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Hick's “accident of birth”: religio-philosophical answer to Nigerian pluralistic question in the Fourth Industrial Revolution

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Hick's "accident of birth": religio-philosophical answer to Nigerian pluralistic question in the Fourth Industrial Revolution

Amos Francis Dike¹

¹ National Open University of Nigeria, Nigeria, paamosdike@gmail.com 

Abstract

Religious *manyness* has been pictured as another way of defining religious plurality or diversity. Nigeria's religious pluralism has presented a challenging and conflicting relationship among faith adherents. Nigeria's rich religious pluralism is a strength and a challenge, particularly in the face of the transformative forces of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. This paper explores John Hick's concept of "accident of birth" as a possible religio-philosophical answer to navigating this complex landscape. The research examines how Hick's idea, which posits that religious affiliation is largely due to circumstance, can be applied to promote interfaith understanding and tolerance in Nigeria. It investigates the resonance of this concept with the lived experiences of Nigerians from diverse religious backgrounds. Furthermore, the study analyzes how Hick's framework can be adapted to address the new challenges and opportunities presented by technological advancements in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The work adopts phenomenological and theoretical approaches premised on the framework of system theory, which is most suitable for studying a heterogeneous nationhood. Hick's accident of birth is that all religions are culturally conditioned responses to the same Ultimate Reality. By critically evaluating the applicability of "accident of birth" in the Nigerian context, the research contributes to fostering greater religious tolerance and dialogue in a nation with a vibrant but complex religious makeup. The research uncovers that Hick's accident of birth, if clearly understood and practiced, will bring peaceful co-existence and an inclusive society to Nigeria instead of crisis and terrorism, thereby preparing the ground for Fourth Industrial Revolution. Religion had become a fertile ground for the manipulation of the masses and the bane of the Nigerian socio-political crisis.

Keywords:

accident of birth; religio-philosophical; pluralism; Fourth Industrial Revolution; phenomenology.

O "acidente de nascimento" de Hick: resposta religiofilosófica à questão pluralista nigeriana na Quarta Revolução Industrial

Resumo

A *multiplicidade* religiosa tem sido retratada como outra forma de definir a pluralidade ou diversidade religiosa. O pluralismo religioso da Nigéria tem apresentado uma relação desafiadora e conflituosa entre os fiéis. O rico pluralismo religioso da Nigéria é um ponto forte e um desafio, especialmente diante das forças transformadoras da Quarta Revolução Industrial. Este artigo explora o conceito de "acidente de nascimento" de John Hick como uma possível resposta religioso-filosófica para navegar por esse cenário complexo. A pesquisa examina como a ideia de Hick, que afirma que a afiliação religiosa se deve às circunstâncias em grande parte, pode ser aplicada para promover o entendimento e a tolerância religiosa na Nigéria. O estudo investiga a ressonância desse conceito com as experiências vividas por nigerianos de diversas origens religiosas. Além disso, o estudo analisa como o modelo de Hick pode ser adaptado para lidar com os novos desafios e oportunidades apresentados pelos avanços tecnológicos da Quarta Revolução Industrial. O trabalho adota abordagens fenomenológicas e teóricas baseadas no arcabouço da teoria dos sistemas, que é a mais adequada para estudar uma nacionalidade heterogênea. O acidente de nascimento de Hick é que todas as religiões são respostas culturalmente condicionadas à mesma Realidade Suprema. Ao avaliar criticamente a aplicabilidade do "acidente de nascimento" no contexto nigeriano, a pesquisa contribui para promover uma maior tolerância religiosa e o diálogo em uma nação com uma composição religiosa vibrante, mas complexa. A pesquisa revela que o acidente de nascimento de Hick, quando compreendido e praticado, trará coexistência pacífica e uma sociedade inclusiva à Nigéria, em vez de crises e terrorismo, preparando assim o terreno para a Quarta Revolução Industrial. A religião havia se tornado um terreno fértil para a manipulação das massas e a crise sociopolítica nigeriana.

Palavras-chave:

acidente de nascimento;
religiofilosófico;
pluralismo; Quarta
Revolução Industrial;
fenomenologia.

Introduction

The challenge of reconciling religious absolutism with the reality of religious pluralism has emerged as a central topic in contemporary theological and philosophical discourse. Originating within Christian thought, this debate has increasingly focused on the complex interrelations between Christianity, Islam, and other major religions, especially in the Nigerian context. In the context of religio-philosophical discourse,

religious pluralism¹ is often treated under three headings of exclusivism,² inclusivism,³ and pluralism.⁴ Exclusivists contend that their faith is the sole truth and that other religions are inherently false, rendering coexistence impossible. Historically, Christian thought, confronted with religious diversity, often adopted an exclusivist stance, asserting Christianity as the exclusive path to salvation and dismissing the claims of other faiths. In contrast, inclusivists believe their faith is ultimate but accommodate other religions as partial or imperfect expressions of the same truth. Pluralists, however, posit that all religions are equally valid paths to a shared ultimate reality. This latter view is generally difficult to reconcile with the core tenets of most religions, including Islam.

