

# Possibility of John Hick's Threefold Typology & Religious Pluralism: A Critical Study.

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**Abstract**

A careful investigation on the concepts of Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Religious Pluralism within a framework of Threefold Typology on soteriological grounds has shown some difficulties to achieve Hick's mission for social development. That is to say, he strives to persuade fellow Christians to view the other world religions as equally authentic as Christianity and to enhance a peaceful co-existence with adherents of different religions and minimize religious conflicts in both community and global levels.

Focusing on the philosophy of religion, theology of religions, and religious experience, this research explicates Kantian distinction between noumenon and phenomenon, Copernican revolution, the problem of conflicting truth-claims, epistemological accounts of faith. Hick's criteriology to assess world religions and alternative approaches to Threefold Typology is also shown to analyze the strengths and shortcomings of Threefold Typology.

By differentiating 'self-committing-affirmation' and 'attitude and action,' it revealed that Hick had placed some saintly figures in the category of Exclusivists and Inclusivists who should be praised and not be condemned by Hick's own criteria. The research found the urgent need to analyze what Hick emphasized on soteriological grounds. After clarifying the arguments of impasse or deadlock of the Typology by other scholars, 'teleological/existential grounds,' which refer to the mere 'transformation' from self-centeredness to

compassionate-centeredness as common potentialities to spiritually and morally grow as individuals, leaving aside 'salvation' controversy. The research concludes that the Threefold Typology on teleological/existential grounds becomes a more viable taxonomy to achieve Hick's intention; the harmonious living with adherents of different world faiths and to direct ecumenical and inter-religious communications with mutual respect at both local and global levels.

**Keywords:** Exclusivism  
Inclusivism  
Religious Pluralism  
Ultimate Reality  
Significance  
Interpretation

## 1. Introduction

As Masao Abe described, Europe has enjoyed a religious monopoly of Christianity in recent centuries (Abe, 1995, p.17). Although his statement is true to some extent, the monopoly of Christianity does not denote the peaceful co-existence with the other Christians when human history reflects the past two World Wars as well as the wars of a few centuries; people in Christians nations were fighting and killing Christians of other nations in Europe due to various reasons, but mainly due to political and economic ones.

For some centuries, generally speaking, religious institutions did not encourage their followers in the congregation to visit the churches of other denominations, nor did they welcome those who openly confessed to other branches of the Christian faith. Unfortunately, it is evident throughout

history that human beings often fought in the name of God or other divine names. among Christian churches, be it Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox. The peace-promoting dialogues or interactions among deferent denominations had not been easy. A testimony indicates the difficulty of worshipping the same triune God between the Protestant and the Catholic Church members. Just about a century ago in Switzerland, it was strenuous for a Protestant believer to participate in the Mass in the Catholic Church, as Brother Roger recalls,<sup>1</sup> a founder and an abbot in the Taize community and who dedicated his life to ecumenical movements. Brother Roger remembers how brave his maternal grandmother was at that time to visit the Catholic Church as a Protestant Christian (Spink, 2015, p.9). Inspired by his grandmother his father, who was a Protestant pastor, Brother Roger was determined

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<sup>1</sup> Brother Roger received Templeton Prize and UNESCO Prize for Peace Education in 1974 and 1988 respectively. Tragically, he was stabbed to death during the service in Taize in 2005 at the age of 90.

to reconcile the divided Christian followers in France since the 1940s. After WWII and the Second Vatican Council, the Taize community gradually started to grow, the number of brothers from almost all denominations gathered and increased. The number of accommodations also increased to welcome young adults to sing with harmony and to pray in silence to glorify Christ together (Spink, 2005). These accounts testify that ecumenical movement and dialogue amongst Christian institutions had been difficult until recently. The tendency that the Catholic congregations condemning the Protestant congregations and vice versa was still a norm during the 1940s in many parts of Europe.

The Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church excommunicated each other in 1054 and the excommunication was lifted only in 1965 as a

monumental outcome of the Second Vatican Council (The Second Vatican Council, 1965).<sup>2</sup> The excommunication, which took place in 1521 for the Protestant reformer Martin Luther has not been lifted yet. Thus, the ecumenical dialogues and interactions amongst different Christian denominations had been a long process roughly until the end of the Second Vatican Council.

Among intellectual circles, the idea of tolerance of different religions occurred earlier. A figure such as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who had an amicable friendship with Jewish philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn, wrote a play called *Nathan the Wise* in 1779, which dealt with religious tolerance and a peaceful co-existence among Christians, Jews, and Muslims. However, this play was not performed during his lifetime; it was first performed posthumously in 1783.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Joint Catholic-Orthodox Declaration of His Holiness Pope Paul VI and The Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I.

