greatest challenges to a theistic interpretation of the universe is the reality of evil. It is a common sentiment that pain, suffering, and wickedness militate against belief in a benevolent transcendence. But a number of theodicies are of a sufficiently comprehensive nature so as to allow for a continued affirmation of the divine. Philosophers of religion from Hick to Alvin Plantinga have argued that, while wickedness and gratuitous suffering surely do not offer evidence in favour of deity, they are nonetheless not incompatible with such a positing.2 Even evil takes its place among the variety of phenomena that can be variously interpreted. Hick concludes:

> It seems, then, that the universe maintains its inscrutable ambiguity. In some aspects it invites whilst in others it repels a religious response. It permits both a religious and a naturalistic faith, but haunted in each case by a contrary possibility that can never be exorcised. Any realistic analysis of religious belief and experience, and any realistic defense of the rationality of religious conviction, must therefore start from this situation of systematic ambiguity. (IRe 124)

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2.1.6 The Critical Trust Approach

From phenomenological considerations, Hick then turns to the epistemological issue of religious knowledge and experience. He argues that given the ambiguity of the universe, it is rational for those who experience it religiously to trust that such experience is valid for their living in the world. Valid, that is, unless there is reason to believe that such experience is suspect: demonstrable hallucination or delusion vitiates its otherwise legitimacy. Hick cites Kai-man Kwan in his description of this position as the “critical trust approach,” and he states that this is in accord with the epistemological position of critical realism generally, since our ineradicable condition nonetheless allows us to make accurate judgements about the world. Our critical trust approach to the world is therefore an aspect of sanity. Further, “[w]e are continuously experiencing aspects of our environment as having kinds of meaning in virtue of which it is appropriate for us to behave within it in this or that way or range of ways. Thus all conscious experiencing is experiencing-as.” (IRe 12; see also IRe xix)

The constant interpretive element in our experience is continuous with the fundamental act of cognitive choice Hick calls ‘faith.’ Both religious and naturalistic/materialistic interpretations of the universe are acts of faith and have genuine potential consequences for every deciding agent. Religious belief is, in other words, cognitive: it involves a claim of fact which is subject to (in theory) confirmation or disconfirmation. But it is questionable whether the act of faith as critical trust can legitimately be applied to higher-order phenomena such as religious

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3 IRe xviii.—This can be compared to an earlier formulation (1764): Thomas Reid’s “principle of credulity”—see NFRS 210 and RwS 29-35.
4 In this regard Hick explicitly rejects non-cognitive/non-realist interpretations of religion, as advanced for instance by Dewi Z. Phillips and R.W. Braithwaite. See IRe 190-209.
experience, as opposed to simply sensory of physical experience. Where the latter demands acceptance for normal effective action in the world, the former does not. But their different putative objects of experience do not betray their parity. The reason for the difference, Hick argues, can be found in a necessary ‘epistemic distance’ between the divine and the world that enables spiritual development:

The compulsion to be aware of the physical world sets the scene within which we exercise our moral freedom but does not undermine that freedom itself. But—putting it in monotheistic terms—if we could not avoid being conscious of being all the time in the direct presence of a God of limitless goodness and power, who knows us through and through, and always wishes us to act in a particular way, we would have a formal, but not a real, moral freedom in relation to the deity. However if God preserves an epistemic distance from us, so that we are free to be aware or unaware of the divine presence, then it can reasonably be expected that at any given time not everyone will have freely opened themselves to an awareness of that presence. (IRe xviii)

Further, granting the cultural conditionedness of all religious experience, it will of course take a variety of different but comparable forms. Hick concludes that “it is reasonable to apply the critical trust principle (with its proviso) to religious experience” (IRe xviii). This is in fact done explicitly or implicitly within all of the great religious traditions. But then we encounter what is the broad problematic/context of this study: A granting of the legitimacy of religious experience in one tradition leads to a granting of legitimacy to other traditions, on pain of contradiction or hypocrisy. The ‘intellectual golden rule’ is honoured: we grant to others the same operating presuppositions we inevitably grant to ourselves. 5 The validity of the principle of critical trust applied to religious experience in turn

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5 This notion can be compared with a statement by Frithjof Schuon, representing the perennialist or traditionalist perspective on the legitimacy of religious truth diversity: “He who sets out to prove the truth of one religion either has no proofs, since such proofs do not exist, or else he has the proofs that affirm all religious truths without exception, whatever the form in which it may have clothed itself” (TUR 18).
validates “a plurality of incompatible religious belief systems.” Thus Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis is “a response to this apparently anomalous situation.” (IRe xix)

Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis posits a transcategorial/ineffable ultimate reality, deemed the ‘Real,’ which is necessarily beyond the range of limited human conceptuality, and yet “whose universal presence is humanly experienced in the various forms made possible by our conceptual-linguistic systems and spiritual practices” (IRe xix). This view has a long precedent and pedigree. Hick continues:

The basic epistemological principle invoked here was well stated by Thomas Aquinas in his dictum that “The thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower” [quid quid recipitur, ad modum recipientis recipitur]…for all awareness of our environment is interpretive, a form of experiencing-as. And whereas in relation to sense perception the “mode of the knower” is much the same throughout the world, in relation to the Ultimate, the Transcendent, the Real, the mode of the knower differs considerably as it has been variously formed by the different religious traditions. (IRe xix)

This position is more fully drawn out in Hick’s use of Immanuel Kant’s distinction between noumenal and phenomenal reality, that is, the way things are in themselves, and the way they appear to human consciousness. Hick applies this to his notion of the Real: the Real as noumenal or in itself (an sich) is ineffable and transcategorial, and the Real as phenomenal manifested itself in the multiplicity of forms according to human cognitive structures shaped by the variety of cultural contexts. Hick should not be understood as presenting a fully Kantian interpretation of religion. He is only appropriating one (albeit key) facet of Kant’s philosophy—not arguing for a Kantian philosophy of religion—failure to recognize this can result in misplaced critiques. Hick has emphasized this point on numerous occasions, as for example: “Some critics have made heavy weather of this use of Kant, and have assumed that I have been engaged in a controversial exercise in Kantian exegesis…But I have only borrowed
from Kant his basic noumenal/phenomenal distinction, and am well aware that his own epistemology of religion is very different from that which I am recommending” (DPR 88-89). So he writes: “the noumenal Real is thought and experienced [as phenomenal] by different human mentalities, forming and formed by different religious traditions, as the range of divine personae and metaphysical impersonae which the phenomenology of religion reports.” (IRe xix)

Thus epistemological considerations—the religious ambiguity of the universe, the rationality of (critically) trusting one’s religious experience as a form of cognitive decision/faith action, the appropriate application of the intellectual golden rule, with the resulting problem of theoretically legitimizing multiple conflicting religious truth claims—lead Hick to posit the noumenal Real as a way of accounting for the multifarious claimed veridical religious orientations.

### 2.2 The Ethical-Theological Route

Hick arrives at his pluralistic hypothesis via another route as well, namely by way of empirically based theological and ethical considerations. He begins by noting that, since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there has been a marked increase in public awareness of other great civilizations and venerable religious traditions—of the larger world generally. Christendom especially experienced a de-centering, with the realization that there was other legitimate, viable, and potentially universally applicable religious forms accessible through scholarship, travel, and the immigration of other cultures and religions (one’s neighbour is no longer necessarily of the same
religion). This has increasingly confirmed the simple but significant realization that followers of religions other than Christianity are in general no less kindly, honest, thoughtful for others, no less truthful, honourable, loving and compassionate, than are in general our Christian fellow citizens. People of other faiths are not on average noticeably better human beings than Christians, but nor on the other hand are they on average noticeably worse human beings. We find that both virtues and vices are, so far as we can tell, more or less equally spread among the population, of whatever major faith. (ChTR13)

There is, further, no way of objectively calibrating the goods and evils found in all religious traditions, in order to determine the ‘best’ of the lot. We can only “come to the negative conclusion that it is not possible to establish the unique moral superiority of any one of the great world faiths,” and that “the onus of proof lies squarely upon anyone who claims that the fruits in human life of his or her own religion are manifestly superior to those of all others” (ChTR 15). Hick notes that this position is at variance with the traditional Christian self-understanding of it being founded by God in person and therefore naturally assumes superiority. Yet, if those living within the body of Christ are closer to God, “[o]ught there not then to be more evidence in Christian lives than in the lives of others of those fruits of the Spirit which St. Paul listed as ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control’ (Gal. 5, 22-23)? If our traditional Christian theology is true, surely we should expect these fruits to be present more fully in Christians generally than in non-Christians generally” (ChTR 16). And yet we see that this is not the case, and Hick concludes that “this theology is in need of revision. For surely its function is to make sense of the facts, not to be a device for systematically ignoring or contradicting them” (ChTR 16). Similarly, perceiving the function of religion as
salvation/liberation, which involves a shift from “ego-centredness” to “Reality-centredness” (ChTR 18), yields the same conclusion:

Suppose, then, we define salvation in a very concrete way, as an actual change in human beings, a change which can be identified—when it can be identified—by its moral fruits. We then find that we are talking about something that is of central concern to each of the great world faiths. Each in its different way calls us to transcend the ego point of view…and to become recentred in that ultimate mystery for which we, in our Christian language, use the term God. (ChTR 17)

Hick cites examples of this orientation from all of the major traditions, such as the Buddhist perspective offered by Masao Abe: “Buddhist salvation is…nothing other than an awakening to reality through the death of the ego”—an awakening, as Hick notes, “which expresses itself in compassion for all sentient life” (ChTR 17)—the primary fruit and criterion of successful genuine religious practice.

Aside from the ubiquitous salvation/liberation (soteriological) claims of the so-called post-Axial traditions there is the closely related yet distinct issue of truth claims. Here, clearly and at times radically different religious truth statements are being made across the traditions, from the nature of the self and the world to the nature of the Ultimate. This leads to the prima facie conclusion that if one belief system is true, all the others must be false (leading to exclusivism rather than pluralism). Bertrand Russell writes: “It is evident as a matter of logic that, since [the great world religions] disagree, not more than one of them can be true” (quoted in ChTR 24). In response, Hick utilizes three analogies to show that there can be multiple ‘true’ religions—‘true’ in the sense of teaching efficacious saving/liberative knowledge of ultimacy and our right relation to it.
First, he invokes Robert Jastrow’s famous ambiguous duck/rabbit drawing later utilized by Wittgenstein in his discussion of ‘seeing-as’ in the *Philosophical Investigations* (PhI 194e-195e). Supposing there is a culture that is familiar with ducks, but not with rabbits, they will naturally conclude that the picture represents a duck. Conversely, if there is a culture that is only familiar with rabbits rather than ducks, they will of course affirm the picture as that of a rabbit. Both cultures will deny that it is any other animal. Both are correct in what they affirm, but mistaken in what they deny. The object invites and sustains multiple correct perceptions/interpretations. In other words, we move from ‘either/or’ to ‘both/and.’ This can correspond with the nature of religious experience. Hick states: “The ultimate ineffable Reality is capable of being authentically experienced in terms of different sets of human concepts as Jahweh, as the Holy Trinity…and again as Brahman, as the Dharmakaya…and so on, these different personae and impersonae occurring at the interface between the Real and our differing religious mentalities and cultures.” (ChTR 25)

Second, Hick offers the wave/particle complementary nature of light in physics: depending on the experimental situation, the observed phenomenon will manifest as either wave form, or particle form. When interpreting the work of Niels Bohr, Henry Folse states that this implies an ontology which “characterizes physical objects through their powers to appear in different phenomenal manifestations rather than through determinate properties corresponding to those of phenomenal objects as was held in the classical framework” (ChTR 26). Here the analogue is to the variety of spiritual practices, for instance prayer, meditation, and group worship as invoking the
specific expected object: “if in the activity of I-Thou prayer we approach the Real as personal then we shall experience the Real as a personal deity” (ChTR 26). The same applies to non-theistic forms of religious experience.

Third, the example of cartography is offered: two-dimensional maps are still effective in spite of necessary distortion of three-dimensional reality. And different maps choose various distortions for different purposes. Hick writes:

If they are properly made, they are all accurate—and yet in another sense they are all inaccurate, in that they all inevitably distort. However, one may be more useful for one purpose, another for another…The analogy here is with theologies, both the different theologies of the same religion and the even more different theologies and philosophies of different religions. (ChTR 27)

These analogies point to Hick’s conception of ultimacy—the Real—and our various relations to it. Thus we see two broad approaches or reasons that led Hick to the positing of his pluralistic hypothesis. Yet there have been many criticisms of his position. The next section shall present those numerous criticisms and rejoinders in order to show that Hick’s hypothesis, while explicitly welcoming possible improvement, nonetheless remains, as it stands, the more viable of the two positions we are considering in this study.

2.3 Criticisms of Hick’s Understanding of the Real an sich

The many criticisms leveled against Hick’s hypothesis refer to four broad objections:

1. It is not genuinely pluralistic, i.e. it is superficial.
2. It does not do justice to the self-understanding of the traditions, i.e. it is inaccurate.
3. It claims a false neutrality and universality, i.e. it is presumptuous.
4. It leads to a debilitating relativism, i.e. it lacks justificatory criteria of assessment.
Following Hick’s responses in *An Interpretation of Religion* (2004—particularly in the introduction—1st ed. 1989), *A Christian Theology of Religions* (1995), and elsewhere, we will discuss numerous specific objections that reflect one or more of each of these main criticisms, in the process revealing important but lesser-recognized facets of the argument. Process pluralists and others sympathetic to their position who criticize Hick’s hypothesis do so on many of the grounds we will examine presently (more on this in #4).

2.3.1 The Concept of the Real

As we have seen (see #2.1.6), Hick distinguishes the Real as it is in itself (ineffable, noumenal, *an sich* or *in se*), and as it is humanly conceived and experienced (all-loving, omnipotent, omniscient, i.e.). The ineffable Real *an sich* has been labeled by Gavin D’Costa as “transcendental agnosticism” (see IRe xx), and as such vitiating its intended explanatory status. This designation is understandable, but inaccurate: it is a mistake to equate ineffability with agnosticism. Hick writes that “[t]he reason why we cannot apply these terms to the Real is not that we do not profess to know whether or not they apply, which would be correctly characterized as agnosticism, but because all such terms are part of our human conceptual field…and…the Real is beyond, or outside, this conceptual field” (IRe xx). Moreover, this position should not be confused with traditional negative (apophatic) theology, in contrast with positive (cataphatic) theological assignations, since

Transcategoriality excludes the attribution of properties either positively or negatively. This is in fact taught by virtually all the great thinkers of the different traditions…but monotheistic theologians then regularly undermine this basic insight by making a wealth of positive claims about the nature of the supposedly ineffable reality. Christian theologians, for example, having declared that ‘God transcends even the mind’ (Augustine) or that ‘by its
immensity the divine substance surpasses every form that our intellect reaches’ (Aquinas), nevertheless profess to know that this ineffable reality is in its ultimate nature a Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the second Person of whom became incarnate as Jesus Christ. (IRe xx)

Without recourse to the hermeneutic difficulties of revelation as literal and propositional, there is indeed a tension here, if not outright contradiction. This leads Hick to continue: “But we ought to be consistent at this crucial point, despite the far-reaching implications of doing so. We cannot rationally hold both that the ineffable, or transcategorial, ultimate reality is indescribable in human terms and also that it is correctly describable in the terms provided by one’s own religious tradition” (IRe xx.). Divine transcategoriality is maintained in part as a response to the chronic and irresolvable debates between traditions, both inter- and intra-. This is essential to Hick’s hypothesis if it is going to be effective in explaining the global religious situation, i.e., if it is going to be comprehensive. With the assertion of the phenomena/noumena distinction, and while yet recognizing the distinction between agnosticism and ineffability, Hick’s position can instead be termed quasi-agnosticism, since it advocates a greater realism regarding our actual and potential religious knowledge.

Teachings holding divine transcategoriality/ineffability are found in the orthodoxies of all the great religious traditions. Hick is drawing out the full implications of this point. And yet, more than just merely logical designations—such as ‘the Real is that which is capable of being referred to’—abound. The teachings of positive ascription have long existed in tension with ineffability. Hick’s solution, following Pseudo-Dionysius and other eminent theologians in the tradition, (see NFRS 162-71), is to designate as ‘mythological’—not literal—all positive ascriptions
to divinity (we will say more about Hick’s use of the mythological as we progress). However, it has been proposed, in contrast to both literal and mythological description, that we refer rather to the traditional alternate teaching of the analogical: for instance, the divine is *like* a loving father, or mother. The consequence of not doing so can render the notion of the divine or the Real as vacuous, or worse—there would be seemingly no defense against concluding that the Real could just as well be demonic. There is, however, a serious negative consequence of accepting analogical teachings as veridical: a commitment to a comprehensive interpretation or hypothesis of religion globally—not just in one’s specific tradition—would make the analogical approach unacceptable, because it would produce a jumbled, incoherent conception of the divine. The conception would have to be, for instance, both analogically substantial and analogically non-substantial; both analogically personal and analogically non-personal—including and then negating all of the posited facets of divine personality. So Hick concludes that the “more you add to the list the more incoherent it becomes” (ChTR 62). This consideration of the application of analogy and its problematic nature helps to see the logic of Hick’s emphasis on traditional transcategoriality. But it must be stressed that this pertains to the Real *an sich*. In contrast, in relation to us and our conditioning conceptual repertoire (*quoad nos*), the Real is rightly described as benign, gracious, and the ground of our highest good.

Nevertheless, a number of critics, such as Brian Hebblethwaite and D’Costa have claimed that this notion of the Real as it is in itself is “so vague as to be entirely redundant” (ChTR 66), and that this so-called “transcendental agnosticism” renders the Real vacuous. Hick is not saying that the Real “does not have the nature that it
has, but that this nature cannot be expressed within our human conceptual systems...this is not to say that it is an empty blank. On the contrary, it is more than we can even imagine. As Anselm said, it is ‘greater than we can conceive’” (ChTR 66). At this point, one might reasonably ask, if nothing substantive can be said about the Real as it is in itself, then why even suppose it to be real?

2.3.2 A Postulation?

If we question the accuracy of confessional absolutism with its highly problematic and implausible claim that only one tradition—one’s own—holds saving truth, and given the overwhelming evidence of and theological reasons for soteriological parity among the traditions, it becomes more realistic to suppose that the different religions are manifestations of/responses to the Real an sich, in conjunction with specific and diverse cultural contexts. And if we start within, to use Paul Tillich’s phrase, “the circle of faith” (quoted in IRre xxv), that is, if we deny the atheistic/naturalistic claim that all religious experience is delusory and instead affirm its general veracity, we are led to the positing of some notion of holy ultimacy, or the Real. Hick states that “the Real is that which there must be if human religious experience, in its diversity of forms, is not purely imaginary projection. It is, in Kantian terms, a necessary postulate of religious experience in its diversity of forms.” (ChTR 68—emphasis mine)

On the issue of the legitimization of pan-tradition religious experience as a product of both perceived soteriological parity and adherence to the intellectual or epistemological golden rule, William Alston argues for the legitimacy of religious experience (see for instance PeG), which Hick commends. But Alston wishes to
maintain the religious experience legitimacy only for the religious form of Christianity. This wish to maintain an exclusivist stance via epistemological considerations is fraught: Alston admits that this is “the most difficult problem for my position” (quoted in DPR 25). He concludes that since we have no neutral way of determining which of the world’s religions is the ‘true way,’ and if we are satisfied with both the theoretical and practical facets of our faith, we would do well to stay within that faith rather than move to another.

There are a number of problems with this view. Hick identifies the most salient concern:

Alston is here assuming that there can be at most one ‘true religion,’ so that the big question is, which of the competing religious belief systems is the true one? But this widespread assumption is fatal to Alston’s thesis that it is (with all the proper qualifications and safeguards) rational to base beliefs on religious experience. For if only one of the many belief-systems based on religious experience can be true, it follows that religious experience generally produces false beliefs, and that it is thus a generally unreliable basis for belief-formation. This is a reversal of the principle, for which Alston has argued so persuasively, that religious experience constitutes a legitimate ground for belief formation…(DPR 26)

Further, maintenance of this unsteady exclusivity is ultimately arbitrary: it could easily be applied, and does in fact get applied for instance by Buddhists, Muslims, or Hindus, and it leads to the illegitimate conclusion that the privileged espousal of one’s religious tradition is simply because it is one’s own! Had William Alston been born a Muslim we would likely see a defense, not of Christian religious experience, but of Muslim religious experience. An experience-based apologetic such as Alston’s still needs to square with the reality of divergent religious experience.
2.3.3 The Nature of the Real

Aside from the question of the concept of the Real, we can turn to the more specific question of the nature of the Real, and iterate the key point of its relation to us. Hick is adamant that we cannot or should not speak substantively of the Real an sich. Just like Kant’s maneuver of the delimitation of reason in order to paradoxically liberate the culture domains of both science and religion, so Hick partially ‘agnosticates,’ as it were, the Ultimate, again in accord with traditional teachings, in order to accede legitimacy to global human religious experience/truth based on compelling empirical criteria. Or more accurately, this is just an ‘uncovering’ hypothesis of what is conceivably the case. As with Kant’s emphasis on the subject and their contextualizing cognitive machinations, so also for Hick the perspective of the perceiver is crucial. This information should be taken seriously, but should not then be transposed to that which is beyond in-formation. Hick’s holding to the relative dual nature of the Real, as is the case with all entities, should not be interpreted as equivocation: The Real in itself (an sich or in se) should not be understood as a loving God, nor as exhibiting all the other qualities we typically attribute to deity. But in relation to us (quoad nos), these characterizations pertain. To better appreciate this distinction, Hick offers another helpful analogy from quantum physics and sense perception: We experience a table as a solid object with which we can interact, for example, by putting plates and knives and forks, etc. on it. It has solidity, a certain varied expanse of color, emits a sound when banged, and it has weight and odour and a stable position. We do not experience what the physicist describes as millions of sub-atomic particles in continuous rapid motion in largely empty space, none of which particles has solidity, colour, odour, sound, or even fixed position. But to see it as a stationary solid object is appropriate for animals at our point in the macro-micro scale, whilst to see it as a whirling sound of particles
would bewilder us and make us unable to act appropriately in relation to it. And so we experience it as it appears to animals with our kind of sense organs and organizing concepts...If we did not exist as we are what we call this table—i.e. the solid piece of furniture that we can use—would not exist, although the millions of particles would. Thus the table exists, with the particular qualities that we experience, only in relation to the perceiver. (IRe xxiii; also IRe 242)

The sub-atomic world of the table is the analogue to the table in itself, and the Real an sich. But whereas even the sub-atomic world is describable, the Real is beyond description. This analogy is provided to emphasize the role of the perceiver, the fact that they can have appropriate and varied responses to their perception/this singular reality, and the likelihood that things are other or more than they seem.

2.3.4 Experiencing the Real

The nature of the Real ties in very closely with our experience of the Real. In contrast to the epistemological position of naïve realism, which holds that there is an objectively real world, and it is just as it appears to us, Hick’s position instead aligns with critical realism: there is an objectively real world, but we only know it mediately, via our inescapable informing perceptual and conceptual apparatus. This now widely accepted epistemological model in other human culture/knowledge domains is here applied in a contemporary mode to religious experience explicitly articulating earlier, not-fully-formed precedent, such as the aforementioned insight of Aquinas: “The thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower”6 (ChTR 68; IRe xix and 153; see #2.1.6). An equally profound variant of this insight can be found in the Hindu Yogavasistha: “Thou art formless. Thy only form is our knowledge of thee” (Parriskar 1978, I, 144 quoted in IRe xxii). Similarly, Hick cites

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6 IRe xix. Or “Whatever is received, it is received according to the mode of being of the receiver”: “Quid quid recipitur, ad modum recipientis recipitur.” Aquinas, S.T., II/II, Q.1, art.2, trans. Ed. Anton Pegis, Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas. New York: Random House, 1945, vol. 2, p. 1057.
Al-Arabi: “The Essence...is not a divinity...it is we who make Him a divinity...Thus He is not known [as Allah] until we are known” (IRe xlii). And Meister Eckhart: “Before there were creatures, God was not God, but, rather, he was what he was. When creatures came to be and took on creaturely being, then God was no longer God as he is in himself, but god as he is with his creatures” (NFRS 169-70). Here too Hick is drawing out an epistemology that has long been implicit in the variety of religious traditions. Based upon our physical and cultural conditioning, vectoring with that which is both within and beyond, we legitimately experience the Real for instance as God, Jahweh, Allah, Brahman, the Dao, or the Dharmakaya.

2.3.5 Direct Mystical Experience?

A closely related but distinct issue is that of mystical experience. Hick asks: “Does not the claim that our awareness of the Real is always a mediated awareness conflict with the claim of many mystics, both eastern and western, to have a attained a direct unmediated unitive experience of the Ultimate?” (IRe xxxvi). Mystics from Pseudo-Dionysius to Shankara have spoken of the experience of unqualified unity as opposed to communative experience. This would appear to contradict Hick’s emphasis on the inevitable mediation and conditionedness of all experience. As he admits, if the unitive mystic achievement is uniform and genuine, his hypothesis would need to be amended (IRe 294). Hick’s argument in response is threefold.

First, it is recognized that the study of trans-cultural mystical reports reveals—just like the more exoteric side of religious teachings—contradictory claims. The contrast of typical western and eastern mystical experience interpretation—the

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7 This has been well analyzed by Stephen Katz (1978 & 1983), whose conclusion of the conditionedness of even unitive mystical religious experience corroborates Hick’s argument.
personal and the impersonal—is well known. But of course, even just within, say, the Asian traditions we find radically different interpretations: the experience of Buddha nature vs. the Atman in Vedantic teachings for instance. Contrasting Mahayana Buddhist and Advaitic Vedanta Hindu experience, Hick writes:

whereas the Real directly apprehended as sunyata is totally immanent in the ever changing forms of concrete existence, directly apprehended as Brahman it is a totally other reality in relation to which the ‘ever changing forms of concrete existence’ are mere illusions. And whereas for the Mahayana Nirvana and Samsara are one, for advaita Vedanta they are distinguished as respectively reality and illusion. And so we have here two very different reports which, taken as accounts of direct, unmediated awareness of the Real as it is in itself, offer incompatible alternatives. (IRe 293)

This suggests that the universal ‘experiencing-as’ structure of consciousness is operative even in reputed supra-categorical unitive mystical experience. Thus Hick concludes that “even in the profoundest unitive mysticism the mind operates with culturally specific concepts and that what is experienced is accordingly a manifestation of the Real rather than the postulated Real an sich.” (IRe 295)

Second, Hick argues that much of the descriptive language of mysticism is more accurately interpreted as metaphorical rather than literal. In support, he cites a number of mystics: According to Ruusbroec, “Yet the creature does not become God…the creature in its inward contemplation feels a distinction and an otherness between itself and God” (IRe xxxvi). St. John of the Cross claims that even in the unitive experience the soul remains “as distinct from the being of God as it was before” (IRe xxxvi). Similar views can be found in Sufism: Al-Ghazali states that the Sufis, “after their ascent to the heavens of Reality, agree that they saw nothing in existence except God the One…But the words of lovers when in a state of drunkenness must be hidden away and not broadcast. However, when their drunkenness abates and the sovereignty
of their reason is restored—and reason is God’s scale on earth—they know that this was not actual identity” (IRe xxxvii). Nevertheless, radical unity tends to be more explicitly asserted in the eastern traditions (*tat tvam asi*: ‘that thou art’).

Thirdly, however, Hick raises a logical difficulty with this view: if the mystic returns from the unitive state, presumably able to remember the experience, this implies a continuous memory-forming individual consciousness able to experience and recount. Is one’s separate identity really then annihilated in divine/other unity? Thus:

To become totally dissolved in the infinite reality of Brahman, like a drop falling into the ocean—which is a familiar analogy in the advaitic literature—would be a state from which there could be no return to the same finite individuality. This may well be the final state far beyond this life. But I am in agreement with Louis Dupré when he says, as regards unitive mysticism in this life, that “such a total elimination of personal consciousness remains an asymptotic ideal never to be reached but to be approached ever more closely.” (IRe xxxviii)

### 2.3.6 Causal Action of the Real

The dynamics of specifically mystical experience aside, there is still the issue of how the Real impacts or acts upon us. Hick notes that this was a considerable problem for Kant in his description of sense perception, since he held that causation itself was one of the mind’s structuring categories. What then is the means by which the noumenal impacts our consciousness of phenomena? Hick’s hypothesis adapts Kant’s phenomena/noumena distinction to apply within the context of religious experience. From the religious perspective, “there is a ‘spiritual’ aspect of our nature—the *imago dei*, or our capacity to receive divine revelation, or the *atman*, or the Buddha nature—that resonates to the universal presence of the transcendent reality, in virtue of which quality we are religious animals” (IRe xxix). It is recognized that we must resort to
metaphorical language here, given the ineffable nature of the subject. The mechanism of religious experience will be discussed further in chapters four and five, as we consider the contribution of process thought to this issue. Similarly when we address the question of the unity or the multiplicity of the Ultimate.

2.3.7 Literal and Mythological Truth

According to Hick, true and false literal and analogical statements about the ultimate can be and are appropriately made within each tradition, the norms within each tradition being the determining criteria of truth-value. Regarding the Real in itself, only mythological statements obtain, not literal or analogical. By mythological truth Hick means that which evokes an appropriate practical response or dispositional attitude to the myth’s referent: it is a pragmatic form of truth that elicits right orientation and righteous action. The various religious beliefs, then, that elicit righteous being and action are literally true of the “divine personae and metaphysical impersonae of the Real, and mythologically true of the Real in itself.” (IRe xxix)

Still, as Alvin Plantinga notes, can mythological truth be truly efficacious? Is it really religiously relevant? He claims that only if one “accept the splendid and powerful doctrines of traditional Christianity” literally will one have a genuinely transformative impact (Plantinga 2000, 81). In response, Hick writes:

To put this more concretely, how can anyone be significantly influenced by the Christian story of God the Son, second Person of the Trinity, being born at Christmas of a virgin mother, dying on the cross to atone for the sins of the world, being bodily resurrected from the dead at Easter, subsequently ascending bodily into the sky, and being present today in the Church through the Holy Spirit, if this is not all believed to be literally true? I accept of course that there are very many on the conservative-evangelical and fundamentalist wings of the churches who operate in terms of a naïve realism and who accordingly cannot see this story as other than either a literally true historical narrative or as a lie. For them there is nothing in between. (IRe xxxiv)
The remaining faithful, however, recognize both the mythological character and spiritually transformative efficacy of these stories and teachings. Hick also notes the very common mythological understanding of the many battles and other activities of the gods in Hindu scriptures, as well as the *Jakata* tales of the previous lives of Siddhartha Gautama in Buddhism. All would evince for instance Tillich’s teaching of the symbolic character of religious language.

Regarding conflicting metaphysical ultimate truth claims among the traditions—particularly of the eschatological variety such as whether the universe had a beginning or not, or whether the soul gets reincarnated into other lives or not—Hick follows the Buddha’s approach of the ‘undetermined questions’ (*avyakata*), or ‘that which tends not to edification.’ “We should be very cautious in making knowledge claims in these areas…I think we have to accept that our opinions in these areas are only opinions, and that it is not necessary for salvation that our present opinions turn out to be true.” (ChTR 52)

It must be emphasized that Hick is not saying the Real is simply the one God with many names. “You’ve been taken to mean that…the Christian term ‘God’ and the Buddhist term ‘Emptiness’ (*sunyata*), and the Hindu term ‘Brahman, and so on, are all different names for the same referent. Is that correct? No, not at all…the differing belief-systems are beliefs about different manifestations of the Real” (ChTR 43). These diverse beliefs are beliefs about genuinely different phenomenal realities, aligned with one or the other *personae* or *impersonae*. This point is stressed in order to meet continued similar criticisms that we will see when we examine the process position in chapters four and five.
Thus far the issues and criticisms raised have been largely centred on the nature of the Real and our experience thereof. We now turn to questions/criticisms which centre on Hick’s understanding of the religious traditions themselves, and the nature of his hypothesis.

2.4 Criticisms of Hick’s Pluralistic Hypothesis

2.4.1 A Modernist Western Imposition?

Perhaps the most repeated criticism of Hick’s hypothesis is that it is an Enlightenment-based western imperialist imposition containing multiple negative ramifications.° Kenneth Rose states that “most adherents of most religions will see the pluralistic hypothesis as not only reductionistic and thus derogatory to the visions of religious truth to which they adhere, but also as another form of Western or Christian religious reinterpretation and reduction to foreign assumptions of what they hold as the deepest truths of life” (Rose 1996, 102). Today, there is a tendency to see any universal notion, principle, or perspective as arising out of an increased global awareness that generalizes specifics—for instance the idea of ‘religion’—and therefore as insidiously distortive and aggressive, thus creating an undesirable ‘totalizing’ hegemony. This view however ignores that “we can only perceive what is universal through the particular. The more forcefully and precisely the particular experience is expressed, the more vividly the universal is manifested” (Marcel Légaut 1982, 2). Hick’s hypothesis is sometimes interpreted as such an undesirable ‘totalizing’ hegemony. There are a number of conflated issues here that need to be distinguished.

° See, for example, Surin 1989; Newbigin 1989; Rose 1996.
First, Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis is illegitimately guilted by association. It is claimed that it is a variant of the capitalistic ‘Americanization’ of the world, with its destructive leveling effects. Hick responds that “contemporary religious pluralism is part of the same world as multinational capitalism; but surely it doesn’t follow that religious pluralism is an ally of international capitalism and its repressive universalizing effects” (ChTR 39). Complicity in unjust structures can take a number of forms, and any position in the theology of religions or religious diversity theory is susceptible to perversion. Furthermore, in response to the view that the pluralistic hypothesis is linked to an inaccurate ‘one world’ sentiment, Hick states, “Modern knowledge about the integral character of the human story and the intertwinnings of religious history has created an intellectual environment hospitable to religious pluralism. But so what? Surely this is no argument against religious pluralism” (ChTR 33). Hick’s theory is fallaciously accused of illegitimacy because it springs from a context that can naturally tend to its creation. Neo-Marxist critiques such as that offered by Kenneth Surin argue that Hick’s hypothesis is, as Peter Byrne puts it, “ideologically loaded,” and that it “cannot claim political innocence” (PRP 28-29). However, as Byrne rightly observes (p. 29):

The problem with Marxising of this kind is that it either proves too little or too much. If we take seriously the point that all communication, as a set of material acts, has a socio-economic and thus political context, then it will turn out that the ‘discourse’ in the pages of a journal of pure mathematics is political…If everything that is spoken is ideological for the reasons cited, then the sense of ‘ideological’ has become too thin to be of interest. Any thicker sense must surely be discriminating…This in turn implies that non-ideological modes of thought and speech are possible.