Religious discourse has continued to engage the attention of various scholars both locally and nationally. Religio-philosophical discourse is like the narrative of the blind and the elephant where the blind men encountered an elephant. The first, grasping a leg, declared it resembled the sturdy trunk of a tree. The second, touching the trunk, disagreed, insisting it was akin to a large snake. The third, feeling the side, dismissed their claims, comparing the creature to a towering wall. Each man was certain of his perception, oblivious to the fact that they were all interacting with the same animal.⁵ This discussion employs the parable of the blind men and the elephant to illustrate the

¹ Religious pluralism points to the existence of many groups of people, whether ethnic, political or religious in a society. Therefore, a religiously plural society refers to a society where there are many religious beliefs, concepts, creeds or ideologies. This perhaps is comparable to a society with multiplicity of religious thoughts and ideologies. Pluralism is a belief in difference. It is a philosophy supporting diversity, religious tolerance, and multiculturalism. Pluralism has always been controversial, as nearly all societies experience a tension between diversity and homogeneity, which can both give benefits and create problems for a society. Meister defines it as: the existence in one society of a number of groups that belong to different race or have different political or religious beliefs and the principle that these different groups can live together in peace in one society.

² This applies to those who believe that they are religious and only their religion, possesses divinely revealed truth and offers a path towards salvation. This position tends to regard other religious faiths as either grossly misguided or outrightly satanic. Religious Exclusivism maintains that only one world religion is correct and all the others are mistaken views of people on the idea of the ultimate reality and relationship between that reality and the universe and its habitats.

³ Inclusivism is one of several approaches in religious studies, anthropology, or sociology to understand the relationship between religious diversity. Within religio-philosophical discourse, inclusivism is the belief that, although only one belief system is true, aspects of its truth can be found in other religions. This allows one to assert the absolute truth of one's own religion while affirming that salvation is also possible for non-Christians.

⁴ Gavin D'Costa, "Christian Theology of Religion" In *St. Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology* Edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al (USA: St. Mary's College, 2022), 234. <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/ChristianTheologyofReligions> Accessed 8th May 2024.

⁵ John Godfrey Saxe (1816-1887), "The Blind man and the Elephant. This poem suggests that humans have a tendency to claim absolute truth based on their limited, subjective experience as they ignore other people's limited, subjective experiences which may be equally true.

diverse perspectives of the world's major religions, each interacting with a singular divine reality (God) without full comprehension. To delve deeper into the core themes of exclusivity, inclusivity, and pluralism, this research necessitates a theoretical examination of John Hick's "accident of birth" concept, a cornerstone in the discourse on religious diversity. It is crucial to acknowledge that Nigeria's religious landscape extends beyond Christianity and Islam, often overlooking the significance of African Traditional Religion.⁶ Generally, individuals tend to adhere to the religion of their upbringing. This adherence, coupled with interfaith tensions, has fostered a society plagued by instability, violence, and economic stagnation. Given Nigeria's diverse religious landscape, a rational response is imperative. While addressing religious diversity is complex, conceptual frameworks can provide valuable insights. This research examines Hick's "accident of birth" theory and its implications for Nigeria's religious pluralism, particularly in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. It seeks to understand how Hick's concept can be applied to Nigeria's challenges, its resonance with the experiences of Nigerian adherents, and its potential to foster interfaith dialogue in the face of rapid technological and societal change.

This study is significant because Hick is speaking out of the experience of ministering in a multi-faith society like Nigeria who is characterized by religious tensions and conflicts. Nigeria is a nation with a rich and complex religious landscape, marked by both diversity and interfaith tensions. The Fourth Industrial Revolution presents new challenges and opportunities for interfaith relations. This study explores the potential of Hick's "accident of birth" to foster greater tolerance and understanding in this context. It tries to investigate the potential impact of the Fourth Industrial Revolution on religious beliefs, practices, and interfaith relations in Nigeria. An attempt is made to critically evaluate the applicability of Hick's concept in the Nigerian context, considering the nation's unique religious landscape and socio-political realities. And to develop recommendations for promoting interfaith dialogue and understanding in Nigeria, drawing on insights from Hick's philosophy and the realities of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. By examining the concept's applicability in a religiously diverse nation like Nigeria, the study contributes to broaden discussions on religious pluralism in the African context. The research sheds light on how religious identities might evolve in the

⁶ Christianity and Islam according to the National Population Commission are the major religions in Nigeria. They also have sacred books that carries their confessional statements and believes.

face of technological advancements, and how philosophical frameworks like Hick's can be used to navigate these changes. The study's findings are valuable for policymakers, religious leaders, and civil society organizations working to promote peaceful co-existence and social cohesion in Nigeria.

The focus is not about human redemption as expressed in the Christian soteriology but creating a conducive society where the fourth industrial revolution can thrive. This way, Hick's accident of birth presents itself as a subject of compromise for religions to manifest its functions of uniting the society as taught by the functionalist theory. This way, every religion becomes a custodian of Divine redemptive plan once it can provide a platform of peaceful co-existence and inclusive society for the fourth industrial revolution. In this understanding, religions are true in as much as they direct believers to the Real by producing right changes in the believer and society and are false with regard to their claim to absolute truth.

Exclusivism

Exclusivism posits that a single religion holds the exclusive path to divine truth and salvation, dismissing other faiths as erroneous or even malevolent. This perspective asserts that only one religion accurately interprets ultimate reality and its relationship to the world. While the term "exclusivism" encompasses a broad range of beliefs, it's essential to differentiate between doctrinal exclusivism, focused on the sole truth of a specific belief system, and salvific exclusivism, which emphasizes the exclusive path to salvation offered by a particular religion. Doctrinal exclusivism maintains that one's own religious teachings are accurate, while differing beliefs are incorrect. Salvific exclusivism, primarily a Christian concept referring to salvation or deliverance, asserts that only adherents of a specific religion will attain ultimate spiritual fulfillment. Unfortunately, there is no widely accepted neutral equivalent for this term. Salvific exclusivism is a specific form of doctrinal exclusivism. Christian salvific exclusivists not only assert the truth of Christian doctrines but also contend that explicit belief in these doctrines is essential for attaining ultimate spiritual well-being. This perspective is deeply rooted in Christian history, particularly due to the biblical passages attributing divinity to Jesus (John's Gospel) and the exclusive claim to salvation in the Bible.⁷

⁷ John 14:6; Acts 4:12.

