

HICK AND SAINTS: IS SAINT-PRODUCTION A VALID TEST?

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John Hick proposes that we test the salvific power of the world religions by testing their saint-production. I shall argue that Hick's test is not simple, not necessarily fair and not strictly empirical. I shall argue that it is not simple by exposing the assumptions it relies on and various cases it must treat. I shall argue that it is not necessarily fair by explaining the condition it must meet in order to be fair. I shall argue that it is not strictly empirical by exposing the doctrinal question it must answer.

In "Religious Pluralism and Salvation" published in this journal October, 1988, John Hick states again the challenge we find in his most recent works: subject Christianity to an empirical test. Does it produce more or better saints than the other great religions of the world? If it does, then perhaps it has a right to claim to be the superior or even the absolute religion. If it doesn't, then Christians should be honest and accept other religions which also do good jobs of saint-making. Hick argues that the empirical data support the latter conclusion.

This approach to Christianity is not new for Hick. In *Evil and the God of Love*, he proposed that one purpose of Christianity was to produce perfected persons and that evil was a necessary ingredient in the soul-making process. More recently in "On Grading Religions," Hick suggests that we grade religious phenomena, but not whole religious traditions, by testing their spiritual and moral fruits in the lives of both the saint and the ordinary believer.¹ More recently still in "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," Hick tests whole traditions by asking the same question—do they promote salvific transformation, i.e., what are their spiritual and moral fruits? In short, how good are the various religious traditions at producing saints?²

As a Protestant active in the church in America I find this challenge rather puzzling. Anyone who has spent much time in the church is easily convinced that the church is not "a museum of saints, but a school for sinners." Jesus started out with such a sorry lot of folks that it is not even clear that his immediate followers compare favorably to the disciples of Gautama. What if Peter didn't become as saintly a person as Gautama's right hand man? What if St. Francis of Assisi turns out to be an eccentric who cares as much about

birds as people, whereas Bonen is the epitome of self-giving love? Must Christians then give up the claim to the absoluteness of Christianity as Hick suggests? Hick's proposed test seems so simple, straightforward, and empirical, but is it? In the first section of this essay I shall quickly review Hick's test. In the second section I show that it is not simple. In the third I shall argue that it is not necessarily fair and make a short comment on its empirical status.

I

In "Religious Pluralism and Salvation" Hick claims that

The great world religions, then, are ways of salvation. Each claims to constitute an effective context within which the transformation of human existence can and does take place from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.³

Let's look at this thought piece by piece. The emphasis is on transformation. Religions are transforming. An underlying assumption is that true or superior religions have more transforming power than non-true or inferior ones.⁴ Second, Hick describes the raw material and the end-product of the transformation. Religion begins with self-centered people and ends with Reality-centered people. Let's assume that we know what it is to be self-centered. The end-product, Reality-centeredness, is a focus on the transcendent. In his most recent works Hick has replaced the word 'God' by 'Reality,' since not all religions think of the ultimate as a personal God. A little bit of Hickian religious epistemology might be helpful here. Hick thinks that there is only one Divine transcendent which he calls 'The Real.' The Real-in-itself is noumenal, but manifests itself phenomenally. These phenomena are conditioned by socio-cultural traditions and thus are interpreted quite variously, even as personal and nonpersonal. As we become more Reality-centered, as Hick thinks we will in subsequent lives, we hone our interpretations and get more adequate pictures of the Real. But for now we see through a glass darkly and our glasses in the different religio-cultural traditions have very different prescription lenses.

If the function of religion is transformation, it makes sense to test the validity of a given religion by how well it performs its function. Check its followers. Are they transformed? You may not want to check just any follower, however. A certain religion may be a powerful vehicle of transforming power and the follower a stubborn case who fails to make use of the transforming power. So, in his more recent works Hick focuses on the saints, those followers who make best use of the transforming power, those who are "much further advanced than most of us in the transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness."⁵ If we want to check the transforming power we check those who are taking the best advantage of it. But what specifically do

we check for? We find the answer in Hick's further analysis of a saint. There are two components to a saint's centering on the Real: a spiritual and a moral component. Hick admits that the spiritual component is vague but he identifies the moral component rather specifically as "the unselfish regard for others that we call love or compassion."⁶

In sum, the project Hick envisions is comparing the saints of the different religions, asking whether one religion makes more or better saints than another. By studying the saints we can test the transforming power of the religion, because the saints are the ones who best exhibit the transformation by exhibiting spiritual vision and self-giving love. Hick admits that an exhaustive study of saints cannot be presently accomplished; we have neither the "conceptual precision" nor the "exhaustive information."⁷ But he thinks we have enough information and conceptual precision to reach the provisional conclusion that Christianity does not have greater transforming power than the other great world religions and therefore is not justified in its claim of superiority. In fact, he concludes that "we have no good reason to believe that any one of the great religious traditions has proved itself to be more productive of love/compassion than another."⁸

At one level Hick's project is very appealing. We short-circuit all the doctrinal disputes and get to a common ground—the fruits of the religions. We leave behind all the metaphysical haggling and focus on what is empirically testable. Just how many spiritual, compassionate persons does each religion produce? If none produces more, then none can claim superiority.