Byrne specifies the implication of not moving past a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’:
such a critique, or ‘deconstruction’ to use the contemporary jargon, can only work if it is employed in contrast to the idea of questions in this area that rest on more adequate presuppositions, and which are thus not candidates for this kind of critique…Unless fashionable ‘deconstructionist’ critique is used in the service of finding more rationally acceptable views, it will lapse into a radical yet rather tired relativism (a fact cogently argued [by Ernst] Gellner). (PRP 29)

Byrne notes that the basic dispute centers on the possibility of cognitive self-transcendence. Hick’s pluralist position affirms this possibility with the necessary provisos and caveats. To affirm otherwise is, of course, self-refuting—namely, to deny the possibility of a universal assessment is itself to make a universal assessment. Any position on the theology of religions spectrum, or any genuine attempt at reasoned explanation requires this presupposition. And the critique of a supposed false universality is no less applicable to non-pluralist orientations. As Schmidt-Leukel notes: “Of course, a pluralist position suggests an overarching interpretation of religious diversity. But this does not distinguish it from exclusivism or inclusivism, which do exactly the same” (PRDT 88). For Byrne, if the possibility of cognitive self-transcendence is after all an illusion, then the enterprise is lost. But if so, the conclusion will not help those who wish to make absolutist claims from within the traditions, claims which the pluralist thinks we have reason to question. Such claims will be no more worthy of respect than the pluralist’s if some form of deconstructionist relativism is true. A kind of realism about truth and knowledge is required as much by the religiously conservative and traditional as by the Enlightenment liberal who contends for the truth of pluralism. (PRP 30)

Second, the basic position of the pluralistic hypothesis—all the great traditions are more or less equal vehicles of salvation/liberation—is not simply the product of modern western/Christian culture. In contrast, Stephen Kaplan writes: “It must not be forgotten that religious pluralism is a modern phenomenon and not part of the
landscape of traditional religious beliefs” (Kaplan 2002, 23). Tom Driver opines that “[i]t will be the better part of wisdom to acknowledge, even to stress, that the whole discussion about ‘religious pluralism’...belongs to western liberal religious thought at the present time” (Driver 1987, 206). Kaplan cites Richard Hayes on this point:

Most of the historical religions are based in some way either on an explicit rejection or denigration of another religious tradition or traditions or on aristocratic claims of ethnic or racial supremacy...That all [of the great] religions are traditionally triumphalist and not pluralistic is simply something that must be acknowledged; it would be ideologically anachronistic and intellectually dishonest to try to find anticipations of a now fashionable way of thinking in traditions that evolved in a social and political setting entirely different from that of the present world. (Kaplan 2002, 23)

Of course, the triumphalist perspective has always been present in every great tradition. But this is not the whole story, and it is just as intellectually dishonest to deny the presence of non-absolutist/pluralist streams of thought throughout the history of the religions. The claim that pluralistic thinking is simply the product of modern western/Christendom is, as Hick states, “just historically false. So far from religious pluralism being a recent creation from within Christianity, Christianity is among the last traditions to begin to take it seriously! And so far from it being a modern western invention, it was a familiar and widespread outlook in the East centuries before the eighteenth century western Enlightenment” (IRe xl). There are a number of pan-tradition pre-modern examples of this outlook. For instance in the Vedic teaching that “The Real (sat) is one, but sages name it variously” (Rig-Veda I, 164, 46), or the Jain teaching of the many-sidedness of truth (anekantavada). The pluralist sentiment, or close approximations to it, was also held by individuals such as Buddhist emperor Ashoka, Guru Nanak, Kabir, Al-Junaid, and Ibn al-Arabi (see IRe 34-37 & 139-47). We mention only a few more that Hick cites:
There is indeed probably no better ‘soundbite’ for the pluralist point of view than [thirteenth century Muslim Sufi Jalal ul-din] Rumi’s words about the religions of his time, “The lamps are different but the light is the same.” And in the West Nicholas of Cusa, in the fifteenth century, spoke in his book on peace between faiths (De Pacis Fidei) of there being “only one religion in the variety of rites”…On a parallel Western track the early Quaker, William Penn (founder of Pennsylvania), wrote that “The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious and devout souls are everywhere of one religion; and when death has taken off the mask they will know one another, though the divers liveries they wear here make them strangers.” (ChTR 36-7)

Hick thus concludes that “it is emphatically not the case that the religious pluralist vision is a product of modern Western culture” (ChTR 37). It is not a view that has been foisted upon the rest of the world. However, “no doubt it was the European Enlightenment that has freed the west to take this insight on board; but its origins lie much further back in human history.” (IRe xli)

The next set of criticisms implicit in the foregoing involves the accusation that the pluralistic hypothesis does not leave the religions as they are, and that it contradicts each religion’s own self-understanding. This is arguably sourced in ignoring the basic distinction and full implications of the Real an sich (in se) and the Real as it is variously conceived and experienced (quoad nos). Every religious practitioner experiences distinct forms of ultimacy; Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis is not contradicting their imagery/conception. A statement by Hick is relevant here: “The Real itself is not a direct object of worship. There is no cult of the Real” (IRe xxxi).

And yet, in fact, contradictory conceptions of ultimacy are operative in all of the traditions. So how, exactly, is the pluralistic hypothesis contradicting each religion’s

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9 This notion can be compared to a statement by Pope Benedict XVI (Josef Ratzinger), where he responded to the question, “How many ways to God are there?” with “As many as there are human beings. For even within the same faith tradition the way of each human being is a wholly personal one.” We can compare this to the traditional Islamic teaching that “There are as many paths to God as there are human souls.” Both quoted in TI 57.
self-understanding, when that understanding is itself diverse and at points contradictory?

Turning specifically to Christianity, Hick suggests somewhat provocatively that “Christian belief is, quite simply, what Christians generally believe, and to note that this has varied enormously over the centuries” (ChTR 126). He discusses two examples of this enormous variation: the concept of God, and the meaning of the crucifixion. The predominant emphasis today is on the unlimited love of God, and on Jesus as love incarnate. But citing the work of historian Dennis Nineham, Hick reminds us that this did not always pertain: God in medieval Europe was conceived predominantly as angry, punishing, and vindictive, eradicating whole armies, and damming the majority, based on an inscrutable will. “Small wonder if such a heavenly lord seemed quite as arbitrary and high-handed as any earthly lord” (ChTR 127). And Jesus Christ was seen as stern judge, meting punishment on the Last Day. Similarly, an evolution is apparent in the Hebrew scriptures—from tribal battle leader/warrior god, to the later universal Lord as taught in rabbinic Judaism. Hick points to the implication of this trans-cultural development: “And so the question arises whether it is God who has changed in these ways through the centuries, or our human images of God? Clearly, the latter. Does this not show that between ourselves and the ultimate reality, there is a screen of varied and changing images of that reality?” (IRe xxxii)

Similarly, the understanding of the crucifixion has evolved over time: from a notion of ransom (Mark 10:45) in a slavery-condoned culture, to the Anselmian, legalistic ‘satisfaction’ theory, to the act of love/bearing of punishment view in modern times. Thus Hick says that
the death of Jesus has become for many Christians today the manifestation of a self-giving love which is an earthly reflection of the divine love, rather than an atoning transaction to enable God to forgive sinners. But this represents a transformation of Christian understanding that would, until within about the last century, have seemed utterly heretical and, at one time, deserving of the direst penalties. (ChTR 130-1)

Similar to Hick, Alan Race holds that “tradition” is itself an idealized term, such that Christian history may just as easily be imagined as a process of “inventiveness,” a series of responses to many radically different cultural and historical influences. In other words, there is a myth of stable tradition also” (Race 2001, 118). These examples within Christianity can be duplicated within every other tradition. To claim that Hick’s (meta) theory contradicts each tradition’s self-understanding is to fallaciously ascribe uniformity and stasis to each tradition, as well as an operative naïve realism.

On the other hand, Hick does indeed argue for each tradition’s reconceiving of its status as has actually been done, however minimally or gradually, in all times and places, and for a move from naïve to critical realism. He acknowledges that the central traditional forms of each religion are distinctive and absolutist, due to the fact that they have developed within their own conceptual worlds. But the problem arises when these relatively discrete conceptual worlds—different claimed awarenesses of ultimacy—come into contact with each other, instigating the need for a coherent explanation of the deep discrepancies. The justification for Hick’s hypothesis is “simply that [it] is a more realistic view because it takes account of a wider range of data than any one of the traditional absolutisms” (ChTR 47). In response to his position departing from each tradition’s mainline self-conception, Hick replies that
Yes, it does and it must. This has to be recognized by anyone who is trying to develop an understanding of religious diversity—a global interpretation which starts from the rough salvific parity of the great traditions will not be identical with the belief-system of any one of them…To complain about this is simply to turn one’s back on the whole project of a religious interpretation of religion in its wide variety of forms. _One cannot seek such a comprehensive interpretation and then disqualify any proposal that doesn’t simply replicate the particular doctrines of one’s own tradition._ The options are either to affirm the absolute truth of one’s own tradition, or go for some form of pluralistic view—or of course have no view and simply regard the whole matter as a mystery. (ChTR 48-49; italics mine)

The legitimate attempted explanatory nature of Hick’s hypothesis is indeed recognized by at least some philosophers of religion, such as Sumner B. Twiss. In response to critics such as Harold Netland (who incidentally like D’Costa is one of Hick’s former students) and Roger Corliss, who claim that Hick’s position is distortive or inappropriate to the various traditions’ self-understandings, Twiss states that this critique results in the overly parochial and protective view that an explanatory account of a belief or practice must be restricted to the perspective and terms of the subject and culture. But this is precisely to confuse different levels or senses of interpretation [internal-descriptive and higher-order explanatory] (and interpretive adequacy) in such a way as to block genuine inquiry and attempts at explanation and theory from a perspective different from that of a subject or culture. This seems at best myopic and at worst a confused antiintellectualism…why should we suppose that an explanatory-theoretical account must at that level simply replicate or be bound by traditional understandings and concepts?…of course, the account is reductive, invoking non-traditional theoretical factors to explain in a systematic and comprehensive way what doctrines-as-they-are-understood-externally-to-tradition may really be all about. Is not this what a theory is supposed to do? (Twiss 1990, 543-45)

This passage in which ‘reductive’ pertains to ‘explanatory,’ not to ‘naturalistic,’ reminds us of the relevance of higher-order explanation. Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis, then, contradicts only each tradition’s absolutist self-conception; virtually all other particularities are left intact, given their description of phenomenal manifestations of
the Real. Virtually intact, that is, unless one adheres to completely literal, as opposed to mythological, interpretations of dogma. And again, both the non-absolutist and mythological (not non-realist) orientations are venerably present in every tradition. Here, Hick is not proposing a radical departure from long-standing teachings.

There is still, however, the charge of homogenization. That is, critics such as Kenneth Surin, John Cobb, and S. Mark Heim claim that Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis ignores real differences between the traditions in order to fit a preconceived explanatory structure (more on this in chapter four). In response, Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis is not a preconceived or aprioristic notion in relation to the phenomenon of religious diversity. Rather, it is the product of much dialogue and observation—specifically sustained dialogue between members of the various traditions and observation of common ‘fruits’ of otherwise diverse spiritual practice. At a number of points, theologies or religious conceptions remain profoundly and irreducibly dissimilar, but actual behaviours and claimed spiritual aims do not. Hick’s hypothesis posits that the similarities between traditions are as real, and ultimately more significant, than their differences. This does not spring from some facile wish that the religions just ‘all get along;’ it is the product of the drive to account for the observed phenomena of diverse traditions producing remarkably similar results—at best, saints, mahatmas, or bodhisattvas. In recent times, there has been an overemphasis on alterity at the expense of equally real commonality, or even unicity. This is partly the product of an increased cultural/political sensitivity rooted in a sense of justice and respect, that is wary of or actively against any universalized conception of the human condition (and even calling into question the validity of such a phrase as ‘the human
condition’), for fear that it is, unknowingly or not, inaccurate and unjustly coercive or totalizing. The emphasis on alterity has been a pendulum swing from (perverse) elements within modernist universalism. Yet universality is not uniformity; diversity can and does thrive—indeed, this is integral to the very notion of ‘pluralism,’ always within a unifying, common context or frame of reference that would otherwise render uncoordinated diversity meaningless. In a sense, classification is always a kind of homogenization. But this is a knowledge virtue rather than vice, especially if it reflects the way things actually are.

We will see that the process position sides with Heim and others in their claim of radical religious diversity and critique of Hick’s perceived superficial pluralism. The organizing questions of the religions, it is claimed, are oriented toward different realities and goals. Cobb and others have observed that the Theravada Buddhist question of how to eliminate suffering, for instance, is markedly different from the Jewish question of how to keep life holy. Hick responds:

Yes, it’s true that the religions ask different questions. But I want to suggest that these questions, whilst specifically different, are generically the same. They all presuppose a profound present lack, and the possibility of a radically better future; they are all answers to the question, how to get from one to the other. In traditional Christian language they are all ways of asking, What must I do to be saved? (ChTR 41)

If not always agreeing that we can speak legitimately and meaningfully about ‘religion,’ most would agree that we can instead talk appropriately about ‘ways.’ But ‘ways’ to what? The preposition ‘to’ might itself be distortive, since we can equally say ‘ways of.’ Nonetheless, from a functionalist perspective, we can say that a religion is what a religion does (with a critique of, say, Keiji Nishitani
They diagnose the failure of ordinary ‘unredeemed’ human life in different ways—as fallen sinfulness, or as the blindness of avidya, or as a centring in the self-positing ego, and so on. But these all refer to the same world-wide human condition with which we are so familiar. They each highlight a different aspect of it and depict the limitlessly better state as its reversal. (ChTR 107)

There are a number of issues here. First, what is our orientation toward species and genera—which is more conceptually fundamental? Is this an appropriate schema for the phenomena under consideration? Second, are the traditions oriented by the same Reality? And third, are the traditions pursuing the same goal? We note Hick’s above-mentioned answer for now. Thus from his perspective the pluralistic hypothesis is an aspect of a universalist conception that is arguably not homogenizing.

### 2.4.2 Hick’s False Neutrality

Hick’s position is often understood as claiming an objective neutrality unconnected to any specific context or religious tradition, or as implicitly claiming a privileged vantage point by which to arbitrate among or assess the problem of the conflicting truth claims in religious diversity. As just one example, John Cobb states:

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10 According to Schmidt-Leukel: “Asking about the particular purpose of religion is misunderstanding religion, argues the Buddhist philosopher Keiji Nishitani in his well-known work *Religion and Nothingness*. For a number of things we can, and have to, ask what their purpose is in relation to us, thereby making ourselves the centre and *telos* of their function. Religion, however, crosses this perspective by putting our own existence into question. Only with the inverted question ‘For what purpose do I exist?’ will a genuine understanding of religion become possible” (TI 173; see also Nishitani 1983, 1-5). We still see, however, the focus on purpose, with the entailed notion of function, from whichever perspective we approach the self-other relation, and from whatever perspective we approach inherent intention. That all spiritual human structures have an ‘instrumental’ character does not deny their many other (more auxiliary) facets. One might, for example, consider the role of art in much of European history until approximately the Renaissance. See for instance Schuon’s “Concerning Forms in Art” in TUR 61-78.
As can be seen from Hick’s position so far, Cobb’s charge of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis being different from all of the received traditions is inaccurate. The internal diversity of every tradition—part of which has been the longstanding affirmation of tradition parity and transcategoriality—contradicts such a blanket statement. Moreover Hick does not claim neutrality; rather, his hypothesis is yet grounded in a specific tradition. To the extent that it is a meta-theory, it is effectively comprehensive; and to the extent that it comes from within the “circle of faith” (Tillich—see above #2.3.2), it has an accuracy that external (to religion) systems cannot achieve. There is neither a claimed neutrality nor privileged vantage point. Hick explicitly acknowledges context. But corroboration of evidence in part leads to the positing of a global explanatory theory. Hick emphasizes the context-grounded, *a posteriori* aspect of the pluralistic hypothesis in a passage that is perhaps the best concise description of his position:

The pluralistic hypothesis is arrived at inductively, from ground level. I start out as one committed to the faith that the Christian religious experience is not purely a projection but is at the same time a cognitive response to a transcendent reality; and its fruits in Christian lives confirm this to me. I then notice that there are other great world religions likewise reporting their own different forms of religious experience, the cognitive character of which is supported in the same way. And so I have to extend to them the principle that religious experience constitutes a valid basis for religious belief. But I now have on my hands the problem of several conflicting sets of truth-claims which are equally well based in religious experience and confirmed by their fruits. (ChTR 50)

Given this situation, Hick continues:
In order to understand this situation I form the hypothesis of an ultimate divine reality which is being differently conceived, and therefore differently experienced, from within the different religio-cultural ways of being human. This is an hypothesis offered to explain, from a religious as distinguished from a naturalistic point of view, the facts described by the historians of religion. It is an explanatory theory; and I suggest that critics who don’t like it should occupy themselves in trying to produce a better one. (ChTR 50)

More recently, Hick has stated that “the pluralistic hypothesis…is thus not an *a priori* or free-standing theory, unrelated to living religion, but an attempt from within it to make intelligible sense of the actual religious situation world-wide. Unless this is taken into account, as it has not been by many critics, the debate becomes off-target.” (IRe xxvi)

Perhaps because Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis does not in fact claim a privileged, neutral and objective status, it is criticized not for a presumptuous objectivity, but instead for being debilitatingly relativistic. This criticism is leveled against the pluralist position in the theology of religions generally. That is, the pluralistic position has been charged with claiming that it is illegitimate to assess religious beliefs and practices given the espoused ‘quasi-agnosticism’ (see above #2.3.1) or lack of access to the source of absolute knowledge or to an absolute arbitrating standard; or conversely, that it is legitimate to assess the beliefs and practices of all the religious traditions if, given pre-commitments to fairness and equality, all the traditions are deemed legitimate and equal. But as a developed position within the theology of religions, pluralism does not avow these views. Paul Knitter emphasizes that

*Pluralism does not imply relativism.* Contrary to current caricatures, pluralism does not assert that ‘all religions are essentially the same’ or that ‘all religious beliefs or practices are equally valid.’ While pluralists do affirm the broad validity…of the many religions, they also affirm the possibility, indeed the necessity, of distinguishing between specific ‘good and bad,’ or ‘helpful and
harmful’ religious affirmations or practices. Such evaluations are always
dangerous and must be carried out carefully, open-mindedly, and (most
important) dialogically. (Knitter 2005, xi)

Returning specifically to Hick’s position, Kenneth Rose notes that “There are
resources within Hick’s writings that help him to avoid the religious relativism that
the notion of cognitive ambiguity seems to imply” (Rose 1996, 134). It can be
summarized from what we have seen thus far that the key resource is the practical
criterion of salvation/liberation. Hick states that the “basic criterion…for judging
religious phenomena is soteriological. The salvation/liberation which it is the function
of religion to facilitate is a human transformation which we see most conspicuously
in the saints of all traditions” (IRe 309). There is in other words a claimed appropriate
response to the Real, culminating in the ‘fruits’ of spiritual practice (Matt. 7:16).

Wittily in critique Ninian Smart has commented that this is a “pretty squashy
criterion” (Smart 1993, 181). In response, Hick writes:

It’s certainly a soft rather than a hard criterion, in that it does not deal in
anything that can be precisely measured. But I think that in fact we all do use it…We all operate with an implicit or explicit moral criterion. Sam Keen
vividly calls it our “spiritual bullshit detector.” It’s not always easy to operate.
But with care we can distinguish between phonies and individuals who are
genuinely far advanced in the salvific transformation. They are the people (or
rather some of the people) whom we call saints, jivanmuktas, arahats,
bodhisattvas, mahatmas. And when we identify them we do so mainly by what
are broadly ethical criteria. (ChTR 77) 11

Moreover, that the behaviours of holy men and women are the appropriate if not
self-justifying responses to the Real and all phenomena are vouched for by the
 teachings of all the great spiritual traditions. Yet it has been noted by Timothy

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11 Hick’s emphasis on pragmatic criteria can be compared to the process position, initially advanced by
Whitehead, of pragmatic justification of held metaphysical principles—“hardcore common sense”—
that which is inevitably presupposed in practice. The process position in turn aligns with the notion of
‘performative contradiction’ advanced by Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel. See PrR 13 & 151;
RwS 29-35 and Griffin 2007, p.7.
Stennett and others that this argumentation is circular: Hick starts with the assumption that all of the great traditions are legitimate or genuine responses to the Real, then he proceeds to justify this assertion by claiming that their ethical teachings show that they are in fact genuine responses to the Real. But this is a misconstrual, because it makes the mistake of assuming Hick is attempting an irrefutable argument for the veracity of religious belief. Hick states that “[i]n offering a religious as distinguished from a naturalistic interpretation of religion I’m speaking from within the circle of religious faith, not professing to establish the validity of that faith” (ChTR 78)

Ultimately Hick’s whole position is circular, but not viciously so: “It’s a circle, I agree, but it’s the kind of circle which any comprehensive view inevitably involves. If you hold, for example, a naturalistic view of the universe you have to use naturalistic assumptions to support it. Or if you hold that Christianity is the only true faith you will inevitably be using its own special criteria to establish this. There are no non-circular ways of establishing fundamental positions” (ChTR 78). If this is understood, it then becomes clear that Hick’s position proceeds with strong supporting connections/components, not least of which is the empirically/inductively-based practical criterion. But along with every other facet of his argument, it has received a fair amount of criticism. For instance, according to Rose:

This approach, though staving off relativism, pays a high price. Reliance on the soteriological criterion as a means of determining what is true doctrine is reductionistic, since in practice it dispenses with the issue of the truth of diverse religious doctrines and stories by asserting that a doctrine or story is true only insofar as it is conducive to the production of saintliness. Thus, various aspects of religious doctrines and stories that do not have directly to do with the production of saints are reduced to secondary importance. (Rose 1996, 139-40)
What Rose seems to be criticizing is the determination of significance of religious teachings and practices—judgements will be made. But it is unclear why this is not perceived as normally operative in all the traditions; or if it is, why an interpretation of religion from within a particular tradition should be debarred from joining in making this assessment? It is a reduction, or rather, a prioritizing of significance. If we understand religions as being primarily soteriological vehicles or ways, it is accordingly appropriate to deem all that does not relate to facilitation of transformation as of secondary or lesser importance. If on the other hand all the facets of a tradition are soteriologically relevant—that is, if one wishes to argue that we cannot isolate specific aspects from the organic whole—then this only makes Hick’s argument more accurate. Hick’s argument would be significantly challenged only if a convincing case were made that religious traditions or ways are not primarily vehicles of transformation.

Perhaps even more accurate a descriptor than ‘reductionistic’ would be ‘discriminating,’ in spite of M.M. Thomas’ claim that Hick’s “pluralistic approach…seems in general to advocate accepting all religions on their own terms without discriminating between the spirits within them” (Thomas 1990, 57), and Alister McGrath’s claim of “Hick’s refusal to take an evaluative position in relation to other religions” (quoted in ChTR 45). Hick does in fact call for critical discrimination. Indeed, the pluralist stance is precisely a judgement about the soteriological efficacy status of other ways, not an avowed skepticism about the possibility of knowledge or the making of determinations thereof. However, there is
sometimes a confusion with the asserted ‘quasi-agnosticism’ toward ultimate metaphysical statements Hick’s position affirms. Thus Hick claims that

First of all, not by any means every religious movement—in the broad family-resemblance sense of ‘religious’—is salvific: not Nazism, or Satanism, or the Jim Jones or the Waco phenomena, for example. And secondly, that the great world religions are contexts of salvation/liberation doesn’t mean that they are perfect contexts, or that every aspect of them is equally salvific or indeed salfivic at all…But such criticism, whether of our own tradition or of another, should always be specific, directed to particular events, individuals, and situations, and should aim at their correction. (ChTR 44-5)

To emphasize the quality of determination in Hick’s pluralism, we remember Schmidt-Leukel’s observation that Hick “takes an exclusivist stance toward certain destructive cults or sects and an inclusivist one toward (quasi-religious) humanism” (ExIP 20). So there are discerning criteria in Hick’s position. But of course, the cogency of these allegedly universal criteria remain debatable (more on this in chapter four).

This discussion of the most important criticisms of Hick’s position, along with initial apologetic responses, has hopefully illuminated the virtues and continued viability of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis. We see that it can answer to the overarching charges of distortive tradition reconceptualization, presumptuous neutrality, non-neutral ineffectual relativism, and more debatably perhaps, superficiality or a homogenizing pseudo-pluralism, along with other attendant issues. It is comprehensive and coherent, but is it fully adequate to the facts of religious diversity? Among others, representatives of process pluralism do not think so. We now turn to the process perspective on religious diversity.
CHAPTER THREE

JOHN COBB’S PROCESS PLURALISM

The process position on religious diversity has been espoused primarily by theologian John B. Cobb, Jr., in his development of a Christian theology that is informed by the philosophical ideas of Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947). Although his philosophical schema has been very influential to certain subsequent thinking in the field, Whitehead himself did not directly address the issue of a theology of religions. Rather, this view on religious diversity was initially formulated by Cobb, and further articulated and championed by David Ray Griffin, as well as other process-affiliated thinkers and theologians such as Schubert M. Ogden and Marjorie Suchocki. In this study we will be looking primarily at Cobb’s and Griffin’s views, since both have been in the vanguard of addressing the issue of religious diversity or a theology of religions from a process/Whiteheadian lens, and as they have been more engaged with Hick’s hypothesis than have other process thinkers.

Like Hick’s hypothesis development, there has been an evolution in Cobb’s thinking on religious diversity over the years. As editor of a volume on Cobb’s thinking about religious diversity, Paul Knitter states: “I’ve described this evolution as a move from Cobb’s concerns to avoid an absolutism of any one religion to one which seeks also to evade a relativism of all religions” (TCW 3). This is the challenge generally for the pluralist position on religious diversity. Along with these primary concerns, Cobb is convinced of the legitimacy of religious experience affirmed by
each of the great traditions. He is also convinced of their radical distinctiveness and irreducibility. From Cobb’s perspective at least, Whiteheadian process metaphysics provide the resources for an account of the veridicality and genuine alterity of varied pan-tradition religious experience. Yet if Hick’s solution to the problem of conflicting religious truth claims—the application of a critical realism, or partial agnosticism—is a high price to pay, the price that Cobb’s pluralism pays—ontological plurality and incommensurable soteriological goals—is, it will be argued, even greater.

Before we turn to that issue, we can say that Cobb’s initial drive to avoid the assertion of arrogant and un-Christian Christian absolutism, and later the mitigation of an ineffectual relativism led him to affirm both the universal truth of Christianity and the universal truth of the other great traditions. One might wonder if there is a contradiction involved in affirming multiple universal truths in the same area of claimed knowledge. We can begin to open ourselves to this possibility, Cobb asserts, if we recognize “that the totality of what is, is very complex, far exceeding all that we can ever hope to know or think” (TCW 128; see TCW 135). With this orienting caveat, let us examine the components of the process perspective, first by summarizing Cobb’s review of the background to current thinking in the Christian theology of religions.

3.1 Theology of Religions History: Cobb’s Select Overview

Cobb deftly summarizes the main modern-historical Christian theological responses to religious plurality in order to highlight their inadequacies and set the ground for his own alternative. As modern awareness of other venerable traditions grew, there
occurred a disturbing awareness of relativity—we are but one tradition among many—and thus a challenging relativization of self-conceived absolute or universal truth claims. Friedrich Schleiermacher’s attempt to understand Christianity in the context of global religion culminated in his construal of Christianity as the superior form of religion. Cobb notes that Schleiermacher’s “description of diversity became an argument for superiority” (TCW 131). The assertions of Schleiermacher forced the question of the definition of religion. As its limited accuracy became clear, an increased empirical examination began to improve upon Schleiermacher’s definition of religion as the feeling of absolute dependence. Like his emphasis on experience, so Rudolf Otto’s emphasis on the experience of the holy followed, and he too concluded that Christianity is the highest expression of religion. Subsequent to Otto was Paul Tillich and his notion of ‘ultimate concern,’ and Christianity as the fullest embodiment of that orientation. But toward the end of his life, Cobb reminds us, Tillich began to doubt this conclusion. “His personal experience with Buddhists in Japan and extensive working with Mica Eliade led him to see that the situation is more complex than he had realized. He called for a theological approach that took the data of the history of religions more seriously and did not insist on Christian superiority” (TCW 131). The notion of ranking religions soon fell out of favour, particularly as interfaith dialogue continued. There was in other words an increased shift from the prescriptive to the phenomenological/descriptive; however, with the attendant outcome of greater relativization.

Aside from the initiatives of Schleiermacher and his focus on religious experience, there was the potent philosophical system of Hegel. With Hegel there began a focus
on the dialectics of history, conceived as the unfolding drama of *Geist*. For Hegel, the culmination of spirit and all human striving generally lies in the modern European expression of Christianity. This orientation was taken also by Ernst Troeltsch: Christianity is superior by virtue of the fact that it exhibits exceptional cultural specificity transcendence. Yet after further world history and religions research, Troeltsch abandoned his initial convictions, particularly as he became more aware of the cultural conditionedness or specificity of Christian teachings, as well as the similar perspectival-to-transcendence ratio of the other great traditions. As Cobb notes, “he finally acknowledged that, among the higher religions, each was best in the cultural sphere in which it flourished. There was no neutral standpoint from which one could be declared superior to the others” (TCW 132). The theological implications of this new orientation in the descriptive are that “we should acknowledge that each community has its own forms of life and thought, that each has its own norms and values, that ours are no better and no worse than others. The relativization of Christianity is complete.” (TCW 132)

If we deem Schleiermacher’s spearheading Christian theology approach to religious diversity as *experiential*, and Hegel’s approach as *historical*, Cobb notes that we can in turn identify a third great approach as *confessional*. This approach was strongly articulated and advanced by Karl Barth. Barth also eschewed a more crass ranking of the traditions, and instead emphasized an inward turn to the axiomatic teachings of Jesus Christ. Concern should not lie in the Christian religion *per se*, nor in its relationship with the other traditions (it should not even be understood as on a continuum with the other traditions), but simply in articulating and fulfilling the
gospel. Nonetheless, the actual unfolding of the implications of Barth’s theology lead to affirming the *de facto* superiority of Christian teaching, as it is confessed that Jesus Christ is the one and only genuine salvational force.

Barth’s virtual anti-theology of religions stance has continued. Cobb means theologians such as George Lindbeck when he states that “a number of theologians of Barthian background have adopted, from anthropologist Clifford Geertz, the idea of a cultural-linguistic system, and have applied this to Christianity. In their view, the church should be the place where people learn that system and how to operate with it.” (TCW 133)

As Cobb observes, all of these theological developments terminate in relativism, and a relativization of Christianity specifically. This is so even for the ‘post-liberal’ Barthian confessional orientation: “It turns away from the quest to understand Christianity from a transcendent perspective toward immersion within the faith itself. The church ceases to try to explain itself to others in a language familiar to them, and simply lives its own faith” (TCW 134). The ghettoization, as it were, of this approach goes against the grain of the universal and explicitly Christian relevance of truth seeking, which calls for an engagement with the larger world and constant critical evaluation of professed beliefs in conjunction with our best and current thinking and assessment of and about reality. According to Cobb, “There is in Christianity a thrust toward self-transcendence and self-criticism, so that the confidence that certain things have been asserted in the past, even in the Bible, is often the beginning of the discussion rather than the end” (TCW 134). The simply confessional approach to religious diversity is inadequate because it does not satisfy human demand for the
cognitivity of truth assertions. This objective truth orientation was present in the foundation of Christianity and the other traditions; it is a perversion of each to retreat into a merely confessional/fideistic or non-realist mode. The apparent cultural-linguistic boundary precludes any larger truth quest. But again, this contradicts the initial orientation: “The pattern of behavior associated with the use of these words arose in a period when no one doubted that they referred to objective reality. Believers may have been wrong, but the belief that God existed quite independently of their language and behavior was essential to shaping that language and behavior” (TCW 135). At this theology of religions juncture the question then becomes: “Can we renew Christian claims to universality without returning to the arrogant and oppressive role that has characterized Christianity in the past?” (TCW 135) Hence Cobb’s attempts to develop a more acceptable theology of religions by incorporating Whitehead’s process metaphysics. In agreement with Cobb, Griffin presents a case for the pluralist stance in the theology of religions generally. His reasons are ethical, sociological, theological and ontological (see DRP 8-21 & RwS 247-8). We now turn specifically to the components of Cobb’s pluralism.

3.2 Basic Components

3.2.1 Cobb’s Position

We begin with the attitudinal orientation, and repeat Cobb’s propaedeutic caveat: “Imagine…that the totality of what is, is very complex, far exceeding all that we could ever hope to know or think” (TCW 135). From here, Cobb states: “Now suppose that in different parts of the world at different times, remarkable individuals
have penetrated into this reality and discovered features of it that are really there to be
found” (TCW 35). This opens us to the possibility that the different traditions—each
with their seemingly conflicting religious truth claims—grasp with relative accuracy a
genuine aspect of reality: “It may be that the differing insights out of which they have
developed their contrasting and conflicting systems are all true!” (TCW 135) If this is
so, then conflicting truth claims such as atman vs. anatman are somehow
complementary rather than contradictory. Complementary formulations can thus lead
to new powerful models. But according to Cobb, “This does not guarantee the
complete truth of the new belief. But in my view, a belief that contains two distinct
insights is closer to the truth than one that affirms one insight to the exclusion of the
other. Something may be lost, but the likelihood is strong that more may be gained.”
(TCW 136)

This position seemingly enables Cobb to avoid a relativistic, parochial stance. The
genuine insights of pan-tradition spiritual savants are each universally true. Rather
than cordoned-off or limited specific truth domains, we have instead truth overlap.
Thus, the good news of Jesus Christ is ubiquitously applicable; and yet of equal scope
and relevance is, say, the Dharma of the Buddha. As Cobb cautions, “What we cannot
do, without lapsing back into unjustified arrogance, is to deny that the insights of
other traditions are also universally valid.” (TCW 137)

Theologically, Cobb offers some support for this attitude by emphasizing a couple
of different points. First, there are the predominant Christian modes of truth
seeking—namely future orientation and humility. Cobb writes: “We will accent
within our own heritage those teachings that point to the future as the time when the
fullness of truth will be manifest, and we will tone down those statements that seem
to imply that we already have the fullness of truth. Our tradition offers us ample
resources for making these moves” (TCW 137). Here we may note accord with
Hick’s view. Next, Cobb highlights the essential quality of faith in Christian
interaction with the larger world. The church seems
to be afraid to admit that Christians can also learn from other religious
traditions. This is a sad commentary on the quality of our trust in God and
openness to the Spirit who is to lead us into all truth. It expresses our
resistance to learn from the New Testament the strength of weakness. Real
strength lies not in clinging to what we have already received, but in openness
to learn from others. (TCW 137)

Faithfulness to or trust in Christ, in other words, calls for a humble and open or even
open-ended stance toward the other. Given the nature of the world’s religious
traditions with their remarkably similar or even identical ethical teachings, we can
surmise that there are likely the needed resources for this approach in their literatures
as well.