While scriptural passages often serve as the foundation for salvific exclusivism, broader criticisms challenge this doctrine. One such critique posits that it portrays a seemingly harsh divine character. Assuming the Christian premise of universal sinfulness, it becomes perplexing why God would extend salvation to one morally upright individual while denying it to another who is equally virtuous, solely based on their religious affiliation. Furthermore, it raises questions about the divine emphasis on specific doctrinal beliefs, rather than on moral character or piety. Theologians have wrestled with this question but whatever the answer, not all Christians are salvific exclusivists. Roman Catholic thought since Vatican II states:

Concretely, it will be in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious tradition and by following the dictates of their conscience that the members of other religions respond positively to God's invitation and receive salvation in Jesus Christ, even while they do not acknowledge or recognize him as their savior.⁸

While Pope John Paul II's statement is grounded in Christian terminology, it encapsulates a broader principle applicable to other faiths. The notion suggests that even if one religion accurately identifies the ultimate source of liberation, individuals from other religions can still benefit from this source without fully comprehending its true nature. Similar to a patient unknowingly benefiting from a correct medical treatment despite a mistaken diagnosis, people of different faiths might unknowingly respond to the divine, even if their understanding of it is inaccurate.

Inclusivism

Inclusivism is a perspective within religious studies that explores how different faiths relate to one another. It posits that while one religion possesses absolute truth, elements of this truth can be found in other belief systems. This approach allows for the assertion of one's own religion's ultimate veracity while acknowledging the possibility of salvation for those who adhere to different faiths. Inclusivism emerges as a nuanced position between exclusivism and pluralism. While it maintains the conviction that only

⁸ See the Vatican II document "Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ," and quoted almost verbatim in an address by Pope John Paul II on September 9, 1998.

one religion possesses absolute truth, it diverges from exclusivism by asserting the possibility of salvation for adherents of other faiths. This perspective acknowledges that elements of truth might be present in multiple religions, but ultimately prioritizes one's own religious tradition as the definitive source of truth. The scope of inclusivism can vary widely, ranging from a limited acceptance of other monotheistic faiths to a more expansive view that encompasses a broader spectrum of religious and even non-religious beliefs.

Pluralism

The third major response to religious diversity is pluralism. Religious pluralism is a slippery concept which simply means religious 'manyness' or diversity.⁹ Religious pluralism describes a society where multiple religions coexist without interference. It emphasizes respectful coexistence among diverse religious groups within a nation. In a pluralistic society, the government maintains a neutral stance toward all religions, ensuring no single faith enjoys preferential treatment. This principle fosters harmonious living among different religious communities.¹⁰ Pluralism posits that multiple religions are both valid paths to salvation and possess inherent truth. Similar to inclusivists, pluralists believe individuals from diverse religious backgrounds can attain ultimate spiritual fulfillment. However, pluralists diverge from inclusivists on the matter of truth, asserting that no single religion holds an exclusive or literal grasp of religious realities. While Nigeria exhibits religious pluralism, the coexistence of various faiths is often marred by interfaith conflict.

Research Methodology

This study adopts qualitative research methodology that integrates phenomenological inquiry with theoretical (philosophical) analysis, while employing Systems Theory as its guiding analytical framework. This methodological triangulation is appropriate because the study seeks neither to generate statistical generalizations nor to establish causal relationships, but rather to critically interpret the phenomenon of religious pluralism and evaluate John Hick's concept of the *accident of birth* as a religio-

⁹ Kilani and Suberu, "Religious Pluralism and the Nigerian State: A Case Study of Madinah Constitution of the Prophetic Era", 482

¹⁰ Kilani and Suberu, "Religious Pluralism and the Nigerian State: A Case Study of Madinah Constitution of the Prophetic Era", 482

philosophical response to Nigeria's pluralistic realities within the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The phenomenological approach is employed to examine the lived experiences and meaning structures associated with religious identity and interfaith relations in Nigeria. Phenomenology is concerned with understanding human experience as it is consciously lived and interpreted by individuals within their socio-cultural environments.¹¹ In the present study, this approach facilitates an examination of how Nigerians experience religious diversity (illustrated with the case of the four blindmen), how cultural and historical contexts shape religious affiliation, and how these experiences resonate with Hick's proposition that religious commitment is largely conditioned by the circumstances of birth rather than by purely rational or objective choice. Rather than treating religious pluralism merely as a demographic phenomenon, the study investigates it as a lived reality that influences social interaction, public life, and national development.

Complementing the phenomenological perspective is the theoretical approach, which involves critical philosophical, conceptual, and hermeneutical analysis of relevant texts. Since the subject matter is fundamentally philosophical and theological, the study relies on documentary sources to interrogate competing theories of religious pluralism, exclusivism, and inclusivism. Particular attention is devoted to the writings of Hick, especially *God Has Many Names* and *An Interpretation of Religion*, as well as the critical responses of Gavin D'Costa, Alvin Plantinga, Keith Ward, and other scholars of philosophy of religion.¹² The objective is to evaluate the logical coherence, philosophical assumptions, strengths, limitations, and contextual relevance of Hick's pluralistic hypothesis for addressing Nigeria's persistent religious tensions and the ethical demands of an increasingly digital and technologically driven society.

The study is further grounded in Systems Theory, which conceives society as a network of interdependent social institutions whose stability depends upon functional

¹¹ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), 37; Clark Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), 41.