II

Hick's proposal is more complicated than it first appears. There are two crucial junctures. First, Hick assumes, but does not establish, that the different religions all focus on the same Reality. There is nothing in the empirical data Hick presents that necessitates that the religions share a Reality. Each can be soteriologically effective and point toward separate Realities.⁹ In fact, John Cobb looks at the same empirical data and concludes that each religion names a different Reality, each of which is transcendent.¹⁰ Since we do not know whether the religions point to different transcendents or to the same one, we must see how Hick's test works for each possibility.

Second, we must be clear about the relationship between saint-production and the primary salvific goal. Salvation, according to Hick, consists in being transformed from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. To test soteriological effectiveness we need a test for Reality-centeredness. Hick suggests one: test for spiritual vision and loving-kindness. But notice that this is not necessarily a direct test. It is only a direct test if being Reality-centered just is having increased spiritual vision and increased compassion. If this is not the case, being compassionate may only be an indirect test or, the worst case

scenario, no test at all. Take the worst case scenario first. Suppose that the world religions are wrong and Reality is as conceived by an atheist scientist. This scientist could be centered on Reality, totally forgetful of self and therefore saved, without a thought for another human being. In fact, she could be cruel to other humans in her pursuit of truth and still be centered on Reality. Or suppose that Reality is evil and that someone selflessly centered on this Reality becomes evil. In these cases, compassion is no test at all for Reality-centeredness.

Now consider a second possibility. It may be the case that loving-kindness and spiritual insight are merely by-products of being Reality-centered. For example, the primary goal of the mystic way is to achieve spiritual marriage with God. As one proceeds along the mystic way, one also has increased dispositions towards virtuous behavior. But the increase in virtue is just one of many by-products of proceeding along the mystic path. It is not possible directly to tell whether a mystic has achieved spiritual marriage by gauging his virtuous behavior. In this case being compassionate is an indirect test for Reality-centeredness.

In short there are two variables we must consider in applying Hick's test: the directness of the test and the number of Realities. Applying this test is not as straightforward as it first appeared.

III

But is this test fair? Let's check the case in which the religions name different realities and the test Hick proposes is indirect. Consider the following example. Coaches of football teams often say that one of the benefits of football training is that it builds character. Certainly the primary focus of football training is to produce skilled football players. All the running into stationary objects, the weight lifting, the endurance training, the repetitive drills, the memorizing of plays is designed to transform individuals from football dilettantes to skilled football players. And, if the coaches are to be believed, one of the off-shoots of all this training is to produce people with better characters. Yet, it seems absurd to test the effectiveness of the transforming power of the New Orleans football training camp by looking for saints amid the ranks. There just isn't a close enough relationship between the primary goal and the fruit, between producing skilled football players and building character.

Now consider this example. One of the recent claims in the study of character ethics is that attending worship builds better character. Certainly the primary focus of worship is God. And if we attempt to train our children to worship, we train them to reverently focus on God, praising him and uplifting him solely because of who he is. We hope to transform our children from fidgety endurers to enthusiastic participants in worship. But, the ethicists

claim, people who regularly worship God become more ethical.¹¹ This is a fruit of regular worship.

Now suppose, à la Hick, we wish to compare the transforming power of our Sunday school training with the power of football training, even though their ultimate goals are quite different. Would a fair test compare the saints produced by each? Certainly not. Though I can't document this, I bet there is a much closer connection between regular worship and character building than there is between football training and character building. Because of this, even if we ascertain that our young worshipers have better characters than the New Orleans football players, we cannot conclude that there is more transforming power in our Sunday school than in the New Orleans football training camp. The camp may very well have much more power to achieve its goal of producing better football players than our Sunday school has to achieve its goal of producing sincere worshipers. I admit that the connection between character-building and increased football skills is very loose, but there is nothing to guarantee that we will not find such a loose connection between Reality-centeredness and spiritual and moral fruits in some religion, especially since we are assuming that the Realities focused on are distinct, i.e. that the transcendent world is multi-dimensional.

Let us turn now to the world religions. Is Christianity better at setting people right with God than Buddhism is at helping people to achieve *Nirvana*, assuming that being set right with God and reaching *Nirvana* are distinct goals? Certainly both religions claim that a person following its path will become more loving as he or she proceeds upon the path. But until we are sure that the correlation between being right with God and the fruit of loving-kindness is the same as that between achieving *Nirvana* and loving-kindness, testing loving-kindness does not give us a fair test of the transforming power of the two religions. It could be that Buddhism is very effective at getting people to *Nirvana*, but that loving-kindness is a minor fruit, whereas Christianity doesn't do such a good job of setting people right with God, but the fruit is more abundant. Buddhism would unfairly fail the test just as the New Orleans Saints did.