We can see, then, the theological justification and resources for Cobb’s positing of
genuine multiple and seemingly conflicting fundamental truth claims. A further point
of this position is to emphasize that deep differences between the traditions indicate
complementarity rather than conflict, to the point of controversially asserting
disparate or incommensurable religious/spiritual goals. Cobb strategically emphasizes
the tradition’s non-aligning goals because it dismantles infelicitous competition. He
states:

Consider the Buddhist claim that Gautama is the Buddha. This is a very
different statement from the assertion that God was incarnate in Jesus…The
Buddhist claim is extremely different from the Christian one. It is based on
very different interests and very different insights. That Jesus was the
incarnation of God does not deny that Gautama was the Enlightened One. In that vast complexity that is all that is, it may well be that God works creatively in all things and that at the same time, in the Buddhist sense, all things are empty. (TCW 140)

But assuming the normal standards of explanatory coherence, how can this be in actuality? Despite his emphasis on the complexity of existence that exceeds our comprehending grasp, Cobb and more thoroughly Griffin nonetheless employ Whiteheadian metaphysics to offer a religious pluralist explanation and defense.

3.2.2 Griffin’s Position

Griffin’s discussion of Cobb’s process perspective on religious diversity can be found primarily in his *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism: A Process Philosophy of Religion* (RwS 247-84), and in a corrected and expanded version in his *Deep Religious Pluralism* (DRP 39-66). We first turn to the still relevant earlier exposition. Griffin notes that process philosophy offers a distinctive framework for understanding the reality of religious diversity, and this distinction is based on two features of its naturalistic theism: 1. Divine power is persuasive, not coercive—God is not absolutely omnipotent in the traditional sense; and 2. There is more than one ultimate reality—God is not the only ultimate. (more on this in #3.4)

3.3 Divine Non-Coercion and Religious Diversity

Contrary to Griffin’s intention, divine non-coercion leads more readily not to a pluralist view as he claims, but rather to some variant of exclusivism or inclusivism. Griffin claims that discussion in the theology of religions has been mostly amiss, since there has been the (monotheistic) assumption of divine omnipotence “according to which God can unilaterally bring about states of affairs in the world” (RwS 255).
Thus, “The relevant implication of this doctrine is that God could have given an infallible and complete revelation of the divine nature and plan of salvation for the human race. This revelation could have also been recorded in inerrant scriptures. An infallible interpreter of these infallible scriptures could have been provided. The traditional Christian position was that this was exactly what God has done” (RwS 255-6). This thereby leads to an exclusivistic position particularly, but not exclusively, for Christianity: our teachings are *the* truth, because God’s omnipotence assures us of this, and especially as God founded this tradition in person, via Jesus Christ. This connection between divine omnipotence and religious exclusivism as an appropriate disposition has been spelled out elsewhere.¹ But given its naturalistic theism, process philosophy, according to Griffin,

rules out religious exclusivism. God acts in one and the same way in relation to all human experience. Although process philosophy allows for variable divine influence, this variability, from the divine side, involves the content, never the mode of agency, which is always the mode of persuasion. This normal way of relating to human experience is not subject to interruptions in which God would cancel out or override our normal human belief-forming processes, with their sinfulness, cultural conditionedness, and invincible ignorance. Infallible revelations and inerrant scriptures are metaphysical impossibilities. The rejection of the traditional doctrine of divine power, accordingly, implies the rejection of religious exclusivism. (RwS 257)

The rejection of divine omnipotence “implies” but does not necessarily lead to the rejection of exclusivism. Yet Griffin does recognize that the same basic postulates of God’s nature can lead to a very different conclusion. Equally affirming divine benevolence along with omnipotence can lead to the complete rejection of any exclusivism, as saving truth must be universalized if God is truly good. Griffin notes

that this is affirmed in, for example, Matthew Tindal’s *Christianity as Old as Creation* (1730). He also cites the perennial philosophy tradition, articulated for instance by René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, in its rejection of exclusivism based upon the axioms of divine goodness and power in combination. Griffin claims that the perennialists teach the identity of all the religious traditions—their saving truths are the same, again based upon divine goodness and power. However, this is not accurate. They only assert unity at the posited transcendental level—most definitely not on the human level, where deep differences are real and acknowledged, to the point of asserting disparate human races to which the different religions are aligned.²

In any event, the process position is in accord with these other views in their common rejection of exclusivism. Partly due to the rejection of divine omnipotence, Griffin affirms radical diversity among the traditions: “Process philosophy has no a priori basis for deducing the essential identity of all the religions. It has, in fact, grounds for suspecting the opposite” (RwS 258). From the process perspective, each actual entity (also deemed ‘actual occasion,’ thus emphasizing the processional nature of being) or agent receives an initial subjective aim from God, which offers the conditions for an optimal structure working in conjunction with its otherwise necessarily partially self-determining character. Given the genuine individuality of each actual entity, and their freedom of will in response to divine aim, it is argued that there will necessarily be different alternatives chosen, and thus realized diversity on the level of actual entity that has the greatest capacity for difference—the human-cultural level. The God-given initial aim, however, always works in conjunction not only with the necessary freedom of each actual entity (because God’s power is

² See TUR 21-24. More on this in # 5.
necessarily not coercive, given Whitehead’s ontology), but also with the influence of past world structure. Each agent, in other words, is always contextualized or partially context-dependent. This is so even for the initial subjective aim of God: it is operative toward “the best abstract possibility that is really possible, given the concrete context” (RwS 259). Or as Whitehead writes, “the initial stage of the aim is rooted in the nature of God, and its completion depends on the self-causation of the subject…The initial aim is the best for that impasse.” (PrR 244)

The context that partially shapes self-determinitive acts can also be called their ‘historicity’: the inescapable structure sequence of free acts, or free acts over time (partially) informing all subsequent free acts. Of course, every facet of culture is a result of this influence, religious traditions included. These cultural canalizations, as it were, over time produce striking differences—a point Griffin and other process thinkers emphasize. Thus, “given the noncoercive nature of divine influence plus the radical freedom and thereby historicity of human beings, we have no basis for assuming that all the religious traditions would teach essentially the same thing about ultimate reality and the way to be in harmony therewith” (RwS 259). Given the non-coerciveness of the divine will, the necessary partial self-determination of actual entities, and their historical conditionedness, religious plurality is to be expected.

The reality of deep differences among the traditions implies also the desirability of inter-tradition dialogue, with a potentially resultant transformative mutual learning. But this line of reasoning arguably contains a number of liabilities for process pluralism. We will consider just one now. The assertion of God’s non-coerciveness can be turned against process intentions and lead to an exclusivistic stance in the
theology of religions. Since the divine aim can only work with what is concretely possible, given a specific context of partially self-determining actual occasions, things are capable of going terribly awry. Griffin notes this point in Whitehead’s thinking: “The extent to which the initial aim is shaped by the context is reflected in Whitehead’s further acknowledgement that in some situations the ‘best [can] be bad’” (RwS 259). In other words, belief systems and practices—including key components in religious traditions—can grow in increasingly distorted ways, to the point of systemic or structural delusion, and veritable sinfulness and malignancy (e.g., the commonly accepted practice of slavery). This view would be welcome by a religious exclusivist who holds that traditions other than his own are misguided and sinful. Now he has a process metaphysics to back up his unsavoury stance. Differences in ultimate beliefs can just as easily imply the falsity of some as it can the mutually enriching nature of all. There is no mitigating component in the process emphasis on difference to keep this from happening.

As a contrast, Schuon’s perennialist position holds that all of the great traditions are divinely ordained or intended. This is based primarily on the assertion of divine goodness and omnipotence. But the process position does not have this posited safety net. Things can go terribly wrong—to the point of creating deeply misguided traditions—and perhaps they have. This determination requires criteria, and this is something that, while an integral part of Hick’s hypothesis, the process position does not (yet) have. Further, justificatory criteria are needed to establish the “rough parity” (Langdon Gilkey) of the world’s religions. The process metaphysics does not have the resources to make this determination. Contra Cobb’s and Griffin’s intentions, it
seems the opposite pertains. At best, it offers an explanatory account of the sheer fact of religious diversity. But it does not have the wherewithal to make normative decisions. As noted, Griffin elsewhere offers reasons for, essentially, why we should like or wish there to be tradition parity, and these reasons are noble. But only in Hick’s position do we see, however roughly, an empirically based justificatory criterion. Citing the view of process-influenced theologian Schubert M. Ogden, Griffin states, “Ogden is at one with Hick on this point. Holding, as he always has, that theology should acknowledge that its claims ‘can be validated as credible only in terms of our common, human experience and critical reflection,’ Ogden agrees that ‘all judgments about the truth or validity of religions must be a posteriori, not a priori.’” (DRP 16)

It is thus ironic that, while Griffin is often critical of apparent non-empirical, deductive/a prioristic formulations of religious phenomena, including the problem of explaining the reality of religious diversity, he nonetheless deduces deep diversity based on a prioristic metaphysical principles: as if he is saying, ‘given the accuracy of Whitehead’s system, here is what must pertain among the traditions’ (“process philosophy has no a priori basis for deducing the essential identity of all the religions. It has, in fact, grounds for suspecting the opposite”). It is also notable that, while not possessing normative/justificatory criteria, the Cobb-Griffin intention is as prescriptive as it is descriptive: unlike Hick’s hypothesis, their view of religious diversity proceeds beyond attempted interpretation or explanation (more on this in # 5). Be that as it may, we now turn to an elucidation of the other fundamental process
metaphysical principle in accounting for the reality of religious diversity, namely the view that God is not the only ultimate.

3.4 Religious Diversity and Triadic Ultimacy

When understanding the process account of religious diversity, of greater importance than the naturalistic, non-coercive nature of divine influence is the assertion of three irreducible ultimate realities: God, the (a) world, and creativity. This triad is the theological version of Whitehead’s “Category of the Ultimate”—the most general structure of being, of which any further reduction is not possible—which is composed of the “one,” the “many,” and “creativity” (PrR 21). Griffin notes that the majority of theistic writings, such as those of Hick, “clearly illustrate the assumption that there is only one ultimate, or ultimate reality, an assumption that has been extremely widespread in the West, thanks in large part to the doctrine that our world was created by the biblical God ex nihilo, which implies that this God is the only ultimate reality, from which all other realities are derivative” (RwS 260). Whitehead considers ultimacy to be triadic; if we aspire to the highest or most comprehensive generality the one, the many, and creativity remain distinct. Griffin holds that Whitehead’s position is in accord with both Plato (specifically the Timaeus) and the Hebrew Bible (specifically Genesis 1-5) in their rejection of creatio ex nihilo:

Whitehead’s way of developing this ancient view is to hold that creativity—which is the twofold power to create oneself out of influences from a past multiplicity of actual entities and then to exert efficient causation upon future occasions—is itself uncreated...this idea means not merely that creative power belongs to the very essence of God—who exists eternally and necessarily, as traditional theists hold—but also that creative power also belongs essentially to a world of finite actualities. (RwS 260)
Creativity always exists as instantiated in more than one entity. Whitehead describes the process of creativity in the following way:

The ultimate metaphysical principle is the advance from disjunction to conjunction, creating a novel entity other than the entities given in disjunction. The novel entity is at once the togetherness of the ‘many’ which it finds, and also it is one among the disjunctive ‘many’ which it leaves; it is a novel entity, disjunctively among the many entities which it synthesizes. The many become one, and are increased by one. (Whitehead 1929, 21)

This fundamental activity of actuality implies the irreducibility of plurality inherent in the nature of things. Whitehead states in Religion in the Making (1926) that “There is no entity, not even God, which requires nothing but itself in order to exist” (104). Creativity is “necessarily instantiated in a multiplicity of finite actualities as well as in the supreme actuality [God]” (RwS 261). How are we to understand the one, the many, and creativity?

3.4.1 God and Creativity

Within the creative process, God is deemed in process thought the “in-formed ultimate,” and creativity is deemed the “formless ultimate” (RwS 261). Or in Cobb’s terminology, God and creativity are deemed the “ultimate actuality” and the “ultimate reality” respectively. As the actual entity that is the chief instantiation of creativity, God is “the source from which forms enter the world” (RwS 261). Whitehead understands God to be the “chief exemplification” of the fundamental metaphysical principles operative in reality (PrR 20); in contrast to God’s exemplification and source of form(s), creativity is “the ultimate behind all forms” (Ibid.). This is comparable to, and yet distinct from, Aristotle’s notion of primary substance or prime matter. It is comparable in the sense that creativity does not exist by itself—it only ever exists in instantiation, i.e., when literally in-formed. Whitehead states that: “In
all philosophic theory there is an ultimate which is actual in virtue of its accidents. It is only then capable of characterization through its accidental embodiments, and apart from these accidents is devoid of actuality. In the philosophy of organism [process philosophy] this ultimate is termed ‘creativity’” (Whitehead 1929, 7) and “substantial activity.” For Whitehead, “Creativity is emphasizing the Aristotelian resemblance: without character of its own in exactly the same sense in which the Aristotelian ‘matter’ is without a character of its own. It is that ultimate notion of the highest generality at the base of actuality.” (PrR 31).

But this is where the parallel to Aristotle’s ‘matter’ ends. As the original name for creativity—‘substantial activity’—implies, Whitehead’s universal is constantly dynamic, rather than being an inert, passive receptacle. Creativity can be described as the process of form unification and transference. This is the act of being itself: ‘the many become one, and are increased by one.’ In further contrast to Aristotle’s prime matter (*materia prima*), creativity is fundamentally experiential. Inherent to actual entity is the capacity for experience, which is part and parcel of the creative process itself. Hence Whitehead’s position is designated as ‘panexperientialism:’ all actual entities have some level of experience, however minimal. This is in contrast to the Cartesian dualism of matter devoid of experience, and mind saturated with experience. Experience does not always imply consciousness: “consciousness presupposes experience, and not experience consciousness” (Whitehead 1929, 53). In other words, experience is prior to and above consciousness; it is *a priori*. Actual entities admit of degrees of organizational complexity. Not all being has consciousness, and not all actualities or occasions have the same level of experiential
capacity. Experience at some level is inherent to the creative process of prehension (reception), concrescence (transformation), and superjection or objectification (subsequent influence). The in-formation of an actual entity is necessarily a ‘felt’ experience, or is simply experiential. And just as ‘substantial activity’ is a better rendering of ‘creativity,’ so Charles Hartshorne prefers the term ‘creative experience’ (RwS 263). But creativity itself does not experience, nor does it act. The reification of creativity must be avoided. This is in accord with Whitehead’s ‘ontological principle,’ which holds that only actual entities are capable of action and experience.

In other words, creativity is an experiential process ever instantiated in or by actual entities, i.e., the one and the many: “being itself is creative experience as such” (RwS 263.). With these distinctions in place, we can now inquire into the relationship between creativity and the ‘one,’ or God.

There are four possible ways in which God and creativity or creative experience can be understood in relation. According to Griffin: “(1) God and creative experience could be identical; (2) creative experience could be subordinate to, in the sense of derivative from, God; (3) God could be subordinate to, in the sense of derivative from, creative experience; or (4) God and creative experience could be equally primordial, equally ultimate, with neither subordinate to the other” (RwS 264). For Griffin, “Whitehead’s position is the fourth [i.e. equiprimordiality]. The idea that there are two ultimates, however, runs contrary to most philosophical and religious thought, not only in the West but also in the East.” (RwS 264—more on this in #3.4.1).
Regarding position 3—God is subordinate to or derivative from creativity—there are passages in Whitehead’s writings that suggest that this was his view. In *Process and Reality*, for instance, he describes the primordial nature of God as the “primordial creature,” a “creature of creativity,” and the “primordial created fact” (PrR 31). He also says that God is the “primordial, non-temporal accident” of creativity (PrR 7). But Whitehead’s terminology must be interpreted within the larger context of his system. Griffin observes that ‘accident’ is better understood as ‘instantiation;’ and ‘instantiation’ must be clearly differentiated from ‘being caused by’:

Whitehead’s references to God as a creature of creativity do not mean that God was created by creativity. This could not have been Whitehead’s meaning, given his ontological principle, which says that only actual entities can exert either final or efficient causation, combined with his clear denial that creativity is an actual entity: the “protean character of the creativity,” Whitehead says, “forbids us from conceiving it as an actual entity…creativity is not an external agency with its own ulterior purposes.” (RwS 266-7)

God as ‘accident’ of creativity is not to be understood in the contemporary sense of accident implying contingency, but rather in the sense of denoting instancy. As Elizabeth Krause notes: “To be actual has but one meaning for Whitehead: to be an actual entity…The substantial activity [creativity], lacking such individuality, is not actual, and since only actualities can function as causes, does not cause God, i.e., is not his ‘creator’ and hence a ‘superior’ order of being” (Krause quoted in RwS 267).

What then of possibility #1—God and creativity are identical? If, from the process perspective being is equivalent to creative experience, then the question becomes: Are God and being identical? Both Cobb and Griffin note that Thomas Aquinas develops this theologically influential view. Aquinas emphasizes the problem of pure being which is a move beyond Aristotle’s analysis of matter and form. Both must be
accounted for by an act of being, which he identifies with God as being itself or *ipsum esse per se subsistens*. God is that Being whose very essence it is to exist and by whose existence all other beings exist. God is thus not only the supreme being, but being itself. Hence God and creativity are identical. Whitehead, however, rejects this identification. Aristotelian matter and the Thomistic act of being are reconfigured as creative dynamic activity of which God is the “aboriginal instance” (PrR 225) and chief instantiation. Thus God is distinct from, but characterized by, the same metaphysical principles operative in the universe. This is the basic component of Whitehead’s naturalistic theism.

Both Cobb and Griffin note that this position is in accord with Martin Heidegger’s analysis of being”:

> The ‘onto-theological’ metaphysical tradition, Heidegger argued, had blurred the all-important ‘ontological difference’ between being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seiende*)—which is exactly parallel with Whitehead’s distinction between creativity and actual entities. Once this ontological difference is seen, Heidegger insisted, the equation of being itself (*esse ipsum*) with any being, even a necessary being (*esse ipsum subsistens*), is unintelligible. (RwS 270)

The Whiteheadian position thus affirms the equiprimordiality of God and creativity, which again is to affirm their equally basic (primordial) and mutually dependent or interdependent status.

### 3.4.2 Process Ultimacy and the Forms of Religious Experience

For process thinkers such as Cobb, God and creativity help illuminate religious experience and the dichotomy of personal and impersonal. As we have seen in Hick’s dealing with the issue (see #2.1 and #2.2), the variety of religious experience presents a challenge to its legitimacy as such. There tends to be three options in response: 1) affirm some form of exclusivism—the claimed veracity of one’s own religious
experience/tradition to the exclusion of others—and thus challenge the veracity of religious experience; 2) conclude that the various tradition forms are all delusory; or 3) conclude that the various forms, with given appropriate caveats and discernment criteria, are all equally veridical.

Options 1 and 2 are alive and well, as we can see for example in Caroline Franks Davis’ statement that conflicting religious experience claims involve

the challenge that since subjects cannot agree on a description of the alleged perception, their experiences must be at worst, illusory, at best, serious misperceptions, and in any case, generally unreliable; and the challenge that since the different descriptions tend to be correlated with the subjects’ different traditions, a reductionist explanation involving prior beliefs is more plausible than any explanation involving an autonomous holy power. (Davis quoted in RwS 272)

In contrast, Cobb’s process perspective emphasizes an irreducible metaphysical plurality corroborated by the two most general and divergent forms of religious experience, namely that of a transcendent, personal, holy reality, and that of an immanent, impersonal reality. Cobb and others identify this as the dualistic relation of self or soul to God (the monotheistic traditions), and the non-dualistic, no-self experience of emptiness or identification with Brahman (the non-theistic traditions such as forms of Buddhism and advaitic Hinduism). A general West/East contrast of experience type can be seen, although each tradition is complex and goes beyond both types. Yet, there are dominant patterns, and these forms of experience are genuinely different. Here is one area where Hick and the process pluralists agree, along with some important researchers in the field. Stephen Katz, for instance, states that “There is no intelligible way that anyone can legitimately argue that a ‘no-self’ experience of ‘empty’ calm is the same experience as the experience of intense, loving, intimate
relationship between two substantial selves” (Katz quoted in RwS 273). The problem of accounting for this divergent experience is the issue, and process pluralism explains the veridicality of each by claiming that each experience structure is oriented toward one of the ultimates: specifically, impersonal religious experience is aligned with creativity as, for example, sunyata or nirguna Brahman, and personal religious experience is aligned with the one or God as, for example, saguna Brahman, Ishvara, Amidaba, or simply God. Each form is equally veridical, because it is an expression of, or is receiving, something that is really there in the nature of things. Thus the argument of conflicting religious truth claims as indicating their cognitive falsity is overcome. Griffin states that “these reports do not cancel each other out. Rather, one type of report reflects experiences in which the existence of the personal ultimate reality has risen to consciousness, whereas the other type reflects experiences in which the existence of the impersonal ultimate reality has risen to consciousness.” (RwS 282-3)

The emphasis on the two ultimates of God and creativity in relation to personal and impersonal religious experience in process pluralism has been largely the result of John Cobb’s dialogical work between Christianity and Buddhism and the relation between God and sunyata (see BeDi). There is also a third ultimate in Whitehead’s “Category of the Ultimate”—namely the “many” of a world—and it too can be aligned to a religious experience mode and tradition. We now turn to this dimension of process pluralism.

3.4.3 The World in Relation to God and Creativity
In his initial discussion of the ultimates and the religions (RwS 247-284) Griffin gave in a footnote his reasons for limiting the exposition to the two ultimates of God and creativity. Subsequently he has stated his regret for this decision. In order to be truer to Whitehead’s metaphysics, as well as more inclusive and comprehensive, Griffin adds the third ultimate—the (a) world of finite actualities—and its manifested religious forms in conjunction with God and creativity. Following the taxonomy of Jack Hutchinson, Griffin then posits three types of religion: “theistic” (personal), “acosmic” (impersonal), and “cosmic” (world-centered) (DRP 49). The world-centered traditions are those continuing pre-axial forms typically deemed ‘primal’ or ‘primordial’ (for instance Native American, African, or Australasian), as well as certain forms of Daoism. This allows us to see how these traditions are equally veridical in their discernment and orientation.

The World or the totality of multiple finite actualities is—along with God and creativity—primordial. From Whitehead’s perspective all three are equiprimordial, and “There is no meaning to ‘creativity’ apart from its ‘creatures,’ and no meaning to ‘God’ apart from the ‘creativity’ and the ‘temporal creatures,’ and no meaning to the ‘temporal creatures’ apart from ‘creativity’ and ‘God’” (PrR 225). It follows from this equiprimordiality that Whitehead’s process position rejects the traditional Christian doctrine of creatio ex nihilo, which clearly ascribed a contingent, dependent, and subordinate status to the world/universe (or to clarify, a world: this particular world

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3 “I have not spoken of three ultimates…for four reasons. First, simply getting a hearing for the idea that there may be two ultimates is difficult enough. Second, the chapter was already long and sufficiently complex. Third, even though ‘the world’ is ultimate in the sense that some world or other exists necessarily, our particular world—our cosmic epoch—does not exist necessarily and will not endure forever. Fourth, many of process philosophy’s doctrines…make clear that it does not support a world-negating spirituality” (RwS 281 n.16). Griffin has corrected this initial misstep in DRP 55 n.44.
or cosmic epoch is understood by process thought to be contingent, but the reality of a world is necessary). In one of his famous “psalmic antistrophes” (Neville 1995, 5), Whitehead says: “It is as true to say that God transcends the World, as that the World transcends God” (PrR 348). So Griffin states: “What exists necessarily is not God, as in traditional Christian theism, and not simply the world understood as the totality of finite things, as in atheistic naturalism, but God-and-a-world, with both God and worldly actualities being embodiments of creativity.” (RwS 49)

This position should not be understood as polytheism for the following reasons. First, there is a distinction between God, or the ‘Supreme Being,’ and creativity, or ‘Being Itself.’ According to Griffin,

Creativity, as Being Itself, is in no way a second god alongside the Supreme Being, because it is not a being and has no reality apart from its embodiments in the divine and finite actualities. It makes no sense to say, as some have, that Whitehead’s God is subordinate to creativity, because, as Cobb argues, “between reality as such and actual things there can be no ranking of superior and inferior. Such ranking makes sense only among actualities.” (RwS 50)

Second, Cobb states that “[a]mong actualities [God] is ultimate” (quoted in RwS 50). This construal of the God-world relation avoids the description of God that ensues, according to Tillich, if we claim God is simply one being among many, however superior. While distinct, God is the “unity of experience that contains all the multiplicity of events and interacts with them” (TCW 122). All finite actualities are in God. Whitehead also writes: “It is as true to say that the World is immanent in God, as that God is immanent in the World” (PrR 348). And Hartshorne holds that “God, the World Soul, is the individual integrity of ‘the world,’ which otherwise is just the myriad creatures” (DiR 59). In Whitehead’s precise language pantheism indicates that God is “essentially immanent and in no way transcendent,” while theism indicates
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that God is “essentially transcendent and only accidentally immanent” (RwS 141).
Whitehead ascribes necessity to both the immanence and transcendence of God vis-à-vis the World. Moreover, the equiprimordiality of creativity and its inherence in all actual entities precludes the identification of God and creatures. The process universe is inherently and necessarily connected, but contra, say, Spinozistic pantheism, it is not uniform. There are the three equiprimordial ultimates, as well as levels of organizational complexity.

The process position attempts to account for the variety of authentic religious experience by stating that each form of experience is referring to one of the three ultimates. Yet according to Griffin and others, these diverse forms of religious experience can and often do exist in single traditions, with the language of the tradition sometimes fusing or confusing these facets. Cobb writes, “much religious language blurs the distinctions and relates to more than one of the three ultimates” (TCW 121). The impersonal nirguna Brahman for example is described as without substantive attributes, and yet one can say of it that it is sat, cit, ananda—being, consciousness, bliss—which sound more like personal notions of divinity than not. Or the (Mahayana) Buddhist notion of sunyata or emptiness, distinct from all form, is nonetheless characterized in its complete realization by wisdom and compassion—aspects of personality. In western theistic language, one can see the admixture of God and being itself, which Cobb believes is due to the fact that “it has incorporated acosmic elements from its Neo-Platonic sources,” and thus “the religious experience of western mystics seems to be at once of theistic and acosmic reality—one might say
that it is the theistic as embodying the acosmic reality, or of the acosmic as qualified by the theistic reality” (quoted in DRP 50).

The fundamental reason for this admixture of experience is debatable, as is for instance Griffin’s claim that “The fact that these types of religious experience have evidently been reported in all cultures is a source of support, rather than embarrassment, for Whiteheadian theism” (RwS 283). Cobb says: “When we understand global religious experience and thought in this way…it is easier to view the contributions of diverse traditions as complementary” (quoted in RwS 51). Yet this kind of legitimization of complementarity should be challenged with regard to equiprimordiality.

3.5 The Irreducibility of Creativity and God: Stephen T. Franklin’s Revision

A number of contemporary theologians claim that Whitehead’s process philosophy offers a compelling and fecund conceptuality for illuminating, interpreting, and strengthening many elements of Christian theology, particularly vis-à-vis our current scientific knowledge and understanding of the world. Nevertheless, while Whitehead’s mutual implication of God, World, and Creativity conforms to his analysis and judgement about the equiprimordiality of the one, the many, and creativity as comprising the “Category of the Ultimate,” it is at odds with the conviction of monotheism. On the one hand, the distinguishing of ultimates provides the basis for a cogent theodicy: since, it is posited, God did not create the world ex nihilo, and because God’s power is necessarily never coercive—only persuasive—
creatures *qua* genuine creatures are fundamentally free agents constituted by or embodying creativity, and thus have the capacity to veer from the divine aim. Virtually solving the rational problem of evil is no mean feat, and is welcomed by many who, like Whitehead, believe that religious teachings “are shipwrecked upon the rock of the problem of evil” (ReM 74), which remains one of the most important reasons for the rejection of religious belief.

This solution, however, comes at a very high price: the denial of God’s absolute omnipotence (or God’s intentional kenotic/self-limitation) based upon a denial of God’s unique ultimacy status and the concomitant affirmed partial sovereignty of all actual entities, given their embodiment of creativity. For many theologians, such as Thomas Hosinski, this is inadmissible as a component in an adequate Christian theology. He states that

> it is not at all clear that Whitehead’s separation of creativity from God is compatible with the implications of Christian experience and faith...It seems to make God only one factor among others at the base of what we experience...Freedom and creativity are correlative concepts in Whitehead’s thought, and creativity is simply ‘there’ as the ultimate metaphysical ground in Whitehead’s system. It is also true that there could be no actual entity without God’s role in initiating it, but the freedom of the actual entity is due to creativity, not to God. This separation of creativity from God thus qualifies God’s ultimacy and seems to compromise what Christianity has affirmed in the fundamental doctrines of monotheism and creation. (Hosinski 1993, 244-5)

More generally, John Berthrong avers that the “Whiteheadian vision is so appealing in terms of its cosmology, and yet somehow religiously remains incomplete because of the separation of creativity from the primordial and consequent natures of God as well as the fundamental constitution of the world...it seems strange or even incoherent to have creativity somehow outside, beyond, or disconnected from the
supreme actual entity, God” (Berthrong 1998, 4). And Stephen T. Franklin asks: “Is it…essential to retain Whitehead’s distinction between God and creativity?” (SpD 323) In holding the view that Whitehead’s characterization of God does not, among other shortcomings from a classical monotheistic perspective, fully do justice to and flesh out what Rudolf Otto deemed the divine numinous or *mysterium tremendum/ganz anders*, Franklin questions the accuracy and viability of this construal. 4 Instead, he offers that

The reunion of creativity and God, however, would certainly support the classical Western view of God as the Wholly Other and the numinous…The union of Whitehead’s God with creativity would open up his process vision for a much larger number of traditional Christians (and perhaps Jews and Muslims as well), and it would allow Whitehead to appropriate much more of the Western heritage of religious affirmation of God…as the source of being. The danger, of course, is the loss of his powerful description of human freedom and his description of the divine as persuasive rather than coercive [and the metaphysical basis for a cogent theory of religious diversity]…Whether this reunion could be accomplished without cutting the nerve of Whitehead’s whole enterprise…is the open question. (SpD 323)

Franklin offers a model for precisely that reunion, to which we now turn.

There are from the process perspective a number of good reasons to maintain the distinction between God and creativity, most notably: 1) It grounds and preserves creaturely freedom, with the correlate of equal actuality between God and other entities; 2) It provides the basis for an effective theodicy; and 3) It provides the basis for an explanation of religious truth claim diversity. But there are arguably more compelling reasons for their reunion. These reasons can at least be divided into the theological and the metaphysical. For instance, from a Christian theological perspective, Langdon Gilkey claims that history—as God’s activity in time—requires

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4 According to Franklin, Whitehead in contrast emphasizes the *mysterium fascinans* and downplays divine power as usually couched in tyrannical, coercive imagery, which he considers to be a holdover of ‘barbaric’ religion (see Whitehead 1933, 212c, 213c, 216c-217a).
the subordination of creativity to God: “the first principle of providence is the conquest of the passingness of time and the continual creation and recreation of each creature through the creative power of God” (quoted in GC 241). Emphasizing the ontological principle, Hosinski, following Gilkey, claims that “since ‘creativity’ is not actual in itself, it cannot ground itself (or serve as its own ‘reason’). Primordially, it requires an actual ground. The ontological principle seems to require that we posit God as the primordial actual ground of creativity” (Hosinski 1993, 250). It would indeed seem to require as much, unless we just posit creativity as one of the three ultimates. Accordingly, it could be countered that since creativity is not a ‘thing,’ but rather a function, it does not require a grounding as per Whitehead’s ontological principle, which holds that “everything must be somewhere” (PrR 46). While not grounded, creativity is however always instantiated; thus it could be said that at most, its ‘grounding’ is its function in necessary relationality between the one and the many.

And yet, Whitehead’s creativity can be charged with arbitrariness: the relation between the one and the many does not require the necessary irreducibility of creativity. Moreover, theologically speaking, for the sake of a coherent monotheism the opposite is required. According to Franklin,

In the classical monotheistic religions…the term ‘God’ refers to a single ultimate. This single ultimate has no competition. Anselm’s definition brings this out powerfully: “God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived.” The existence of two ultimates, no matter how compatible, defeats the logic of monotheism. Therefore, if creativity and God can both be called ultimates as in Cobb’s argument, or if being is granted the status of an ultimate but denied the name of God as in Heidegger’s argument, the inner structure of monotheism…would seem to be jeopardized, thus making their recombination quite imperative. (GC 240)
From the ontological perspective there is the key issue of creation or being at the most fundamental level. Whitehead inquires into the being of particular existants, and the factors needed to account for their general identity and structure; but he does not, like Aristotle, address the radical question of existence itself. In relation to Whitehead’s system, this has been noted by thinkers such as Robert C. Neville, Robert Spaemann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Reto Luzius Fetz. For example, Fetz notes that “Whitehead was content to accept an analysis of coming-into-being of entities which are assumed to be given, without ever inquiring into what it is that actualizes their being or investigating the grounds for the possibility of this enactment” (Rapp & Wiehl 1990, 208). And Cobb says that the “rejection of the radical question as to why there is anything at all is…characteristic of Whitehead” (quoted in 14). Franklin argues that a sufficient analysis of actual entities requires the addressing of sheer existence of actual entities, and their associated particularity. He does this by drawing a key distinction between “creativity-esse” (approximating but not identical with Aquinas’ notion of esse), and “creativity-characterization.” Essentially, creativity-as-esse, or the giving act of sheer being, is fundamental and sourced in God; and creativity-as-characterization, or the specific structuring subsequent to esse is the joint product of God and actual entities in dynamic relation. Franklin then combines this key distinction with the other key notion of the ontological principle and asks, similarly to Gilkey, where creativity resides vis-à-vis an analysis of what characterizes actual entity status. It is important to note that while

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5 See, for example, their contributions in Rapp & Wiehl 1990; and John H. Berthrong’s discussion of Neville’s argument against the separation of God and creativity in Berthrong 1998, 61-95.
6 “Creativity-as-esse” and “creativity-as-characterization” is also comparable to Robert Neville’s “ontological creativity” and “cosmological creativity,” respectively. See Neville 1995, 36-47.
creativity-esse and creativity-characterization are to be conceptually distinguished, there is only one creativity. Franklin states:

First, creativity gives the concrescence [or the information-receiving actual entity in process] its particularity and makes that entity a real agent that truly exists. We may call this creativity-esse...Second, this existence is nothing else than the process whereby the new concrescence eliminates some possible characteristics and opts for others, and so creates its own identity. We may call this the power of characterization or creativity-characterization.” (GC 252)

Franklin further states: “On the one hand creativity-as-esse precedes creativity-as-characterization in the sense that esse is the presupposition of characterization” (GC 252). He argues that creativity-as-esse must be ‘sourced.’ That is, “The ontological principle requires that creativity be ‘located’ in, and thus have its source in, one or more actual entities.” (261)

Specifically, there are three actual entity source possibilities: 1) the actual entity itself; 2) past actual entities; and 3) the actual entity that is God. Option one is rejected, because while entities partially create themselves, they do not self-originate. Rather, “self-creativity is only partial and has to do with the power of characterization and not with the radical question of the origin of the actual entity’s esse. Self-creation in the sense of an actual entity’s origination of its own being-here is not an option.” (267)

Option two—creativity as sourced in past actual entities—is also rejected, because past actual entities are no longer active subjects; their activity is objectified and ceases to be operative, i.e. turning into actuality. Loss of subjectivity ensures the loss of efficacious creativity-as-esse and offers only the possibility of creativity-as-
characterization. As Franklin puts the point: “Past actual entities affect the future; they do not effect the future.” (268)

Franklin thus argues for option three: God is the originating locus of each actual entity’s creativity. His claim is expounded in six main points. First, he emphasizes that an actual entity’s freedom is not compromised by affirming God as a source of creativity. A parental analogy is appropriate here: A mother gives birth to her child, but does not ipso facto completely control or ‘work the will’ of the child. Rather, God’s role is better conceived as freedom-imparting structure, or as the conditions for its possibility. Franklin says that “God as the sole source of each creature’s creativity, not only establishes that creature in its esse, but also establishes that creature as a free agent with its own capacity to partially choose, that is, to partially characterize its own identity.” (273) This accords with Hosinski’s statement, that “God is creator in the sense that God makes every temporal actual entity possible, but once the initial subjective aim is given, the temporal actual entity is an instance of creativity in its own right.” (Hosinski 1993, 211)

Second, after the initial gift of being and initial subjective aim, the activity/power of choice always resides in the actual entity itself. This is to emphasize the limitation of God vis-à-vis actual entities, and their sharing of responsibility in the shaping of the world/contexts for future actual occasions. There is always the influence of divine aim and context, but never complete determination, as is brought out in the distinction between characterization and esse.