Furthermore, the significant fact is that before the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church had been holding the dogma, *extra ecclesiam* no salvation outside of the Church for more than a millennium.

In addition, most of the growing fundamental Protestant churches are also holding this position as of today. The Pentecostal church is a good example in modern secular countries as a sociologist Peter Berger pointed out (Berger, 2014, p.24). Berger initially predicted that the more secularization progresses, the less the number of religious followers will be; Berger thought that secularization is “the process by which sector of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols” (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p.107). However, to his surprise, he found out the fact that the members of religious organizations did not diminished, admitting that his prediction was wrong. Instead, the numbers of the Pentecostal followers grew

much faster pace than that of the conventional mainline Protestant churches (Berger, Davie, & Fokas, 2008, p.10). In a time where migration is accelerating, it is significant to find out a way to minimize religious conflicts.

## 2. Objectives

1. To provide a detailed explication of Threefold Typology on soteriological grounds.
2. To provide a detailed exposition of Hick’s Pluralistic Hypothesis and epistemological accounts related to his Religious Pluralism.
3. To provide sufficient arguments from various scholars who are both for and against Hick’s Religious Pluralism and those who are critical of the taxonomy *per se*.
4. To provide clear criteria, Hick utilized to measure the validity and authenticity of Christianity and other world religions.
5. To provide Threefold Typology on different grounds, which becomes

more viable and result-oriented to achieve Hick's intentionality.

### 3. Research Hypothesis

1. This research investigates the reasons that Hick criticizes both Exclusivism and Inclusivism and advocates Religious Pluralism as the most optimal choice. Following his arguments to refute both Exclusivism and Inclusivism, the research also explores Hick's intentionality to promote Religious Pluralism as a solution for the negative incidents that had happened in the past and will possibly happen to adherents of different faiths in the future.

2. The research layouts the exposition of Hick's thought; which are both his Pluralistic Hypothesis and epistemological accounts pertaining to how human individual can perceive their own religious significance during knowing, interpreting, and experiencing the significance as the divine presence. By conducting a critical analysis of Threefold Typology, the researcher

illustrates and demonstrates the clear argumentative points of other scholars pertaining to Typology. By understanding various Christian scholars' points as well as a Buddhist scholar's perspective, the research gains a broader view and insights into the Typology's validity and inadequacy.

3. The research finally attempts to synthesize some of the ideas acquired from the previous chapters. The researcher incorporates both Hick's ideas and other scholars' ideas to reinvent the Threefold Typology. This dissertation attempts to reconcile the heated debates on the problem of truth-claims among Exclusivists, Inclusivists, and Religious Pluralists.

By revisiting Threefold Typology, the readers will understand how humankind can increase one's self-understanding, spirituality, inner peace as well as tolerant views to religious others. John Hick was a scholar who added fuel to many controversies. However, by carefully analyzing Hick's criteriology to validate the post-axial

world religions and by understanding his extensive knowledge about various religious scriptures, and by knowing how his thoughts were evolved over the course of his life. The researcher utilizes some critics' idea and the researcher's own idea, but mostly Hick's own ideas to reinterpret the taxonomy as Threefold Typology on teleological/existential grounds as a viable solution to achieve Hick's intentionality and reduce the exclusive nature of each camp among all Exclusivists, Inclusivists and Religious Pluralists.

#### 4. Significance of this Study

After World War II, Christian theologians and ministers of both Europe and North America encountered the urgent need to reconsider their Christian theology and philosophy of religion to minimize conflicts and promote peaceful order within

their own countries and on a global scale. John Hick, as a young university student, was very much against physical violence; for him, the war between nations is a collective insanity of killing, maiming, and destroying our common human assets, and he refused to take part in the war as a 'conscientious objector.'<sup>3</sup> Instead, he joined the Friends' (i.e. Quakers') Ambulance Unit and served in several hospitals (Hick et al., 1996, p. 31).

