The Secret and Globalatinization in John Hick's Philosophy of Religious Pluralism: A Derridean Critique

Matthew S. Haar Farris

Submitted 2010-05-04, Revised 2011-05-15

Abstract

In light of Jacques Derrida's notions of *the secret* and *globalatinization*, this article argues that John Hick's pluralistic hypothesis is always doing the speaking, always "running out of breath," on behalf of the world's post-axial religious traditions. In effect, the pluralistic hypothesis sucks all the air out of the discussion of religious pluralism. Moreover, what the pluralistic hypothesis *does not* express is how the world's Indigenous religious traditions could be thought of as appropriate communal dispositional responses to the Real. This failure to speak is tantamount to the failure of Hick's hypothesis on its own terms. Ironically, Hick's pluralistic hypothesis keeps the secret of religious pluralism safe by attempting, but necessarily failing, to reveal it.

Keywords: Jacques Derrida, John Hick, religious pluralism, the secret, globalatinization, Indigenous religious traditions

Perhaps the most widely discussed contemporary theory of religious pluralism in Western philosophical and theological literature is still that of John Hick, especially as his "pluralistic hypothesis" is proffered in *An Interpretation of Religion* and *A Christian Theology of Religions*.[1] Unfortunately, the discussion of Hick's important theorization of religious pluralism has grown stale, and critiques of his pluralistic hypothesis continue to be drawn from a relatively narrow bandwidth of

[1] See: John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); and ———, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths*, 1st American ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

scholarly resources. For instance, few critics — or proponents for that matter — have endeavored to examine Hick's philosophy of religious pluralism in light of contemporary continental philosophy. The aim of this article is to bring a fresh breath to the conversation by offering a Derridean critique of Hick's pluralistic hypothesis. Specifically, I will deploy two key Derridean notions, namely *the secret* and *globalatinization*, to argue that Hick's pluralistic hypothesis says both too much and too little on behalf of the world's religions. The resulting effect of Hick saying too much about what ought to remain secret, and too little in affirmation of marginalized religious voices, is the suffocation of real religious diversity and the dissimulation of the *mystery* of religious pluralism.[2]

For starters, it's important to limn the basics of Hick's soteriocentric pluralistic hypothesis. In *A Christian Theology of Religions*, Hick delineates his hypothesis as follows:

> the hypothesis … is that of an ultimate ineffable Reality which is the source and ground of everything, and which is such that in so far as the religious traditions are in soteriological alignment with it they are contexts of salvation/liberation. These traditions involve different human conceptions of the Real, with correspondingly different forms of experience of the Real, and correspondingly different forms of life in response to the Real.[3]

Acknowledging the importance of culture in human experience, and invoking the massive amount of work done by historians of religion, he says:

> 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.[4]

This special relationship with the Real called religion has as both its function and its main criterion of evaluation the effectiveness of the tradition in transforming

[2]For a detailed "deconstructive reading" of Hick's pluralistic hypothesis, see: Matthew S. Haar Farris, "Participatory Wisdom in Religious Studies: Jacques Derrida, *Philo-Sophia*, and Religious Pluralism" (Dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, 2010). See especially Chapter 4, "Deconstruction's Hospitality to the Excluded Other in John Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis."

[3]Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths*, 27.

[4]Ibid., 50.

individuals from a "natural" state of self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. Hick puts it this way:

> I take the function of religion to be to facilitate what I have been calling salvation/liberation, meaning by this the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to a new centring in the Real — which of course means in practice the Real as known in a particular way within some particular tradition. And so the criterion by which to judge both a tradition as a whole and its constituent elements, including its doctrines, is soteriological. The question is how effectively they promote this salvific transformation.[5]

Finally, Hick says, "In the religious domain the pluralistic hypothesis is proposed as the most comprehensive and economical theory, from a religious as distinguished from a naturalistic point of view, with which to understand the phenomena of religious experience."[6] Hick's aspiration for the comprehensiveness and universality of his salvation-centered pluralistic hypothesis in service to religious diversity *seems* quite clear.

While Hick vehemently denies in *A Christian Theology of Religions* that his program endorses a philosophical and religious winner-take-all imperialism, such an accusation is regrettably warranted. One might ask, But why? Doesn't Hick go to great pains to justify his famous proclamation that all of the post-axial[7] religions are authentic loci for an "appropriate dispositional response" to the Real and therefore for salvation/liberation? Well, Hick establishes through induction that all of the post-axial religions are authentic loci for appropriate dispositional responses to the Real, and therefore for salvation/liberation. But here's the rub: ultimately the post-axial traditions are unwilling agents of the putatively universal process of salvation/liberation.