These examples show that a condition must be placed on Hick's test. The fairness of Hick's test depends on the relation between saint-production and Reality-centeredness. More precisely, Hick's saint-production test will be fair only if being transformed to Reality-centeredness and exhibiting the fruits of spiritual insight and compassion are positively correlated to the same degree in each religion. I cannot see that Hick has given us a reason to believe that this condition is in fact met.

Nor can I see that the status of Hick's test is any different if we change one variable and accept Hick's assumption that there is only one Reality. If saintliness is merely a by-product of salvation, i.e. we are still assuming that

saint-production is an indirect test, there is no guarantee that the by-product of saintliness will be produced in the same quantity by different religions, even though they are all focusing on the same Real. A devout Muslim may be just as Reality-centered as a devout Buddhist but be less loving and compassionate, if the Muslim way does not produce loving-kindness to the same degree as Buddhism. Different methods of centering on the Real, though equally soteriologically effective, may be varyingly effective in spinning off the by-product of sainthood. Once again Hick must establish a positive correlation to the same degree between being transformed to Reality-centeredness and exhibiting the fruits of saintliness. Once again he has not done this nor do I see that it can easily be done.

But if we change the other variable and assume that Hick's test is direct, then I suggest it is fair regardless of whether there is one Reality or several. And, in fact, there is one Christian theology which describes Reality-centeredness in such a way that Hick's test would be direct. One of the continuing points of discussion between Protestants and Catholics is the Protestant emphasis on justification by faith alone. Luther called justification by faith the

first and chief article. . . . On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world.¹²

By justification by faith alone, Luther meant that neither work, law nor merit but only faith justifies us, faith in the power of God's grace on the cross. Catholics hold just as firmly as Protestants that justification is the work of God alone, but they view the relationship between justifying faith and works of love as being much closer. According to the Catholics, faith must be "intrinsically qualified by love"¹³ in order to be justifying. Protestants, on the other hand, typically hold that even though love "springs from" faith, it is "among the works of the law, which do not justify."¹⁴ So for Protestants love is truly a fruit, albeit a necessary one, and not part of justification. For Catholics, love is part of justification. Another way of putting this point is that for Catholics becoming more loving is part of being saved, whereas for Protestants, loving-kindness is a by-product and not part of salvation itself.

If the Catholics are correct and loving-kindness is part of being saved, then Hick's test works. Testing for loving-kindness is, in this case, a direct test for being Reality-centered. Therefore it is unproblematical to claim that a religion is effective in transforming people to Reality-centeredness if it is effective in producing saints, since the latter is a component of the former.

But notice what the fairness of Hick's test now hinges on—a doctrinal question of the relationship between saintliness and salvation. From the Catholic perspective God's transforming power can be directly tested by testing loving-kindness. But what about the other religions? A Buddhist, Muslim, Shintu, Navejo and Hindu scholar would have to tell us whether his or her

own religion is closer to the Catholic or Protestant view, or, as is more likely, has some entirely different view of the relationship between loving-kindness and the Real's primary goal. That the two primary Christian groups should differ so significantly on this issue should alert us to the problems involved in testing fruits. We cannot simply assume that Hick's test is a direct one. It must be established. And if the Catholic/Protestant dispute is any guide, religious doctrines will need to be examined. So, as much as I too would like to short-circuit doctrinal disputes, I fear that we cannot. We need to know the exact status of this so-called fruit of loving-kindness and we have no place to look other than in the doctrines, the "theologies," the learned works of the various religions.

In conclusion, if Hick's test is a direct one, then it seems to be a fair one. But, whether or not it is a direct test hinges on a doctrinal question and is not empirically discoverable. If, on the other hand, Hick's test is indirect, then it works only if the same degree of positive correlation holds between salvation and saint-production in the various religions to be tested. Hick has done nothing to show us that such a correlation does hold and the task of establishing such a correlation is monumental. So a test which appears simple and empirical is neither. It must either go through the complicated task of establishing a correlation between saint-production and salvation or it must give up its empiricism and accept a particular doctrinal position, one akin to the Catholic view of the relationship between sainthood and salvation.

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NOTES

1. John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), p. 81.

2. John Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity" in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, eds. John Hick and Paul Knitter (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987). See also *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press and London: Macmillan, 1988), chapter 17.

3. John Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (1988), p. 366.

4. This is particularly clear in "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," pp. 23-24.

5. Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," p. 23.

6. Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," p. 367.

7. Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," p. 24.

8. Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," p. 369.

9. See Gerald Loughlin, "Noumenon and Phenomena," *Religious Studies* 23 (1987), pp. 493-508 for a convincing argument to this effect.

10. John B. Cobb, "Christian Witness in a Pluralistic World" in *The Experience of Religious Diversity*, eds. John Hick and Hasan Askari (Aldershot, England: Gower Publishing Co., 1985), p. 156.

11. William H. Willimon, *The Service of God—How Worship and Ethics are Related* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1983).

12. H. George Anderson, et al., eds., *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), § 27.

13. Anderson, *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII*, § 106.

14. Anderson, *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII*, § 106.