I will recommend the book to students of Islam in Africa, Islamic history, and Islamic studies in general.

Mohammed-Bassiru Sillah


A.N. Wilson's novel, Paul, The Mind of The Apostle, made a headline in newspapers (see The daily Dawn, Karachi, February 19, 1997, p. 21) on account of the novelist's claim that Jesus Christ was not a Christian and had no intention of founding a religion; the faith that bears his name was invented by Saint Paul. "There would have been no Christianity if there had been only Jesus", claims Wilson, as the inventor of Christianity, in his opinion, was Paul.

That Jesus of Nazreth was not a God incarnate, but an intensely God conscious human being — a prophet — who had tremendous influence on the lives of his first century followers, is a theme that has been repeatedly argued by John Hick, a Presbytarian theologian of the Church of England and a philosopher of high rank belonging to the British analytical tradition.

However, novels on controversial themes, whether based on facts or fiction, are more widely read, and if their contents are contrary to common man's religious faith, they are capable of creating a furore more easily (as did Wilson's novel) in the people of a certain faith than serious research-based books and articles published in academic journals. Despite this, John Hick's edited book The Myth of God Incarnate, SCM Press, London, 1977 which is a scholarly book, created a similar furore in England twenty years ago on the same issue, and many Christian theologians of the Church of England and other Churches vehemently reacted to the publication of this book.

The themes of incarnation, the original sin and the atonement of Christ themes alongwith the Christian supremacy or uniqueness are closely linked to the issues of global theology and religious pluralism which have been John Hick's theological/philosophical passion for over twenty years. Problems of Religious Pluralism, God Has Many Names, Faith and Dialogue, The Myth of Christian Uniqueness, Three Faiths One God, and his masterpiece An Interpretation of Religion (on which he won Grawmeyer Award in 1991 worth one hundred and fifty thousand dollars) are all dedicated mainly to religious pluralism. And now, The Rainbow of Faiths is yet another addition to his album on the above theme.

The Rainbow of Faiths is based on Hick's Auburn lectures which he delivered in 1994 at the Union Theological Seminary, New York.

Exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, Hick explains, are the three alternative ways of looking at other religions. The exclusivist claims his own faith as the only true faith and the scheme of salvation provided by his faith as the only true one. He makes absolute truth claims about his religion excluding the possibility of truth of other religions. The inclusivist allows other religions' claims
as valid to the extent they confirm his faith, and thinks or believes that other
faiths, in so far as they are true, are not different from his faith; rather they are
included in the territorial boundaries of his faith. The pluralist argues for the equal
validity and viability of all great world religions. The great religions of the world
are like a rainbow of faiths "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 experience" (The Rainbow, Preface).
The Ultimate, the Real, the Divine remains largely unknown — a mystery — yet,
each religious tradition sees it either "as" Allah, or Yahweh, or a Triune God, or
Brahma, and so on. This is so because Reality is religiously ambiguous. Hick uses
an example employed by Wittingstein, according to which it is like an ambiguous
duck-rabbit picture. For a person who has seen duck but never seen a rabbit, it is
a picture of a duck, for a person who has never seen a duck, but has seen rabbits,
it is a picture of a rabbit. Both persons are partially right and partially wrong; right
in so far as the picture resembles the duck or the rabbit, and wrong in so far as it
is different in itself from either of the two.

Advocating religious pluralism at the theological and philosophical
forum, Hick argues that every great world religion's tradition draws a different
picture of the Real, the Ultimate, or what we call God which has its charm and
beauty for its followers. All the great world religions such as Hinduism,
Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are equally valid responses to the
Ultimate, the Real, the Noumenon. Since the Real is the common denominator in
all world religions (Sat in Hinduism, al-Haqq in Islam, Yahweh, the one God, in
Judaism, and so on), therefore it can be considered as the unifying element in
these religions. Yet each religion is distinct in its different way of conceiving and
responding to the same Ultimate Real. Also all great world religions, claims Hick,
are soteriological; they aim at making the world a better place to live. Thus, they
all share the common goal of religion to promote good and shun evil, though they
propose different schemes of salvation/liberation through their different
redeemers.