Hick's unintended paternalism becomes clear when his theory is given its proper status as a *religious* theory alongside the post-axial religious traditions

[5]Ibid., 76.

[6]Ibid., 74.

[7]According to Hick the "post-axial" traditions are those that originate "from very approximately 800 to very approximately 200 BCE" when human consciousness was expanded dramatically by individuals who acted as catalysts for the decisive move from "archaic" religion to religions of salvation/liberation. See: ———, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 29. Included among the "post-axial traditions" are Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and some forms of atheism. Religions of Indigenous peoples, among others, *are not* included in this category, a serious problem I'll explain below.

with their own worldviews. In other words, Hick's theory belongs to the same category as first-order, religious theories of religion. When Hick's hypothesis is not granted its intended meta-perspective, its affirmation of real religious difference is stripped away. The pluralistic hypothesis only *seems* to allow for a diversity of religious perspectives because it *allows* Christians to believe in God, Muslims to believe in Allah, and even naturalists to "believe in" Karl Marx or Charles Darwin. Nevertheless, the subtext of Hick's subjection of the post-axial traditions to the overarching Real is that the post-axial traditions are ultimately subject to the lordship of Hick's Real. This much is hardly news to anybody who has followed the issue of religious pluralism at least since the publication of *An Interpretation of Religion*. Jacques Derrida's work, however, allows us to see Hick's hypothesis differently.

That Hick's pluralistic hypothesis is imperialistic in spite of his best intentions would come as no surprise to Derrida. In his provocative essay, "Faith and Knowledge," Derrida says that when we are speaking of religion, "**we are already speaking Latin.**"[8] That is to say,

> Does not "the question of religio" ... quite simply merge, one could say, with the question of Latin? By which should be understood, beyond a "question of language and of culture", the strange phenomenon of Latinity and of its globalization. We are not speaking here of universality, even of an idea of universality, only of a process of universalization that is finite but enigmatic. ... Well beyond its strictly capitalist or politico-military figures, a hyper-imperialist appropriation has been underway now for centuries. It imposes itself in a particularly palpable manner within the conceptual apparatus of international law and of global political rhetoric. Wherever this apparatus dominates, it articulates itself through a discourse on religion. From here on, the word "religion" is calmly (and violently) applied to things which have always been and remain foreign to what this word names and arrests in its history.[9]

As with "the conceptual apparatus of international law and of global political rhetoric," *religio* is violently ensconced in the field of religious pluralism, particularly in its inscription in Hick's pluralistic hypothesis. How so? Using char-

[8] Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 64. Please note that in this and all following quotations, bold type or italics is in the original.

[9] Ibid., 66.

acteristically polysemous and suggestive language, he contends that "the entire 'religious vocabulary'" is marked by an "essentially Christian" *globalatinization* (or, in French, *mondialatinization*).

> What is involved here is a Latinization and, rather than globality, a globalization that is running out of breath ‹essoufflée›, however irresistible and imperial it still may be. What are we to think of this running out of breath? Whether it holds a future or is held in store for it, we do not know and by definition cannot know. But at the bottom such non-knowing, this expiring breath is blasting the ether of the world. Some breathe there better than others, some are stifled.[10]

So, how might Hick's pluralistic hypothesis be running out of breath, yet at the same time stifling the breathing of others? Simply put, by its very inscription as an issue of and response to *religious* pluralism, the pluralistic hypothesis determines the post-axial traditions (especially the non-Christian ones) as subjects of a violent Latinization. But why violent, and who is being subjected to what? For starters, these "religious" traditions "have always been and remain foreign to what this word [*religio*] names and arrests in its history."[11] Furthermore, under the bailiwick of the pluralistic hypothesis, the post-axial traditions are treated like foreigners accused of breaking the laws of Hick's posited religious Real and his normative process of salvation/liberation. The traditions are written up, subjected to an assumed sovereign authority, confined. The arrest is carried out by the pluralistic hypothesis, but religio — ultimately the One in charge — may very well be giving the orders. Under this Latin authority figure, the post-axial traditions have severely restricted rights.

Carrying my Derrida-inspired critique a step farther, how else might Hick's pluralistic hypothesis instantiate *globalatinization*, and what significance is there to thinking of it in terms of a "globalization that is running out of breath"? What draws my attention is the possible usefulness of the notion of "running out of breath" in association with discussions of religious pluralism. On a basic physiological level "running out of breath" is a problem. It often results from overexertion. Running out of breath, when taken to the extreme, is suffocation, the inability to take in fresh air.