Third, Franklin reiterates the significance of the ontological principle in the interpretation of creativity: “According to the ontological principle only actual
entities can be causes...Creativity in any of its roles, apart from actual entities, is a mere abstraction that does not, and cannot, ‘do’ anything...Thus God, and not creativity-esse as such, causes the new actual entity to emerge as a concrescence.” (GC 275)

Fourth, Franklin notes the dual conception of novelty that corresponds to the two facets of creativity. These can be deemed radical novelty and relative novelty, respectively. The first refers to the new virtually ex nihilo, and the second refers to the new as variations on, or re-combinations of, pre-existing structures. These two facets work together, as God works with creation. But the former is always the ground of the latter. Radical novelty is “the foundation of the novelties of characterization,” and further, without the novelty of creativity-as-esse, “the creative production of new characterizations would remain purely abstract and hypothetical, unrelated to any event in the world.” (275-6)

Fifth, God creates both ex nihilo, or radically, and in tandem with already existing actual entities and structures, i.e., relatively. Franklin claims that “just as esse is the presupposition of characterization, so creatio ex nihilo is the presupposition of actualization” (66n). Both modes of novelty creation are operative. This ties in with Franklin’s last main point. If we compare his position to classical teachings on creation, we see that his is essentially a combination of classical and process doctrines. So he writes: “We can say that God creates the creature’s freedom. But, and this is my central point, we cannot say that God creates, ex nihilo, the creature’s decisions” (277). In contrast, we remember that in Whitehead’s system, actual entities do not ‘owe’ their creativity to God; this is one instance of his remark that we do not
pay unnecessary “metaphysical compliments” to God (ScMW 258). According to
Whitehead, “every actual entity, including God, is a creature transcended by the
creativity which it qualifies” (PrR 88). This was postulated in large part for the
preservation of genuine creaturely actuality and freedom; the reintegration or
subsumption of creativity in God arguably eliminates an actual entity’s autonomy.
Franklin’s emphasis on the ontological principle and the distinction of creativity-as-
esse and creativity-as-characterization is a way of conceptualizing genuine creaturely
freedom in accordance with monotheistic intuitions about the singularity of ultimacy.

Correlatively, we can see how this informs the concerns for an adequate theodicy.
Franklin’s modified process position is encapsulated in the statement that “God’s
creation ex nihilo of a new entity is the establishment of that entity as a free subject”
(GC 284). From the traditional ‘free-will’ theodicy perspective, God intentionally
withdraws his power and capacity for intervention or control, in order to afford
genuine creaturely autonomy. There are many considerable problems with the
traditional free-will theodicy. In contrast, “The key move in process metaphysics
was to make creaturely freedom necessarily inherent in the creature’s very existence;
and the best way to do this, it was thought, was to separate creativity from God,
making each creature ‘self-creative’ (285). But here too we see that the recombination
of creativity and God does not render inadequate a position that is otherwise generally
consistent with the tenets of process thought.

7 For an excellent overview and discussion of the manifold difficulties of traditional free-will theodicy,
as well as divine all-determining views, see David Ray Griffin’s 1991 publication, Evil Revisited,
(Albany: SUNY Press) and his 1976 publication, God, Power, and Evil (Louisville: Westminster John
Knox Press, revised 2004).
8 Nevertheless, some process thinkers such as Griffin claim that, even if Franklin’s construal could
neutralize the theodicy problem, the distinction, or even separation of God and creativity is still a
We can see a similar motive and rationale in play in Rem B. Edwards’ offering of a process conceptuality congruent with the affirmation of *creatio ex nihilo*. This is done by utilizing some current cosmological thinking on the nature of space, time, and (in)finitude. Invoking the cosmologist’s positing of ‘Superspacetime’—a virtually transcendent structure that contains other universes and that can be said to ground or contain our current universe—Edwards calls into question the usual process assumption of an infinite oscillation of temporal cosmic epochs contained within spatial finitude, bounded only, it is speculated, by God. Given God’s loving and creative, and therefore relational being, process theologians hold that there must have always been some cosmic epoch to which God relates. Edwards writes:

 process theologians have been unable to conceive how to make sense out of *creation ex nihilo*, and still affirm infinite Divine creativity, love, sociality, and embodiment. This is largely because they assumed that finite space is the only possible compliment to infinite time. Hartshorne, for instance, says that “the divine actuality…must involve a numerically infinite number of past creatures, but the creation need not, and I think must not, be spatially infinite”…and he repeatedly asserts the finitude of space while affirming the infinity of time. (Edwards 2000, 82)

Edwards argues, instead, that God, within or as an infinite Divine Superspacetime, could exhibit all of the necessary divine characteristics by remaining operative in and as other modes among spatio-temporally discrete domains, theoretically infinitely apart, creating whole epochs *ex nihilo*: “Divine creation of universes *ex nihilo*, thus understood, always *presupposes* other actualities, i.e., God’s embodiment *somewhere* in Superspacetime, but actual universes or Divine bodies *need not be created out of* other actualities, such as temporally antecedent universes” (Ibid.). It is plausible that at least certain strands of this Superspacetime structure, and perhaps our own, can be

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necessary component in the harmonization of religion qua theism with scientific naturalism. This argument can be found in a number of his writings, especially ReSN and RwS.
understood as deriving from virtual nothingness, or the potency of ‘empty’ space—
given the posited reality of an infinite space to match that of infinite time. Edwards
continues:

Mainstream process theologians were unable to conceive of creation *ex nihilo*
because they were wedded, implicitly if not explicitly, to the model of a single
strand of spatially finite oscillating universes extending infinitely into the past,
each member of which arises causally from both God and from its immediate
predecessor...This cosmological model precludes the possibility that a
universe could arise causally only from God at some point in the finite past—
the essence of creation *ex nihilo*. It assumes that God’s infinite creativity was
only temporally ordered; but it may also be spatially ordered as Divine
Superspacetime, where God might be everlastingly creative of multiple
universes that have no causal relations with our system of spacetime; and our
system of spacetime could arise directly from God’s Superspacetime and
creative will alone, without being preceded by antecedent universes. Other
universes or cosmic epochs could be “beyond” ours spatially, to use
Whitehead’s word for it, without being “before” ours temporally, as
mainstream process theology has assumed. (Ibid. 84)

This emphasis on the role that (infinite) space plays in actuality enables us to reaffirm
more commonly held monotheistic-cosmological conceptions; so Edwards concludes
that “the crucial barrier between mainstream process theology and traditional
Christian theology would no longer exist.” (Ibid. 82)

Edwards also notes that the theodicy problem is not necessarily reanimated by an
affirmation of creation *ex nihilo*. Not unlike Franklin’s assessment, Edwards writes
that “God’s creating co-creative creatures is logically contradicted by the traditional
notion of creating totally programmed non-creative creatures, but not by the notion of
God’s creating the universe out of nothing. No *logical* obstacles exist to combining
creation *ex nihilo* with ongoing divine creativity and divine creation of co-creative
creatures.” (Ibid. 88)
3.6 Creativity as Holy Reality

Aside from the challenge posed by writers such as Rem B. Edwards for the process non-necessity of rejection of creatio ex nihilo, there are views within its own system that militate against genuine pluralism. One of which results from the held Whiteheadian/process drive to multiple domain uniformity, namely Griffin’s attribution of all religious experience to God. Griffin asks:

> It may be wondered why experiences of the impersonal ultimate—creative experience as such—would be religious experiences...this is based on the conformal prehension of God, understood to be a Holy Reality...We have ‘experiences of the holy’ when our prehensions of the Holy One rise to the conscious portion of our experience. (RwS 283)

Then the question arises: “Why should experiences in which creative experience as such rises to consciousness also be experiences of the holy? If creative experience as such is devoid of (substantive) attributes, then it cannot be said to be holy” (RwS 283). Creativity is, as Griffin holds, understood by many to be of ultimate importance, and the power of being, which vitalizes all actual occasions. Nevertheless, “there is no reason to attribute the quality of holiness to it” (RwS 283).

The answer, he continues,

> can be provided by the notion that creativity never exists by itself but always exists as instantiated. We never experience creativity as such but always experience it as embodied in, and therefore characterized by, God and worldly actualities. What makes an experience of creativity as such a religious experience is, by hypothesis, the fact that creativity as such is always characterized by God and therefore by holiness. (RwS 283)

Aware of this implication, Griffin continues,

> To say this is not to return to the view that theistic experiences are more accurate than nontheistic religious experiences. It is to suggest, however, that the fact that we are always prehending God is the explanation for the distinctively religious character of nontheistic religious experiences, just as this fact is the explanation for various other features of our experience—such
as our experience of novel possibilities and of moral, aesthetic, and logical norms—that usually do not involve a conscious awareness of God as such. (RwS 283)

Griffin then spells out the implications for religious diversity interpretation:

This hypothesis, that even nontheistic religious experiences involve prehensions of God, would account for some of the paradoxical descriptions of the impersonal ultimate reality…although Nirguna Brahman is by definition ‘without (substantive) attributes,’ it is also described as sat-chit-ananda, or existence-consciousness-bliss. And although Emptiness is said to be empty of all qualities, it is also described in terms of wisdom and compassion…creativity, as prehensively experienced is always characterized by divine attributes. The religious nature of the experience would be due to the divine attribute of holiness (283-4).

While conceivable, this construal would require a more radical tradition-internal reorientation than most of the respective adherents would approve. These traditions, or their majority orthodox report at least, assert the ultimate impersonality or transpersonality of Brahman, sunyata, or the Real, to return to Hick’s preferred descriptor (see above #2.0). In their view, the sacred does not require the admitting or embracing of the Judeo-Christian God or other forms of personal deity as ultimate.

In spite of the statement that “although Whitehead’s philosophy, because of its content, can be considered a natural theology, it must, in light of its origin and basic worldview, be called a Christian natural theology,” Griffin nonetheless thinks that a mutual religious affirmation and incorporation is possible via a Whiteheadian metaphysics. He writes:

The basis for the mutual lack of respect among the various religions, at least insofar as this basis has been the assumption by theistic religions that nontheistic religions are simply wrong and vice versa, will be undermined…They may also be inspired to work toward a ‘higher-order

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9 RwS 248.—It is noteworthy to compare this statement by Griffin to Whitehead’s own in regard to situating his philosophy: “In this general position the philosophy of organism seems to approximate more to some strains of Indian, or Chinese, thought, than to western Asiatic, or European, thought. One side makes process ultimate; the other side makes fact ultimate” (PrR 7).
global religion’ that can embrace complementary worldviews,’ which has been advocated by Ninian Smart. (RwS 284) [emphasis mine]

We can see the process position on religious diversity as an aspect of a larger attempt to combine all areas of human culture under a single comprehensive and coherent metaphysical system, namely the metaphysics developed by Whitehead. This is in other words a drive to domain uniformity via the mutual modification of divergent or seemingly incompatible conceptual/cultural systems.10 Considering it to be the first in a set of core doctrines of process philosophy, Griffin holds that this entails: “The integration of moral, aesthetic, and religious intuitions with the most general doctrines of the sciences into a self-consistent worldview as one of the central tasks of philosophy in our time…this purpose can be translated more succinctly as the integration of science and religion into a single worldview” (RwS 5). In Religion and Scientific Naturalism (2000), Griffin explains why from a process perspective science needs supplementary insights from religious teachings, and vice versa. Specifically regarding motivation for adoption, however, he states that “the intellectual leaders of the scientific community certainly will not reject naturalism in favor of a more open form of naturalism simply because doing so might overcome the apparent conflict of science and religion. They will do so only if they become convinced that naturalism has become a problem and that a new form of naturalism will provide a better basis for science itself” (RwS 29). This take on the attitude in the scientific community is accurate. However, this does not translate to the inter-religious domain. From Hick’s

10 Griffin cites Cobb on this issue: “Cobb, having described his goal of modifying contradictory statements from diverse religious traditions so as ‘to render them non-contradictory—and, ideally, coherent,’ points out that he holds ‘the same hope for the relation of religious and scientific statements.’ When contradictions appear, he sees this ‘as an occasion to re-examine statements made on both sides with the goal of avoiding contradiction and even attaining coherence’” (DRP 41 n. 5).
and other scholar’s studies we see that they all ‘work,’ more or less equally, in producing transformed individuals and societies. This implies that they have a sufficient grasp (apprehension) of ultimacy, or an adequate metaphysics. What, then, is the process rationale or criterion for requested/expected revision? Moreover, if God—or specifically in this instance the Christian God—is ‘at work’ in all of the world’s religious traditions, then the process position is more a form of inclusivism, contra its ostensible intention, and so should not pretend otherwise. It is difficult to see how this could properly be considered a form of genuine religious pluralism. It might be countered that this is, rather, a kind of ‘mutual inclusivism,’ whereby each tradition makes basic theological adjustments to the other. But there clearly remains a (Christian) bias, one that is problematic internally and externally. If this bias were positively affirmed (as Cobb does—see # 4.1.3) as a kind of mutual superioristic particularism, it would create more problems than those it originally attempted to resolve.

Regarding the rationale for the required theological revisions, it appears basically intellectual. The virtue of coherence is raised very high in process thought, motivated by the aim of domain integration. Admittedly, a worldwide conceptual coherence, or “the ideal of the attainment of a harmony of the understanding” is, as Whitehead says, “an excellency of which we have nearly forgotten the existence” (ScMW 76) and this is if anything only more true today. But it is questionable whether Whitehead’s

11 Comparably, and anticipating the discussion somewhat, we note S. Mark Heim’s view on Cobb’s position here: “What dialogue makes possible is for each tradition to develop the fullest and most rigorous and inclusive version possible of its distinctive convictions and life. Cobb assumes that this necessarily involves transformation for all the traditions. In fact, he is not hesitant to make a claim for Christian superiority—the claim that a faith centered on Christ will prove to have an unsurpassed capacity for precisely this kind of dialogue, inclusion, and transformation...And he would view it as entirely appropriate for those in other traditions to make reciprocal claims” (STDR 144). This is, in other words, advocacy of mutual inclusivism (more on this in # 4).
approach as marshaled by Cobb and Griffin is applicable to the entirety of the world’s religious cognitive/metaphysical teachings. We could ask, for example: Given that creativity is always characterized, is the process construal amiss in equating emptiness/impersonal religious experience with creativity? If creativity always exists as instantiated or with qualities—always e.g. sa-guna, not nir-guna—then creativity is probably not what most Buddhists, advaitic Hindus, and others are experiencing.

The next chapter clarifies the difficulties already introduced and discusses other key problems by engaging Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis with the Cobb-Griffin process proposal. We will examine in particular Griffin’s recent study, *Deep Religious Pluralism* (2005). Therein can be found an attempt to dismantle the ‘dominant’ religious pluralism model (i.e., Hick’s hypothesis) by utilizing the sharply critical work of S. Mark Heim, which is an incisive condensation of earlier critiques such as those by D’Costa and DiNoia. After rejoinders are offered, we will consider more closely Cobb’s alternative model, and Griffin’s discussion thereof. We will then offer the remaining perceived liabilities in the process position.
CHAPTER FOUR
HICK’S PLURALISTIC HYPOTHESIS AND COBB’S
PROCESS PLURALISM

Griffin suggests that “Hick’s particular hypothesis has led to the charge that his position is not really pluralistic or is at best superficially so” (DRP 6). Elsewhere and more pointedly, he states that “We can also avoid Hick’s…pluralism, according to which everyone is wrong. Hick does succeed in his effort to make all the religions equal, but only by making them equally erroneous” (RwS 282). In contrast, this has led to the development of what Griffin deems a ‘deep’ religious pluralism (Cobb talks of a ‘radical’ religious pluralism). Following Cobb and his use of Whitehead’s metaphysics, Griffin calls the process model he and Cobb are offering ‘differential’ as opposed to Hick’s so-called ‘identist’ version: for Griffin, the former affirms irreducible difference both ontologically and soteriologically, while the latter affirms uniformity or identity at least ontologically, and possibly soteriologically as well. For the purpose of convenience in distinguishing views, we will follow Griffin’s terminology, while noting its polemic nature or pejorative connotation in the use of the term ‘identist,’ which may imply an inaccurate and even undesirable uniformity. Similarly, we can argue that process ‘differentialism’ is better understood as ‘hyper,’¹ because it emphasizes difference over commonality to such a degree that it falls off

¹ Other terms in use include “ultra pluralism” (Hick, NFRS 154-161), and “polycentric pluralism” (Schmidt-Leukel, GOG 176-179 and PRS 85-111).
the pluralism map, ultimately nullifying or defeating its own stated intentions. “Every principle, if exaggerated, is responsible for its own undoing,” Forrest Church writes, echoing much ancient wisdom (Buehrens & Church 1989, 47). Initially, plurality must maintain its balancing counterpart of commonality.² This leads us to ascertain the substance of that commonality—a key component in Hick’s position (see #2.4.1), his Wittgenstein-inspired ‘family resemblance’ approach notwithstanding—if that part of the dyad is acknowledged as well as the relative weight of plurality. The process position initially emphasizes difference to the point of incommensurability, fitting where cultural-linguistic/religious domains remain discrete, unbridged, and ultimately ‘Balkanized.’

But first, another expository aside: it is both a curious and revealing move on Griffin’s part to employ the work of S. Mark Heim in his attack on Hick’s hypothesis. As noted in chapter one (#1.4), Heim is a self-described ‘committed inclusivist,’ arguably of the least generous variety. This orientation is at odds with Griffin’s stated commitment to genuine pluralism. Apparently, Griffin is not cognizant of the extent to which Heim is anti-pluralistic, thinking perhaps that Heim only wishes to clear the ground for a more genuine and accurate pluralistic theory. At first glance, this seems a reasonable view to take, when we read statements by Heim quoted by Griffin such as, “The overarching task [of a more adequate approach to religious diversity] is to find a fruitful way of combining recognition of truth or validity and difference across the religions…A perspective is needed which can recognize the effective truth of what is truly other” (in DRP v). But for Heim, these are negative truths and inferior

² For a discussion of this conceptual balance as found in the “law of polarity” pertinent to process theology, see Hartshorne & Reese 2000, pp.1-15.
differences: he abjures any non-Trinitarian-based religious faiths—they are second rate, or worse—relegating their devout adherents to other lesser fulfillments or forms of purgatory or hell, or to annihilation. Without working through the implications of Heim’s view, Griffin understandably then considers his stance “paradoxical” (DRP 22). But Heim’s intention is to de-legitimize all leading extant forms of pluralism, put forward for instance by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Hick, or Paul Knitter, in order to bolster the validity of attempts to thoroughly honour only the phenomenological fact of religious plurality, while at the same time providing a clear value-judgement as to the superiority of the Christian tradition, more specifically the triune God of Christianity. Parenthetically, as Schmidt-Leukel notes, “we might ask Heim which of all the various versions of the Trinity promulgated throughout the history of theological discourse he has in mind as being the real one” (BCD 203). Heim’s worldview is pluralistic, but he is not a pluralist in the commonly accepted sense of denoting the asserted equality or rough parity of the great traditions.

Griffin’s utilization of Heim’s critique, then, is in the form of a foil; but this tool cuts both ways. Given the same ‘differentialist’ presuppositions, the extent to which Heim’s model is unsatisfactory is largely the extent to which the Cobb-Griffin model is as well, and it is for these reasons that we will give some attention to Heim’s position. Heim’s inclusivism and process pluralism are strange bedfellows, united against what is perceived as an ‘identist’ pluralism advocating a spurious commonality that, for Heim’s part, *illegitimately* equalizes the traditions, and for Griffin’s part, *legitimately* equalizes the traditions, but with an inaccurate and inadequate argument that leaves pluralism *per se* susceptible to easy dismissal. Let us
now turn to the specifics of the Cobb-Griffin/Heim concurrence against Hick’s position, while touching on the writings of others in the field in order to situate the contrast between the two positions.

4.1 Differential Charges and Identist Rejoinders

We return to the four overarching criticisms leveled against Hick’s hypothesis as outlined in #2.3 and #2.4, addressing each in turn specifically in response to the charges leveled by Heim/Cobb-Griffin.

4.1.1 Pluralistic Theories/Theologies Are Not Really Pluralistic

Griffin clarifies what he means by ‘identist’ and ‘differential’: “Identist pluralism is…identist both ontologically and soteriologically” (DRP 24). Ontologically, it rejects ultimate plurality; soteriologically, it rejects incommensurately plural ultimate ends. However, it is not accurate to say, as Griffin does, that “[a]ccording to identist pluralism, all religions are oriented toward the same religious object” (DRP 24). In Hick’s identist position, the religious objects are different, at points radically so (see #2.4.1). The different referents or foci are maintained, while noting that they “are not identical with the Real in itself, but are the Real as humanly pictured in different ways” (ChTR 46); and further noting that “the Real in itself is not a direct object of worship” (IRe xxxi)—very much like Creativity in itself, particularly when ‘separated’ from God and World (see # 3.5); or as Alan Race states: “The differences between the names given to ‘That Which’ is conceived of as ultimate in the different religious traditions are differences between different phenomenal manifestations of
the one noumenal Ultimate Reality. They are not differences between different names for the same directly accessible ultimate referent.” (IE 35)

Not only is Hick not saying that all the religions are oriented toward the same religious object, he is also not claiming, contrary to what Cobb and Griffin imply, that religious experience is uniform. Interestingly, both Hick and Griffin utilize the work of Steven Katz to support their arguments. Remembering that Katz says, for example, that “There is no intelligible way that anyone can legitimately argue that a ‘no-self’ experience of ‘empty’ calm is the same experience as the experience of intense, loving, intimate relationship between two substantial selves” (DRP 46), Griffin approvingly cites this statement as evidence for the truth of differentialism. Yet Hick, when discussing specifically mystical religious experience says for instance:

There has been considerable discussion in recent writings on philosophy of religion about whether, as W.T. Stace, Ninian Smart and others have argued, “phenomenologically, mysticism is everywhere the same” (Smart 1965, 87) but is differently interpreted within the different religions, or whether, as Steven Katz and others have argued, “the experience itself as well as the form in which it is reported is shaped by concepts which the mystic brings to, and which shape, his experience” (Katz 1978, 26). In this debate I side with Katz. (IRe 170-1)

The question is what this difference points to. In spite of implying the contrary in other passages (for instance DRP 27-28; 35), Griffin does acknowledge that “Hick does not claim that the experiences as such are identical” (DRP 46-7). While affirming the same ultimate, Peter Byrne holds a position similar to Hick: he writes for example that “it does not follow that what is experienced is exactly the same phenomenologically. The traditions…experience the common focus of religion differently, just as two observers may have different experiences of the same event
because their angles of vision and background expectations and beliefs are different. Object identity does not entail phenomenological identity.” (PRP 80)

In contrast to this, Griffin holds that “differential” pluralism is “pluralistic soteriologically and perhaps also ontologically” (DRP 24). In the case of Cobb-Griffin process pluralism it is decidedly ontologically plural. He inserts the ‘perhaps’ primarily to accommodate Heim’s position, which is radical with regard to soteriological pluralism and yet uniform ontologically. The pluralism that Heim/Cobb/Griffin critique as superficial, then, is branded “identist.” Speaking of the distinguishing components in the identist version, Heim says that the “assumption that there is and can only be one religious end is a crucial constitutive element of ‘pluralistic’ theologies” (DeR 27). This might be said of some pluralistic theologies, but Hick’s position is more complex than that. Heather Meacock notes that Hick “fully acknowledges the variety of soteriological aims, which, nevertheless, he believes are mutually compatible, rather than mutually exclusive. He has adopted the formula of writing of ‘salvation, liberation or enlightenment,’ to underline his acknowledgement that precisely the same thing is not meant by each concept.” (AAT 215)

Heim is also guilty of the distortion Griffin repeated previously, as Heim holds that “pluralistic theologies are opposed to the view that ‘different religions may offer alternative religious objects’” (DRP 27). No one is denying that the religions ‘offer alternative religious objects;’ the question, rather, is whether they are manifestations of a more fundamental non-dual reality, or whether we can and should speak of ultimate realities, or equiprimordiality. To correct the other aspect of Griffin’s/Heim’s
position, Hick has indicated that he is not opposed to the possibility of multiple ultimacy: “that there is one ultimate reality rather than many, is offered as a ‘best explanation,’ not an iron dogma” (IRe xxvii). He also notes that, strictly speaking, we should not ascribe to ultimacy any quantity whatsoever, “for even number is part of our human conceptual repertoire” (ChTR 71). This is in keeping with diverse venerated religious teaching; Brahman is “The one without a second,” for example, indicating the imperfect inevitability of recourse to number, as well as, importantly, the ineffability and supra-conceptual nature of the Real. Like Hick, Heim also seems to accord with this openness to alternate possibilities:

It could be that there is only one such actual being, structure, or condition, which unites or subsists in the various ineffable religious ends. But it could also be that there are in fact various realities in the noumenal realm which are religiously significant and which ground diverse religious fulfillments (for instance, both some form of personal deity and a condition similar to that described as nirvana). (STDR 146)

Heim’s use of the phrase “the noumenal realm” is noteworthy, and also the fact that, when Griffin cites this passage (DRP 27), he leaves that expression out. In any event, Heim’s more developed Christian view emphasizes the triune unicity of the truly ultimate. With the plenitudian emanation from the Holy Trinity of all diverse eschatological possibilities, his position diverges from the Cobb-Griffin process model. But their agreement lies in an emphasis on irreducibly divergent soteriological outcomes. Griffin recalls that “Cobb has long insisted...that the ‘nirvana’ or ‘satori’ experienced or sought by the Buddhist is radically different from the salvation

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3 See also ChTR 69-71; DPR 193; IRe 248-9; NFRS 206.
4 Chandogya Upanishad, VI 2.2.
5 Hick’s quotation of Maimonides is also illustrative: “In our endeavor to show that God does not include a plurality, we can only say ‘He is one,’ although ‘one’ and ‘many’ are both terms which serve to distinguish quantity. We therefore make the subject clearer, and show to the understanding the way of truth by saying He is one but does not possess the attribute of unity” ( [12th century] 1904, 81) (IRe 251, n21).
experienced or sought by the Christian” (DRP 28). Indeed, Cobb is explicit: “There is no common goal” (in DRP 246). With reference to Hick’s proposal that the common soteriological base in all the (post-axial) religions is transformation from self- to Real-centeredness, Cobb claims: “We have here another case of generalizing from the monotheistic traditions. In these it makes sense to speak of centering our lives in God rather than in ourselves. In Buddhism it does not make sense to speak of centering in emptiness rather than in ourselves. The realization of emptiness is better understood as decentering” (in DRP 247). It is unclear, however, whether the precise locus of centering or its conceptualization is of primary importance when interpreting the act of spiritual transformation. We could say that the goal is the act, and state—not necessarily its locus, or mode.

In similarity to Cobb’s view, Christopher Ives states that “Hick’s ontologically and soteriologically identist pluralism founders in Buddhist waters” (in DRP 179). The main concern is the putative object of experience. Ives writes:

For example, Zen thinkers have represented their religious ‘experience’ not as a perception of a special object of experience but as a shift in their mode of experience (from a subject-object mode to a ‘non-dual’ mode), through which the discriminating, self-conscious experiencer ‘drops off,’ leaving no sense of being a subject over against the experienced object…the object of Zen ‘experience’…is ordinary reality. (Ives in DRP 179)

Yet this still clearly describes a ‘shift’ in experience—to what? Everyday reality; or phrased differently, real-ization, or the Real. Thus even the “decentering” that Cobb emphasizes is ultimately a re-centering. In this regard it is apt to remember the well-known Zen aphorism: “Before studying Zen, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers; while studying Zen, mountains are no longer mountains and rivers are no longer rivers; after studying Zen, mountains are once again mountains and rivers are
once again rivers.” Instead of the Real mischaracterized as just the object, it is better described as facilitating function of for that shift; it would therefore be, in classic paradoxical fashion, both means and end—for instance samsara is nirvana, as the Lotus Sutra in the Mahayana traditions asserts.

As it is, Hick’s hypothesis should not simply be reduced to “another case of generalizing from the monotheistic traditions,” as Cobb claims, and thus be dismissed. Obviously, Cobb’s proposal springs from the same broad intellectual background and part of the world as Hick’s hypothesis. Both are no less legitimate for that. One must distinguish between the sheer de facto character of (in this case western) situated statements, and the illegitimate leap to their rejected ascription of de jure status. Hick is offering a point of view, and of course it comes from somewhere. Moreover, it is necessarily inclusive, as are all interpretive positions. This does not negate the possibility of context-transcending accurate generalized description/explanation. Indeed, diagnosis of the human condition, for instance, has been understood as general and generally applicable by virtually all of the great religious traditions.

Griffin also emphasizes the difference of religious outcome. He suggests that “meditation on Emptiness and submission to Allah seem to produce strikingly different types of people” (PrT 42). Speaking of Buddhist-Christian encounter, J.A. DiNoia claims that “the doctrinal standards by which a person would be judged to have attained the true aim of life in the Buddhist community are rather different from those which would be invoked in appraising the whole of a Christian life…Seeking, attaining, and enjoying Nirvana are not the same things…as seeking, attaining, and
enjoying the perfection of charity or the beatific vision” (DiNoia 1992, 34). In response, we can ask: do they not both still involve a shift from egocentricity to (the root of) the way things really are? As Heather Meacock writes, “Hick has…made it clear that he has no wish to identify the concepts of God and sunyata, or any other religious concepts that are clearly so far from being the same. He is in agreement with Cobb that these concepts are not identical, but, he believes, constitute different ‘lenses’ through which the Ultimately Real is humanly experienced.” (AAT 189)

DiNoia also approvingly cites Grace Jantzen, where she cautions against the assumption that “all religions have a concept of salvation at all, let alone that they all mean the same thing by it or offer the same way to obtain it: it is misleading to assume that there is some one thing that is obtained when salvation is obtained (DiNoia 1992, 40). Hick is more nuanced in his assertion of soteriological commonality. First, he recognizes the important pre/post-axial distinction in religious tradition orientation, while still remaining open to a soteriological interpretation of pre-axial traditions as well as to the contrast with potentially transformative secular ideologies. Also, he affirms the sometimes radically different spiritual ways or methods and orienting objects or referents, and he acknowledges the at least superficial complexity in the telos as shown by his “salvation/liberation” pairing. We say ‘superficial complexity’ because we could add the naivety in asserting divergent soteriological incommensurability based on, at best, religious-linguistic-conceptual and even experiential discordance, and at worst, variously motivated aprioristic dogmas of difference. In contrast, Alan Race writes, “The spiritual fruits of the many faith-traditions seem comparable: all have inspired saints and holy figures…the
comparability of spiritual fruits suggests a common source of inspiration, however this is portrayed in different traditions (IE 31-32). This echoes an earlier statement by Hick:

My reason to assume that the different world religions are referring, through their specific concepts of the Gods and Absolutes, to the same Ultimate Reality is the striking similarity of the transformed human state described within the different traditions as saved, redeemed, enlightened, wise, awakened, liberated. This similarity strongly suggests a common source of salvific transformation. (ChTR 69)

We can see here two distinct yet inseparable points—namely the result, and the source of salvation/liberation. Hick, and the so-called ‘identist’ strand of pluralism, generally sees more similarity than not of spiritual result underneath, as it were, the surface of conceptual differences, and he deduces—or more accurately induces—a deep common origin. ‘Differentialists’ on the other hand, begin by observing more difference than not of spiritual form as opposed to result, and deduce deeply different origins. To return to Race’s point:

While it is true that the religions are radically particular when viewed as whole apprehensions of religious life, I do not myself think that this necessarily undermines the point...that a generic Cycle of Religious Life is a legitimate inference to make based on observation and experience. The alternative picture is that we accept that each religion is locked into its own version of what constitutes the meaning of life. But this hardly seems attractive, let alone possible in today’s global interconnectedness. (IE 33-4)

Approvingly citing Rita Gross, Race continues:

“One cannot understand the specificity and uniqueness of one’s religion if one does not have a basis for comparison”. This far-reaching remark undercuts the drive towards isolationism. From a pluralist perspective it provides backing for the intention in the hypothesis to honour both the radical differences between the religions and their transcendent origins in the ineffability of Ultimate Reality.
Plurality obviously requires diversity, and it also requires what the majority of pluralists argue is a more fundamental commonality. This is for instance brought together in a statement by Huston Smith:

As everything both resembles and differs from everything else—resembles it minimally in that both exist; differs from it in that they are at least numerically distinct—the various religions have to be alike in some ways; we would not refer to them collectively as religions if they had nothing in common…I am more interested in their similarities (which is to say that those are their aspects that strike me as being most important) for…my ruling interest is in salvific truth. (PrT 77)

This statement highlights the pluralist assertion of (potentially) universal soteriological efficacy, and its functioning as the uniting commonality among the traditions. This is of course disputed, primarily by those who are outside of the pluralist orientation. It is a position summarized by George Lindbeck when he states that there is no “common soteriological core” among or within the traditions (Lindbeck 1984, 49). Meacock cites Wolfhart Pannenberg as another representative of the view that rejects such a common core. The typical strategy involves emphasis on the untranslatability of tradition-specific terms/concepts, and their perceived inevitable disfiguring when applied outside their indigenous borders, and so resulting in a blurred or “undifferentiated concept of salvation to which no tradition, including Christianity, would subscribe” (AAT 215). As Sumner Twiss reminds us, however, the successful subscription will require the recognition that a proposed meta-theory will of course not be identical to the phenomenon under consideration, and this is no liability; it is, rather, inherent to the structure of explanation. A similar point is operative in Meacock’s observation:

Pannenberg…seems to want to locate the concept of salvation so firmly within a structure of biblical texts confined to Christianity, that, by definition,
no comparison can be made between Christian salvation, and ‘liberation’ or ‘enlightenment’ as understood within other faiths. But, if he is making the point, against Hick, that religions are not alike, and that they do not share a common soteriological structure, this surely cannot be done simply with recourse to the biblical usage of the term; more powerful collateral reasons are needed, and Pannenberg does not supply these. (AAT 192—emphasis mine)

To date, there have been no sufficiently “powerful collateral reasons” to successfully refute the possibility of a common soteriological basis among the traditions. This denial is rather sourced in aprioristic inclusivist or exclusivist commitments that must necessarily reject a spiritually efficacious commonality. In his created dialogical response to critics, Hick writes: “[Grace:] And so one writer [J.A. DiNoia] claims that ‘the soteriocentrism of pluralistic theologies of religion seems bound to equalize or absorb the ineffacably particular soteriological programs of other religious communities.’ Don’t you think there’s something in that charge? [Hick:] From an exclusivist or inclusivist point of view, yes; from a pluralist point of view, no.” (ChTR 107) This accords with our view that process pluralism is better understood as mutually inclusivistic. Hick’s pluralist position, in contrast, is vectored by a posteriori considerations that demand a place in any successful explanatory system. Similarly, noting the empirical and contextually sensitive character of Hick’s hypothesis, Roger Haight states:

John Hick has given a reasonable description of religious pluralism in his philosophy of religions which does not prejudice the religions themselves…Hick is sometimes criticized for not respecting the individual distinctiveness of each religion, and for reducing religious pluralism to the scheme of a single meta-narrative by his unified theory…I do not accept this criticism. In principle, Hick accounts for religious pluralism through socio-cultural mediation. (Haight 1999, 411)
Haight’s statement emphasizes the ‘ground-level’ basis of Hick’s hypothesis, since he asserts the common condition of mediation and its role in colouring a yet observed striking soteriological similarity that crosses cultures. There is, for instance, no more “evidence in Christian lives than in the lives of others of those fruits of the Spirit which St. Paul listed as ‘love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control’ (Gal. 5.22-3)” (ChTR 16). We could ask at this point: What exactly are the differences Griffin has in mind when he states that “meditation on Emptiness and submission to Allah seem to produce strikingly different types of people”? What is striking is that the perceived incommensurable traditions with their radically different referents nonetheless seem to produce similar types of people. Saints, Bodhisattvas, Mahatmas—the commonality of these exceptionally evolved spiritual types parallels an (ultimately) common soteriology.