¹² John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (London: Macmillan, 1980); John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000); Alvin Plantinga, "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," in *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith*, ed. Thomas D. Senior (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

interaction among their constituent parts.¹³ Within this framework, religion is understood as one subsystem operating in continuous interaction with political, economic, educational, technological, and cultural institutions. Consequently, religious intolerance, extremism, and absolutist truth claims are interpreted not merely as theological disagreements but as systemic disruptions capable of generating social instability, weakening national cohesion, discouraging innovation, and obstructing technological advancement. Conversely, interreligious dialogue, mutual recognition, and peaceful coexistence contribute to systemic equilibrium, thereby creating the social environment necessary for sustainable development and the successful implementation of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Systems Theory is therefore particularly appropriate for analysing a religiously heterogeneous nation such as Nigeria, where the interaction among social institutions significantly shapes national stability and development.

The study relies exclusively on documentary sources of data, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral dissertations, official reports, policy documents, and other authoritative publications relevant to philosophy of religion, religious pluralism, Nigerian religious studies, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution. These documentary materials constitute the primary evidence upon which the conceptual arguments are developed and evaluated. Data are analysed through qualitative content analysis, involving systematic reading, coding, categorisation, comparison, and interpretation of textual materials to identify recurring themes and conceptual patterns relating to religious pluralism, exclusivism, inclusivism, tolerance, dialogue, social cohesion, technological transformation, and national development.¹⁴ The findings are subsequently subjected to philosophical interpretation using phenomenological insights and the explanatory framework provided by Systems Theory. This analytical procedure enables the study to critically assess the extent to which Hick's concept of the *accident of birth* offers a coherent and contextually relevant religio-philosophical framework for promoting peaceful coexistence, inclusive citizenship, and sustainable national development in contemporary Nigeria.

¹³ Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (New York: Free Press, 1951), 11; Ludwig von Bertalanffy, *General System Theory: Foundations, Development, Applications* (New York: George Braziller, 1968), 64.

¹⁴ Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2019); 13. Philipp Mayring, *Qualitative Content Analysis: Theoretical Foundation, Basic Procedures and Software Solution* (Klagenfurt, Austria: SSOAR, 2014), 112.

The selected methodology is particularly suitable for this research because the study is essentially conceptual, interpretive, and normative rather than empirical. Its objective is to examine ideas, evaluate philosophical arguments, interpret religious experiences, and propose an intellectually defensible framework for addressing the Nigerian pluralistic question. Accordingly, the methodology conforms to established standards of scholarship within philosophy, theology, and religious studies and is consistent with the methodological expectations of humanities journals, including *Resenhas*, where conceptual clarity, rigorous textual analysis, and theoretical coherence constitute accepted methodological practice.

John Hick (1922-2012) Accident of Birth

The concept of pluralism is better understood with regards to John Hick's major scholarly contributions on religious discourse. He is arguably one of the most influential religious philosophers whose scholarly impact in theology and philosophy was not hindered by series of religious experiences.¹⁵ Hick argues that sincere adherents of other faiths experiences transcendence like the Christians though with certain differences due to their various factors, which include cultural experience and historical background, and others.¹⁶ How should we reconcile the myriad religious claims prevalent in the world, particularly Nigeria? This longstanding philosophical question serves as the backdrop for this study. To address this, we will examine John Hick's concept of "accident of birth." By understanding this concept and its implications for Nigeria's diverse religious landscape, we aim to explore potential solutions to the challenges posed by religious pluralism and to identify strategies for fostering an environment conducive to the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Ultimately, this research seeks to illuminate a rational response to Nigeria's complex religious tapestry.

Growing up as a child, Hick was led to church each Sunday but found the services to be relatively uninteresting. So that, it was until he reached college that he found himself spiritually searching. In his first year of law school, Hick underwent what could be described as a religious conversion. In his words, "I became a Christian of a strongly evangelical and indeed fundamentalist kind."¹⁷ Despite his initial career in the Church of

¹⁵ Hick, *An Autobiography*, 160

¹⁶ Hick, *An Autobiography*, 162

¹⁷ John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (London: Macmillian, 1980), 3.

England, Hick maintained conservative theological views for an extended period. However, the implications of his Christian beliefs for other religions increasingly troubled him. If his faith was exclusively true, it logically followed that other religions must be partially incorrect. A pivotal shift occurred in 1967 when Hick relocated to Birmingham, England to teach philosophy. Birmingham's diverse religious population, including large Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu communities, provided him with firsthand exposure to different faiths. Through attending worship services in various places of worship, Hick observed striking similarities: these diverse religious practices all seemed to involve a fundamental human aspiration to connect with a higher power, perceived as personal, benevolent, and demanding moral uprightness and interpersonal love.¹⁸ Hick's initial step in developing his hypothesis stemmed from his contemplation of life and his experiences with different religions. He embraced the notion of cultural relativity of religious truth claims, suggesting that an individual's religious beliefs are largely shaped by the cultural environment into which they are born. Hick concluded that the core experiences within churches, synagogues, and mosques share fundamental similarities. Initially troubled by Christian exclusivism, the belief that salvation is restricted to Christians, Hick found it untenable to deny salvation to the virtuous adherents of other faiths. His discomfort with this doctrine led him to develop a pluralistic perspective, most notably articulated in his concept of the "accident of birth":

For it is evident that in some ninety-nine percent of cases the religion which an individual professes and to which he or she adheres depends upon the accidents of birth. Someone born to Buddhist parents in Thailand is very likely to be a Buddhist, someone born to Muslim parents in Saudi Arabia to be a Muslim, someone born to Christian parents in Mexico to be a Christian, and so on.¹⁹

The above is a possible interpretation and explanation of John 10:16.²⁰ Hick posits that one's religious beliefs are largely determined by one's place of birth. For instance, a Christian upbringing typically instills the belief in salvation through Jesus Christ, while

¹⁸ Hick describes his spiritual pilgrimage in some detail in the introduction to this work. Hick, *God Has Many Names*,

¹⁹ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human responses to the Transcendent*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 2.