Once the Derridean metaphor is applied to Hick's hypothesis, it becomes clear what happens when the post-axial traditions must speak through Hick's pluralistic

[10]Ibid., 67.
[11]Ibid.

program. As an intended meta-theory, Hick's hypothesis ultimately provides the only acceptable avenue of aspiration or respiration for the world's religions. It is ultimately and decisively the only language for giving breath to, and receiving breath from, spiritual experience.[12] If all adherents of the post-axial traditions must breathe through Hick's pluralistic hypothesis, then they (and the post-axial traditions) suffocate because they are unable to take in fresh air, or air that has not already been expelled by the pluralistic hypothesis. They are also in a sense unable to exhale, to speak, or give breath to their own spiritual knowledge or experience without final revision by the pluralistic hypothesis. Hick's hypothesis is always doing the speaking, always "running out of breath" on behalf of the post-axial traditions. *Suffocation*: neither the pluralistic hypothesis nor the religio-cultural traditions it encompasses are able to exchange fresh breath. The pluralistic hypothesis, contrary to its intended purpose, sucks all the air out of the discussion about religious pluralism.

While the pluralistic hypothesis proclaims all too much on behalf of the post-axial traditions, what Hick or his hypothesis *do not* profess, proclaim, or reveal — what remains hidden — has real significance. In *The Gift of Death* (among other texts), Derrida suggests that instances of demonstrative showing or revealing something are simultaneously instances of re-veiling, covering up, or hiding something else. Thus, an absence in a text or theory potentially has major significance. An absence, far from a mere lack of the presence of something, often signals the trace of a *secret* or *mystery*.[13]

Interestingly enough, the "secret" is often hiding in plain sight, à la Poe's "Purloined Letter." Following the predominantly Heideggerian logic of Jan Patočka in the latter's *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*, Derrida writes:

[12] I am reminded here of the etymological relation between "breath" and "spirit."

[13] While the surface level of the discussion here is about garden-variety secrets and mysteries, the more important point is that *the secret* or *mystery* as a philosophical notion or philosopheme is at play. In other words, secrets behave, operate, or function according to a particular economy, that of *the secret*. The same applies for mysteries and *mystery*. When theorizing the secret, Derrida consistently refers to "the secret," "the" accompanying "secret" in order to signify that the very economy of secrecy — philosophically, the way secrecy works — is what's being discussed. See: Jacques Derrida, "'I Have a Taste for the Secret'," in *A Taste for the Secret*, ed. Giacomo Donis and David Webb (Malden: Polity Press, 2001). I am tempted to italicize *the secret* or *mystery* when deploying them as philosophemes, but to do so may be more distracting than helpful, so I will only occasionally italicize them here for effect. Finally, although my focus is on the secret, the related notions of mystery and the sacred are simultaneously signified as well because they are "nonsynonymous substitutions" for the secret. To put it differently, the secret, mystery, and the sacred are mutually conditioning philosophemes.

> Inauthentic dissimulation, that of a masked role, bores to the extent that it claims to unveil, show, expose, exhibit, and excite curiosity. By unveiling everything it hides that whose essence resides in its remaining hidden, namely, the authentic mystery of the person. Authentic mystery must remain mysterious, and we should approach it only by letting it be what it is in truth — veiled, withdrawn, dissimulated. Authentic dissimulation is inauthentically dissimulated by the violence of unveiling.[14]

For Patočka, showing off the undiscoverable secret amounts to "inauthentic" dissimulation. Such revealing is bombast, superficial, incomplete, and ultimately illusory since the real secret remains hidden. In fact, this simulated dissimulation is violent to the secret or mystery, pushing it further into concealment. The "authentic mystery," in order to maintain its secret status, retreats. Derrida continues:

> if one holds to the logic of (inauthentic) dissimulation that dissimulates (authentic) dissimulation by means of the simple gesture of exposing or exhibiting it, of seeing in order to see or having it seen in order to see (which is the Heideggerian definition of "curiosity"), then one has here an example of a logic of secrecy. It is never better kept than in being exposed. Dissimulation is never better dissimulated than by means of this particular kind of dissimulation that consists in making a show of exposing it, unveiling it, laying it bare. The mystery of being is dissimulated by this inauthentic dissimulation that consists of exposing being as a force, showing it behind its mask, behind its fiction or its simulacrum. Is it therefore surprising to see Patočka evoke Poe's "Purloined Letter"?[15]

Derrida is hardly uncritical of Patočka's approach, particularly the way in which "Everything Patočka tends to discredit — inauthenticity, technology, boredom, individualism, masks, roles — derives from a'metaphysics of force.'"[16] Having said that, if we strip from Patočka's work the offending authentic/inauthentic binary, with its concomitant metaphysical determinations, his insight into the economy of revealing and re-veiling is quite helpful. In an attempt to show the secret, it recedes, repelled by its double, its representation, its simulacrum, its other. For

[14]———, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills, Paperback ed., Religion and Postmodernism (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 37.