Notably, Meacock interprets Cobb’s emphases in his pluralism as aligning with Hick’s universalist soteriocentrism. While Cobb “would agree with Pannenberg that there is more diversity than common ground to be discerned in a comparison of world faiths,” he nevertheless indicates that “contradictory doctrinal statements can to some extent be reconciled” (AAT 193). Cobb notes that the respective affirmation and denial of the existence of God in Christianity and Buddhism can be mutually modified or reinterpreted to affirm the complementary notions of non-attachment and ultimate trust. Yet there likely will remain irresolvable doctrinal differences or contradictions, and in this instance, Cobb advises that we “listen to the deep, even

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6 For further discussion of the act of reconceptualization in order to achieve complementarity, see Cobb’s essay “Beyond Pluralism.” In D’Costa, ed. 1990, ChUR 81-95.
ultimate, concerns that are being expressed in these diverse statements” (in AAT 193). According to Meacock,

What is interesting is his [Cobb’s] illustration of the results of a change of preoccupation and emphasis. When we abandon preoccupation with conflicting doctrines and turn instead to religious concerns, we are immediately led back to soteriology. Implicit in Cobb’s insights is a recognition of the common religious purpose and concern for the ultimate destiny and salvation for humankind. This recognition is shared by other theologians who would be in agreement with Hick’s belief that religions share a common soteriological structure. (AAT 193—emphasis mine)

While Cobb would likely take issue with this characterization of his position, it is not amiss to suggest that differences in formal structure and perceived ends do not preclude a universalized ultimate soteriology in accord with our common humanity, no less as in accord with what the religious traditions actually teach anyway: namely religion-transcending eschatologies and their unlimited or general applicability. If such commonality is denied, it would contradict the otherwise enthusiastic differentialist emphasis on dialogue. On what exactly is dialogue based? To be sure, there are thinkers who deem the incommensurability between the traditions so great as to render dialogue meaningless. For instance, in his essay “The End of Dialogue,” John Millbank does not flinch from incommensurability/exclusivist implications: “I do not pretend that this proposal means anything other than continuing the work of conversion” (in ChUR 190). For those that still hold to the relevance of genuinely two-way inter-religious communication, however, the question is pressing. Meacock asks: “On what basis can such dialogue take place, if ‘common ground’ among the religions is denied?” (218) Put another way, she states (Ibid.):

The question which needs to be asked, clearly, is what exactly does constitute commonality among the traditions? Put simply, what is it that makes some Christians and Buddhists wish to engage in dialogue as opposed, for example,
to Christians and supporters of Manchester United Football Club? The fact that dialogue takes place between certain groups of persons and not others, presupposes a mutual recognition of certain common concepts.

This indicates undeniable divergence in content, and to an extent form, but not necessarily goal.

Meacock’s threefold distinction in conceiving the commonality/disparity of “soteriological core” (see above p. 141) among the traditions addresses accused conflations of means and ends typically directed at pluralists such as Hick. In response to Keith Ward’s work on shared moral criteria indicative of most pluralist positions, D’Costa claims that Ward “simply jumps from assuming a common structure [a movement towards a supreme objective value] to conflating that structure with content, and therefore a common goal…[this is a] classical case of a category mistake; the confusion of the categories of form and content” (D’Costa in AAT 221).

In response, Meacock offers, rather than simply distinguish between form or structure and content, there can be added the third feature of purpose/goal, as distinct from content. Thus, for instance, Christianity contains a form (the Body of Christ), a content (theology, liturgy, worship), and a goal (the post-mortem beatific vision). While related, these can rightly be distinguished; likewise with other traditions. For illustration, she provides a compelling analogy:

Educational establishments, schools, colleges or universities, may be deemed to manifest structural similarity, towards a common but only partially conceived goal (for what, in its entirety, do we encompass in the idea of an ‘educated person’?) The content of such establishments, in terms of what is actually taught, may however, be radically dissimilar…In the case of the religions, I would suggest that we may discern something of the same kind. Similarity of structure may lead to similarity of goal…via dissimilarity of content. (AAT 221-2)
Indeed—do schools with very different curricula tend to produce very different persons? No. If well-conceived, they tend to produce well-educated persons. Meacock rightly mentions the ambiguity involved in the meaning/notion of a well-educated person: we assert the meaningfulness of such a notion, but there is little agreement as to what it encompasses. This accepted condition in education is analogous, we could say, to numerous facets in Hick’s hypothesis: the critical realist/realistic acknowledgement of religious knowledge limitation and its cultural conditionedness, the yet positing of that which is beyond our religious knowledge and to which our religious knowledge points, and the emphasis on the ‘bringing out’ (educare) of the ‘fruits of the tree,’ which reminds of Hick’s statement on criteria: “It’s certainly a soft rather than a hard criterion, in that it does not deal in anything that can be precisely measured. But I think that we all do use it…” (ChTR 77; see above # 2.4.2). In both cases there is the goal of transformation, yet with a variety of diverse means and even description.

There is a problem with Meacock’s threefold distinction though: debate about disparity of content is not fully resolved by pushing it back to uniformity of purpose/goal. Radical differentialists or non-pluralists will likely object to even this move. Nevertheless, it helps to clarify the nuance of Hick’s view and it locates the source of much contention in the conversation about the criterion of soteriological core. Those not fully convinced of irreducible difference might be inclined to appreciate the ‘compromise’ of this distinction. Form is broadly similar—meditation and prayer for instance, are more alike than meditation and football. Content can be radically dissimilar—this is where we see the non-pluralist and ‘comparative
theology’ emphasis. And the goal/outcome—again is broadly but remarkably similar (given the often divergent formation and content experience). Mahatmas and saints for instance, are more alike than mahatmas and football players. Regarding the final end of the individual, however, we accurately assert the limitations of our knowledge and exhibit the concomitant humility, as well as asserting the non-necessity of such speculation (of ‘that which tends not to edification’ in Buddhist parlance) for our spiritual advancement and maturation, let alone for the harmony among the traditions.

In contrast to the typical non-pluralist judgement of perceived form/content conflation as a fallacious category mistake or insufficient distinguishment by pluralists, and thus contributing to a spurious commonality, we can see non-pluralists engage a similar but inverse maneuver. For example, consider this passage by Griffin:

In response to the statement by fellow Christian theologian Monika Hellwig that “we have a common starting point and a common end in the transcendent ultimate” and that “what is truly ultimate is unified so that all quests for communion with the ultimate are in process of converging,” Cobb argues that “there are many Buddhists who do not understand themselves as seeking communion with the ultimate,” so their Buddhism offers “a different path to a different goal, a different name of a different aspect of reality, a different language through which something quite different from communion is sought” (DRP 28)

We can note the stress on difference in “name” and “language,” and then consider a well-known utterance from the Rig-Veda: “The Real is one—sages name it variously.” It is fallacious to assume that since the interpretation is different, the goal must ipso facto be different. Does a different path necessarily lead to a different goal? Do we have, as it were, not many paths up a single mountain, but rather many paths up many mountains? That different groups understand their goals differently does not

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7 Ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti (Rig-Veda, I: 164:46).
necessarily indicate that their distinctive paths lead to ontologically distinct goals, as Cobb and Griffin affirm and imply here.

We also read “a different aspect of reality” (emphasis mine)—not different realities—implying an ultimate unicity, akin to Hick’s position. It is tempting to conclude from Cobb’s phrasing that he slipped in stating his actually believed conception of ultimacy, similar to the way Whitehead suspects Hume, in a discussion of causation and perception, “let his pen slip,” revealing other possibly more illuminating conceptions. But Griffin corrects that suspicion in a footnote: “Cobb says that he should not have used that term [“aspect”], which suggests that Buddhists and Christians simply apprehend an identical reality in different ways, but should have more clearly said that they focus on a different ‘principle, element, reality, or ultimate.’” (Ibid., 28 n.113; more on the significance of “aspect” in # 5)

In any case, contra the Cobb/Griffin/Heim assertion, ultimate soteriological concern does not imply non-pluralism or pseudo-pluralism, let alone superficiality. Rather, if we wish to move beyond the grounding of comparative religion, and into comparative theology or theology of religions, it is arguably what provides the basis for being able to talk about conflicting truth claims/religious difference in the first place. “Identist” pluralism is the result of a greater acquaintance with the depths of the traditions, in tandem with striking observed behavioural similarities/outcomes, which affirms a trans-cultural commensurability or simply common humanity. Why should irreducible difference imply greater profundity? We can ask this of the process pluralists in particular, as they affirm the equal ultimacy of the ‘many’ and the ‘one.’

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8 See Franklin 2000, p. 252.
Rather than affirming irreducible difference, such equal ultimates implies the at least equal status of commonality.

The next two of the three main criticisms Heim, Cobb, and Griffin level against Hick—false neutrality, and pseudo-Christianity—have already been addressed primarily in chapter two (see # 2.4.2). Here we will only briefly augment the discussion with some additional observations and documentation.

**4.1.2 Pluralistic Theories/Theologies Falsely Claim a Neutral Universality**

Griffin states that according to Heim, pluralistic theologies “pretend to have transcended particularity—to have a neutral, universal perspective from which to decide what is valid and invalid in historic Christian faith and other particular religious traditions” (DRP 30). Heim maintains that “there are no neutral meta-theories that offer a different order of knowledge about the religions,” and he deems as incoherent “any supposition of a neutral meta-theory, of judgments made from above the religions rather than among them” (STDR 10). This charge does not apply to Hick’s hypothesis (see # 2.4.2); it is an avowedly religious interpretation of the global religious situation. Heim in fact explicitly acknowledges the legitimacy of the endeavor: after asserting the incoherence of self-claimed neutral meta-theories, he writes: “This is a different point than the question of whether it is legitimate to make second-order judgments about religion, judgments that do not agree with the self-understandings of adherents. It is legitimate” (STDR 4). The recognition of the faith-based context, along with an acknowledgement of the legitimacy of second-order interpretation/judgement, neutralizes the charge of false neutrality leveled against Hick’s hypothesis. In arguing against the postmodern/postliberal worldview that
denies this legitimacy, Peter Byrne astutely summarizes the related issues in the following passages:

Once we begin to think that there are many cultures in the world we have attained some kind of global view of the human situation. The possibility of then raising certain kinds of questions—such as ‘Do their various religions have a common reference?’—arises. The questions may turn out, on argument being offered, to be badly put or unanswerable; though, even to show something of that sort is to show something global about culture. A thesis that cultures and religions are incommensurable or mutually incomprehensible says something global and significant. (PRP 27-28)

And further to the point of the self-defeating reflexivity of postliberal interpretation, Byrne continues:

Moreover, the particular questions asked by the religious pluralist appear to arise out of the religions themselves. Confessionalism in the interpretation of religion is built on the fact that religions make absolutist claims about salvation and the truth for humanity. If such claims are impossible to put then they are in trouble. No one from within one of the major traditions should complain if the philosophy of religion takes up these questions for itself.

Similarly emphasizing the inductive and epistemologically sensitive nature of the pluralist approach, Race states: “Pluralism does not erect another grand narrative, so much as follow through the consequences of philosophical observations about how knowledge comes to human consciousness and then applies this in the realm of (plural) religious consciousness” (IE 35). In a discussion of Frithjof Schuon’s perspective on the religions, Huston Smith writes, “Forms are to be transcended by fathoming their depths and discerning their universal content, not by circumventing them” (in TUR xxv). Heim’s charge against pluralism as holding alleged neutrality of perspective consequently implies—not unlike D’Costa’s claim—the impossibility of pluralism, since we are always situated in a particular tradition, and thus always interpret the other by our own. Paul Knitter writes that in “a certain sense, then, all
religious believers are *inclusivists*. All of us experience, understand, and judge other religions from the perspective of our own religion” (MyRS 31). As has been noted however (see # 1.3), this kind of inclusivism does not de-legitimize the pluralist perspective. Heim seems to understand this: after agreeing with the legitimacy of second-order interpretations, he writes: “My point here is simply that ‘meta-theories’ are in no different position than religious judgments made on another tradition; such judgments do not have to accept as final that tradition’s account of itself” (STDR 4). And yet what Heim does with this procedural point is to use it in service of a robust inclusivism, which if pursued would bring one back to the compelling reasons for the pluralist stance in the first place. In any event, Hick’s hypothesis is none the worse for its clear acknowledgement of contextualization or anthropological conditioning (what the non-pluralist positions arguably do not fully take into account) and legitimate second-order activity.

**4.1.3 Pluralistic Christian Theologies Are not Really Christian**

This charge by Heim, and affirmed by Cobb and Griffin, involves the claim that so-called ‘identist’ pluralist theories—Hick’s in particular—rob Christian faith of uniqueness and substance. For instance, quoting Heim, Griffin states that these pluralists “call for ‘an unequivocal denial of Christian uniqueness,’ thereby rejecting the idea that the Christian tradition has any ‘unique religious value’” (DRP 31). This is, simply, false. And it is frankly surprising that this perception or unnuanced construal of Hick’s position continues. The uniqueness of Christianity is not denied by Hick; what is denied is its superiority among the traditions. Uniqueness and superiority are conceptually distinct, and the denial of the latter does not amount to
the denial of the former. Inclusivists such as Heim and (we argue) Cobb make much of this alleged pluralist denial of tradition distinctiveness or uniqueness; this accusation is the converse cover for their held superiority or their resistance to cede mono-tradition absolutism. The emphasis on both uniqueness and superiority partly explains why Cobb decamped in the anti-pluralist D’Costa-edited essay collection, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, which was a response to the Hick and Knitter-edited collection with the misunderstood title, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*. The discussion has been continued and updated in the 2005 Knitter-edited volume with the clearer title *The Myth of Religious Superiority*. But Cobb comes close to a genuine pluralism via an approximate mutual inclusivism when he states, for example, not only the uniqueness of every tradition, but further that “the uniqueness of each includes a unique superiority, namely, the ability to achieve what by its own historic norms is most important” (quoted in DRP 33). Moreover, he says that “[a]s a Christian I can, and do, evaluate other communities and traditions by [my] norm,” and, as Griffin notes, Cobb “recognizes the equal right of people in other traditions to evaluate Christianity by their own norms” (DRP 33). Cobb thus exhibits at least a normative/epistemic inclusivism, while yet wishing to maintain a radical soteriological pluralism. We do not believe he succeeds at this; hence our description of his position as an *approximate* mutual inclusivism.

Hick highlights some of the inherent problems and ambiguities in inclusivism. For instance, he writes: “Once it is granted that salvation is in fact taking place not only within the Christian but also within the other great traditions, it seems arbitrary and unrealistic to go on insisting that the Christ-event is the sole and exclusive source of
human salvation” (MCU 22). In a discussion of the Christian inclusivist notion of the salvific work of Christ hiddenly operative in all the other traditions, Hick appropriately points out the challenge of precisely spelling out how Jesus of Nazareth effects this salvation (a form of the ‘scandal of particularity’), noting the need, for instance, to posit a far-fetched liberating retroactive causation to account for those saved before the appearance of Jesus of Nazareth and invisible causation generally operative in unreachable locales. (All comparable to the tenuous Ptolemaic ‘epicycles’ in astronomy—in other words, an attenuated theory in its dying stages).

Thus, the specific historical figure of Jesus is left behind, as it were, for the positing of

a non-historical, or supra-historical, Christ-figure or Logos (i.e. the second person of the Trinity) who secretly inspired the Buddha…and Moses…and Confucius and Lao Tzu and Zoroaster…as well as Muhammad, Guru Nanak…and many others since. But this Christ-figure, or Logos, operating before and thus independently of the historical life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, then becomes in effect a name for the world-wide and history-long presence and impact upon human life of the Divine, the Transcendent, the Ultimate, the Real…Christians may call this the cosmic Christ or the eternal Logos; Hindus and Buddhists may call it the Dharma; Muslims may call it Allah; Taoists may call it the Tao; and so on. But what we then have is no longer (to put it paradoxically) an exclusively Christian inclusivism, but a plurality of mutually inclusive inclusivisms which is close to the kind of pluralism that I want to recommend. I am suggesting in effect that religious inclusivism is a vague conception which, when pressed to become clear, moves towards pluralism. (ChTR 22-3)

We would say, rather: when pressed, it moves towards either pluralism or exclusivism. Here is one example of Cobb’s attempt to have it both ways: with his emphasis on mutual inclusivism he seems to intend a form of pluralism, but he decidedly maintains one foot in the exclusivist camp. Paul Knitter understandably notes that Cobb’s position is hard to categorize (TCW 3); but this is due not to its
coherent integration of multiple strands—i.e. its inherent complexity—but rather to the unresolved dissonance of maintaining multiple absolutisms. Cobb’s view is best characterized as a form of inclusivism, while noting the inherently unstable nature of his position.

Interestingly, Cobb’s statements parallel in some measure certain statements of the perennialist thinker Frithjof Schuon—whom Griffin claims is an ‘identist pluralist’ that has much in common with Hick. Schuon affirms that every religious tradition is unique, and even superior in a sense, but not *sui generis*. In a passage from *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (2nd ed. 1993), Schuon claims that the exclusivist possession of

> a unique truth, or of Truth without epithet, is...an error purely and simply; in reality, every expressed truth necessarily assumes a form, that of its expression, and it is metaphysically impossible that any form should possess a unique value to the exclusion of other forms; for a form, by definition, cannot be unique and exclusive, that is to say, it cannot be the only possible expression of what it expresses. Form implies specification or distinction, and the specific is only conceivable as a modality of a ‘species,’ that is to say, of a category that includes a combination of analogous modalities. (TUR 18)

At this statement, Cobb and others disinclined to a general pluralist perspective would likely baulk. But it gives logical form to an intuition that the world’s many great ways contain enough of a common structure to enable us to discuss them as species of Ways, Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s warnings against reification notwithstanding. Schuon continues:

> To claim that a limitation, for example, a form considered as such is unique and incomparable of its kind, and that it excludes the existence of other analogous modalities, is to attribute to it the unicity of Existence itself...a

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9 “An identist version of pluralism that has much in common with Hick’s is articulated by Frithjof Schuon in *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*” (DRP 24, n.92). There are however significant differences between the two as well. See for example Blakeslee 2009, pp. 49-70.
form is always a modality of a category of formal, and therefore distinctive or multiple, manifestation, and is consequently but one modality among others that are equally possible, their supraformal cause alone being unique.” (TUR 19)

With Schuon’s emphasis on “the unicity of Existence itself,” we begin to see the foundational reason for the divergence from Cobb’s process pluralism. This becomes more evident when Schuon adds:

The distinction between forms must needs be compensated by an indistinction or relative identity that prevents them from being absolutely distinct from each other, for that would entail the absurd idea of a plurality of unicities or Existences, each form representing a sort of divinity without any relationship to other forms. (TUR 19)

Or in W.C. Smith’s succinct words, “A claim to uniqueness is not unique” (MCU 64).

Here we can see the differences between general pluralists such as Hick and Schuon, and “radical pluralists” such as Cobb and Griffin (a term used by Cobb in self-description—see for example DRP 35)—amounting essentially to the acceptance or rejection of a base commonality supported by an affirmation or denial of multiple ultimacies, or even ‘Existences,’ as Schuon phrases it.

Where we might see a surprising alignment with Cobb and Schuon, however, is in the assertion of tradition superiority. Schuon writes:

Returning to the question of the relative incompatibility between the different religious forms and more particularly between certain of them, we may add that it is necessary that one form should to some extent misinterpret the others, since the reason for the existence of a religion, from one point of view at least, is to be found precisely in those things wherein it differs from other religions…every religious form is superior to the others in a particular respect, and it is this characteristic that in fact indicates the sufficient reason for the existence of that form. Anyone who speaks in the name of his religion always has this characteristic in mind; what matters, where the recognition of other religious forms is concerned, is the fact…of such recognition, not its mode or degree. (TUR 23-24, 35-36)
Cobb would likely concur with such an affirmation of ‘particularity’ from a so-called ‘identist’ thinker. However, Schuon states, after affirming each tradition’s unique superiority, that “Divine Providence has permitted no mingling of the revealed forms since the time when humanity became divided into different ‘humanities’ and moved away from the Primordial Tradition, the only unique religion possible” (TUR 24). This goes against the Cobb-Griffin pluralism’s hope for a mutual transformation among the traditions, particularly because for Cobb, Griffin, and perhaps even Heim, the so-called ‘Primordial Tradition’ is—contrary to Schuon who adopted this expression coined by René Guénon (1886-1951)—not ‘the only unique religion possible.’

Schuon’s following statement does document that he belongs to the ‘identist’ camp: “The evidence for the transcendent unity of religions results not only from the oneness of Truth but also from the oneness of the human race.” With other pluralists, Schuon affirms the equal validity of the great Ways. But he is more aligned with Hick’s position in emphasizing the salvific self-sufficiency of each of the Ways, along with an entailed downgrading or rejection of any generalized absolute among the traditions. The superiority of each tradition is understood as its distinctive genius, which is yet sufficient for and applicable to its own domain, or cultural unit. Contrary to Cobb, then, each Way is indeed unique, and even superior; but it is a relative superiority, i.e. not sui generis. Like Schuon’s model, Hick’s position leaves the
traditions virtually as they are, but with the crucial difference of altered self-importance assessment vis-à-vis other traditions.

Nevertheless, Cobb speaks for many Christians when he adamantly upholds the uniqueness of the salvation mediated by Jesus Christ. According to Griffin, “Cobb explicitly affirms that Christianity is unique in the sense that it ‘achieves something fundamentally different from other religions. It is quite likely…that the precise salvific experience brought about through faith in Jesus Christ occurs in no other way’” (DRP 33). We note only in passing one of the implications of this view: the resultant expectation of Christian mission, and the eventual incorporation of all of the traditions into Jesus Christ. On the other hand, Hick would certainly agree that the “precise salvific experience” is unique; what is debated, though, is that this experience “achieves something fundamentally different from other religions.”

Catholic theologian Roger Haight has developed a religiously pluralistic Christology that rejects the *sui generis* status of Jesus, and yet, he argues, remains dogmatically orthodox. Haight develops this in a number of steps that will not be analyzed in any detail here. We will only highlight some statements particularly pertinent to the topic at hand. There are a number of points on which Cobb would agree. First, given the general saving presence of God, active in human consciousness, and the reality of diverse cultures, Haight holds that from a Christian standpoint therefore, a pluralism of religions is to be expected [and] is not surprisingly but entirely coherent with the Christian conception of God as transcendent but immanently present and operative in the lives of all human beings. Not to affirm an expectation of religious pluralism, or to be embarrassed by it, runs counter to the basic Christian conception of God…Positively because God creator and savior relates to all of history, the articulation and experience of God’s presence takes on multiple different forms. (in MyRS 156)
This much would certainly be un-problematic for most inclusivists. But Haight then gives it a more specifically pluralist spin when he adds (p. 157):

Given the limitation of all historical mediation, and given the transcendent character of ultimate reality, no single salvific mediation can encompass God’s reality or human understanding of it. This represents the standard Christian view that God as transcendent can be characterized as infinite and incomprehensible...From the transcendence of ultimate reality, of God, it follows that no religion in the sense of a set of religious truths can adequately portray its object. From a Christian standpoint, therefore, the plurality of religions mediates more revelation of God than any single religion, including Christianity itself.

Further, Haight argues, there is thus a mutual normativity and general relevance of all the traditions, which provides a solid foundation for, and expectation of, interfaith dialogue. This perspective on the religions “does not consist in a proposal that comes from outside Christian faith and threatens it but lies implicit in the revealing message of Jesus himself” (158). More succinctly and provocatively, Haight writes: “The primary argument for the truth and authentic saving power of other religions comes from the witness of Jesus Christ” (Haight 1999, 412). This emphasis on mutuality and the integrity of internally generated interpretive theory accords well with Cobb’s priorities. When Haight outlines his pluralist Christology, however, it appears contra-indicative of Cobb’s espousal of a sui generis view. For example, Haight says:

Relative to the construction of an orthodox Christology it is crucial that Christians understand that the issues of a pluralist Christology does not depend on how ‘high’ or how ‘distinctly divine’ it portrays Jesus. It depends rather on what is predicated of him is so unique to him that it cannot be shared by others...The projecting upon Jesus of a divinity that radically sets him apart from other human beings does not correspond to the New Testament and undermines the very logic of Christian faith. Analogously, if God’s being present and active in Jesus had no parallel manifestation in other religions that mediate consciousness of God at work for human salvation, then once again
the content of the revelation of Jesus about God is undermined. (quoted in MyRS 160)

Haight concludes with a brief statement on his pluralist Christology compared to previous forms:

This does not consist in lowering a Christian estimate of Jesus but in expanding its relevance. The difference lies in recognizing that what God has done in Jesus, God does generally. Pluralist Christology does not differ from Christologies from the past in what it affirms about Jesus Christ but rather in the context in which Christological doctrine is formulated and in the noncompetitive way in which Jesus Christ is understood. Pluralist Christology recognizes that other religions and other religious symbols mediate the ‘same’ transcendent source and power of salvation. Put simply, pluralist Christology is orthodox in affirming the basic experience and conviction of Christians regarding the true divinity of Jesus, but it does so in a noncompetitive way. (in MyRS 161)

There is commonality in recognizing the importance of context, and likely the affirmation of non-competition. But in contrast to the views of Cobb/Griffin/Heim, we see Haight’s insights affirming the more accurate character of Christian theology that combines, or better, brings out the expected non-singular, non-absolutism with the yet continued relevance, distinctiveness and efficacy, and that remains closer to traditional teachings on the unicity of the ultimate salvational source. This non-differentialist perspective is thus not a compromise or “negation of basic Christian commitments.” (TCW 79)

But instead of relativizing the belief in each tradition’s sense of absoluteness, as is ultimately the case in Schuon’s perennialism, or simply denying absoluteness as we see in the pluralist camp, Cobb appears to wish the maintenance of absolute status of the traditions and their divergent general truth claims. His solution is to legitimize the multiform universal truth by correlating it with multiple ultimate realities—his and
Griffin’s take on Whitehead’s equiprimordial God, World, and Creativity. Before addressing that solution in more detail, we turn now to the other facet of the Heim/process charge against Hick’s model in relation to Christianity: the divesting of substance.

4.2 Mythological Truth and Perceived Agnosticism

Hick has gone to considerable lengths to argue against non-cognitive theories of religious truth, or non-realism generally (see IRe 172-227). And yet his solution to the problems of religious knowledge, and answer to both non-realists and, in a religious context, literalists or naïve realists has been met with much criticism. We have noted Griffin’s contention that Hick attempts to equalize all the traditions by making them all equally erroneous (see # 4.0). Further, given Hick’s stress on divine transcategoriality, Griffin writes:

This solution...undermines Hick’s whole attempt to provide an alternative to nonrealist views of religious language...Although Hick regards his position as superior in this respect to that of the nonrealists, it is not, because it is essentially the same. That is, there is no significant difference between saying that the word *God* refers to nothing outside our imaginations, as the nonrealists do, and saying that it refers to something about which we can know absolutely nothing, as Hick does. (RwS 275-6)

Griffin adds another commonly charged accusation: “If we can say absolutely nothing substantive about ‘transcendent Reality’...no one form of human behavior can be said to be more ‘in alignment with that Reality’ than any other.” He concludes, “In view of these self-defeating implications, one might wonder why Hick has come up with this hypothesis.” Similarly, P.J. Griffiths writes, “While it may be the case that ultimate reality is, in and of itself, just the kind of thing that can be characterized and
mediated in the way suggested [as transcending all our characteristics of it]…the prior probability of this being true seems distressingly low; some powerful collateral reasons to support it are needed” (quoted in AAT 171-2). It should be clear by now why Hick has come up with this hypothesis, and what those supporting powerful collateral reasons are. As Meacock states: “The validity of the philosophical and theological speculation, that each human conception of “the Real” is a partial, incomplete image, is rooted in the facts of religious pluralism and the need to account for the diversity and variability of human responses to the Real” (AAT 172). Additionally of course, it is rooted in our best scientific knowledge of human cognition and in what the religions themselves teach.

The charge that Hick’s hypothesis divests the religious teachings of substance must always be brought back to the reasons for positing this theory in the first place, and to the fundamental question: “why is it the case that we have so many diverse and seemingly incompatible human characterizations of the Real? Surely the very fact of religious pluralism calls out for some theological explanation as to why this is so” (AAT 172). Meacock then quotes Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s observation that “modern theologians have addressed the question of the appropriate attitudes of Christians to non-Christians but have given little attention to accounting for the religious diversity of mankind in the first place.” As Meacock rightly states, “A philosophical framework which attempts to account for this cannot be dismissed as a ‘distressingly low probability’ without some alternative explanation of the religious diversity of humanity.”
Nonetheless, Griffin, Cobb, Heim and others complain that ineffability leads to vacuity. For Griffin, “Although Hick says that religions evoke dispositions ‘appropriate to the Real,’ this phrase, Heim rightly says, ‘tells us literally nothing,’ because we are said to have no idea what the Real is like” (DRP 32). Speaking of the word ‘like’: indeed, as we have seen (# 2.3.4; # 2.3.7), we do not even have recourse to analogy in our effort to comprehend and describe the Real, for the reason that it would lead to a complete mass of contradictory truth statements; in other words, it would bring us back to where we started with the problem. Only one appropriate analogy comes to mind here: like Kant’s radical maneuver of delineating phenomena/noumena and thus simultaneously delimiting and empowering both the aspirations of science and religion, so Hick’s hypothesis empowers by limitation, not unlike one of the paradoxical etymologies of ‘religion’—that which binds in order to liberate. Griffin and other critics of Hick such as Cobb and Heim are essentially asserting an exemption for religious knowledge. But increased awareness of our cultural/anthropological conditionedness or historicity combined with verifying experiments in cognitive science and the sociology of knowledge have only borne out the critical realism perspective; and if we follow Hick’s positing of all experience-as-interpretation, including faith, this applies equally to religious knowledge as well. Why posit That which we can say literally nothing substantive about, except purely formal/logical ascriptions? In part because, as Nicholas Rescher reminds us, “Noumena are ‘things the understanding must think’—given the modus operandi of the human mind” (Rescher 1983, 8), and because “Noumena curb the pretensions of sensibility” (Ibid.9). Precisely if our religious knowledge is to be deemed veridical,
we must posit the ineffable. But it is a continuing inaccuracy leveled against Hick to say that we can thus know literally nothing in the religious domain, and have no means of discriminating true from false religion. Even with Hick’s quasi-agnosticism,\(^{11}\) which simply follows through on the implications of divine ineffability—we can know quite a bit given empirical and pragmatic criteria, but always held in the spirit of future greater correction/confirmation; i.e., the possibility of eschatological verification as grounding the cognitivity of religious truth. Thus Hick’s religious knowledge assertion is in fact different from the non-realists—there is a held transcendent Reality—and it wisely stays within the bounds of realistic assertion, affirming only our sufficient knowledge of transformative or soteriological truth couched in the interface with and partial construction of the phenomenal Real, or through the lenses with which we perceive divine manifestation: “Thou art formless. Thy only form is our knowledge of Thee.” (*Yogavasistha*; see # 2.3.4)

*In relation to us*, as Hick stresses, we who begin with a conviction of a transcendent and immanant ultimate reality rightly perceive and experience the Real as benign, of ultimate importance and serendipitous. Hick’s position, it needs to be repeated, is not an attempt to *prove* God or the divine; it is an attempt to *explain* religious diversity with its inherent conflicting truth claims. The most accurate language in the service of religious truth communication is myth; its genius lies in its development of metaphors which bypass and are richer than analogies. Myths allow us to communicate potent truths that are more than approximations, and yet are not

\(^{11}\) If one complains of the religious inadequacy of a quasi-agnosticism, one has the option of affirming a full-blown gnosticism, as it were. But this would involve courting a whole host of traditional contra-indications and difficulties—for instance: “Any propositional theory of revelation is confronted by the insurmountable difficulty of distinguishing the divine from the human element in the purportedly revealed texts” (Schmidt-Leukel, PRD 94).
mistaken for *das Ding an sich* (Kant). They do not exist in equipoise between the literal and the false, for this would imply an inaccurate half-notion of ‘half truth, half falsity.’ Rather, they are facets of factuality—like symbols—connecting one to another order (*metaphor*—etymologically from the Greek—‘to transfer’). If they support the religious life of various faith communities, they are deemed by Hick to be ‘true’ myths. They are cognitively true, but not literally true. As Meacock quotes Hick, he

> holds that true myths are embedded in a context of genuinely factual belief. The profound level of truth they contain is dependent on a connection with objective reality, for…such myths “are distinguished from whimsical or arbitrary exercises of the poetic imagination by their relation to a framework of factual belief which they supplement and adorn…what might be called valuable or significant myth is necessarily parasitic upon non-mythological beliefs.” (AAT 174-5)

That true myths are embedded in factuality enables us to say that they are *not* devoid of cognitive/realist content. Moreover, as Meacock points out, myth/metaphor is more properly understood as an enhancement of the embedded meaning in the host fact, rather than a change of that meaning, which supports the cognitivity and paramount significance of non-literal religious assertions; they retain an integrity via their signified intent. Nonetheless, not everyone agrees that religious truth should be interpreted as non-literal and yet cognitive and significant. But as Meacock incisively states: “Critics have yet to explain why it is that a ‘true religious myth,’ that evokes right response to God, or Ultimate Reality, is necessarily an inferior kind of truth to a ‘literal truth’” (AAT 110). Referring to the literal interpretation of the Incarnation in Christianity, she writes, “Put another way, the onus seems to be on the Incarnationalists to explain what is meant when it is claimed that Jesus is God in one
of his modes of being, and how this is literally true, in order to make it clear why the idea of mythological truth is unacceptable.” (AAT 110)

4.3 Process Prehensionism as Mode of Religious Experience

Does Whitehead’s epistemology lend greater credence to religious experience and equiprimordial ultimacy? His nonsensationist prehension helps to increase the veracity of religious/spiritual experience *per se*. This is grounded in the notion that “consciousness presupposes experience, and not experience consciousness…Thus an actual entity may, or may not, be conscious of some part of its experience” (PrR 53; see also # 3.4.1 above). Experience that is not necessarily conscious provides for the fact that, as Griffin puts it, “(1) all people at all times feel, albeit usually only at an unconscious level, the existence of a Holy Actuality, which accounts for what is sometimes called ‘the religious dimension of experience,’ and (2) in some people this direct prehension sometimes rises to the level of conscious awareness, producing what is called an ‘experience of the Holy’ or a ‘mystical experience’” (RwS 85). The cogency of Whitehead’s epistemic model is due to the fact that all of the necessary actualities cohere in a system that does not need to invoke a ‘God of the gaps’ or *deus ex machina*. The working of information processing, however, whether conceived as ‘spiritual’ or ‘mundane’ in nature, does not bypass the critical realist claim of conditionedness. So Griffin writes: “Whitehead does not, by any means, deny that conscious experience is *largely* constructed by the percipient. He in fact praises Kant as ‘the greatest philosopher who first, fully and explicitly, introduced into philosophy the conception of an act of experience as a constructive functioning’” (RwS 76).
Stephen T. Franklin concurs: “Whitehead does not deny the role of the subject in constructing the phenomenal world. He does not have a naïve realism” (SpD 82). In a discussion of truth theory Griffin also writes:

Whitehead’s correspondence theory rejects naïve realism…Whitehead’s theory does retain, nevertheless, a form of realism. Although the world as it is in itself is extremely different from the world as displayed in our sensory perception, it does exist independently of our percepts and concepts of it. To think about other actualities as they are in themselves, Whitehead’s whole ontology is devoted to showing, we need to think of them in terms of categories supplied by our own experiencing as such (rather than in terms of categories suggested by the data of our sensory experience). We can, therefore, intelligibly affirm the existence of a real world to which our ideas may or may not correspond. (RwS 332)

We can see how this experientially based correspondence theory of truth acquisition can go part of the way in affirming the notion of veridical religious statement.