But none of these different picturers of the Real and different
eschatologies, and different salvation schemes or claims, Hick argues, can be fully
validated because of our limited access to the Ultimate, the Real. What is
important for us is to recognize that they all aim at human transformation from
self-centredness; to God-centredness, from self-consciousness to God-
consciousness and in this effort they are at par.

What is different in The Rainbow of Faiths from Hick's other titles on the
theme of religious pluralism is; first, Hick's treatment of the issue in hand in a
dialogue form. Philosophical style has always been considered to add some extra
weight to the arguments if it is impressive. A difficult and terse style tends to
obscure meaning. Dialogue form has been used since the time of Plato for
propounding philosophical themes with ease. Thus, Hick, who is already lucid in
writing, now adopts this style for propagating his earlier theme to a larger
audience; second, the Rainbow is Hick's critique of the critique of his earlier work
by fellow philosophers, theologians, students, etc. He incorporates in this book all
the actual and anticipated criticisms and lines of arguments against his position in
order to reply to them point by point. For this purpose, he first summarizes his
position regarding religious pluralism as advanced in his earlier titles, and then examines and evaluates the various criticisms to it.

For answering his critics, adversaries, commentators, reviewers, etc. Hick introduces some characters in the dialogue. Phil. represents a philosopher critic; Grace, a theologian critic; and John (i.e. John Hick) replies to the arguments of both Phil. and Grace.

Thus the dialogue proceeds in an atmosphere of philosophical serenity and theological earnestness. Hick is open-minded and is ready to help dispel the slightest doubt that might emerge in the mind of his critic. He is also willing to give the benefit of doubt to the critic whenever an ambiguity arises. This is characteristic of Hick, who is not only a theologian par excellence but also a philosopher of great integrity.

From the philosopher's side the main objection to Hick's religious pluralism and global theology agenda is based on the post-modernist critique of global culture and homogenization process. The main champions of this critique, some of them pointed out by Phil. are Herbert Marcuse, Jurgen Habermas, Jaque Derrida, Michel Focult, Theodore Adorno. Phil. argues that Hick's global theology is susceptible to the post-modernist's attack on global culture. How is Hick's plan of a unified religious culture (global theology) different from the post-modern "hamburger culture" or "supermarket culture" or "the cultural pancake" promoted by various media devices? asks Phil. How can Hick meet the post-modernist critic's charge that the vision of this new culture is nothing short of the Western intellectual imperialist and capitalist venture to gain ideological power and by that means a single world order. Like the other various phenomena of post-modern culture, such as homogenization, universalization, urbanization, individualism, etc., pluralism is also the child of European Enlightenment of the seventeenth/eighteenth centuries with its universal rationalism. Religious pluralism is also an ideology, a political cosmology aimed at Americanization of the world culture.

John Hick defends his position by pointing out that "post-modernism" is a vague term and critics label his position both as "post-modernist" and "anti-post-modernist" depending upon what they understand by these terms. It is indeed true that post-modern culture has a greater emphasis on homogenization as a result of international capitalism; but his brand of religious pluralism does not share the capitalist agenda.

Again, Phil. argues on behalf of the post-modernist that pluralism as homogenization aims at eliminating and suppressing the otherness of other religions, and tries to "obscure that radical historical, particularly which is constitutive of the truly "other" (The Rainbow, p. 40). It is a form of "Christian barbarism" which seeks to presume superiority over the non-Christian 'other'. Besides, it mars the originality and distinctness of other religions and represents a distorted picture of them. Its portrayal of other religions is sharply different from the self-understanding of these different religions. It is thus a new form of "exclusivism".