[15]Ibid., 38–39.

[16]Ibid., 37.

a literary example of the nasty ("inauthentic") dissimulation of what really ought to — and ultimately *does* — remain a mystery, think of the way Dr. Frankenstein responds to his "creation" once he realizes what he has brought into being.

According to Derrida, we can only approach the secret. Like the sacred, the sacrosanct, *l'indemne* (the unscathed), the holy (*heilig*), and the immune,[17] the secret maintains itself by remaining inaccessible.[18] Or, to put it another way, the sacred or the secret *as such* cannot be revealed or exposed.

> In consensus, in possible transparency, the secret is never broached/breached [*entamé*]. If I am to share something, to communicate, objectify, thematize, the condition is that there be something non-thematizable, non-objectifiable, non-sharable. And this "something" is an absolute secret, it is the *ab-solutum* itself in the etymological sense of the term, i. e., that which is cut off from any bond, detached, and which cannot itself bind; it is the condition of any bond but it cannot bind itself to anything — that is the absolute, and if there is something absolute it is secret. It is in this direction that I try to read Kierkegaard, the sacrifice of Isaac, the absolute as secret and as *tout autre* [wholly other]. Not transcendent, not even beyond myself, but a "making appear" to me: a resistance to the daylight of phenomenality that is radical, irreversible, to which any sort of form may be given — death, for example, though it is not death either.[19]

The upshot here is that the secret is the condition for revelation, the latter necessarily being removed from the former. The mystery remains *tout autre*, even

[17]Throughout "Faith and Knowledge," Derrida deals with a host of nonsynonymous substitutions for the sacred and the way they invoke one another due to their grammatological relationship. These nonsynonymous substitutions all play a vital role in autoimmunization, the name Derrida gives to the general economy of religion.

[18]The secret and the other nonsynonymous substitutions for the sacred appear to have agency here, but the matter is much more complicated than that. For the sake of simplicity I am using metaphorical language that suggests agency or intentionality where it doesn't exactly belong. Derrida does, however, use a good deal of life-related language when theorizing these quasi-transcendental terms in "Faith and Knowledge." To wit, the very economy of religion, namely *autoimmunization*, bears a strong relation to life, survival, and health, so I am not taking liberties in claiming that the secret or mystery "maintains itself." This claim of course begs the question of whether or not the *mystery* or the *secret* technically has an "itself." For the purpose of this article I need not leap down the Derridean rabbit hole; the secret has an "itself" *so to speak*. For those interested in the precise stance Derrida takes, I recommend a thorough examination of "Faith and Knowledge."

[19]Derrida, "'I Have a Taste for the Secret'," 57.

when we endeavor to represent it. In order to remain secret, the secret cuts itself off from its revelation, from the "light" of knowledge, always enduring as "unseen," mysterious. If Derrida has "a taste for the secret," it is nothing less than an excessive respect for that which must, and does, remain absolutely esoteric.

In light of Derrida's insights concerning the secret and its dubious dissimulation as a representation of the unrepresentable, I conclude that as careful as Hick is to avoid overselling his theory of religious pluralism (it is, after all, a hypothesis[20]), he is nevertheless too sanguine about revealing (in fact a re-veiling, a covering-over-again) his pluralistic secret. Like Frankenstein, he constructs a monstrance for his holy mystery — *his* relationship to the Real, and *his* relationship to the pluralism of the world's religions — and inscribes this monstrance with a metaphysical name for that which it ensconces: "the Real." The problem occurs when he determines that his pluralistic *secret*, deployed exoterically, could serve as a framework for preserving and protecting the post-axial traditions from one another (and, more importantly, from the "extra-axial" religions, a claim I will argue more specifically below). In order to make the Real equally accessible to all of the post-axial religions, Hick super-sizes his monstrance, thereby creating a philosophical safe in which all of the post-axial religious ultimates are locked up under the protective auspices of "the Real." Ironically, the effect of this monstrous monstrance is that it further removes *the Real* (if there is such a thing) from human grasp, both epistemically and ontologically. "The Real" (in quotes, locked up), is simply not the ultimate that the religions claim to know and experience. It replaces the ultimates of the traditions as the pinnacle of religious belief, yet the Real (even free of Hick's implied quotation marks) belongs to the pantheon of no one, *not even Hick*. To put the problem in Derrida's terms, the Real is nobody's *secret*, nobody's *mystery*, not even Hick's, as *the secret* cannot be revealed. Again, ironically, Hick's pluralistic hypothesis speaks for everybody in declaring the Real to be *the* secret of the post-axial traditions. In effect, the post-axial traditions must believe to be ultimately true a postulate of Hick's inductive reasoning that is locked up in a super-sized monstrance for safe-keeping, furthermore replacing their own experienced and understood sacred realities.