Whitehead’s epistemology applies not only to religious knowledge acquisition. In this sense, as noted, religious knowledge does not require exceptional status for a divinely implanted religious sense, given its assertion of a more fundamental non-sensory prehension that is part and parcel of all actual entities. Rather than contradicting intuitions of veridical religious experience, we are given a more developed conceptuality for explaining the dynamics of religious knowledge acquisition, while yet acknowledging its deeply conditioned character. The specific components of that religious knowledge, however, i.e., what that prehended information indicates about the ultimate and how we choose to conceptually map it—as transcategorical, as equiprimordial, or in some other fashion—remains an open question, and one that continues to call for creative interpretation. Whitehead states:

In our cosmological construction, we are, therefore, left with the final opposites, joy and sorrow, good and evil, disjunction and conjunction—that is
to say, the many in one—flux and permanence, greatness and triviality, freedom and necessity, God and the World. In this list, the pairs of opposites are in experience with a certain ultimate directness of intuition, except in the case of the last pair. God and the World introduce the note of interpretation. (PrR 341)

We can conclude then that Hick’s hypothesis withstands the numerous criticisms voiced by its differentialist critics. We have seen that his hypothesis is, first, properly pluralistic, in that it recognizes the reality of common ground for a number of reasons, not least being the logical necessity of commonality to make coherent the discussion and conceptualizing of genuine plurality or diversity. Second, Hick’s hypothesis does not falsely claim a neutral generality, in that it readily acknowledges the relation of universality and particularity. Third, Hick’s hypothesis can very well be applied to a Christian theology of religions. Denying absolute *sui generis* status to Jesus Christ and hence the superiority of Christianity does not undercut the divine and salvific character of Christianity. It is rather a more accurate grasp of our context—the reality of religious diversity—in conjunction with Christian teachings of the universally salvific activity of God. Moreover, Hick’s employment of critical realism to the religious knowledge sphere and its subsequent interpretation of this knowledge as mythological does not evacuate substantive Christian teaching. It is precisely this mode of discourse that substantiates the language that navigates between or reconciles held ineffability and cataphatic or positive statements. It does emphasize certain strands of the tradition over others. Nevertheless, in its Christian core, Hick’s theology of religions is genuinely Christian; it is entirely in keeping with the history of pluriform and often divergent Christian theological thinking. Finally, rather than undercut Hick’s partial Kantian conception of our relation to the Real, Whitehead’s
epistemology can help to illuminate this basic ancient insight, transposed into modern critical realist form, of both the conditionedness and veracity of our knowledge, religious and otherwise.

4.4 Differential Pluralism: A Critique

Let us return to Griffin’s charge that what Hick’s position amounts to is “saying not that each type of religion is correct, but that each is equally mistaken. This drastic conclusion follows from Hick’s apparently unshakable commitment to the idea that there is only one ultimate reality” (DRP 45—see above # 4.0). What Hick’s position amounts to is that each type of religion is equally correct, but equally mistaken in its unqualified absolute truth claims. What is remarkable is the amount of resistance to acknowledgment that we can not have it both ways. Given all that we know about the spiritual traditions, human conditionedness, and human cognition, this is simply the more realistic view. Even Cobb acknowledges that the “absence of a common ground returns us to a dangerous parochialism” (TCW 103). Whatever the reinterpretable readjustments required in Hick’s hypothesis, none are so drastic as that found in the differentialist proffering. This is particularly evident in S. Mark Heim’s Trinity-based ‘salvations’ theory which, as noted, Griffin uses to bolster the differentialism of the process position.

The process religious pluralism worked out by Cobb and advocated by Griffin pairs up in many respects with Heim’s position on religious diversity. Griffin emphasizes Heim’s position as the hitherto most powerful critique of Hick’s hypothesis. Heim’s own model, however, contains a number of shortcomings that are
severe enough to render it unacceptable as a viable alternative explanation. And we shall see that many of the problems in his model easily and unfortunately transfer to process pluralism.

We can begin to get a sense of Heim’s intentions when he writes, “I want to point out that the ‘finality of Christ’ and the ‘independent validity of other ways’ are not mutually exclusive. One need not be given up for the sake of the other unless we insist that there can be only one effective religious goal” (STDR 3). And so he states, “I contend that it does make sense to speak of salvation in the plural…I argue there is a real diversity of actual religious ends” (STDR 6). According to Heim, his hypothesis of salvation in the plural

directs us unavoidably toward the religious traditions themselves and their accounts of their religious aims. It is the religions as they actually exist—as patterns and complexes of life directed toward particular visions of human fulfillment—that are the objects of affirmation, not a principle abstracted from them, of which they are secondary cultural forms. (STDR 147)

This approach is just as hypothetical as is Hick’s position. Clearly, both are interpretations of the data. That one is more literalistically oriented is no ground for greater accuracy. Heim continues, “The hypothesis that grounds exist for the realization of particular religious ends impels us to take the testimony of the traditions and their believers with a good deal more seriousness than in Hick’s case” (STDR 147). On the contrary, as has been indicated, it is precisely the seriousness with which he takes “the testimony of the traditions and their believers” that leads Hick to posit his hypothesis in the first place. This entails not just adequacy to the particulars of both congruent and conflicting held truth claims, but also the necessity of pairing adequacy with coherence in a model that is both comprehensive and, heeding
Occam’s razor, *economical*. These variables should arguably also be *balanced*. For balance, we could say, is the bedrock of viability. Of course, how each theorist negotiates the tensile balance of these explanatory virtues varies. But this ideal should be emphasized; or following Whitehead, the approach should conform to what can be called the reining-in of overstatement, if it holds true that “The chief error in philosophy is overstatement.” (PrR 7)

Heim continues with another apparent contrasting feature of his model, namely the integral relativity among the traditions. He states that

> The hypothesis of multiple religious ends ‘relativizes’ each faith path in a rather different way. It affirms that more than one may be truthful in their account of themselves, and that these truths are distinct. That is, it relativizes the religions precisely by actual relations to each other. This contrasts with the relativizing of traditions on Hick’s hypothesis by referring them to his postulated absolute, which as such figures in no one’s lived religious life. (STDR 147)

In response: Hick acknowledges the reality of religious diversity, with an awareness of their often conflicting givenness. This is the raw material for an interpretation—not an imposition. While a contra-indicating deconstructive view is conceivable, the two are nevertheless different, and one does not necessarily entail the other. The normative sense of relativization, however—as in relativism—is a different matter, and is addressed by Hick’s hypothesis (see # 2.4.2). Heim again seems to be saying that his position does not ‘abstract’ from the concrete context, thus remaining at the somehow more accurate and legitimate level of first-order discourse. But without the necessary and context-integral act of “cognitive transcendence” (Peter Byrne 1995), we would lapse back into the uncoordinated state of no proffered theory. Or if we

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12 See, for example, Peter Byrne’s discussion of Kenneth Surin’s critique of pluralism, with its overstepping tendencies. PRP 24-30.
begin in completely context-bound theorizing, we are tied to incoherence. In order, instead, to coordinate and account for these apparent incompatibles, we refer to theory, or that which enables us ‘to see.’ “Postulated absolute(s)” are necessary for conceptual integration, however variously conceived or manifested. And these are integral to the religious traditions themselves. They are a part of everyone’s religious life, consciously understood or not. Of course, Hick’s postulated absolute “as such,” regardless of its hypothetical nature, is just one variant in the larger stream of thinking about religious life, and as such is as integral to that part of religious life as is held truth claims. Further, if Heim wishes instead to ground the coherence of the relation of the Ways, not in some ‘ideology’ such as pluralism, but rather in, say, the Christian Trinity, then we are back to where we started, with all of the inherent problems of non-pluralistic models. Heim’s account, in other words, functions and fares no differently in this regard.

Like D’Costa, Heim claims that all “theories of religion are either exclusivist or inclusivist in nature” (STDR 152). This is congruent with his positing of the fairly novel inclusivist view of multiple genuine religious ends as well as non-religious and anti-religious kinds of purgatories and annihilations (STDR 165 & DeR 272-3), combined with one superior (Christian) salvation. This is based on the notion of the Christian Trinity as internally plural and generating eschatological plenitude. As Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen describes this view: “Plenitude is a qualitative description of the divine life as triune; a personal communion-in-difference can be judged to be better than a pure divine substance. Furthermore, this divine fullness is expressed in all God’s creation, with humans created with freedom and thus capable of choosing
whether they desire communion or not” (K 141). Therefore we should expect diverse religious fulfillments (and non-fulfillments) based on divine plenitude with the triune Christian God as its source and centre. All ways and ends are equally real and different; the choice among them is critical for the individual. There are however a number of problems in Heim’s pluriform model paralleling the process position and endemic to the inclusivist stance generally. These problems can be grouped under the following: 1) coherence, 2) plausibility, and 3) faithfulness to the traditions themselves. We begin with the last issue first.

4.4.1 Faithfulness to Tradition-Internal Conception

Staying with Heim’s own tradition of Christianity for the moment, it should not be surprising that his conception of multiple religious ends is deeply at variance with the spirit of Christian catholicism/universalism. There are a number of deviations from traditional Trinitarian thinking. After a study of Heim’s model, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen asks: “does Heim’s interpretation of the Trinity coincide with the (early postbiblical) Christian reading of biblical salvation history that resulted in the doctrine of the Trinity?” (K 146) It does not, for a number of reasons. First, it runs against the original impetus for the doctrine of the Trinity as securing a monotheistic conception by unifying the God of the Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus Christ; and as coordinating historical particularity (Jesus of Nazareth) with the fully transcendent God. So Kärkkäinen notes that “the original purpose of the doctrine of the Trinity was not so much to affirm diversity in God as it was, in light of the Incarnation and giving of the Spirit, to affirm belief in one God. In that sense, the way Heim works towards his theology of the Trinity is exactly the opposite” (K 146). This construal can be
understood and even appreciated as creative theology, however converse to original intent. But Heim’s expansion of the doctrine, rather than reinterpret metaphorically like Hick does, begins to pervert the original unifying tenor. Thus, while both Hick and Heim creatively work with the materials of the tradition, the latter steps past legitimate, tradition-concordant interpretation and into a deformation of fundamental convictions. Noting that Heim “has a tendency to overstate his case” (K 146), Kärkkäinen writes:

His observation of the disciples’ connecting their encounter with Jesus with the God of the Jewish faith…as an indication of the plurality of ways God relates to human beings is of course a fact; but I do not easily see how that in itself supports his idea of the kind of pluralism in the Trinity that leads to positing varying religious ends. The identification of Jesus with Yahweh rather speaks to the unity in the Trinity, not of the diversity. And even if it did, it is a long, long way from this observation to the idea of the plurality of ends! (K 146)

This indicates then an unfounded line of reasoning, and one of the foundational flaws of Heim’s thesis. The actual biblical tradition contra-indicates Heim’s faithfulness to Christian teachings. Kärkkäinen rightly asserts that “it hardly has the needed biblical attestation. On the contrary, it seems to be seriously at variance with the biblical vision of the gathering of all people in the New Jerusalem under one God (Rev. 21-2)” (K 147). As Paul Knitter notes, to ask Christianity (as well as all of the other traditions) to accept the idea of multiple and incommensurable “salvations” and very different religious ends is to ask them to accept what is viewed as “a strange if not heretical belief” (ITR 231). Knitter encapsulates Heim’s overemphasis on difference in his Christian proposal as follows:

Christians have always taken for granted, and still do, that because there is one God, there is one final destination. Heim’s efforts to draw out the
possibility of many salvations from the Christian doctrine of the Trinity go only half-circle. Yes, Christian belief in three divine persons does mean that diversity is alive and well and a permanent part of the very nature of God; and this could well mean, as Heim concludes, that it is alive and well and enduring among the religions. But that’s only the first half of the circle of Christian belief in God as triune; the other half swings back to oneness: the three divine persons, Christians also affirm, have something in common that enables them to relate to each other, enhance each other, achieve ever greater unity among themselves. Heim does not seem to apply this part of the Trinitarian circle to the world of religions: as diverse as they are, as incommensurable as their differences may seem, they also, like the persons of the Trinity, have something in common that enables them to transcend their differences without doing away with them. (ITR 231)

In other words, the ‘one’ and the ‘many’ should be thought together—not in terms of priority either of the ‘unity’ of God’s being or of the ‘differences’ of the divine persons. Transcendence of/in God is no ‘one-dimensional’ either/or, exclusive of the one over against the other perspective. This is what equiprimordiality could mean within Trinitarian theology, and this is what Heim misses.

Knitter draws a conclusion opposite to Heim’s intention when he states, “Belief in the Trinity, therefore, would seem to call Christians to affirm not only, as Heim urges, real diversity among the religions, but also the real possibility of common ground—a common ground that recognizes different paths, but not different final goals” (ITR 231). As a variation of this line of thinking, Knitter notes that using the Trinity to contemplate the relations among the religions would lead one to a genuine pluralism—not inclusivism—in that one would wish to avoid the heresy of subordinationism. This could then be applied to relations between the traditions.

Heim’s proposal is at odds with the Christian intent, and is thus not faithful to the tradition itself. Yet, might his theory that denies universalism work for other traditions? In short, no. As Kärkkäinen writes with regard to “Heim’s insistence on
linking the salvation in Christianity and the religious ends in other religions to the triune God of the Bible,” “this claim is, of course, nothing other than a typical inclusivist reading of other religions, totally against their own self-understanding, thus making Heim’s critique of the faults of other kinds of pluralisms begin to falter” (K 149—emphasis mine). Therefore, “not much room is left for raising the question of whether this is nothing other than imposing the Christian understanding of God on other religions.” (K 150)

There are a number of consequences to Heim’s position: not only is the imposition of the Christian God on other traditions obviously not in accord with their own self-conceptions, and thus failing at being more genuinely pluralistic. It also is not in accordance with Heim’s own tradition. It reinterprets the intention of Trinitarian thinking, and denies universality in soteriological and eschatological conception. This line of reasoning is exactly one of the supposed aspects of identist pluralist thinking of which Heim is so critical. As Kärkkäinen writes,

Denying that right for universal claims does not seem much different from what Heim critiques in other kinds of pluralisms: whereas Heim accuses conventional pluralisms of the imperialism of assuming the ‘rough parity’ among the religions despite seeming differences, he himself is prone to be guilty of imperialism by insisting on radical differences against the intended universalistic orientation of religions. Ironic as this sounds, it is a serious challenge to Heim. (K 149)

While trying to give genuine difference its due, Heim, because of his inclusivist commitment, cannot but deem other ways as inferior to Christianity. Perry Schmidt-Leukel spells out the unfecund implications of Heim’s stance:

The price paid for such a ‘recognition of difference’ is that divergence becomes equal to inferiority. The other religious tradition is seen as wrong precisely in so far as—and precisely there where—it differs from one’s
While Heim advocates the legitimacy of unique *salvations*, he is in fact claiming a distinction between alternative religious *ends*, and Christian *salvation*—the former being at best ‘penultimate’ and inferior to the latter. Since the Ultimate *is* the Christian Trinity, all other paths that are not so oriented will necessarily be missing the mark, as it were. Thus Schmidt-Leukel notes that “the diversity of religious ends that Heim’s approach can accommodate is nothing but the diversity of various *stages* on the way to the one and only true eschatological end represented by Christianity” (BCD 204). Heim and other inclusivists would likely respond that we can only ever be, at best, inclusivists, since we always judge the other by our own, and it would be an unnatural and unrealistic imposition to expect otherwise. As Schmidt-Leukel observes of the differentialist approach:

> The result is a mutual inclusivism, with each side claiming the final superiority of its own religious path. However, mutual inclusivism cannot be a solution to the question posed by religious diversity. On the contrary, it *is an exact description of the problem*. All religions claim—traditionally—that they are superior to all others if not uniquely true. But if these claims all have the same referent then it is logically impossible that all of them are right. (BCD 202-3—emphasis mine)

This brings us to the next set of issues.

### 4.4.2 Coherence

The positing of multiple religious ends and their corresponding eschatologies leads to the question of how they might cohere. Heim invokes Dante’s *Divine Comedy* with its multiple end levels as a way of helping us conceptualize many domains to which the
Ways terminate. But this is applicable (and questionably so—see # 4.3.1) only to the Christian outlook. We have a new problem if we attempt a general eschatological model. How can the different affirmed eschatologies of the different traditions cohere in a map that is not completely scrambled? The affirmation of ontologically different and real ends—the Christian heaven, the Buddhist nirvana, the Muslim paradise, or various affirmations of reincarnation—implies the various deities and impersonal realities that structure these ends. Hick notes that “we cannot have an eschatological religious end without the divine power or the cosmic process or structure that undergirds and sustains it” (NFRS 161). Each tradition holds its concept of ultimacy in absolute terms: and here again, the problem of self in relation to the other is posed. But even if somehow the traditions accommodated this pluriform ultimacy, or more accurately multiple ultimacies, there remains the question of logical coherence. Hick describes this situation as follows:

the Holy Trinity is one reality, Allah is another reality, Adonai, the Lord blessed be he, of Rabbinic Judaism is another reality, Vishnu another, Shiva yet another, Brahman another again and likewise the Tao, the Dharmakaya are all different realities. But consider the implications of this. Would it mean that the Holy Trinity presides over and is worshiped in Christian countries, the Allah of Islam in Muslim countries, the God of the Sikh faith in the Punjab, while the transpersonal focus of Buddhist meditation is real in Burma, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Tibet, parts of China and Japan, and so on? This would be not only polytheism but also (to coin a phrase) polyabsolutism. (MyRS 11-12)

For Hick, this is an incoherent state of affairs for three reasons. First, the monotheistic traditions in particular assert that one God is the sole source of all. Second, there is a fundamental incompatibility between affirming the non-theistic structure or process of reality—such as the Buddhist conception of *pratitya samutpada*, i.e., *equiprimordiality* (Boutin 2001, 436n.15)—and theism. Third, these divisions
become absurd when spelled out geographically. How do we divide divine jurisdictions? Between nations or cities, or households? And what is one to make of a multi-faith practicing individual? Heim tries to make this sound coherent by offering the following reasoning: “Nirvana and communion with God are contradictory only if we assume that one or the other must be the sole fate for all human beings. True, they cannot both be true at the same time of the same person. But for different people, or the same person at different times, there is no necessary contradiction in both being true” (STDR 149). Does a Buddhist Christian then, for instance, given sufficient spiritual progress, achieve first nirvana, and then communion with God? Or after union with Brahman, does one’s personality get reconstituted for the beatific vision? How exactly does subjective expectation play a role in objective end state? If I expect reincarnation, for example, will it be so? The more the specifics are considered, the more incoherent, or at the very least, implausible the differentialist scenario becomes.

Contemplation of this supposedly objectively irreducible divergence leads Roger Haight to write:

> When religions and religious beliefs are considered from a cognitive perspective as having a referent, the principle of non-contradiction becomes keenly significant. Along the same line I presuppose the unity of being and the unity of the human race. By contrast I do not accept the idea that because religious experiences and corporate religious worlds of construal are subjectively different, these differences correspond to different objective worlds or autonomous spheres of objective reality. (Haight 1999, 401)

Heim’s alleged coherence is challenged also with regard to interfaith dialogue (more on this in # 5). As alluded to with statements by Heather Meacock (# 4.1.1), radical divergence of means and ends gives one no common ground or language with
which to speak to other traditions; any genuine mutual enrichment is nullified by the 
fundamental rejection of the spiritual ends of the other. As Knitter writes:

With his [Heim’s] notion of *salvations* …religions differ not only in the means 
they use but in the ends they pursue. But if two people have different goals, 
if…[they are] moving in different directions, how will they ever be able to 
understand each other, help each other in reaching their goal, or perhaps 
confront each other about the value of what they are seeking? Heim pointed 
out that it is only on the basis of accepting such total differences not only in 
means but also in ends that we have the possibility of learning something new. 
But if the ‘something new’ is found in a goal that is of no interest to me 
because I’m going somewhere else, what is there to learn?…When the 
religious communities of the world are on journeys that have divergent final 
destinations, then all they can do is wave at each other as they pass.” (ITR 
229-30)

New learning based on divergent difference is of course possible; but given 
soteriological incommensurability this new information becomes at best a curiosity. 
Christians should not engage with Buddhists for enriching conversation on steps to 
salvation; as Catholic theologian Joseph DiNoia says, “I do not want to attain 
Nirvana” (DiNoia 1992, 230). This situation would be like automobile mechanics and 
florists dialoguing—attempting to learn from each other—about a non-agreed upon $x$. 
The only agreement is that the other is not in possession of the best means to one’s 
own goal. The ‘dialogue’ would then likely revert back to attempted conversion (e.g., 
Millbank 1990, 191: “I do not pretend that this proposal means anything other than 
continuing the work of conversion”). Even if one were to grant the morally 
indubitable nature of proselytization, the approach remains misguided. For 
Kärkkäinen, the “implications for interfaith dialogue are less than satisfactory. 
Holding on the radical differences in ends, ironically, makes the dialogue fruitless; 
the possibility of a few individuals, or even a few groups, changing their allegiance is 
by far too meager a goal for *interreligious* dialogue, the representatives of which
come from particular religions claiming universal validity for their views” (K 151).

Furthermore, as Meacock writes:

If disparate traditions are deemed to be completely incommensurable then, logically, it cannot follow that they can have any reason to engage in dialogue. Judgements of the levels of incommensurability vary, and, presumably, no theologian who advocates inter-religious dialogue can hold the view that the disparity between traditions is such as to render them incomparable, for the acceptance of such a high degree of incommensurability would imply that dialogue would indeed be a fruitless exercise. (AAT 218)

This non-pluralist espousal of interfaith dialogue, if it is not based on a hidden motivation of converting the other, leads us back to the question, “what exactly does constitute commonality among the traditions?” (AAT 218) Differentialist pluralists and thinkers of a non-pluralist orientation remain strapped by this fundamental question; the acknowledgment of commonality would de-absolutize their own orientation and lead to adjustments, conceptual or otherwise. For Cobb and other differentialists, the answer to that question is to be reached through dialogue (more on this in # 5). It is surprising enough that this implied commonality would be asserted in this way, particularly in light of Cobb’s statement that “there is no common goal” (quoted in DRP 46).

4.4.3 Plausibility

Interrelated to the issue of coherence is plausibility. Given that this is a religious theory, it must be asked whether this is theologically plausible. As with coherence, theological plausibility is also related to tradition-internal integrity. And here it runs up against the assignation of less than final fulfillment for most orchestrated by a God rendered inaccessible through no fault of one’s own. Given Heim’s emphasis on individual choice, or the individual’s critical decision in faith commitment, a plethora
of genuine, inferior final ends are present in God’s economy to receive those that choose unwisely (i.e., not choosing the Christian path). Heim interprets this scenario to be indicative of God’s omni-benevolence, presumably because one has the freedom to make choices, to decide one’s fate. Heim states that “The diversity of religious ends provides an extraordinary picture of the mercy and providential richness of God” (DeR 264). And yet, as Hick asks: “Is there not something disturbingly unrealistic here?” (Hick review 2001, 413). At issue is the naïve or misguided perception of the individual choice dynamic in the specific cultural, geographic, and mental constitution contexts, and the kind of God that this dynamic reveals. As Hick continues:

In the great majority of cases people have not freely chosen their religion. They have nearly always inherited it, grown up within it, and been formed by it, so that it fits them and they fit it. The opportunity to study the full range of religious options and make a free choice among them is a recent western development that is open to very few. Can a Tibetan, Thai, or Burmese Buddhist, or most of the hundreds of millions of Muslims, or of Hindus, or most Jews or Jains or Taoists, be said to have deliberately chosen the religious end available to them in deliberate preference to the Christian religious end? How then can the highest good of Christian salvation realistically be said to be accessible to that large majority of the human race who have lived in all the centuries (including those before Christ) either in complete ignorance of the Christian message and/or within other religious traditions which have formed their relationship to the Ultimate in other ways? Heim’s assumption that everyone has freely chosen either the Christian or some other religious (or secular) end ignores in an astonishing way the realities of human life and history. (Hick review 2001, 413—emphasis mine)

As Hick points out, this is actually a bleaker, less generous form of inclusivism, in that it does not posit the full salvific power of Christ operative in other religious ‘choice’ domains, and so consigning the majority of the human race to inferior and possibly eternal final ends. Here, Karl Rahner offers a far better ‘solution’ (see Boutin 1982, 602-29). Heim calls his position a “pluralistic inclusivism,” and he considers it
to be “a step beyond” classical inclusivism (STDR 152).—A step ‘beyond,’ or a step back to a medieval line of thinking that most would deem morally suspect? Heim does perhaps take Dante’s vision too seriously. Or his position can be interpreted as narrowly evangelical: the unrealistic, individual choice component is over-emphasized, and universal salvation is underemphasized, or denied.

The hypothesis of multiple divergent religious ends counts against its theological plausibility in that it cuts deeply against the grain of universal truth claims and typically ends with Christianity being no exception. Heim creatively mitigates this somewhat by attempting to locate the source of these divergences in the triune God. But as Kärkkäinen observes, Heim offers some unwarranted extrapolations. For instance, “While it is true that there is a kind of ‘absence’ or ‘emptiness’ in the presence of God in God’s creation, it is again a huge leap logically and theologically to say outright that this is to be identified with the idea of moksha or nirvana, and then take the still more questionable step of saying that therefore the Buddhist’s vision of nirvana/moksha is a valid end from the perspective of Christian theology” (K 150). These are just correlations, the same way, as Kärkkäinen notes, that the triune God of Christianity can be correlated to the Hindu triumvirate of Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva. To take the step into identification requires the perspective or self-understanding from other traditions. And this self-understanding would not be based on the Christian God. So Kärkkäinen concludes that

Heim goes too far in his presentation of the taxonomy of religious ends. What he can say on the basis of Christian tradition is that there might be parallels; to proceed from that to the idea of identification, and not only identification, but the validity of those ends, endorsed by the triune God, is clearly something unwarranted by any stretch of Christian Trinitarian theology and, from the
perspective of other religions, is nothing other than a typical inclusivist reading of them. (K 150)

Granted, Heim attempts to fuse, for instance, the Buddhist notions of emptiness and nirvanic end into the Christian Trinity and its plenum. But there is little chance that this line of approach will be accepted by any of the respective traditions. If we opt instead for a more discrete suggestion, we run into objections of incoherence. So Hick states that “while these different cosmic situations can co-exist as human belief systems they cannot co-exist ontologically, or in reality. There cannot be the different ends of which Heim speaks if these are integral to ontological realities which cannot co-exist in the same universe” (NFRS 161). Thus if we presuppose with Haight “the unity of being and the unity of the human race” (Haight 1999, 401; see # 4.42), Heim’s model becomes implausible, theologically and otherwise. This leads Hick to conclude that “Heim’s distinctively Christian and Trinitarian theory does not help us find any comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the existing religions” (NFRS 161). Heim’s line of reasoning seems to be that, since we cannot be anything but inclusivists—or mutual inclusivists—our inclusivist orientation is therefore justified. But again, this is not a solution; it is precisely an expression of the problem. On the contrary, we can in fact think non-inclusivistically (or non-exclusivistically). Other motives are really in play.

Given its tradition-internal unfaithfulness, incoherence, and implausibility, Heim’s alternative model in no way decreases the viability of Hick’s hypothesis. If anything, since it is considered by many to be a powerful differentialist alternative to Hick’s so-called identist theory, it renders the latter in a more realistic and plausible light. Where Heim initially set out to achieve a model comprised by greater tradition-
internal faithfulness, in reaction to Hick’s hypothesis, the ironic result is an imposed pan-tradition distortion. Both Heim’s and Hick’s positions must wrestle primarily with tradition integrity. But whereas Hick calls for reinterpretation—specifically, the downgrading of each tradition’s *sui generis* absolute status, Heim in contrast effects a greater twisting of each tradition’s self-conception. This is what happens with every theory that attempts to maintain an inclusivist or exclusivist (or particularist) orientation, however finessed. If one wishes to do justice to the full scope of the data, as well as incorporate the critical-realist facts of human cognition, Hick’s downgrading maneuver should not seem inappropriate.

We have introduced Heim’s critique of Hick’s hypothesis for the following reasons. First, as a concentration and extension of previous critiques, it is viewed by many as the most effective response against Hick’s position; the extent to which Hick’s position withstands these attacks allows us to assess its continued viability. Second, Heim’s hypothesis in many ways aligns with and mirrors/illuminates the process position as presented by Cobb and Griffin, enabling us to see more clearly some of their commonly shared inherent problems. And third, it carries the differentialist implications farther in their problematic realization, again affording us the chance to better determine whether the broad differentialist perspective is or can be theoretically successful. Before turning to the important differences between the two positions, we will briefly examine the differentialist approach to religious truth found in Stephen Kaplan’s 2002 work, *Different Paths, Different Summits: A Model for Religious Pluralism*. 
4.4.4 Differentialism and Holography

Stephen Kaplan’s approach to religious diversity attempts to illuminate “how there can be a plurality of ultimate realities and a concomitant plurality of soteriological experiences…different ultimate goals…sustained by a pluralism of ontological possibilities” (DPDS 117). Kaplan takes inspiration from the holographic image—holography being “the technique by which one can reproduce three-dimensional optical images from an imageless film” (DPDS 7)—and its use by physicist David Bohm, as a means of describing Bohm’s bifurcation of reality into the ‘implicate’ and ‘explicate’ orders as parts, it should be noted, of a deeper undivided wholeness.  

Generally speaking, the implicate order refers to an undifferentiated *potentia*, and the explicate order refers to the world of realized particularity. In the holograph, the implicate order is aligned to the imageless film, and the explicate order is aligned to the three-dimensional image. The holograph is remarkable in its capacity for interpenetrating reproduction (and its imageless film which can be said to ‘precede’ subject-object dichotomy); that is, “each piece of the hologram can reproduce the entire holographic image, yet the whole film only reproduces one holographic image” (DPDS 9). This leads Kaplan to three presuppositions in his theory: the implicate and explicate domains 1) logically demand each other; 2) exist simultaneously; and 3) are mutually interpenetrating—in sum: this is a basis for advancing what could be understood as equiprimordiality. He then applies this model to religious diversity by relegating the transpersonal traditions—with a distinction made between monistic nondualism and process nondualism—to the implicate domain, and the theistic traditions primarily to the explicate domain. Or more accurately, Kaplan sees the

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theistic view as “incorporating the relationship between the implicate domain and the explicate domains.” (DPDS 14-15)

The imagery of the holographic model, along with Bohm’s distinction of the implicate and explicate orders, is suggestive when applied to religious diversity. It offers a model of genuine and ‘deep’ pluralistic parity that is very congenial to the differential pluralist ideal. However, Kaplan acknowledges that “there is no assumption on my part that this model proves the truth of religious pluralism, but rather only provides us with a way to envision religious pluralism” (DPDS 10), and he further acknowledges that “The truth or falsity of any religious tradition is beyond the knowledge of this author” (DPDS 117). Therefore, “This model does not prove that there is a plurality of ultimate realities and it is not intended to prove that point…Instead, this model illuminates how a plurality of ultimate realities can be simultaneously existing and equal” (DPDS 123). According to Hick however, “Despite his pluralistic intention Kaplan is proposing one unitary system, which he chooses not to call what it clearly is in ordinary usage, namely, a conception of a single ultimate reality as having different aspects, implicate and explicate, the latter fragmented into the different deities. His denial of this depends entirely on his own redefinition of ‘ultimate reality,’ tailored to fit his theory” (NFRS 158). Similarly, Schmidt-Leukel writes, “in the end this analogy entails that the different concepts—as Kaplan understands them—do not really refer to ontologically separate ultimates, but to different simultaneous structures or aspects of one ultimate reality” (PRD 98). Hick’s and Schmidt-Leukel’s position holds to the appropriateness of maintaining “ordinary usage” in language and conception. As such, it contrasts with an
interpretation of Whitehead’s situating of equiprimordiality not in consciousness, but in experience as an *a priori* (see #3.4.1).