Hick in reply argues that his religious pluralism respects, recognizes and affirms the different great religious traditions as equally authentic contexts of salvation/liberation, each with its own unique character and historical
particularities. But he further contends that these different religions' particular belief-systems are different manifestations of the Real. "They are not conflicting beliefs, because they're beliefs about different phenomenal realities" (The Rainbow, p. 43). The Real, in itself (the Real an sich), the Noumenon, Hick argues, manifests itself both as personal and non-personal. And different religious traditions respond to the personae and the non-personae of the Real in their unique and distinct ways which are not mutually conflicting. Besides, no religion envisages the Real absolutely in terms of its own understanding of It. All religions admit the ineffability of the Real. Though all religions tend to make absolute truth-claims about their metaphysical beliefs, the admission of ineffability of the Real by each faith is a philosophical check to the seriousness of such claims. As for differences of religions regarding their belief systems, eschatologies, or questions about how salvation will be brought about, these in Hick's opinion do not really matter. What is important is the seriousness of different religious traditions in preparing their followers for salvation by reminding them to follow their different prescribed ethical paths. As long as these religions stand the pragmatic test, i.e. are capable of ethically transforming their followers, they are valid responses to the Real.

And finally let us turn to the philosopher critic's charge that Hick's religious pluralism amounts to the "myth of the neutral observer" — the observer who has a privileged vantage point — and thus the hypothesis assumes an arrogant posture. To this Hick replies that his brand of religious pluralism has been inductively arrived at, and is based on recognition of religious experience (of various traditions) as valid foundation for their religious lives. The charge of arrogance should not apply to his brand of religious pluralism as it is not meant to hypostatize philosophical perspective by minimizing the importance of religious experience. It rather aims at complementing our religious consciousness by philosophical objectivity. Religion is not a human projection. It is a response to the Real — a response in which religious experience plays a dominant role. As a philosopher — a critical realist — his objective has only been to guard against the tendency to make absolute truth-claims about one's own system of religious beliefs resulting in narrow-mindedness in evaluating other religions. Hick further clarifies that his position is different both from the naturalist and the agnostic because he considers religion as a valid response to the Transcendent or the Ultimate, whereas the naturalist considers religion a human projection and the agnostic remains uncommitted both to religious or non-religious ways of responding to the Real. He abstains from commenting on any of these paths.

It is interesting to note here that Hick includes Marxism also amongst religions through his broad definition of "religion" as the human response to the Transcendent seeking human salvation/liberation. In so far as Marxism also seeks human transformation towards a better life, it is salvific for humanity in its own way, and is thus a religion. Hick forgets that Marxism is concerned only with this worldly matters. If religion is a response to the Real, the Noumenon — which is largely unknown and unknowable — according to Hick's own definition, then how can Marxism fit in as one of its brands? It can always be admitted as salvific but it cannot be considered as a response to the Transcendent.
Next, with the theologian Grace, Hick argues against Christ's incarnation, his atonement, and the uniqueness of Christianity. The contemporary biblical criticism, Hick argues, has sufficiently invalidated these dogmas. That Christ was the son of God, the second person of the Trinity, can be proved to be baseless on historical, theological, and philosophical grounds. Jesus often refers to God as Father (Abba), which, in the light of linguistic culture of his time, can be interpreted to mean nothing more than a loving expression of an intensely God-conscious man. Besides, the "Father" and "the son of God" expressions, were commonly used metaphorically at that time for emperors, kings, pharaohs, and holy men; and were meant to express intimacy and devotion to God. Any literal interpretation of these metaphorical expressions will be out of place. Expressions in John's Gospel such as "I and the Father are one", and "He who has seen me has seen the Father", again, cannot historically be proved to be Jesus' own sayings. None of the Jesus' twelve disciples authored any of the Gospels. "The Fourth Gospel is generally thought to have been written towards the end of the first century and to express the theology that had developed in the writer's part of the church. It is this Johannine and Pauline theology that was to become Christian orthodoxy — which is of course why it dominates the New Testament canon that the church eventually adopted" (The Rainbow, p. 91).

These expressions, again, do not entail Christ's divinity or substantial identity with God but only his nearness and intense awareness of God. But unfortunately traditional Christianity has formed on their bases some fantastic beliefs, such as Christ's two natures, one fully human and the other fully divine. Christ's two nature theory is a philosophical absurdity. Rejecting it, Hick says: "There is a morass of difficulties here, and Christian orthodoxy has in the end only been able to say that the idea of the God-Man is a divine mystery which we cannot understand but must nevertheless revere" (The Rainbow, p. 98).

