

Comment:

Ratzinger's Hick

Sales of John Hick's books should improve. Last May Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger addressed the presidents of the doctrine commissions of the bishops' conferences of Latin America (*Briefing* 16 January 1997:36–42): with the collapse of Marxism, the 'central problem' for Christian faith now is 'the so-called pluralist theology of religion'. One of the 'founders and eminent representatives' of this movement is 'the American Presbyterian John Hick'.

Many Catholics think all religions reach the same goal, Christ is only one path among others to ultimate reality. We are misled by thinkers like Hick who, relying on the Kantian appearance/reality distinction, exclude knowledge of anything beyond what is empirically accessible.

The central problem for the Catholic faith in Latin America, one might have thought, comes from the unstoppable growth of Pentecostalism. Traditionally Catholic countries are heading towards non-Catholic—mostly Pentecostal—majorities by 2010. Brazil already has more Pentecostal pastors than Catholic priests and, unlike the priests, they are almost all native Brazilians. Rejection of hierarchical institutions and dogmatic religion, liberation of the energies of women and young people, and so on, play a vastly more significant part in the accelerating disintegration of traditional Catholicism in Latin America than relativism is ever likely to, at any rate if it is defined as 'a typical offshoot of the western world and its forms of philosophical thought'. Can Kant's philosophy really be as damaging as the Cardinal makes out? (For that matter, how certain is it that Marxism has gone for good?)

It may be pedantic to say so, but John Hick is a Yorkshireman, educated in York, Edinburgh and Oxford. His academic career has been evenly divided between the United States and England. He has retired to Birmingham, the family home for many years. Some may not be worried by this mistake; others may think that, if easily checkable facts are wrong, accounts of some one's still developing ideas may not be accurate either.

To be fair, Cardinal Ratzinger has not read John Hick's books. His reflections, as he says, are 'mainly based' on a recent study by a German scholar who discusses Hick's work in connection with the 'uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the context of the question of meaning'.

The problem of affirming the absolute uniqueness of Christian revelation, without either dismissing other religions as more or less idolatrous, or assimilating them as more or less 'anonymously Christian', is not going to go away, even if John Hick, let alone Kant, finally get their come-uppance.

Hundreds of undergraduates test their views against John Hick's work: staple fodder in philosophy of religion courses for over thirty years. He has moved from evangelical Christianity to the thought that Christ needs to be seen as a 'temporal cross-section of God's Agapéing [sic] ... not the entirety of that of which it is a cross-section'. Whether he believes, as Ratzinger's source holds, that Kant 'proved beyond dispute that the absolute cannot be recognized in history' is another matter. What he says is, rather, that 'the different encounters with the transcendent within the different religious traditions may all be encounters with the one infinite reality, though with partially different and overlapping aspects of that reality'. For sure, he does not regard Christianity as the definitive historical revelation of God. That does not mean that he denies the possibility of real human encounter with a transcendent reality. Far from basing himself on a 'rationalism which declares that reason ... is incapable of metaphysical cognition', let alone succumbing to 'the inebriety of the infinite which can be experienced in inebriating music, rhythm, dance, frenetic lights and dark shadows', etc., Hick believes, with Ratzinger, that 'in man there is an inextinguishable yearning for the infinite'. Certainly, he places Christianity alongside every other religious tradition in his rainbow of religious apprehensions of what he regards as universal truth. Equally clearly, he regards the varieties of religion as more or less adequate encounters with that 'ultimate divine reality' which 'transcends the grasp of the human mind'.

If his mature thought endorses a pluralist understanding of religion with which an orthodox Christian could not be happy, it is not because Hick denies that we can have knowledge of some other than ourselves which he would describe as 'divine'. On the contrary, he remains stubbornly 'realist' in his insistence on religion as human encounter with a world-transcending reality. If his philosophy of religion threatens the Catholic faith in Latin America, or anywhere else, it must be because he lays emphasis on the universality of religion, rather than on the particularity of Christianity.

What is needed, as Cardinal Ratzinger says, is a dialogue between philosophy and faith, between reason and history. Attempts to develop an understanding of religion in abstraction from the history of God's self-revelation, are bound to fail, Cardinal Ratzinger insists. However it may be with John Hick's philosophy of religion, the Cardinal is 'of the opinion that neo-Scholastic rationalism failed', since it tried, 'with reason totally independent from the faith, to reconstruct the *praeambula fidei* with pure rational certainty'. Whether that is fair to the natural theology we practised forty years ago is disputable. Whatever he may say about John Hick, the threat to Catholicism, Cardinal Ratzinger knows, resides, in the end, where it always begins—in bad Catholic theology.

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