Like S. Mark Heim, and to a lesser extent Cobb’s and Griffin’s process pluralism, Kaplan emphasizes the actuality of individual choice in religious orientation and ultimate soteriological outcome. He says, “This model calls for individuals to choose…Each practice engages the individual in distinct ways and as such leads the individual in a specific direction…this model leads us to the conclusion that different paths terminate in different summits” (DPDS 161). But even with the holographic model as an interpretive aid, this contradicts every tradition’s teaching of a common ultimate end (see # 4.1.1; # 4.2.1). Kaplan acknowledges this when he writes that “proposing a plurality of ultimate realities affects the way in which we conceive of each of the individual ultimate realities. In other words, it must be acknowledged that proposing a pluralism of ultimate realities alters some of the philosophical and theological issues surrounding our understanding of a given ultimate reality” (DPDS 162). Talking about a ‘plurality’ or ‘pluralism’ of ‘ultimate realities’ misconstrues equiprimordiality in the way it is alluded to by Whitehead, thus problematizing the similar way Cobb and Griffin understand and apply this notion to religious diversity.

With regard to the internal and historical diversity of each tradition, oversimplification should be avoided. In Christianity for instance, do medieval teachings about the afterlife apply to the contemporary Christian, or Pauline Greco-Roman conceptions, or just to whatever an individual happens to believe? Such an attempt to honour difference might well be viewed as “completely unrealistic” (NFRS 160).
The reality is that the vast majority of men and women do not have before them a range of alternative religious possibilities which they can compare and among which they can then make their choice. In the vast majority of cases, people are born into and live with one particular religious tradition and usually know little, often virtually nothing or only some distorted caricature, of the others, certainly not enough to make an informed choice. (NFRS 159)

Hick notes, further, the confusion surrounding the end state of the millions of secularized/non-religious/atheistic individuals holding a naturalistic worldview—he ironically suggests: “Presumably they cease to exist” (NFRS 159), as well as those who are simply unsure or confused—he ironically asks: “Do they survive in some kind of amorphous fog? Or what?” (NFRS 159)

We can see in this brief summary and critique of Kaplan’s position, then, similar problems faced by Heim’s model, problems endemic to a differentialist perspective generally, and which are no less ameliorated by appeal to holography. With these examples and perspectives in place we can now attend to the other problematic facets of Cobb’s and Griffin’s process pluralism.
CHAPTER FIVE
FURTHER DIFFICULTIES IN COBB’S PLURALISM

As a protest against perceived alterity-eradicating, imperialist explanatory systems, Cobb offers the following alternative:

Why not allow, at least as a working hypothesis, that what is named by ‘Yahweh’ and ‘the Father of Jesus Christ’ is not the same as what is named by ‘Emptiness’? Such a hypothesis would not imply that one is real and the other not. Quite the contrary, it could mean that each has just the reality and character attributed to it by those who are recognized authorities in the two traditions. We could acknowledge that both are transcendent in very important ways without identifying them. And we could allow each tradition to define the proper mode of relating to that of which it has most experience. We could allow parallels and similarities to appear, but we would have no need to obscure difference at the most fundamental level. (CWPW 156)

This has led Cobb to adopt Whitehead’s triadic ultimate of God-World-Creativity in order to account for fundamental differences in orientation and goal among the world’s spiritual traditions (see # 3.4). According to Cobb, while deeply divergent, the Ways are nonetheless potentially complementary. He continues:

This proposal is so simple and so liberating that I am driven to ask why it is so strongly resisted. The answer may be that there is a very deep assumption that when two traditions both claim to deal with what is transcendent and ultimate, they must be understood as relating to the same reality. What is ultimate, it is assumed, is truly ultimate and therefore must be ultimate for all. That there are different views of the ultimate is understandable, but from the perspective shaped by this assumption they must be seen as diverse perceptions of the same reality. (CWPW 157)

He further argues that the different ways are asking fundamentally different questions about the nature of things. Asian traditions, he claims, have tended to focus on “what
one is and *what* all things are,” whereas the western traditions have tended to ask “*how* and *why* things have the particular character or form they have” (CWPW 158). Attention to specific practical divergences has led Cobb to conclude that so-called ‘identist’ forms of pluralism such as Hick’s are not really pluralistic; they are rather superficial and culpable of infidelity to each tradition’s self-conception (on this see # 4.1).

5.1 Ultimates in the Plural?

Three broad tasks pertain to Cobb’s process position: 1) the understanding of his notion of multiple ultimacy; 2) the relativization of cultural expressions and conceptualizations; 3) the resultant implications for dialogue, practice, and conceptual model making. Cobb’s emphasis on different query foci between Asian and Western Ways (CWPW 158) might indeed generalize the traditions’ orientations; yet different orienting questions do not allow us to conclude that there are different ultimates. This would cut against monotheistic convictions (see # 3.5 and below) and be incompatible with the very tradition Cobb and Griffin are endorsing. This contrast with monotheistic convictions is only more adamantly the case with regard to Judaism and Islam. Sandra Lubarsky notes that even the more contemporary Jewish renewal movement led by thinkers such as Arthur Waskow, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, or Arthur Green and influenced by the neo-Hasidim of Martin Buber, Abraham Joshua Heschel and others such as Irving Greenberg and David Hartman—while affirming many aspects of pluralism, and even naturalistic tendencies such as in process pluralism—nonetheless “all speak in terms of one and only one ultimate
reality. Many paths are celebrated, but all paths are regarded as leading to a relationship with a single ultimate reality...At this point, ‘identist pluralism’ characterizes the position of this diverse group of Jewish Renewal thinkers...The inclination, I believe, is to affirm diverse aspects of reality but to treat them as aspects of a single ultimate, God.” (Lubarsky 2005, 127-8)

In response to Cobb’s perspective, Julius Lipner writes,

> It seems to me that, when the Buddhist claims that all things are empty, it is being claimed that in one way or another the God that [Jews, Christian and Muslims] worship as God is, howsoever thoroughly we may try to demythologize and deanthropomorphize our understanding of ‘God,’ ultimately empty of the character of what it means to be ho theos...Thus...Cobb(s)...hypothesis undercuts the religious enterprise as a whole. It fails to take account of the overriding commitment a religious person makes to his or her ultimate precisely as the Ultimate rather than as an Ultimate. Sunyavadins no less than theists make this commitment. (quoted in Hewitt 1991, 230)

Regarding the issue of different questions, Lipner observes that

> It seems to me wrong for [Cobb] to go on and argue that there may be more than one Ultimate as the terminus of the different kinds of ultimate questions that religious believers ask. For instance, ‘Emptiness’ is the ultimate answer to the question of what things are, whereas God is the ultimate answer to questions concerning the how and why of things. Surely we cannot accept such a distinction. For surely religious people everywhere are looking basically for the same kind of answer from the Ultimate that they so variously seek: an answer to what it means ultimately to be human, to transcend the ego in self-fulfillment...The contours and emphases of the questions asked in the various faiths may differ in important respects—for cultures differ—but the answer sought is invariably the same: an adequate account of the what and the how and the why of things, so that there is ultimate meaning to our lives. (quoted in Hewitt 1991, 230)

This is echoed by Hick when he writes, “It is sometimes said that each faith is an answer to a different question. But this is misleading. The concepts and the paths are different, but for each the basic question is, in the generic sense of ‘salvation’ that I have indicated, What must I/we do to be saved? (NFRS 150)
Holding that his “goal is to transform contradictory statements into different but not contradictory ones” (TCW 74), Cobb attempts to consonate divergent Buddhist and Christian utterances by saying for instance:

When a Buddhist says that no God exists, the main point is that there is nothing in reality to which one should be attached. When a Christian says that God exists, the meaning may be that there is that in reality that is worthy of trust and worship. If those translations are correct...then it is not impossible that both be correct...the Buddhist could in principle acknowledge the reality of something worthy of trust and worship without abandoning the central insight that attachment blocks the way to enlightenment. And the Christian could come to see that real trust is not attachment in the Buddhist sense. (quoted in DRP 48)

This shift from propositional contradiction to complementarity implies an underlying commonality (# 4.1.1). Complementarity is closer to commonality than it is to contradiction; however, this does not mean for Cobb that defining religion becomes possible for that reason. Here, Griffin disagrees with Cobb: “There are… passages in which Cobb rejects not only [the] notion of a normative essence of religion but even the idea that there is anything that all religions have in common so that we can give a definition of religion…This denial seems extreme, unnecessary, and unsupported” (DRP 35n.141). This is reminiscent of an observation by Whitehead that “a one-sided formulation may be true, but may have the effect of a lie by its distortion of emphasis.” (ReM 127)

There is still the question of the sheer coherence of multiple ultimates as put forward by Cobb and Griffin. Paul Knitter states: “To talk about ‘many absolutes,’ of course, is a contradiction in terms. ‘Absolutes’ don’t come off an assembly line. An absolute is a one-time production. Therefore, to suggest that there are many absolute expressions of truth is to imply that there are no absolute expressions of truth” (ITR
234). We have already noted Hick’s views on the incoherence of Heim’s and Kaplan’s irreducible multiple ends position (# 4.4.2; # 4.4.4). We further note here Hick’s opinion of the concept and the possibility of multiple ultimacy generally. Granting that it is possible that there is a plurality of ‘Reals,’ he says: “We can’t rule that out a priori. It wouldn’t of course be a plurality of ultimates, because none of them would then be truly ultimate, but of penultimates” (ChTR 69). Hick resists the alternative possibility of Whitehead’s equiprimordiality as developed by Cobb: he perceives it as the less economical explanation of religious diversity and in tension with both non-theistic and monotheistic tenets. Hick writes: “Some [Cobb] have suggested a single finite generic God together with just one of the non-personal absolutes. But this would be a selective…theory which would be very hard to justify…The Buddhist concept of the non-personal process of the universe, *pratitya samutpada*, precludes there being a God who is the universal creator” (ChTR 70). If Hick does not explicitly engage Whitehead’s notion of equiprimordiality, then Cobb and Griffin misconstrue it: in talking about ‘multiple ultimates’ they insert a level of uncoordinated divergence—again, in the attempt to account for seemingly radical religious diversity—that is not present in Whitehead’s Category of the Ultimate.

Some analogies might be worth considering. Ultimacy—etymologically: ‘come to an end’ (*ultimare*)—refers to a progression down a line up to a ‘last stop’ or ‘land’s end’ (for instance *Ultima Thule*). Such linear fashion implies that there is and can only be one genuine ultimate. The proximate stop before would be ‘pen-ultimate’ (*paene*—‘almost’). Of course, it can be objected that there are multiple lines, which would be like the image not of the many paths up a single mountain, but of the many
paths up many mountains. However, if we think of those lines not in a linear fashion, but in a globe structure, they converge—say, at the North Pole. Espousing a differentialist pluralism, Raimon Panikkar offers the striking metaphor of all rivers running discretely, until their waters join only in an atmospheric vaporization. And yet rivers do run into common seas, so that we can say that their origin is different—mountain peaks—and their terminus is common.

Perhaps the best image for the unicity of ultimacy is the manifestation of light (see above # 2.2). We know from Werner Heisenberg’s research in quantum physics that light can manifest itself in both wave and particle form—two contrary modes—depending upon what is ‘elicited’ by the observer. Otherwise, light can be said to exist in a non-dual potential, for instance after the saying: “Thou art formless. Thy only form is our knowledge of Thee”—Yogavasistha. The image of light both Hick and Frithjof Schuon utilize, providing a profound image for identist pluralism generally, is that of prismatic refraction. Schuon states that ‘esoteric’ knowledge, when it is manifested through a religious symbolism, is conscious of the colorless essence of light and of its character of pure luminosity; a given religious belief, on the other hand, will assert that light is red and not green, whereas another belief will assert the opposite; both will be right insofar as they distinguish light from darkness but not insofar as they identify it with a particular color…every color…provides the possibility of discovering the ray that makes it visible and of tracing this ray back to its luminous source. (TUR xxx & xxxiv)

Hick writes: “The rainbow, as the sun’s light refracted by the earth’s atmosphere into a glorious spectrum of colours, is a metaphor for the refraction of the divine Light by our human religious cultures” (ChTR ix-x). This echoes Rumi’s aforementioned famous statement that “The lamps are different, but the Light is the same: it comes

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1 See Knitter in Prabhu, ed. p. 183, n. 26.
from Beyond” (RePI xL). It is an appropriate irony that Cobb considers the identist position generally to be “not illuminating.” (BeDi 43); that some of these images are often invoked—to the point of cliché—to express commonality should not blind us, as it were, to their depth.

Griffin charges that Hick “has been unable to relinquish the metaphysical assumption that there must be only one ultimate reality” (DRP 60n.78), and he holds that the arguments Hick gives for his “apparently unshakable commitment to the idea that there is only one ultimate reality…are remarkably weak” (DRP 45). According to Griffin, Hick “has two arguments. His first one—that since the ultimates of the various traditions are different, they ‘cannot all be truly ultimate’—simply begs the question. Hick’s second argument—that the idea that there is only one ultimate is ‘the simplest hypothesis’—assumes, wrongly, that simplicity is more important than adequacy” (DRP 45n.19). Any theoretical account of religious diversity must also be viable in application, at ‘ground level,’ and this is where its coherence and adequacy are challenged. It is unfair of Griffin to charge Hick with assuming simplicity to be more important than adequacy. The latter is wanting in the process position when applied to religions as they stand. If both Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis and the Cobb-Griffin process pluralism can be said to miss the mark in accounting for religious diversity, the former is a sin of omission, and the latter is a sin of commission. Hick’s hypothesis virtually leaves the religions as they are. There is no inserted explanatory mechanism, except the reinterpretation or downgrading of (partly) traditional absolute truth claims.
It is remarkable that Cobb, Griffin and other ‘differentialists’ expect a justification for asserted singular ultimacy. Given their expected incorporation of different ultimates within each tradition, the onus of argument lies with the differentialists. They also have the burden of explaining the sense in which religions purportedly produce radically different kinds of people. It seems ridiculous to have to argue for what all of the great traditions, with the occasional metaphysical mavericks like William James or the Hindu Nyaya-Vaisesika school excepted, have long affirmed, particularly given the wish to stay as true as possible to each tradition’s self-conception. In considering the debate over perceived threatening pluralistic interpretations of the religions, Griffin notes Hick’s opinion that the “present divide between fundamentalist/evangelical and liberal Christianity could lead to a complete split, so that there would be ‘visibly two Christianities’…Hick rightly says that ‘this would be a highly regrettable development.’” Ironically, Griffin then says, “I would add, however, that if liberal Christianity were by and large to accept Hick’s version of religious pluralism, the likelihood of such a split would be greatly increased.” (DRP 38n.151)

As one example of the challenge to interpretive fit: it is questionable whether there is an accurate subsumption of non-theistic conceptions of ultimacy as diverse as Buddhistic sunyata and Hindu Nirguna Brahman under Whitehead’s notion of creativity. So we read from Jonathan Weidenbaum:

David Ray Griffin has employed Nirguna Brahman of Advaita Vedanta thought as a prime example of the creativity side of the Two Absolutes, and at first this makes perfect sense. Taken as an ultimage, creativity very much satisfies the sense of immanence found in the contemplative version of the religious experience…But this is where the similarity ends, for on closer

inspection, creativity has little in common with Nirguna Brahman…for Cobb is adamant in pointing out that Advaita Vedanta, like the monisms of Western mysticism and theology, remains a *substance* ontology, and holds static being over becoming. Creativity, with its endless passing of multiplicities into unities resembles the *sunyata* or void of Mahayana Buddhism far more accurately than the Brahman of Vedanta. The former is an ever-changing relation between entities, and lacking an absolutely independent existence, and not the One of Sankara. (Weidenbaum 2009, 41)

To amplify, Huston Smith observes, “I see little resemblance between Shankara’s concrete Nirguna Brahman and Griffin’s abstract creative experience” (Griffin & Smith 1989, 171). In representing the transpersonal traditions with Shankara, and the theistic traditions with Climacus (Kierkegaard), Weidenbaum argues that

the mysticism of Shankara and the theology of Climacus share a focus on the liberation and transformation of the human being. Yet the metaphysics of both, what James calls their ‘over-beliefs,’ are clearly opposed to one another…the doctrine of the Two Absolutes, a position designed to harmonize both personalistic theism and the impersonal ground of Asian and Western mystical traditions, fails to fully incorporate the absolute of *either* Sankara or Climacus. (Weidenbaum 2009, 44)

Thus Weidenbaum answers his posed question in the negative: “can either one be incorporated within process metaphysics when taken *individually*—let alone reconciled or harmonized with the other, contrasting perspective?” (Ibid.41) The irony here is that Cobb’s and Griffin’s process position, like Heim’s model, distorts the traditions precisely in the way they set out to avoid, and precisely in the way in which they deem culpable identist forms of pluralism, particularly Hick’s hypothesis.

There are a number of other ways in which process metaphysics à la Cobb-Griffin would be unsatisfactory as a model of religious diversity. Before David Ray Griffin went on the offensive against Hick’s hypothesis, he engaged the perennialist or traditionalist forms of identist pluralism in an extended conversation/debate with Huston Smith, subsequently published as *Primordial Truth and Postmodern Theology*
Therein we see in sharper relief the basic challenges the Cobb-Griffin process position faces in achieving anything approximating the status of mainstream monotheistic thought, and in achieving an adequate account of religious diversity.

5.2 A Perennialist Critique of Process Theology

Before addressing the issue of Griffin’s presentation of multiple ultimacy, Huston Smith criticizes Whitehead’s maneuver of making God the “chief exemplification” of fundamental metaphysical principles, not a singular exception thereof. Smith writes:

*Whitehead contended that God should not be an exception to metaphysical first principles, which seems to be a carryover from the modern, scientifically derived prejudice against supernaturalism. My impulse is to argue the opposite: a God who does not exceed the categories that govern nature does not deserve our worship. To absolutize those categories is a category mistake...Whitehead’s categories are demanding, but they do in the end fit into our three-dimensional reason, from which it follows that to fit God into them is to position her inside our limited understanding. This translates into putting God in a cage. Religion must, to be sure, be intelligible in certain ways, but to try to make it rationally intelligible, fully so, is to sound its death knell. (PrT 80-81)*

Smith is echoing the broader religious sentiment, and someone like Teersteegen, who said that “a God comprehended is no God”—“Ein begriffener Gott ist kein Gott” (in EPR 24). Smith implies, in other words, that Whitehead’s God is not the God that is worshipped in the Abrahamic faiths. On the other hand, process theologians such as Charles Hartshorne have gone a considerable distance in showing how the God of process thought is actually more worthy of worship than the God of more traditional

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3 Whitehead states: “God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse. He is their chief exemplification” (PrR 343).
conceptions. As Cobb suggests, “The world is vastly more complex than our thoughts can grasp,” and “I find Whitehead’s vision of this complexity convincing as far as it goes. But Whitehead was very sensitive to the limitations of any scheme of thought in finally grasping the whole” (quoted in DRP 254): “There remains the final reflection, how shallow, puny, and imperfect are efforts to sound the depths in the nature of things. In philosophical discussion, the merest hint of dogmatic certainty as to finality of statement is an exhibition of folly” (PrR xiv). Indeed, Whitehead always advocated humility, particularly before logic and fact, in combination with boldness of thought, and Cobb’s stress on the complexity of things accords with Hick’s emphasis on traditional teachings of divine ineffability. And yet, there is no concordance here if we take Griffin’s polemic jab against Hick at face value: “Hick defends his negative theology by saying that ‘all serious religious thought affirms that the Ultimate, in its infinite divine reality, is utterly beyond our comprehension’…thereby implying that philosophical theologians who disagree, such as Hartshorne, Cobb, and Ogden, are not really serious thinkers” (DRP 60, n.6). This is a false implication. Hick’s point is simply to emphasize the ubiquitous religious teaching of transcendence, which surpasses any system ‘as far as it goes.’

Smith would agree, and Hick would concur with Smith’s perspective on multiple ultimacy: “Griffin’s two ultimates, creative experience and God, sound provisional to me. Whitehead had a third ultimate, the structure of actual occasions, but, be they two

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5 “Speculative boldness must be balanced by complete humility before logic, and before fact. It is a disease of philosophy when it is neither bold nor humble, but merely a reflection of the temperamental presuppositions of exceptional personalities” (PrR 17).
or three—or four if we add eternal objects—, I find multiple ultimacy unsatisfying; they have (for me) the feel of metaphysical polytheism. My hunger for wholeness prods me to push past them.”

Process thinkers are quick to point out that their conception of multiple ultimacy does not equal polytheism: Creativity, or Being Itself, is not another God, and neither is the World or the collective of actual occasions. Nonetheless, Smith’s perspective is the way many cannot help but to perceive as multiplicity; in practice it amounts to polytheism, or at least an awkward ‘poly-absolutism.’ Cobb contends that this line of thinking “reflects the Western passion for unity and metaphysical tidiness which should be respected but not allowed to dominate” (TCW 185; see also Heidegger in Boutin 2001, n15). But is this drive to ‘push past’ multiplicity just a Western passion? Identist pluralists, as well as thinkers of other persuasions, would disagree. Smith continues:

Why don’t the process theologians make one of their ultimates really ultimate and productive of the others?…I do not think my tropism toward unity here is exceptional; on the contrary (and with apologies for the offense), it strikes me as an important mark of a philosopher… “the aim of philosophy is to see the world as a unity (which process philosophy does); to understand it in terms of a single, all-encompassing principle (which process philosophy does not).”

(PrT 82)

One might say rather that process philosophy does, conceptually speaking, in fact have an all-encompassing principle—the triadic ultimate—and that God/World/Creativity are equiprimordial, despite the fact that some process-oriented theologians like Stephen T. Franklin, Robert C. Neville and David A. Pailin make one ultimate productive of the others.

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8 Griffin & Smith, 81-82. Consider Plotinus in his discussion of the Intelligence: “What established the Intelligence thus? Its source did, the partless that is prior to plurality, that is the cause both of being and of multiplicity, that is the maker of number. Number is not the first; one is prior to two and two comes after one. Two, indeterminate in itself, is made determinate by one” (Plotinus 1964, 96). See also PrT 186 n. 9
Smith then turns to two critical and related points from a monotheistic perspective initially addressed in our discussion of Franklin’s reworking of creativity (# 3.5), namely power and sheer being. The following begins to get at the more explicitly traditional religious, and also philosophical need, to ‘push past’ the given empirical:

The singularity that philosophy seeks is needed because the essence of ultimacy is not primordiality or ubiquity, as process philosophers would have it, but rather the possession of ultimate power. Shared power is never ultimate because, unless its division is fixed from the start (in which case who or what did the apportioning?), it must be negotiated with a rival, as Manichaenism clearly perceived. Process philosophers shift the weight of ultimacy from power to ubiquity because they do not try to press the explanation of why the world is the way it is to its logical limit. (PrT 82)

As Robert C. Neville indicates, Whitehead, for all of his constructive genius, does not push his inquiry to the most radical or fundamental level: “The conclusion to be drawn is that the Category of the Ultimate does not genuinely address the ontological question but only records the ontological situation, namely, that there are actual entities whose being consists in constituting themselves as unifications of manys” (WOM 264). Whitehead tempers his otherwise Platonic metaphysical structure with an Aristotelian empiric delimitation, keeping in tune with the scientific (scientistic?) bent of the intellectual climate of his day. Smith continues his perspective on the prematurely delimited process approach:

Beginning with the world as we experience it, they trace it to the fewest number of agents that are needed to account for that world, and there rest their case. Why the world and its agents are as they are, and why there is something rather than nothing, are not considered fruitful questions. I see things differently. Not to pursue such questions feels to me like stunting the

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7 Smith writes: “Griffin argues that although Whitehead’s metaphysics accommodates twentieth-century physics, it was not tailored to that accommodation. I am not fully persuaded of this—I suspect that the question is a matter of degree…I would need to hear more…to be persuaded that Whitehead’s philosophy of organism would have been only incidentally, not structurally, different had he not been as thoroughly conversant with the physics that was falling into place as he wrote” (Griffin & Smith 1989, 85, n.13). Contrasting this perspective, see Stengers 2002, 150-159.
philosophical quest. “Some world of finite things must exist,” Griffin says, but unless one accepts the fact that some such world does exist as the reason that it must exist, I do not find him saying why. For me, this is too close to Bertrand Russell’s positivistic pronouncement on a radio program that “the world is simply there and that’s all there is to it.” (PrT 82.)

In response, Griffin notes the difference of opinion in satisfactory stopping points in explanation. He holds that “The eternally existing reality is God-and-a-world. It makes no sense to try to go behind this…To say that worldly actualities necessarily exist, and to provide a reason for thinking this, is to press explanation as far as it can go” (PrT 117-118). But this brings us back to the religious criterion of adequate ultimacy and entailed power. The ‘religious availability’ of a system that values a seeming inseparable continuity as a requirement of coherence is questioned. (We say ‘seeming’ because of an ambiguity in asserting radical religious difference with implied ontologically distinct eschatologies). Without intending to delve into the psychology of theological conception, we just note that Whitehead offered the notion of God as ‘friend’—“God is the great companion—the fellow-sufferer who understands” (PrR 351). But can we worship a friend? To be sure, Hartshorne and Griffin have offered more robust construals of the worshipfulness of the process deity. But the necessary divine restriction to the universe’s operational principles remains a religious stumbling block, as well as the process assertion of the uniformity of level of actuality. God is no more actual than the most insignificant wisp of a

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8 PrR 351, and also PrR 31-2: The ‘primordial creature’ and ‘creature of creativity’ (PrR 31; RwS 265) and condition for creativity “is here termed God; because the contemplation of our natures, as enjoying real feelings derived from the timeless source of all order, acquires that ‘subjective form’ of refreshment and companionship at which religions aim.” (Italics mine). When focusing on the religious object, one can see an emphasis on ‘companionship’ over ‘worshipfulness.’ See also n. 4 in # 3.5.

9 See RwS 163-8, as well as Hartshorne, The Divine Relativity.
transient occasion.\textsuperscript{10} Tying this to the notion of power, we see Smith questioning this adherence to uniformity:

“What is power that is not power \textit{in relation} to something else?,” Griffin asks rhetorically. Agreed, but the “something else” need not be a separate entity that is equally actual. (I see Whitehead committing his own famed ‘fallacy of misplaced concreteness’ by crediting finite entities with as much concreteness—actuality—as the infinite possesses). We speak of having the power to move our limbs, but I do not think Griffin would want to deny that those limbs are in an important respect ourselves. I assume that he would fall back here on his “distinguishable but not separable” phrase. (PrT 171)

Whitehead’s maneuver is brought out further in Smith’s statement that, “Generally, process philosophy inclines toward continuity, which may explain Griffin’s tendency to see ‘gnostic dualism’ lurking behind what for others are merely categorial differences. Perennialism, on the other hand, wants to make sure that we do not overlook differences that are not merely ones of degree, but of kind” (PrT 84). We can contrast the two positions by noting the uniformity of actuality, yet with ontologically distinct but inseparable ultimates on the one hand, and the variability of actuality, yet with an ontologically singular ultimate on the other. Perhaps the fundamental difference between the process and traditionalist conceptions lies in the difference between ontological and epistemological unity. Smith writes:

Whereas I look for unity in ‘a single, self-sufficient origin’ from which all else derives, Griffin looks (with Hartshorne) for ‘a single, all-encompassing principle’ in terms of which to understand the world. He considers his to be the ‘better exemplification of the type of unity sought by science and philosophy,’ and I agree if he is speaking of \textit{modern} philosophy. But I consider that epistemological type of unity superficial compared with the premodern, ontological type. For though an ‘encompassing principle’ brings the world to focus, providing (as it does) coherence for the way we see it, it does not explain, or try to explain, why the world is the way it is. It stops with description rather than pressing on to explanation. (PrT 184-5)

\textsuperscript{10} Whitehead says that “In the philosophy of organism, as here developed, God’s existence is not generically different from that of other actual entities” (PrR 75).
Indeed, description of structure still desires its explanation. Smith concludes that, “Unity for Griffin is epistemological; it resides in a single set of interrelated categories that can make intelligible, and in this sense account for, the entirety of human experience. For me the presiding unity is ontological. Its referent is an actuality—the One, Absolute, Ultimate, Infinite Reality—from which all else proceeds.” (PrT 185)

We now turn to the other main problems of the process proposal in its account of religious diversity.

5.3 Inferiority of World-Centered Traditions

The process pluralism developed by Cobb and brought into engagement with identist pluralism by Griffin does not consistently hold to the equiprimordiality of God, Creativity, and World. For the purpose of a truly pluralistic account of religious diversity, there are a number of problems here. First, just as we must question the ‘fit’ of the multiform transpersonal religious traditions under the characterization of Whitehead’s ‘creativity’ (particularly given its much better alignment with Buddhistic processist conceptions than with Vedantic permanency), so we must question the extent to which the totality of finite occasions accurately characterizes the multiform ‘cosmic’ traditions. Second, although Griffin states that “there is also a type of religion, illustrated by forms of Taoism and many primal religions, including Native American religions, that regard the cosmos as sacred [and that] by recognizing the cosmos as a third ultimate, we are able to see that these cosmic religions are also oriented toward something truly ultimate in the nature of things” (DRP 49), it is
dubious that these traditions would accept the contingency of this world Cobb’s and Griffin’s process thought asserts. This belittles the sacrality of particular geographic and geologic sites and places, and even the laws inherent to this particular world and cosmic epoch. Thus the Dao that infuses all things would be—regrettably—contingent.

Third, for Cobb and Griffin, the ‘cosmic’ traditions have inferior status. At first glance, this does not seem to be the case, given avowed process intentions of tradition parity, and statements such as the following by Cobb: “These three factors found in the analysis of any event are all, in an important sense, ultimate. That is, they are not hierarchically arranged, and none is merely derivative from the others…they mutually require one another” (Cobb 1996, 53). However, quoting Cobb on the relation between the three ultimates, he writes,

> It makes no sense to say, as some have, that Whitehead’s God is subordinate to creativity, because, as Cobb argues, “between reality as such and actual things there can be no ranking of superior and inferior. Such rankings make sense only among actualities. Among actualities [God] is ultimate.” This statement also makes clear that Whitehead’s position does not make the world of finite being equal with God…As the ‘world soul,’ understood as “a unity of experience that contains all the multiplicity of events,” God is the being that includes all beings. (DRP 50—emphasis mine)

The “world of finite being” is the ostensible focus of the ‘cosmic’ traditions. If the world is not “equal with God,” we then have a hierarchical situation, which therefore renders a whole set of religious traditions inferior to the others: what Daoism, Shinto, and the pre-Christian aboriginal traditions are worshiping is not the world process or the geo-indigenous deities, but the ‘soul of the world’—i.e., God. This is the albeit subtle imperialistic inclusivism Cobb’s and Griffin’s process pluralism wishes to
avoid. It tells the earth-centered traditions that in effect they are not worshipping what they think they are. Here, this is precisely what differentialists accuse identists of doing.

However, religious diversity grounded in equiprimordiality—rather than a confused multiple ultimacy that is yet hierarchical—arguably prevents so-called ‘deep’ plurality from resulting in an imposed inclusivity. The Cobb-Griffin position as it stands is at the least inconsistent—thus rendering it less adequate to the facts of religious diversity in comparison with Hick’s hypothesis.

5.4 Eschatological Confusion

By insisting on radical difference in experience and outcome—‘There is no common goal’—differentialism veers into incoherence. The insistence on radically different outcomes—say between nirvana and the abiding beatific vision—must be followed through. We have seen Kaplan’s attempt at explaining irreducible multiplicity by arbitrarily meting a unitary whole, and then positing interdependence of the irreducible diversity in order to account for its coherence, however highly implausible this be in our lived global religious experience (# 4.4.4). And we have seen that Heim grappled with this issue by positing a plenitudian, Dante-inspired hierarchical map of final ends (# 4.4) which, however implausible and theologically and ethically abhorrent, is nevertheless relatively coherent in its Christian Trinitarian inclusivist structure. This model, it should be remembered, does not help at all for the majority of thoughtful religious believers globally. The Cobb-Griffin process position arguably fares as badly. While attempting to avoid the negative implications of
exclusivism/inclusivism by attaching different paths to different ostensibly equal orienting ultimates, it fails on both counts of avoiding imperialism and achieving coherence.

Whitehead posited the individual’s final end to be “objective immortality” in God (PrR 29, 60, 82, 223). That is, personal consciousness ceases, and one subsequently becomes intimately remembered by God’s consequent nature, adding to God’s richness. But the rejection of subjective immortality is religiously unsatisfactory for many believers (e.g., Ramanuja’s famous quip against non-dual Vedantists: “I wish to taste sugar—not become sugar!”) and belief systems. Granted, Griffin claims that, while Whitehead likely did not believe in personal immortality, his metaphysics are nonetheless malleable enough to accommodate this possibility. However, adhering to Whitehead’s metaphysics, it is still an inclusivist eschaton—our end of the line is still some relation with God. Needless to say, this would be problematic for non-theistic traditions. If Whitehead’s thinking is flexible enough to accommodate the possibility of both objective and personal immortality, we need to ask: is it also flexible enough to accommodate near endless reincarnation, sheer mortality, and other possible alternatives one may conceive? And as we asked regarding Heim’s position (# 4.4.2), what do we make of individuals in multiple genuine religious practices, who achieve apparently radically different spiritual states? Sri Ramakrishna reputedly achieved diverse profound spiritual states in putative divergent religious modalities, and yet he maintained an identist position toward religious diversity (see Aleaz in MyRS 169-70). He did not become different persons as the result of following different spiritual paths. The example of Sri Ramakrishna contra-indicates the need to theorize and hold
to the notion of incommensurable terminations. But we still need a coherent, plausible model, particularly if we are going to assert radical difference. We remember Cobb’s statement: “In the vast complexity that is all that is, it may well be that God works creatively in all things and at the same time, in the Buddhist sense, all things are empty” (TCW 140). Does this then imply multiplicity in the ultimates? Not only would this cut against the convictions of all the great religious traditions, but it would also be incompatible with equiprimordiality. Uncoordinated divergent eschatologies is not a scenario Whitehead would have endorsed. One might then resort to, say, Panikkar’s ‘higher’ mystical resolution of plurality, echoing perennialism and Nikolaus Cusanus’ notion of coincidentia oppositorum. But the task of spelling it out in coherent terms still remains. Cobb admits that the incorporation of fundamental and seemingly divergent truths from other traditions will require “extensive rethinking of our received faith” (TCW 140), and that “We have barely begun to deal with the fundamental changes that must be effected within our Christian faith” (quoted in DRP 65). Must this be so? Or is the action required not simply a kind of ‘recalibration’ of one’s faith vis-à-vis others? In a passage that sounds virtually identical to what Hick has been advocating for decades (Hick 1980; 1987; 1995; 2004), Griffin writes:

One of the implications of this importantly new situation [the greater acknowledgement of religious diversity], Cobb would suggest, is that it can lead adherents of the various religions to make a somewhat more modest claim. Granted that religions traditionally have claimed to be the formally true religion, could not believers in this new situation be content to see their own religion as a formally true religion? Could they not come to see, furthermore, that this new understanding of Christianity’s place among the religions of the world is more appropriate to their founding events than the claims to be the formally true religion? It is this slight but crucial change that Cobb’s complementary pluralism makes. (DRP 58)
It would be more accurate to say, rather, that Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis makes “this slight but crucial change.” Be it as it may, Cobb’s reformulation of the meaning of Christian faith—involving “extensive rethinking” and “fundamental change”—is intimately tied to the project of sustained interfaith dialogue.