Rejecting this dogma, Hick adds: "However, it is a mystery created by human beings through a process that we can trace historically, and in fact it's only a mystery in the sense of a form of words which has no clear literal meaning"! (The Rainbow, p. 98).

Again, historically speaking the original sin and the atonement dogmas along with the incarnation doctrine were unknown to the first century Christians. These were Pauline ideas that gradually got assimilated in official Christendom in the third century at the Council of Nicaea in 325 and at Chalcedon in 451. Christ himself was neither aware of being God incarnate nor ever declared himself to be so to his followers. His crucifixion, argues Hick, is historically evidenced. But on the basis of his crucifixion, divinity cannot be claimed for him.

The traditional Christianity's claim that Christ exerted his divine authority by abrogating the Jewish law, informs Hick, is also being challenged by contemporary New Testament researchers. Christ announced divine mercy and love on account of his intense awareness of God. He never presented himself as God and never abrogated the Law. Therefore, the argument of theologians that on account of his divinity Christ was in a position to abrogate the Law of Moses stands refuted. Also it is not possible to maintain that Jesus was God incarnate and yet he did not know it, or teach it; for this leads to a paradoxical position, namely, how can church know better than Jesus himself that he was God incarnate?
With Grace, next, Hick takes up the issue of Christian uniqueness. The Christian religious hegemony, Hick argues, is internally bound to the Christian belief that Christ atoned the original sin through his crucifixion. The atonement dogma has led to another baseless doctrine *extra ecclesian null salus* (outside the church no salvation). This dogma has done great damage to the development of a global religious culture on this earth. Even though some ecclesiastics today recognize the severity of this dogma and have tried to slight its implications by adopting many other inclusivistic measures that would allow salvation to the earlier patriarchs and some later non-Christians, yet, on the whole the dogma is damaging. As an implication of this dogma everlasting fire for non-believers has been proclaimed by many ecclesiastics in the past, and this practice continues even today. These dogmas adversely affect efforts at interfaith understanding and promotion of global peace.

Thus, from a Christian religious perspective, John Hick rejects traditional Christianity’s dogmas, namely, Christ was the son of God, the original sin, Christ’s atonement, Eucharist, etc. All this radicalism on Hick’s part is meant to expound his religious pluralism and global religious perspective themes.

From the Islamic point of view John Hick’s efforts to put Christianity in proper perspective is welcome. The Qur’an has long been claiming that traditional Chirtianity has distorted the original teachings of the Christ and his mission. According to it Jesus, son of Mary, was a glorious prophet, sent to announce God’s absoluteness, and to remove some of the fabrications in the Law of Moses. He did not abrogate or denounce the Law of Moses. Chirstianity’s original sin dogma has no place in the Qur’an as Adam’s and his wife’s sin was forgiven by God when they both turned to God in repentance (Qur’an, 7: 22–25, 2: 37–38). Thus the Christ’s atonement dogma also has no meaning for the Muslims. Unity of God is the basic creed of Muslims. Christ never ascribed partners to God. He proclaimed himself to be a human being, a slave of God, a Mercy from God (Qur’an, 19: 27–34).