²⁰ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. (John 10:16).

someone from Igboland might equate salvation with liberation from oppressive governance. Similarly, an individual from Sokoto might prioritize the Hajj pilgrimage. Hick argues that claiming exclusive possession of religious truth based solely on one's birthplace is both morally wrong and illogical, as it fosters religious conflict and societal dysfunction. Instead, he proposes that a rational approach involves acknowledging the diverse paths to understanding the divine, recognizing that each religion represents a unique perspective on an ultimate reality that transcends all human comprehension.²¹ In his book, *God Has Many Names*, John Hick, an ordained minister, reveals a lifelong conviction: a profound and personal belief in God as the universe's loving creator. This belief has been a constant in his life since his earliest memories.²²

Consequently, in 1973 Hick further explained the concept of accident of birth in his book *God and the Universe of Faiths*. Here, Hick argues that each of world's religions is "different human responses to one Divine Reality"²³ The fullest development of Hick's views can be found in *An Interpretation of Religion*²⁴ published fifteen years later. In his work, *An Interpretation of Religion*, Hick develops a comprehensive theory known as the "pluralistic hypothesis." This framework seeks to explain how religious beliefs and practices are influenced by cultural factors while ultimately pointing to a shared, underlying reality. According to Hick, all religions are essentially human responses to this ultimate, divine truth, shaped by their respective cultural contexts.²⁵

The main thesis of Hick according to Sumner B. Twiss, is an underlying unity to the obvious religious pluralism that is to be understood and explained as "a set of differential responses to a transcendent reality conceived and perceived in alternative ways by different cultural and religious traditions."²⁶ Hick's central contribution to the philosophy of religious pluralism lies in his development of the pluralistic hypothesis. Drawing on Kantian philosophy, he proposed that all religions represent distinct human responses to a single, transcendent Ultimate Reality, which he termed "the Real." As this "Real" is fundamentally unknowable, no religion can claim exclusive access to truth.

²¹ Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (later simply *Interpretation*), 235-6.

²² Hick describes his spiritual pilgrimage in some detail in the introduction to *God Has Many Names*, London: Macmillan, 1980.

²³ Hick, *God Has Many Names*, 34. Hick describes his spiritual pilgrimage in some detail in the introduction to this work.

²⁴ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989). 190

²⁵ Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 187

²⁶ Sumner B. Twiss "The Philosophy of Religious Pluralism: A Critical Appraisal of Hick and His Critics," *The Journal of Religion* 70, no. 4 (1990): 533. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1204340>.

Consequently, all faiths possess equal validity, offering unique cultural and experiential lenses through which to encounter the divine.²⁷

He invited religionists to join him in the "reformational movement"²⁸ as he encouraged them to make similar reforms in their creeds to eliminate religious perspectives that are absolutistic in nature. Accordingly, absolute claim implies absolutism of faith – theologically claiming one's religion is the only true faith. Absolute view, for him, can justify anything; that is, he strongly holds an opinion that "to insist on the unique superiority of one's faith is to be part of the global interreligious problem."²⁹ Consequently, he vehemently questions how peaceful co-existence can take place between "rival absolutes."³⁰ For him, the ultimate solution of achieving peaceful co-existence, will only be "stable and enduring" when different religious adherents mutually acknowledge various world religions to be equally valid for salvation and ways to the truth about God or "Ultimate Reality."³¹

In essence, Hick's accident of birth posits that there exists a singular Ultimate Reality, referred to as the Real. This Real transcends human comprehension and cannot be entirely encapsulated by any single religious system affirming *Deus Incognito* – (Unknowability of God).³² This way, diverse religions represent culturally influenced responses to this transcendent reality, and each offers a distinctive perspective on the Real. By and large, he holds the strong view that all religions are equally valid paths to the Real.

Gavin D'Costa on Hick's Accident of Birth

While a minority might carefully evaluate different religious claims and rationally choose their beliefs, this is not representative of most religious adherents. Gavin D'Costa offers a counter-perspective to Hick's "accident of birth" theory, providing a comprehensive and critical analysis of this influential concept. D'Costa contends that

²⁷ David C. Cramer, John Hick (1922—2012), <https://iep.utm.edu/hick/#SH4c>, accessed on 08- 05-2023

²⁸ John Hick, Religious Pluralism and Islam, See, David C. Cramer, John Hick (1922—2012), <https://iep.utm.edu/hick/#SH4c> accessed on 08- 05-2023

²⁹ Muhammad Legenhausen, *Misgivings about the Religious Pluralisms*, (n.d)

³⁰ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 300, 307, 337

³¹ John Hick, *Religious Pluralism and Islam*, 112. Accessed 08-05-2023.

³² Amos Francis Dike, "The Cosmos Under the Reign of "The Prince of This World:" A Philosophical Discourse" A PhD Seminar presented at Department of Religious Studies, National Open University of Nigeria. November 2022.