In all of this Derridean veiling and un-veiling, telling and withholding of secrets, let's not forget what Hick says about the function of religion:

[20] Hick does not intend for his pluralistic hypothesis to be a logical proof; rather, he understands it to be the "best explanation" for the diverse forms of human religiosity. He would have us judge the impact of his theory's explanatory power as a whole and not in its formal logical strength. For a cogent exposition of Hick's position, see: Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths*, 49–51.

> I take the function of religion to be to facilitate what I have been calling salvation/liberation, meaning by this the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to a new centring in the Real — which of course means in practice the Real as known in a particular way within some particular tradition. And so the criterion by which to judge both a tradition as a whole and its constituent elements, including its doctrines, is soteriological. The question is how effectively they promote this salvific transformation.[21]

Given that for Hick the very function of religion is salvation/liberation, and given that the definition of religion is inextricably tied to this same function, shouldn't it be safe to assume that the pluralistic hypothesis speaks on behalf of the salvific/liberative efficacy of "pre-axial and extra-axial religion, such as African primal and native American religion"?[22] In other words, shouldn't one take for granted that Indigenous religious traditions are soteriologically oriented responses to the Real, just as the post-axial religious traditions are? Hick's text falters:

> these [traditions] are not, if I understand them rightly, salvific in the sense of seeking a radical human transformation, but are more concerned with keeping communal life on an even keel both in itself and in relation to the sacred. They are communal rather than individual responses to the Real.[23]

But how do non-salvific, communal responses to the Real fit into the process of individual transformation from a state of self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness, i. e. what Hick calls salvation/liberation? How do the pre- and extra-axial religions fit into the pluralistic hypothesis? This much is hardly clear in Hick's texts. Can or can't Hick's program speak on behalf of everybody according to the professed aspiration of the pluralistic hypothesis?

There is *no* section in *A Christian Theology of Religions* or *An Interpretation of Religion* on appropriate communal responses to the Real and how that process works. Based on Hick's own confession that "pre-axial and extra-axial religion, such as African primal and native American religion" is simply not salvifically oriented — and based on his almost complete silence on Indigenous religions — the pluralistic hypothesis is at best a philosophical account of the so-called "great" post-axial traditions. It's troubling that a theory of religions deemed to

[21] Ibid., 76.
[22] Ibid., 108.
[23] Ibid., 109–110.

be “pluralistic” defines away or turns its back on a crucial portion of the world’s religious traditions, especially given that it claims to offer “the ‘best explanation’, i. e. the most comprehensive and economical explanation, from a religious point of view, of the facts of the history of religions.”[24] Hick claims to offer the “best explanation” yet he does not explain how pre- and extra-axial religious traditions fit into his meta-theory. He does not speak on behalf of the ultimate significance and merit of these apparently *non*-great religions. Here the pluralistic hypothesis runs out of breath, finally has nothing to say, where its professed commitment to the spirit of pluralism falls silent.

In conclusion, the destabilization of the *religio* at the heart of theories of religious pluralism is necessary if the discussion about the so-called problem of religious pluralism is to truly deal with *pluralism*. Hick and his main critics are caught up in a continuous exhale, a running out of breath, so perhaps a breath of fresh air would be healthy. The contribution of new voices, the voices of *others*, may serve to honor the magnitude of the mystery of religious pluralism and point the way forward for more truly pluralistic theorizations of the diversity of the world’s religious traditions.

WORKS CITED

Derrida, Jacques. “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone.” In *Acts of Religion*, edited by Gil Anidjar, 42–101. New York: Routledge, 2002.

——. “‘I Have a Taste for the Secret’.” In *A Taste for the Secret*, edited by Giacomo Donis and David Webb. Malden: Polity Press, 2001.

——. *The Gift of Death*. Translated by David Wills. Paperback ed, Religion and Postmodernism. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Haar Farris, Matthew S. “Participatory Wisdom in Religious Studies: Jacques Derrida, *Philo-Sophia*, and Religious Pluralism.” Dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, 2010.

Hick, John. *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths*. 1st American ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.

[24] Ibid., 51.

——. *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.