Islam is the last of the three Abrahamic Faiths. It is proud to trace its roots to the great prophet Abraham and even before him to Noah and Adam. Islam has never claimed to be an exclusive religion of a particular race or people. It mentions with respect all the prophets of Judaism and Christianity and regards them as prophets of Islam. It does not deny the possibility of religions other than of Abrahamic origin to have originated with some divine revelation in other parts of the world. It does not monopolize the right to receive divine guidance for any specific race or people. In a spirit of tolerance the Qur’an declares: "No coercion in "Religion" (2:256). For inviting people to a single God, the Absolute, and for uniting them as a single people — the human kind — it repeatedly reminds that its message is not new but has been delivered to other peoples also through their prophets. Islam claims itself to be a natural religion, *dīn-al-fīrah*. Its basic message, "there is no God, but God" is not an extra-ordinary or unique claim but is a revalidation of earlier prophets' messages to their peoples. However, this time this message is sent through the prophet Muhammad. After all some one had to bring this message of peace once more and in highly forceful terms to all peoples when it had been forgotten despite reminders. God chose Muhammad, a human being, as before, one distinguished in his morality and dedication to God, for this
prestigious task. This Islamic notion of God, i.e. of absolute unity of God is very similar to the concept of God Hick arrives at through his philosophical and historical criticism of Christianity and other religions. Religion, according to Hick, is a response to the Transcendental and the Ultimate, the personal and the nonpersonal, or the ineffable Reality. That the Absolute God is both personal and nonpersonal and still ineffable, yet not vacuous or redundant, as Hick explains, is something that Muslims also believe to be the case. That God is often experienced as compassionate and loving and just and wise, etc. and yet He remains tremendous and incomprehensible, and not fully conceivable is also affirmed by Islam.

So far the Muslims will have no difficulty with Hick. But when it comes to responding to this Ultimate, Hick’s stance is not understandable to the Muslims. Following Hick’s logic of religious pluralism one is right in worshipping any thing in the name of God if one's tradition allows that. But why? If the Infinite Real, the Noumenon, is not plural, as is claimed by Hick (The Rainbow, p. 69), then why worship false deities? Why identify It or Him with local gods or natural phenomena? Why confuse It/Him with human figures? Why invoke His/Its mercy, grace, love or justice through inappropriate means, e.g. through priests or demi-gods or incarnate god-figures, etc.? And, why testify Him in terms inadequate? Why confuse the One with many? Why ascribe partners to God?

John Hick’s patent answer is: diversity of religious cultures should allow different ways of responding to the Ultimate. In this context he quotes his favourite Indian parable of the elephant and the seven blind men. Every one of the seven blind men is partially right and partially wrong in identifying the elephant. The parable narrated by Hick needs a little extension to incorporate the point of view of one of these blind men, perhaps the seventh one, who may argue against Hick’s stance that his claim does not end at identifying the elephant with its tail, trunk, or body, but more importantly in making sure that the elephant is identified inappropriately, yet needs to be recognized as the sole king of the jungle to whom all animals of the jungle must submit; and that the elephant does not like to hear that other animals share his power. All animals must know that they are totally at the mercy of the elephant in their right to exist or not exist, and for their conduction of life in the jungle. To challenge the sole power of the elephant is to annoy him, and to beg anything from some other animal in the jungle instead of the elephant is, again, to cause disrespect to the king of the jungle.

By the same analogy, the Muslim’s claim is — Hick may identify the Muslim as the seventh blind man — that though man is incapable of identifying completely the nature of God, yet he is at least capable of acknowledging Him as the sole deity. Reason has never been able to identify more than one God. Thus from Plato to John Hick, philosophers have always identified God as One, Absolute, Transcendental, Ultimate Real. Revelation of prophets confirms this well understood truth. Thus man must submit to Him alone, and worship Him alone because He alone is the King of the worlds, the Lord of the worlds. Man should not ascribe partners to God, as he has no partners. To worship any one other than God is blasphemy.

The Muslim’s claim is not that he knows God in His entirety, because man cannot know fully the Infinite. There is no argument about it. But when it
comes to the question of responding to the Absolute, Islam makes it abundantly clear that no other being deserves to be worshipped except God, because He alone is the Real, and the Ultimate.