Hick's conclusions about religious pluralism are fundamentally flawed, misleading, and fail to address the core issues. He argues that the concepts of pluralism and inclusivism are inherently contradictory, as they both operate within an exclusive framework. Essentially, D'Costa posits that any claim to truth, whether explicit or implicit, necessarily excludes other claims as false. Therefore, pluralism and inclusivism, in his view, are ultimately forms of exclusivism in disguise.³³ D'Costa argues that the concept of "accident of birth" inherently involves a form of exclusivity, as it privileges one's own cultural and religious upbringing as the primary determinant of one's worldview. He contends that pluralism, despite its claims to inclusivity, ultimately collapses into a form of exclusivism. This occurs because pluralists, like exclusivists, rely on their own tradition's criteria for determining truth, thereby implicitly excluding other perspectives that do not conform to these standards.³⁴ To him,

the real differences between those called pluralists, inclusivists and exclusivists are not, for example, that salvation may be attained by one who is a Muslim in this life (on this they may all agree), or that certain forms of loving one's neighbour are to be valued (on this too they may all agree), but rather they disagree in what counts as normative truth and how it operates.³⁵

Exclusivists and inclusivists both prioritize their own religious tradition as the ultimate truth, while pluralists have their own criteria for determining what constitutes absolute truth. D'Costa is critical of Hick's "accident of birth" theory, challenging its claims of superiority in addressing religious diversity through tolerance, accommodation, and respect. He argues that pluralism lacks a higher moral ground, as its underlying logic is fundamentally no different from that of exclusivism.³⁶ Ultimately, those who do not meet the pluralistic standards for truth are excluded in the same way that those who do not align with exclusive truth claims are rejected. D'Costa warns against the illusion that pluralism is inherently superior to other perspectives, arguing that its apparent appeal is deceptive.

³³ Gavin D'Costa, "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," (London: Macmillan, 1989), 225

³⁴ D'Costa, "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," 225-226

³⁵ D'Costa, "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," 226

³⁶ D'Costa, G, "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions,"

Hick, a prominent advocate for pluralism based on the "accident of birth" theory, criticizes D'Costa's arguments as creating unnecessary confusion by blurring clear distinctions. He specifically challenges D'Costa's assertion that using any criteria to evaluate truth automatically equates to exclusivism, defined as accepting one position while rejecting others.³⁷ Exclusivism and pluralism are so different from each other that "even if we banished the word 'pluralism' the two rival views would remain so manifestly different that we would still need different names for them."³⁸ Hick argues that using the term "exclusivism" in such a broad and trivial manner, while understandable, is ultimately more confusing than clarifying. He suggests that following D'Costa's logic, one could be labeled an "exclusivist" simply for admiring figures like Gandhi and the Dalai Lama while condemning Hitler and Stalin.³⁹ To express the arbitrariness of D'Costa's position, Hick argues that any assertion or proposed theory inherently excludes opposing viewpoints. However, labeling every judgment, theory, or opinion as "exclusive" renders the term meaningless. If everything is exclusive, then nothing is exclusive, and the term loses its ability to differentiate between positions.⁴⁰

Hick assumes that D'Costa does not intend to promote the self-defeating idea that applying any criteria equates to exclusivism in its broadest sense. However, Keith Ward offers a different perspective, known as convergent pluralism. Ward suggests that while all religions strive towards a unified truth, none currently possesses a complete understanding. This view acknowledges a singular ultimate truth while asserting that no single tradition holds a monopoly on it. Truth, according to Ward, is an ongoing process of discovery and refinement.⁴¹

Plantinga on Accidents of Birth

Another serious critique of Hick's accident of birth is offered by Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga shows reservations on the "accident of birth" and argues that the logic of pluralism is not very different from that of exclusivism.⁴²

³⁷ Hick, *The Possibility*, 161

³⁸ Hick, *The Possibility*, 161

³⁹ Hick, *The Possibility*, 163

⁴⁰ Hick, *The Possibility*, 162

⁴¹ C. Knight, "Psychology, Revelation and Interfaith Dialogue," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 40, 1996, 152 cited from K. Ward, *A Vision to Pursue*, (London: SCM Press, 1991), 175.

⁴² Hick, *An Interpretation*, 2

Plantinga's inference from this "sociological fact" is that if he had been born, say, in Madagascar rather than Michigan, his "beliefs would have been quite different (e. g. he "probably would not believe" that he was "born in Michigan"). Of course, the same goes for the pluralist. Pluralism is not and has not been widely popular in the world at large; "if the pluralist had been born in Madagascar, or medieval France, he probably would not have been a pluralist."⁴³ The crux of Plantinga's argument is that (1) the "hermeneutic of suspicion" that Hick promotes⁴⁴ is applicable to his own pluralistic arguments (i.e. that they are culturally and historically particular beliefs and in return vulnerable to a self-referentially corrosive effect). Furthermore, (2) being attached by birth to a place has no effect either on the epistemic value of our beliefs (i. e. it will not make them true or false) or on their reliability (whether they have warrant or not). Especially, since Hick admits that "the relativity of religious belief to the circumstances of birth does not, of course show that claims to a monopoly of religious truth are unjustified."⁴⁵ But he still maintains that it warns us "to look critically at such claims."⁴⁶ Plantinga also thinks that Hick's accident of birth does not guarantee religious and philosophical beliefs, thus:

No matter what philosophical and religious beliefs we hold and withhold (so it seems), there are places and times such that if we had been born there and then, we would not have displayed the pattern of holding and withholding of religious and philosophical beliefs we do display.⁴⁷

While Plantinga's perspective offers a nuanced view, it misses a crucial point about Hick's hypothesis. If Hick is accurate, religious beliefs are predominantly shaped by one's cultural upbringing rather than a rational response to objective truth. This implies that religion might primarily reflect societal conditioning rather than a genuine pursuit of reality.

⁴³ Plantinga, "Pluralism," 211-212. On another occasion, he writes "if Hick had been born elsewhere and else when, he probably would not have been a pluralist, so that by his own principle, he should think twice (or more) about his pluralism" (Plantinga, A. "Ad Hick," *Faith and Philosophy* 14, no. 3, 1997, 298).