5.5 The Dynamics of Dialogue

According to Cobb, interfaith dialogue pertains to ‘purification,’ and ‘enrichment.’ The former is operative between members of those traditions attending to the same putative ultimate such as Jews, Christians, and Muslims; the latter is operative between members of those traditions attending to different ultimates, such as Buddhists and Christians. In the latter case of ‘enrichment,’ Cobb emphasizes the notion of complementarity. Because Cobb insists not only on the absence of a common religious goal, but correlative, on the absence of a common religious ground, he relies on complementarity to structure the coherence of dialogue between the faiths. For him, “The insistence on a given identity among the several religious Ways continues to block the urgently important task of learning from one another.” (CWPW 153)

Complementarity can only function within both difference and commonality. For Cobb, commonality is not an aprioristic presupposition understood as ‘identity’ or as ‘genus.’

According to Roger Haight:

John Cobb is firm in denying that the religions of the world have any common genus. They all share nothing in common as religions…While he makes a good point, Cobb may exaggerate. For Cobb himself is equally firm in asserting that there can be interreligious dialogue in which members of different religions communicate. But they can only communicate by sharing

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11 See TI 2 and PRP 73-74. See also Lindbeck 1984, pp. 40 and 48, and Hedges 2008, pp. 112-35.
something in common. If the human species is one, for which there is a good deal of evidence, there will be broad, formal, common ground for interreligious communication. (Haight 1999, 397)

For Cobb, commonality takes place in the interfaith dialogical process. What exactly is entailed in the dialogical components of ‘purification’ and ‘enrichment’?

Regarding purification and the transforming of contradiction, Griffin offers an illustration from Cobb in “the tension between the Christian assertion that ‘Jesus is the Christ’ and the Jewish insistence that ‘the Messiah has not yet come’[:] Jews and Christians, he suggests, should ‘work together repeatedly to clarify the difference between what Jews mean by ‘Messiah’ and what Christians legitimately mean by ‘Christ.’ Having made this distinction, Cobb adds, Christians should then ‘join the Jews in their longing for the coming of the Messiah and the messianic age’” (quoted in DRP 48-9). Here, ‘purification’ is taking place by way of refinements to the end point of convergence. These refinements do not just depend on formal definitions, if Willard Von Orman Quine’s suggestion is right that to define something is to show how to avoid it. Moreover, mere reference to historical facts understood as ‘obvious’ cannot be taken either as starting points or as goals. If Christians should “join the Jews in their longing for the coming of the Messiah and the messianic age,” should Jews then join with Christians in their acknowledgement that the Messiah (Jesus of Nazareth) has already come? This kind of query derives inspiration from the “mutual suspicion” Millbank is suggesting in his downgrading of dialogue and runs against Cobb’s intention. For Cobb, “Christianity can learn from [other religions] as well as

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12 See Millbank 1990, pp. 176-81. For a critique of Millbank’s position, see Meacock 2000, pp. 218-19; 244-6; 264. Against this mode of ‘mutual suspicion,’ Ian Markham writes: “The Millbank outlook feeds the tribal instinct to which large parts of the Christian narrative are so strongly opposed” (264).
teach them. All can gain from their mutual encounter with the possibility of moving toward convergence” (TCW 25).

As regards the dialogical process of ‘enrichment,’ the end point is synthesis. Griffin writes that for Cobb, “the different religions can each be seen as proclaiming universally valid insights, which can be synthesized” (DRP 48). Cobb claims:

While Christianity is Buddhized, Buddhism can be Christianized…there will be a movement toward greater resemblance. A Buddhism that has truly learned in its encounter with Christianity and a Christianity that has truly learned in its encounter with Buddhism will resemble each other more than Christianity and Buddhism now do. Perhaps some day they will cease to be two traditions but instead will merge into one. (TCW 46 & 59)

For Griffin, such mutual learning can be taken to another level and inspire the formation of a “higher-order global religion’ that can ‘embrace complementary worldviews’” (RwS 284). According to Griffin, Cobb regards “theistic and nontheistic religions as equally adequate in a cognitive sense insofar as they seem to be equally adequate to different truths. He would consider a religion cognitively even more adequate, of course, insofar as it involves a synthesis of those complementary truths” (DRP 53n.53). Similarly, Cobb writes, “We must understand Christianity as a movement toward a final and unifying fullness which needs the help of others in order to attain its goal. Only as we progressively incorporate in our own community the wisdom that others offer can we invite them to join in our enlarged movement toward the ultimate goal” (CWPW 162). Elsewhere (in CWPW and TCW) Cobb emphasizes the great relevance of each of the great traditions; for him, it would be an incalculable loss to humanity if one or more of them were to become extinct. He argues for the incorporation of truths contained in other domains: for instance, Christianity successfully incorporated the wisdom found in the Greek philosophical
tradition, while yet remaining distinctively and visibly Christian. Indeed, he sees an imperative entailed in following Jesus Christ that one must honour and incorporate truths found in other traditions (in line with Philippians 4:8); this exhibits an admirable and powerful faith in Christ to welcome and trust the process, however unsettling, of truth attainment wherever it leads, even when it extends beyond the bounds of one’s orthodoxy. It is in fact, Cobb claims, a sin to proceed otherwise, with the defensiveness that comes from insecurity, i.e. lack of faith. This provocative point is worth applauding:

It has taken Christians a long time to recognize that there are other movements in the world that are bearers of authentic contributions to salvation that differ from our own. Indeed, even now the resistance to that acknowledgment is very strong. Many Christians fear that their faith will be undercut by such an admission. They want to believe that all that is needed for the individual salvation of the whole world is found in the past and specifically in the past of our own tradition. This is understandable, but it is also sin. It is not an expression of faith but of defensiveness, which is faithlessness. (TCW 48)

Similarly, Cobb writes that the church seems “to be afraid to admit that Christians can also learn from other religious traditions. This is a sad commentary on the quality of our trust in God and openness to the Spirit who is to lead us into all truth. It expresses our resistance to learn from the New Testament the strength of weakness. Real strength lies not in clinging to what we have already received, but in openness to learn from others” (TCW 137). We can also compare Cobb’s contention to a recent statement by Schmidt-Leukel: “If someone hears the ‘voice of God’ in and through some element of a non-Christian religion, he or she is not entitled to reject this. From a spiritual perspective there is no choice…Christians who hear God’s call in and through a non-Christian religion must not close their hearts and minds. They will
have to integrate the truth as recognized in the other with the truth as known from
their own tradition” (TI 79).

If this incorporation becomes mutual, that is, if all the traditions proceed in the
same way, what then do we have? According to Cobb, what we have is indeed
“extensive rethinking” and “fundamental change” (see # 5.4). At least from a
“semantic” perspective—i.e. the emphasis on the relationship between language and
so-called extralinguistic reality (Boutin 1992, 64-65)—it would be a monolithic
religion, which could be acceptable only as long as it remains genuinely Christian: “If
this leads some day to a merging of all the great ways into one that is at the same time
Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, primal, and so forth, so be it.
If that merged way is fully and authentically Christian, I as a Christian see nothing to
fear from that” (TCW 90-91). Conceptually at least, this can only mean mutual
inclusivism that leads to undifferentiatedness. The ‘convergence’ and ‘synthesis’
involved in ‘purification’ and ‘enrichment’ might, if practically possible, very well
make for a stronger, more profound form of religiosity. But it should be clearly stated
that this is the Cobb-Griffin intention, rather than the disingenuous assertion of a so-
called ‘radical pluralism’ or ‘deep pluralism.’

5.6 Dialogue and Relativism

In spite of language used that indicates the contrary, what Cobb is committed to
preserving is the integrity of each tradition, or at least Christianity, from an
antithetical, imperialistic homogenization. The seeming contradictions that are
sometimes evident in Cobb’s language can be traced to the complex evolving task he
has set for himself, summarized by Paul Knitter (initially noted in # 3.1): “I’ve described this evolution as a move from Cobb’s concerns to avoid an absolutism of any one religion to one which seeks also to evade a relativism of all religions” (Knitter in TCW 3). Specifically, Cobb seeks to avoid a “debilitating relativism” (Race in DRP 59). This involves the lack of an adjudicating criterion to determine good from bad, true from false, the spiritually efficacious from the bogus or malevolent. Traditionally, for the most part, each cultural-religious system has viewed its own norms as absolute and finally authoritative in truth determination. If we remove the claims of any religion having absolute status vis-à-vis the others, as pluralism does, we then face the problem of discerning an objective or appropriate adjudicating criterion or criteria. Those unconvinced of the pluralist position have tended to argue the impossibility of such: we simply cannot get out of our own context and find and utilize some criterion that transcends or supervenes each respective cultural-religious system. Thus we must reject the possibility of pluralism and adhere to our own specific, culturally conditioned mores or norms for effective orientation and guidance, and yet continue to accept its general truth and validity. But from this non-pluralist perspective, the problem of religious diversity remains, for those willing to look beyond their own borders at least, as acute as ever. If anything, as Paul Tillich, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Roger Haight, and others have argued, our respective theologies must now be inherently multi-religion sensitive, or must be constructed with other Ways as essential data components, more so, at least, than before. The current response options to religious diversity have been discussed
primarily in chapters one and two. Here we note a basic problem for pluralists—“debilitating relativism”—and the process pluralism response.

This problem is defined by the equation that all religions being equally true equals all religions being equally false, canceling any truth claims out, and so leading to a ‘debilitation,’ or skepticism. Masao Abe concisely states the problem: “The primary reason that the pluralistic situation of religion is such a problem to the adherents of various religions is the fear that it will threaten each religion’s claim to absoluteness. People fear that an affirmation of religious pluralism will lead to a vicious relativism and finally to a self-defeating skepticism. They see it as a viewpoint that will undermine their religious commitment” (Abe 1985, 167). Hick and Griffin, among others, deal with this in different ways. Griffin charges Hick’s hypothesis with failing to meet this challenge. He writes, “Hick denies that any of our predicates, including goodness, can apply to the Real in itself, which implies that the idea of ‘alignment with the Real’ is vacuous. [Thus] Christian values at their best can be said to be in alignment with the Real no more than Nazi values at their worst” (DRP 59). We reiterate, first, that vacuity is not implied in the idea of “alignment with the Real” because, in relation to us—as manifested—the Real is rightly understood as beneficent and loving, functioning as we are within faith’s circle, which teaches the ineffability as much as the goodness of the Ultimate. This is a relativity, or relationality without relativism: we have criteria taught within our faith context—the transformation of ego-centredness to Real-centredness with the resultant mode of love—that is both broad enough to be applicable to all the traditions, and is pan-tradition internally generated: it is a criterion, variously worded of course, that comes
out of all the Ways. We can compare Griffin’s statement with a passage from Hick, which clearly shows the inaccuracy in claiming an absence of a criterion to adjudicate between “Christian values at their best” and “Nazi values at their worst”:

The criterion of facilitating the transformation of human life from self-centredness to a new orientation centred in a manifestation of the Real, progressively freeing us from ego-concern and for love and compassion for others, functions as the criterion for assessing religious organizations and movements. The result is usually ambiguous. Religious institutions in general have probably done as much harm as good in the long course of history. But some, such for example as the Japanese sect that put sarin gas in Tokyo underground, and such semi- or pseudo-religious movements as Nazism and Fascism, fail spectacularly under this criterion.13

As Hick notes, if one then asks what is the criterion used to ground the legitimacy of transforming love/compassion as the standard by which religious structures are judged—one should not expect an answer or proof. There is no answer beyond the self-justifying act of love (taught by the religious traditions as sourced in the Ultimate, and to which we have the capacity to respond) that will not lead to an infinite regress. It is a ‘properly basic belief’ (Plantinga, Wolterstorff) in foundationalist epistemological language: “If someone asks how we can validate that common criterion, the love/compassion that is fellow-feeling with others, and seeing kindness as good and cruelty as bad, we can only say that it cannot be proved but that it is a basic and (apart from psychopaths) universal human insight. It is a ‘properly basic belief’ reflecting a fundamental human moral insight” (NFRS 170). And so as we have seen (# 2.4.2), Hick’s hypothesis avoids a debilitating relativism by upholding spiritual fruits as the criterion for (imperfectly) determining true from false in the religions.

13 IRe xxvi.— We also remember that, in relation to movements such as Marxism, Hick is an inclusivist—correcting the distorted critique that his is an indiscriminate pluralism, which continues to be leveled, as we see with Griffin’s assessment as recently as 2005.
For Cobb and other differentialists however this still somehow smacks of imperialism, tradition-internal distortion, and/or a principle so broad that it does not say much.\textsuperscript{14} Cobb believes, rather than having a pre-set general principle that applies to all, it is the challenge for pluralists instead to gradually work one’s way out of the relativistic mire, dialogically. He wants to hold greater tradition specificity as universally (generally) applicable, in contrast to the perceived identist approach of holding to a nugget common to all the Ways. Cobb writes, “We can affirm our insights as universally valid! What we cannot do, without lapsing back into unjustified arrogance, is to deny that the insights of other traditions are also universally valid” (TCW 137). So each Way asserts its own norm as applicable to all. This mutual inclusivism, however, is an unstable unresolved position as it stands. Part of the problem is noted by Griffin: “In giving this answer…it may seem that Cobb has avoided imperialism only by accepting a more subtle form of relativism—one that, rather than saying that \textit{nothing} is of universal truth and validity, has a \textit{plurality} of universally valid norms based on different universally valid truths” (DRP 63). This would bring us back to where we started with the problem of religious diversity and its conflicting universal truth claims. As Knitter notes, for the differentialist, “if there’s any hope of common ground between religions, it has to be created \textit{in the dialogue}. But it seems that it would have to be a ‘creation out of nothing.’ There doesn’t seem to be anything within the religions out of which we can envision or fashion what they might have in common. When you’re traveling in different directions, what do you share?” (ITR 230) Indeed, from one perspective, the only

\textsuperscript{14} The universally present Golden Rule is also too broad and therefore insubstantial. But its dyadic simplicity contains a complex of wisdom and ponderability. See, for example, Neusner and Chilton eds. 2008, 2009.
thing the traditions have in common, fittingly, is that they all make universal truth
claims and claim universal applicability. This alone implies, paradoxically, a cohering
commonality. As Knitter continues, “it seems to be part of the experience and
convictions of each religion that there is Something that can be meaningful for
persons in all religions—Something, in other words, that can ground connections and
the possible relationship between the religions.” (ITR 231)

Consistent with his proposal in other facets, Cobb attempts to overcome the
problem of relativism, not by shared purpose or commonality,\(^15\) but by the maneuver
of tradition interpenetration and synthesis, which could if followed through lead to a
structure that is global—and uniform. At times, this comes across as more explicitly
inclusivist, and unintentionally imperialistic, and in a sense identist, as when he
speaks of Christianity as progressing to a “unifying fullness” which incorporates
other traditions, and invites the other to join in moving toward the “ultimate goal”
(CWPW 162—see # 5.5). Griffin’s description of Cobb’s relativism-resolving
program highlights what might be called progressive identist inclinations: “Cobb’s
solution draws on the twofold idea that Christianity is a living movement which
‘should be constantly changing and growing,’ and that the Christian devotion should
be not to any particular form of Christianity but to ‘the living Christ’ who ‘calls us in
each moment to be transformed by the new possibilities given by God for that

\(^{15}\) See Knitter’s assessment: “If the religions do not have any given common ground, don’t they have
common problems? And all of these problems are focused or fed, one might say, in one reality:
suffering…Can suffering, therefore, be the material, as it were, out of which the different religions can
fashion or find the common ground where they can stand and act with each other and talk to each
other?” (ITR 231-2). We are also reminded of the observation by William James, that every religion
involves two parts: 1) An unease; and 2) Its solution. Or as Stephen T. Franklin writes: “According to
John Hick, all the major religions—at least those emerging during and after the Axial Period—share a
commitment to salvation, whether defined as enlightenment, forgiveness, satori, or something
else…” (GC 244). For a brief discussion of this construal from a process perspective, see RwS 254.
moment’” (DRP 64). And further, “The fullness of Christianity lies in the ever-receding future” (DRP 65). But the stated goal of this constant change is increased convergence, resemblance, and by implication, identity. Griffin concludes his reading of Cobb’s program: “The way for the Christian theologian to be pluralistic without being relativistic, in other words, is to encourage the continual creative transformation of Christian theology in the direction of its becoming a ‘global theology,’ in which the truths and values of the other religious traditions have been incorporated.” (DRP 65) Ultimately then, the only way for each tradition to avoid a debilitating relativism is for each tradition to become more like the other—leading to a uniformity that then no longer has to deal with the challenge of adjudication and difference.

Undoubtedly, process proponents would take issue with this perspective. The deeper utilization of Whitehead’s thought here involves his principle of relativity, wherein can be found a distinguishing of and tension between identity and coinherence. Whitehead writes:

The principle of universal relativity directly traverses Aristotle’s dictum, ‘A substance is not present in a subject.’ On the contrary, according to this principle an actual entity is present in other actual entities. In fact if we allow for degrees of relevance, and for negligible relevance, we must say that every actual entity is present in every other actual entity. The philosophy of organism is mainly devoted to the task of making clear the notion of ‘being present in another actual entity.’ (PrR 50)

Cobb seems to have taken his cue from this notion of inter-being, or coinherence in Whitehead’s analysis of the basic components of existence, and so applied this to the relations of the Ways and their conceptual systems. The implication is that the Ways might not now be synthesized, but since distinct entities are coinherent, it is inevitable
that, given enough dialogue, our conceptual system(s) and traditions will eventually
catch up with reality, as it were, and reflect the interpenetration of being/process.
However, these various conceptual systems hold elements that are irreparably
incongruous and can only be synthesized on pain of incoherence, indicating our
fundamental conceptual limitation and hence natural proclivity toward the positing of
the transcendent Other that is not just one (albeit critical) component in nature’s
complexity. For the more religiously inclined, God is not a phenomenon of a
gradation, but an ontological discontinuity. Locking God into this relativity has been
both celebrated and decried by theologians. The suspicion of conceptual coinherence
and attempted integrating follow through is a misstep—for the result is more likely
con-fusion, and a sense of imposition. This again indicates the basic inclusivity of
Cobb’s process view, as distinct from the more genuinely pluralistic position of Hick
and other ‘identists.’ While we can speak, in an important sense, of concept and
tradition interconnection, and even larger unity, we baulk at the notion of moving
from interconnection and unity to coinherence and interdependence, and the seeming
end of the trajectory in identity, at this level of actuality. As noted in relation to
equiprimordiality, the idea of coinherence/interpenetration renders more implausible
the Cobb-Griffin emphasis on distinct ontological realities that are yet normal to the
natural order. Or this could incline rather toward an aspectival conception of unity.

Perhaps Cobb is reaching back beyond Whitehead to James and his notion of
‘radical pluralism.’ Whitehead’s system can still be seen as a form of absolutizing—
and thus making uniform—the otherwise pluriform nature of reality. Cobb seems to
be resisting a perceived totalizing impulse—like James against a hegemonic
Hegelianism—that would result in ‘too much’ coordination. With his insistence on radical, irreducible plurality, and yet eventual synthesis thereof, Cobb exposes a tension, or even contradiction in his adherence to Whitehead’s system: He both embraces and resists Whitehead’s “trend toward the philosophic closure of the cosmos,” and also holds to “a radical cosmological pluralism without any supporting ontology” (Berthrong on Neville’s critique of Whitehead; Berthrong 1998, 52).

Of course, this undifferentiated result implicit in Cobb’s program can be so construed as to be a caricature. Surely differences and different emphases would remain in religious practice, with the worshipping modalities and foci remaining distinct. As Griffin writes, “Although these three ultimates [God/World/Creativity] are inseparable, individuals and religious traditions can concentrate on one or two features alone” (DRP 50). In practice however, if the unlikely point is ever reached where the different Ways accept and incorporate three different ‘ultimates,’ exclusive focus on one or two will inevitably be felt as inappropriately parochial and ignorant, particularly since the traditions espouse a universal orientation. The process pluralist could here propose as a helpful analogy the Hindu trinity of Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva: there are in fact devout and distinct Vaishnavites and Shaivites, each focusing on their own deity. But the difference here is that the Hindu tradition teaches that the Ultimate is one, or ‘one without a second’: transcending all multiple manifestation is Nirguna Brahman, or the transcategorial Ultimate, of which Hick’s ‘Real’ approximates, but is not conceptually identical to—in his system, the Real is beyond both saguna and nirguna. This natural leap beyond multiplicity in the ultimate is what process
pluralists resist. Similarly goes the notion of applying the Christian Trinity—three in one—to the Cobb-Griffin conception of the ultimates.

The differentialist overemphasis on difference, and overcontextualization leads to incoherence; this seeming awareness prompts Cobb back to a form of identism—just what he sets out against—that is misguided. It is a greater distortion to claim eventual unity in the relative than it is to claim abiding unity in the absolute. In contrast we note Schuon’s characteristically mystic-rational perspective: “It must be emphasized that the unity of the different religions is not only unrealizable on the external level, that of the forms themselves, but ought not to be realized at that level, even were this possible, for in that case the revealed forms would be deprived of their sufficient reason” (Schuon 1993, xxxiv). The process position’s stress on each tradition’s absoluteness but relative insufficiency is more inaccurate and degrading than Hick’s emphasis on each tradition’s inherent limitation and yet sufficiency. If the process proposal is played out to the end game as it were, overcoming internal impulses to the contrary, in practice there will be eventual uniformity. Thus the designations of ‘deep’ or ‘radical’ religious pluralism would cease to apply. Whether this is desirable and well conceived or not, it is not in accord with the celebration of difference, and the honouring of the (relative) completeness of truth in the other.

By following the differentialist absolutization of all the great traditions, we end up with either incoherence, or a tradition-distorting uniformity beyond recognition. This program springs in part from the Whiteheadian ideal of knowledge domain uniformity (see also #3.6), which is envisioned as an integration of religious and
scientific insights melded by philosophy. Consider, for example, the following passage in *Process and Reality*:

Philosophy frees itself from the taint of ineffectiveness by its close relations with religion and with science, natural and sociological. It attains its chief importance by fusing the two, namely, religion and science, into one rational scheme of thought...Philosophy finds religion, and modifies it; and conversely religion is among the data of experience which philosophy must weave into its own scheme. (PrR 15-16)

The traditional religious structuring of knowledge domain levels, with scientific investigation fitting squarely within larger religious structures and aspirations, or the modern separation placement of each working with qualitatively distinct data, is in tension with the uniformization of the process ideal. Given each domain’s distinct respective genius—both the way in which it is effective and where its effectiveness lies—Huston Smith cautions against the drive to mutual modification:

No amount of protest on Griffin’s part is...going to disengage “science” from its heavy—indeed, decisive and appropriate—involvement with the controlled experiment, hence with upward causation. That is what modern science has been and, because that is the direction from which its power derives, that...is what we are going to continue to ask it to be. To hire science as a consultant for the higher reaches of life is, therefore, willy-nilly to invite those regions to be seen in inferior ways. It invites reductionism. Much cleaner and safer is the route that portions out the noetic field, respectfully assigning its visible, material regions to science while remaining clear-eyed and very stern about the incompetence of the methods that work superbly there to say explicitly anything of the slightest importance about other domains. (PrT 84)

While *harmony* is welcome by most, its major modification and placement within a larger process philosophical scheme would be (is) contested, likely more so than Hick’s minimally intrusive critical realist scheme. Corralling all of the religious Ways into a coherent model is challenging enough; but it is merely a preliminary step before a larger religion-science fusion is effected. This mutual incorporation, or the incorporation of science into a global theology, only renders more problematic and
implausible the process campaign. To see things whole is desirable; but this arguably entails the need to see things hierarchically or aspectivally, and to see things as sourced in a single, all-encompassing principle. In contrast to Cobb’s and Griffin’s assertion of irreducible multiple ultimates, we turn back now to the identist aspectival option.

5.7 The Aspectival Conception

In a number of writings Cobb emphasizes the ontologically distinct multiplicity of Ultimacy. To reiterate, for example: “Knitter has difficulty with my talk of multiple ultimates as ontologically given. This is an important part of my understanding” (TCW 184). Griffin has taken this further in an effort to more forcefully distinguish process pluralism from the commonly criticized ‘identist’ forms. In a discussion of Trinitarian thinking and process views, Marjorie Suchocki writes, “the process structure is triadic, but not trinitarian, leaving much room for creative interpretation. The many, in this instance, are not necessarily one!” (Bracken & Suchocki 1997, x).

Intentionally or not, and not unlike Whitehead, Cobb often leaves an ambiguity in his language on this issue, which indicates the possibility of reconceptualizing the ontological status and relation of the ultimates—namely as aspectivally related—as aspects of a unitary system that yet leaves open the connection to an ineffable transcendent. Or to stay true to Whitehead’s vision, understanding ultimacy as equiprimordial. For instance, when discussing the understanding of creativity in relation to diverse Asian traditions, Cobb writes: “But whether the term is Atman or dependent origination, the aspect of reality which is discerned and toward which
attention is directed is much the same” (Cobb 1996, 53). The point of citing this statement is the expression ‘aspect of reality’ characterized as ‘much the same’ with reference to the ‘attention’ directed by either Atman or dependent origination. Cobb adds further: “These…ways of being religious are all valid and conformal to what-is. What each discerns is real, and as its constructions encourage further penetration into the facet of reality, each has gained a deeper wisdom. However different the discernments may be…they cannot contradict one another.” (Cobb 1996, 54)

To ‘see’ the Ways as reflecting aspects of a unity provides a coherence in conception that is lacking—and arguably incapable of being achieved—in the differentialist perspective. Schmidt-Leukel asks: “If God is understood as the ‘worldsoul’ of the cosmos (making the latter God’s ‘body’) and if both are seen as coactualizations of ‘creativity’ which does not exist in itself but only in its realization as God and some sort of cosmos…would it then not be more appropriate to speak of three different aspects of one complex ultimate reality instead of three ontologically distinct ‘ultimates’? (PRD 97) While not explicitly articulated by either Cobb or Griffin, one suspects a resistance to the dyadic, ‘either/or’ thinking that an aspectival conception indicates. Yet aspects are always of course part of a larger unity—understood as ‘both/and’—one that conceivably transcends both the one and the many. Cobb interprets a perception of larger unity negatively: as in the totalizing and hegemonic. As well, Cobb resists the construal of an ultimate as something more transcendent still; he sees the emphasis on ineffability as somehow arrogant, and a disservice to each tradition’s espousal of absolute truth. He writes for instance that “[t]o claim that all are directed toward an ultimate that lies behind or beneath these three, disparages
all of the religious traditions with the claim to know directly what all of them relate to only indirectly” (TCW 185). On the contrary, the claim is that we do not know directly. It is less presumptuous to assert one’s limitations and to claim that one does not know something that is greater, than to claim that one does know that something at all. Cobb of course knows this, and he knows that this is an integral component in all of the human Ways— for instance when he states that “the totality of what is, is very complex, far exceeding all that we can ever hope to know or think” (quoted in DRP 47—emphasis mine), thus echoing Whitehead: “However far our gaze penetrates, there are always heights beyond which block our vision” (PrR 342). This acknowledgement can allow for the development of a transcategorial component in Cobb’s and Griffin’s model of ultimacy, which would then lean closer to Hick’s ‘identist’ view.

If staying within process thought, however, Cobb’s and Griffin’s position would be better served by the development, not of multiple ultimacy, but rather of equiprimordial ultimacy. This would remove the distortions of differentialism while maintaining the complexity of Whitehead’s triadic ultimate. Equiprimordiality in the ultimate is a more robust metaphysical claim. Indeed, by asserting interpenetration and interdependence, it goes ‘deeper’ into the nature of things, making differentialism appear simply incoherent, and relegating the aspectival conception to the level of mere ‘appearance,’ i.e. the superficial. This is particularly the case if one adheres to Whitehead’s prehensionist epistemology, wherein experience—including experience of posited equiprimordial ultimacy—precedes consciousness and our conceptions thereof. But the assertion of equiprimordial ultimacy also runs into greater difficulty
with the overarching question of this study, namely accounting for religious truth claim diversity, including its areas of chronic conflict. How exactly non-theistic processist conceptions might ‘fit’ or ‘cohere’ with monotheistic or monistic substance perspectives in an equiprimordial view of ultimacy, and how this can align with the diverse lived religious teachings remains to be seen.

Whitehead’s thinking is a “cosmological construction” (PrR 341) hinting at theological application; yet for him, “whatever suggests a cosmology, suggests a religion” (ReM 141). This cosmological construction nevertheless requires some adjustment with regard to the common religious concern as expressed by Smith: “I vehemently oppose the Whitehead/Griffin project of rationalizing mysticism,” and also with regard to the diverse insights of the Ways. This is only, of course, if one stays within the pluralist fold; contrary to Griffin’s placement of Cobb, it is not so clear that this is the place in which Cobb fits. The proper placing of Cobb’s position within the theology of religions spectrum remains open to debate. For example, Knitter writes:

He has tantalizingly fallen through the cracks of the often-used model for dealing with the reality of many other religions…while Cobb is certainly not an ‘exclusivist’ (only one true religion), neither can he be ranked with the ‘inclusivists’ (among many true religions one outranks the others) or the ‘pluralist’ (many equally valid religions). Cobb somehow wiggles between, or slips beyond, the neat categories of inclusivism and pluralism. That shows both the inadequacies of the models, but even

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16 PrT 167.— Smith’s protest against fully rationalizing religion via Whitehead’s metaphysics warrants further documentation: “Whitehead set out to forge a set of categories that would account for everything. The metaphysician in me commends that project; we need to see things whole. But by insisting that that whole be rationally intelligible to the human mind—or where it is not, by leaving the remainder with a confession of ignorance rather than grappling with it religiously—Whitehead left too little room for regions of God that are ganz anders, radically other. Griffin will dispute this, to which I can only say (in anticipation) that radical has weaker and stronger meanings. I want its strongest meaning, in which God is emphatically an exception to metaphysical first principles insofar as these are derived from our normal experience and its extensions into science. Griffin opts for rationality; I for mysticism” (PrT 167).
more so, the creativity and care of Cobb’s way of honoring and linking religious differences. (in TCW 3)

We disagree with Knitter’s assessment of “the inadequacies of the models” (see above # 1) and his view that Cobb should not be ranked with the inclusivists, while agreeing with the complexity—or at least the aspiration to such—of Cobb’s position, which exhibits a decided inclusivist tendency, however hybridized.

In order to appease the legitimate differentialist concern for the maintenance of the depth and integrity of each of the traditions, we do not need to resort to the counterproductive mutual absolutizing of each tradition, with the entailed necessary and expected incorporation of each into the other. Rather, all of the traditions, as Schmidt-Leukel says, “refer to different experiences with the same reality and to different ways of arriving at these experiences” (TI 40). Huston Smith, in his conversation with David Ray Griffin, indicates the following modifications:

Griffin’s statement that his four irreducibles—God, creativity, possibilities, and finite entities—“are distinguishable but not separable,” seems promising. I too say that the Godhead (as infinite) entails what is other than itself (the finite), thereby creating (in the sense of giving rise to) what is other than its infinitude…But for me, the three derivatives are aspects of the one concrete universal, the Godhead. (PrT 171)

Smith goes on to note the different connotations present in the discussion of ultimacy:

I continue not to see why he does not likewise regard his other three as God’s attributes. I suppose the reason for him is that ‘ultimate’ has only temporal-spatial meaning—‘furthest’—and he sees no way to argue that God causes or accounts for the other three: “it would be nonsensical to speak of [Whitehead’s four ‘ultimates’] as producing the others, as if it could have existed prior to them.” But causes need not be temporally prior to their effects. A table that causes a vase to stand above the floor need not be older than the vase, nor even (in principle) precede the supporting role we find it serving when we enter the room. “Of course, we dare not talk of generation in time, dealing as we are with eternal Beings,” Plotinus tells us. “Were we to speak of
These passages highlight a hierarchical, transcategorial conception of ultimacy that remains superior to the Cobb-Griffin espousal of plural ultimates. One can also see greater affinity, or at least less dissonance between traditional aspectival, transcategorial conceptions and the unity of Whitehead’s triadic ultimate—the Category of the Ultimate—than one can see between either and posited multiple ultimacy.
CONCLUSION

The underlying reasons for maintaining the separation, or at least the irreducible ontological distinction of the ultimates, is the accounting of creaturely causal efficacy and freedom, and the ‘solution’ to theodicy; more importantly for our purposes, it is the solution to religious diversity and truth-claim conflict. But we argue that these theoretical challenges do not warrant the counterproductive separation of ultimacy. As Smith indicates, causational issues do not warrant the separation either. Cobb’s and Griffin’s use of Whitehead’s metaphysics fails to achieve the purported goal of being an accurate interpretive model of religious truth diversity, and one that is an improvement upon more ‘identist’ conceptions such as Hick’s hypothesis. Creative adjustment of the metaphysical schema, however, can potentially achieve greater interpretive accuracy. The space to rethink this metaphysic in application to religious diversity remains open and debatable. As it stands, with its dialogue-based global theology program, Cobb’s and Griffin’s position

1. does not accurately depict the traditions vis-à-vis equiprimordiality in Whitehead’s category of the ultimate (for instance, *Nirguna Brahman* does not equal or correlate with creativity);

2. does not adequately explain claimed radical difference in soteriology and eschatology;

3. limits and compromises the God of the monotheistic traditions in power and natural law subsumption, and inferiorizes the world-centered traditions;
4. is prescriptive/normative rather than merely interpretive/descriptive;
5. facilitates an eventual world theological ‘domain uniformity’;
6. compromises religion generally by expected adjustment to, and integration with, science;
7. contradicts Whitehead’s coherence intention and compromises his implied eschatology.

The differences within each tradition should receive at least as much attention as the differences between each tradition. Internal diversity should not be minimized for the sake of locating radical difference between the traditions. Difference can be greater within the unity than among the diversity. Cobb’s and Griffin’s pluralism is ultimately less adequate to the facts of religious diversity than is Hick’s internal impulse. Griffin’s observation that “[t]here might also be forms of Whitehead-based pluralism that would not be versions of complementary [Cobb-Griffin-differentialist] pluralism” (DRP 40n.4) calls for an in-depth analysis and understanding of Whitehead’s equiprimordiality, which goes against multiple ultimacy, and which from the process perspective would be a more potentially cogent interpretive model of religious diversity.


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