Again, Hick's stance that all great world religions are equal in their understanding of God is quite questionable. Worship of supposedly incarnate gods, religious heroes, ancestors, etc. implies both inadequate understanding of the nature of God, and inadequate mode of responding to the Ultimate, the Divine or the Real. If this were not so Hick himself would not have entered into the venture of cleansing of his own religious tradition, Christianity, of all irrational elements. His entire professional life is dedicated to ridding Christianity of all those dogmas that do not make sense. If Hick feels it important to do the cleansing job at both the philosophical and theological level for the benefit of his own religious tradition, and if he enthusiastically recommends others to attempt a similar work within their own tradition, then, it is not understandable why he discourages people of one religious tradition to undertake the cleansing job for the other religious traditions? Is it not necessary to get rid of religious obscurity at all levels, and of all traditions for the benefit of humanity at large? One who feels that his understanding of God is more adequate and less obscure should be justified in sharing his understanding with fellow human beings who belong either to his own tradition or some other tradition. Without assuming a superior or an arrogant posture in dialogue with members of other religious traditions, sharing ones rationally arrived at religious conviction with them and inviting them to a similar understanding of religion need not be perceived as religious narrow-mindedness, but rather religious generosity. Feasibility of such a project need not be denied. According to the Qur'an: "There is no coercion in religion" (2: 256), yet it recommends calling people to truth in a goodly manner (Qur'an, 16: 125). Such a project should not cause any misunderstanding provided it is done in a goodly manner. Hick himself is engaged in a dialogue with members of other religious traditions for the sake of his religious pluralism. His dialogue groups are limited. If he thinks it feasible, at a high intellectual, philosophical, or theological level to have dialogue with limited groups, then, what is wrong with similar interfaith dialogues at a more general level by others? Why should a lay man be discouraged to share and invite others to his understanding of religion? Why should religious conversion projects be shelved?

Hick's religious pluralism seems to be assuming the posture of a new religion among the existing religions of the world. He is enthusiastically preaching this new "global religion". But if Muslims feel that Islam is already meant for the whole of humanity on ground of its being a universal religion, or to use the new metaphor, "a global religion" — then what is so awkward about it? Islam does not totally reject other religions but only reminds of the distortion and disfiguration that has taken place in different religions in the course of history as a result of man's unscrupulousness, or stubbornness; and calls people to mend themselves and purify their traditions. This is the meaning of Islamic Da'wah (call to the truth).

When Hick advises all religious traditions to abstain from making absolute truth claims, because they cannot, in his opinion, be validated, the distinctions between relatively absolute and absolutely absolute are blurred. When
any religion, e.g. Islam makes an absolute truth claim about its understanding of God, such a claim is made from the point of view of human understanding (reason) guided by God through revelation. Certainly no human being can know the Absolute in its Absoluteness. But with the aid of reason and revelation or religious experience one can approximate to the Absolute Reality. Such approximation can become the basis of one's religious life. If one is not convinced rationally in one's own mind about a certain truth, one cannot live peacefully in accordance with it. But when one is convinced one justifiably feels a strong urge to share it with others and invite them to accept it.

And finally, Hick’s claim is not correct that all religious traditions believe in, and respond to the One, Ultimate, e.g. to Sat in Hinduism, Yahweh in Judaism, Triune God in Christianity, al-Haqq in Islam, etc. Except Muslims, only some philosophers and intellectuals of various other traditions believe in the Transcendental, the Absolute; or the Ultimate. A common believer of a Hindu tradition, for example, does not believe in one God Brahma, but in many gods; and he responds to those gods also. Similarly a common Christian believes that Christ was God incarnate, and thus invokes him also in his prayers. A common Buddhist also believes and responds to Buddha as a God. Lay men of these religions are not monotheists in their attitudes. They do not always respond to the Ultimate, in their prayers and worships. The case is different in Islam where both a lay religionist and an intellectual believe in one God, and respond to Him only.

*The Rainbow of Faiths*, in any case, is an earnest effort in interfaith dialogue and needs to be appreciated for the author’s clarity of arguments and his sincerity in understanding his own and other religions in an objective spirit. As a philosopher of religion Hick works with a remarkable hermeneutical insight. As a theologian his contribution to Christianity’s new self-understanding will definitely be significant in promoting interfaith understanding and will also be a valuable check to narrow sectarianism in different religious cultures. His conclusion regarding global religion and religious pluralism will however remain a subject of dispute. Hick is aware of the unlikelihood of complete success of his project in this vast world of multi-dimensional religious cultures. But he is justifiably hopeful that his efforts will bring fruits by at least transforming the religious visions of people in a positive way and will help them in understanding their own and other religions in a more objective light and appreciative spirit.

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**Arifa Farid**