⁴⁴ Hick, "The Epistemological Challenge," 281 Hick believes that as a result of the relativity of religious allegiance to the "accident of birth," a "hermeneutic of suspicion is appropriate in relation to beliefs that have been instilled into one by the surrounding religious culture." Hick, J. "The Epistemological Challenge of Religious Pluralism," *Faith and Philosophy* 14, no. 3, 1997, 281.

⁴⁵ Hick, "The Epistemological Challenge," 281

⁴⁶ Hick, "The Epistemological Challenge," 281

⁴⁷ Plantinga 1995, 212.

Regarding Plantinga's point, Hick contends that "one is not usually a religious pluralist as a result of having been raised from childhood to be one, as (in most cases) one is raised from childhood to be a Christian or a Muslim or a Hindu, etc."⁴⁸ Therefore, he concludes, that "the cases are so different that the analogy fails."⁴⁹ What about religious belief? Should Hick's hypothesis convince us that it is produced by an unreliable process?

The Dilemma of the Nigerian Pluralistic Question and its Effects

Many religions present seemingly credible claims supported by philosophical arguments. However, determining the ultimate truth among these competing beliefs, if one exists at all, proves to be an insurmountable challenge. Skepticism about religion is a valid stance. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this research, we will assume that religious belief is also a justifiable position.

If all religions lead to the same path as Hick claims in his accident of birth, how do we explain the conflicting religious claims between Christianity John 14:6; Acts 4:12 and Islam Quran 3:19 and 85. Could the challenge be that of mismanagement and misinterpretation hence pluralism of Nigeria has become a threat to Nigeria's socio-economic and political stability, by pitting different religious and cultural beliefs, particularly of new, radical, extreme Christian evangelical and Muslim fundamentalist groups against each another. Religion in Nigeria today can best be described as a knife which is used by bigots to cause tension, harass, and kill innocent lives.⁵⁰ Afsaruddin, thus:

The above descriptions are further evidenced by the Global Peace Index which ranked Nigeria as the "second most deadly country in the world after Iraq". The rating was caused by frequent attacks by Boko Haram in 2013 and 2014 when Nigeria experienced 140% increase in Boko Haram caused deaths. In economic terms, the report puts the cost of violence by religious terrorists around the world at a record of \$14.3 trillion in 2014. The cost of violence is no doubt hampering

⁴⁸ Hick, "The Epistemological Challenge, " 281

⁴⁹ Hick, "The Epistemological Challenge, " 281

⁵⁰ Kilani and Suberu, "Religious Pluralism and the Nigerian State: A Case Study of Madinah Constitution of the Prophetic Era", 483

Nigeria's economic progress and posing a serious threat to achieving her goal of being among the top 20 economies by 2020.⁵¹

Religion has had a profoundly negative impact on Nigeria's social fabric. The country's religious climate is tense due to rivalry and extremism between Christians and Muslims. Regrettably, religion has been exploited for various purposes, including ethnic, economic, and political gain, directly contradicting socialist ideals. Kilani and Suberu highlight the role of religious manipulation in creating Nigeria's current dysfunctional state.

One of the problems include “the manipulation of the nation's religious plurality, ethnicity, colonialism, economic recession and international political issues.” (Israel, 2011:250). The country has been bequeathed with a culture that is secular, exploitative and killing. This is manifested in the global influence of secular economy in Nigeria that throws up the culture of poverty in the midst of plenty, sickness in the midst of death clinics called hospitals, terrorism in the midst of ethnic and tribal dislocation.⁵²

Akper affirms the existence of manipulation of religion in Nigeria's public sphere in his argument that religion, intended to provide a framework for understanding and engaging with national development, is often distorted to serve personal interests, harming society as a whole. This manipulation stems from ulterior motives that dominate discussions of public interest.⁵³ Manipulation of religion in Nigeria has reached the climax that the relationship between the two major religions (Christianity and Islam) is so hostile to the extent that there is hardly any point of agreement except in the areas of retort, criticism and verbal attack even where there is existence of no concrete reasons for it. Omotosho collaborates with the above in his observation that “the mere fact that an adherent of one of the two faiths presiding over affairs of the nation or headship of a government parastatal not only provides room for accusation, but also lead to the

⁵¹ Afsaruddin, “Absolutism Vs. Pluralism in Islam Today”, 15 citing Global Peace Index Report, 2013.

⁵² Kilani and Suberu, “Religious Pluralism and the Nigerian State: A Case Study of Madinah Constitution of the Prophetic Era”, 483

⁵³ Godwin I. Akper, *Are we the reason ...? (Christian) Religion in the Nigerian Public Spheres*, being text of the 25th Inaugural Lecture of National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja, 25th April, 2024, 41

conclusion that s/he is using his or her position to Islamize or Christianize the nation even when the opposite is the case.”⁵⁴ Kilani and Suberu went further to maintain that intolerance of one another and lack of recognition is a bedrock of the problems. One cannot shy away from the fact that wrong interpretation of the scriptures by those who claim authority to the interpretation of the holy books together with ignorance are other reasons responsible for religious crises in Nigeria, thus:

If not so, one wonders why people act contrary to the teaching of the scriptures in matters pertaining to peaceful co-existence, unity and sanctity of life, and properties. Many of the issues that often orchestrate Muslim-Christian violence in Nigeria can be traced to ignorance of the religion as most adherents of the two religions know little or nothing about their respective faiths. Also, religious prejudice, and excessive patriotism to one's religious sect, which consequently transformed to fanaticism, wrong perception of other people's religion or faith, and wrong religious orientations are contributing factors to this religious vulnerability in Nigeria.⁵⁵