He initially had been holding an orthodox position. However, his conservative view evolved into a more and more liberal and pluralistic view after obtaining the H. G. Wood chair of theology at the University of Birmingham in 1967 (Hick, 2002, p.143). He witnessed that the city of Birmingham had started accepting immigrants from the Caribbean islands and Indian subcontinent who created Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu communities along

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<sup>3</sup> Cambridge English Dictionary defines 'conscientious objector' as a person who refuses to work in the armed forces for moral or religious reasons. Cf. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>



with long-established Jewish communities during the 1950s and 60s; later, he also noticed several Buddhist groups were also coming; at the same time, he also realized that the neo-Nazi National Front was active in the area, generating prejudice and hatred and promoting violence against black and brown people and against Jews (Hick et al., 1996, p.37).

Hick was not only involved in various community relations organizations, but he was one of the founders of the activist AFFOR (All Faiths for One Race) and found opportunities to visit the temples, mosques, synagogues and to converse with those religious leaders (Hick et al., 1996, p.38).

Although Alan Race firstly introduced Threefold Typology classification in Christian Theology of Religions in 1983, Hick elaborated his idea of Religious Pluralism by comparing two other formulas, namely, Exclusivism and Inclusivism in an effort to solve the problem of conflicting truth-claims

among different religions to find common ground to construct philosophically coherent arguments among major world religions. The researcher explores Hick's Religious Pluralism from two different and yet strongly connected philosophies. The first attempt is to explain what Hick's Threefold Typology is and critically analyze what had been discussed about Religious Pluralism within the framework of Threefold Typology. The second attempt is to examine his Pluralistic Hypothesis. The third attempt examine what kind of framework will be beneficial and constructive for communication after conducting the textual research both for and against the Typology by understanding the epistemological accounts of faith: how human beings came to know God or Ultimate Reality if there is one. The last section layouts Hick's criteriology to assess the world religions. Thus, chapter two focuses on the exposition of Hick's philosophy of Threefold Typology.

The chapter three, the researcher aims to illustrate both criticisms and defenses of Threefold Typology from the lens of other eminent scholars. By understanding other critics' philosophical or theological arguments and by presenting alternative approaches by Gavin D'Costa, Paul Knitter, Mark Heim, Perry Schmidt-Leukel, among other scholars, reveals both shortcomings and strengths of those scholars' arguments.

This research can be useful for readers due to mainly the three reasons. The first reason is to address the crucial issues in ecumenical and inter-religious dialogues within the framework of Threefold Typology.

The second reason is that the researcher found room to reinterpret the Typology which can better suit in pluralistic societies after conducting a critical study of the criticisms and defenses of it.

## 5. Scope of Study

Research is limited to Threefold Typology, Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis, which is the core philosophical base of Religious Pluralism and epistemological accounts related to Religious Pluralism. The research is a textual analysis based on his works of the subject on Threefold Typology and Religious Pluralism and relevant material of his defenses and criticisms made by scholars who are or had been proponents and opponents in the field.

## 6. Definitions of the Terms Used

**Exclusivism:** It is a self-committing-affirmational position that claims that there is no salvation except for Christians, which had been based on the central dogma *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, no salvation outside of the Church for the Catholic Church until the Second Vatican Council, and this view is still well-accepted position among many, if not the most of, fundamental Christians (Hick, 2006, p.150).

**Inclusivism:** It is a self-committing-affirmational position that insists that there is salvation for people of different religions, but salvation must always come from Christ. The prominent figure who advocates this position is Karl Rahner (Hick, 2006, p.152).

**Religious Pluralism:** There are some different versions of Religious Pluralism. However, Hick's Religious Pluralism indicates that there is salvation for all major world religions such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, and they are as equally authentic and valid as Christianity (Hick, 1995, p.ix) (Hick, 2006, p.153).

**Ultimate Reality:** Ultimate Reality is a single transcendental ineffable reality that all major religious people are responding to. Despite the different forms of worship, language, tradition, all religions are responding to the same one transcendental Ultimate Reality. Hick admits this idea stems from the distinction between noumenon and phenomenon explained by

Immanuel Kant. One metaphor from a Muslim poet Jalal Rumi would be, "The lamps are different, but the light is that same," which means that the light that facilitates different lamps' function and purpose is the same (Nicholson, 1978, p.166).

**Significance:** It represents the fundamental environment where human cognition functions, it also indicates the objects, persons, and other sensual inputs that constitute our consciousness. Hick uses this terminology to explain the nature of faith from the perspective of the epistemology of faith (Hick, 1988, p.98-99).

**Interpretation:** It is a correlated cognitive activity to apprehend all the significances. Hick classifies the interpretation into three different settings, an interpretation towards nature, the other humankind, and the divine. The combination of significance and interpretation renders action to appropriate the environment where human beings inhabit (Hick, 1988, p.101-102).

## 7. Research Methodology

A critical study of the subject will be carried out by explicating the strengths and shortcomings of Hick's thought on Religious Pluralism and Threefold Typology. In doing so, a dialectical and critical method will be followed, which will bring arguments for and against his thought under criticism too.

## 8. Summary and Conclusion

Threefold Typology on soteriological grounds is not result-oriented because of its inherent shortcomings in providing an agreeable discourse for co-existence and harmony among different adherents of faiths. Instead, Threefold Typology on teleological/existential grounds is suggested as a viable solution.

The main challenge of this dissertation was to address the fundamental problem in classical Threefold Typology and Hick's utilization of

Threefold Typology, within which he dismissed the other two camps and proposed Hick's Religious Pluralist is the most optimal choice among the three. By showing his arguments in Threefold Typology on soteriological grounds, it turned out that Hick's dialectic argument, i.e., Exclusivism as thesis, Inclusivism as antithesis, Religious Pluralism as synthesis, did not result in enhancing the actual people of life as Hick wished. Therefore, the researcher has suggested Hick's Threefold Typology on transformational grounds. What are transformational grounds? In Irenaeus terms, it examines the transformation from the image of God to the likeness of God. In Hick's terms; it assesses from self-centeredness to Ultimate Reality-centeredness. The Bible reads, "You will know them by their fruits...A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit" (Matt: 7.16-18).<sup>4</sup> Both refers to "transformation"

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<sup>4</sup> All the Bible citations are from NRSV.

in a religious sense; the transformation becomes possible due to either one's own practice by following the path of religious teachings or one's own will to believe and accept the present life by retaining a profound faith in the divine being.

Teleological transformation, in short, refers to the actualization of human potentialities causing positive results for society or the world. An analogy to the teleological transformation would be a seed of an apple that can grow into an apple tree, which bears many apple fruits from the tree. Accordingly, the manifestation of human potentialities is the transformation from an infant to a social reformer, a political leader, a great scientist, a great scholar, a medical doctor who saves many people's lives, a religious saint, and so forth. In a way, everyone is connected to society so that everyone has one's role and potential for teleological growth, impacting one another in the community. However, in another way,

it is also true that not everyone can be a historical figure who became known to many others with tremendous positive effects in the process of social or global and spiritual development.

Consequently, the existential transformation has its significance to religious followers. Even if most human beings think that their existence was not fully actualized or that they wish they could be more successful or influential figures in a secular sense during this lifetime, they can still transform themselves as the ones who can wholeheartedly accept life as it is and its fate of death and liberate themselves from human estrangement and suffering. All post-axial world religions teachings spread merciful, graceful, and compassionate attitudes towards the sick, the poor, and the old as well as all the other ordinary people, and their possibilities for transformation from human bondage to liberation or from misery to happiness are always open to them as a realistic option.

Threefold Typology on soteriological grounds could neither solve the conflicting truth-claims nor promote a peaceful co-existence due to a priori disagreements on salvific knowledge. Two critics suggested “impasse,”<sup>5</sup> or “deadlock”<sup>6</sup> of Threefold Typology on soteriological grounds, and one critic claimed a need for “a different ground”<sup>7</sup> other than *salvatio n*.

Therefore, the researcher suggested the need for the grounding shift to teleological/existential grounds to endorse awareness and transformation which inquire all humankind to view the religious others by abiding by the minimum requirements as a form of love and patience of the vertical criterion,<sup>8</sup> and the Golden Rule of one of the horizontal criterion<sup>9</sup> as a common ethical criterion among all post-axial world religions as a posteriori question

throughout each individual’s entire life, which fitted Hick’s own criteriology and intentionality as well.

## 9. Recommendations for further Research

The researcher believes that further study needs a closer look at inner human existence and a posteriori attitude and action. Among Christian communities, the ecumenical dialogues must carry on without hindering inter-religious dialogues, and the vector to the divine should be adjusted and re-adjusted whenever religious conflicts emerge. In this sense, after the suggestion of the Threefold Typology on teleological/existential grounds, the recommendation of further study is to investigate a focal point for individuals’ transformation from suffering to the equanimity of human consciousness and experience among all post-axial world religions.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Barnes, 2002, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Fredericks, 1999, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Valea, 2013, p. 234.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Gal 5:22-23. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

<sup>9</sup> Hick advocates that all post-axial world religions share four main characteristics; soteriological transformation, saintliness, the Golden Rule and ethical criterion by their holy scriptures.

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