The absence of genuine efforts to comprehend each other's religious beliefs and practices, and to acknowledge shared values and disparities, significantly hinders Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria. Instead of focusing on common ground, religious extremists exacerbate differences, fueling unrest in the nation.⁵⁶

Hick's Accident of Birth as a Religious Compromise for Fourth Industrial Revolution

Hick's "accident of birth" theory proposes a compromise for religious adherents. He suggests it's acceptable for Christians to approach the divine as Christians, Muslims as Muslims, and so on. However, this approach faces challenges. For instance, the Christian belief in Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection contrasts sharply with the Islamic view that Jesus was not crucified. Such fundamental differences highlight the complexities of

⁵⁴ Kilani and Suberu, "Religious Pluralism and the Nigerian State: A Case Study of Madinah Constitution of the Prophetic Era", 483 citing Omotosho, (2003), 18.

⁵⁵ Kilani and Suberu, "Religious Pluralism and the Nigerian State: A Case Study of Madinah Constitution of the Prophetic Era", 484-485

⁵⁶ Kilani and Suberu, "Religious Pluralism and the Nigerian State: A Case Study of Madinah Constitution of the Prophetic Era", 486 collaborating with Adesuyi and Olawale (2011),

reconciling diverse religious perspectives within a pluralistic framework. Hick believes that no single religion possesses the literal truth, but many offer paths to a greater good. The ultimate reality, or "the Real," is fundamentally unknowable, echoing the concept of *Deu Incognitio* (Unknown God). Many religions, including Asian traditions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, explore this divine mystery through their own unique lenses. As the Bible's Book of Isaiah states, God's thoughts and ways are beyond human comprehension.⁵⁷ While believers may disagree on the nature and extent of our knowledge about the divine, most acknowledge the existence of an infinite unknown. According to Hick's hypothesis, individuals from diverse religious backgrounds can connect with this ultimate reality and attain salvation or liberation, as suggested by Luke 13:29. The diversity of religious beliefs stems from the limitations of human language and understanding when attempting to describe the indescribable. We can only approach the divine through the conceptual frameworks provided by our respective traditions, resulting in partial knowledge and limited expression.

Relevance of Hick's Accident of Birth to Nigerian Pluralistic Question and Fourth Industrial Revolution

1. Man is a religious configuration. It is unfortunate that despite the growing scholarship on religious studies, no attempt is made in understanding Hick's accident of birth and its impact to a pluralistic Nigerian society towards achieving the fourth industrial revolution. Therefore, the research discovered that understanding Hick's accident of birth is vital in the provision of answer to the dilemma of the Nigerian pluralistic question and promotion of freedom of religion in Nigeria because it promotes respect and tolerance for different religious traditions and beliefs. The fourth industrial revolution is easily achieved in an environment where religion unites instead of being divisive;
2. A clear understanding of Hick's accident of birth waters down the absolute religious claims which puts Christianity and Islam in confrontation to each other. The religionist chiefly ignorant of this notion has emphasized the inherent religious exclusivism within the pluralistic Nigerian society despite its negative impact and the prevalent cultural change. This has made Nigeria religious and

⁵⁷ Isaiah 55:8-9.

public space susceptible to disharmony and seeming impossible to achieve religious dialogue, accommodation, collaboration, and avoidance in a pluralistic society. Man is a religious being and a religious configuration. Religion must be understood in the light of Hick's accident of birth. This way, religion will be adaptable, and accommodating of modern life and its pluralistic complexities thereby paving way for the fourth industrial revolution. The silence of the sacred books (Bible and Quran) many issues of life, governance and political administration historically must be taken as grounds for flexibility to rapidly changing circumstances in our contemporary society. Consequently, countries with Hick's view and less religious emphasis do better in producing a peaceful co-existence, inclusive society, and technological advancement which are necessary for the fourth industrial revolution to strive;

3. The fourth industrial revolution with its emphasis on technological advancement is only achievable in a peaceful and inclusive society. It is achievable under a pluralistic Nigeria nation that defines "secularism" as allowing the practice of religion in private space instead of the public sphere as currently practiced. Fourth industrial revolution is not attainable under the current pluralistic Nigerian practice of "secularization" which has made religions tools in the hands of politicians and ethnic bigots. Peaceful and inclusive society is highly achievable in a pluralistic society like Nigeria, this way fourth industrial revolution will be easily achieved. Rather than boasting of pureness of Christian or Islamic state, we must regard any state which guarantee certain basic individual and communal rights and liberties as being in accordance with broad moral parameters and thus meeting the religious litmus test. Without this kind of understanding, one particular religious tradition is sure to become dominant. And then, the rights of the followers of other traditions are undermined. This has been the experience of Nigeria throughout history, with the most extreme examples involving persecution, imprisonment, violence and human right abuse. The only way to secure the rights of the religions is through a set of principles which treat all religions – Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion with complete equality being the expression of the same thing.

Conclusion

Hick's concept of the "accident of birth" provides a viable religio-philosophical framework for rethinking Nigeria's pluralistic reality. By recognising religious affiliation as largely shaped by historical and cultural circumstances, it encourages tolerance, mutual respect, and constructive dialogue rather than absolutism and conflict. Within the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, this perspective offers a philosophical basis for fostering inclusive citizenship, social cohesion, and the ethical use of emerging technologies in a religiously diverse society. Consequently, embracing this framework can help reposition religion as a catalyst for national integration, sustainable development, and peaceful coexistence in Nigeria. This study therefore recommends that policymakers, religious leaders, educators, and civil society actors promote interreligious dialogue and pluralistic education as essential strategies for building a resilient, innovative, and peaceful Nigerian society.

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