The major religious traditions clearly seem to be making very different claims about the nature of the religious ultimate and our relation to this ultimate. For example, orthodox Christians believe in an infinite creator God who has revealed himself definitively in the Incarnation in Jesus. But while affirming that there is one God who is creator and judge, devout Muslims reject as blasphemous any suggestion that Jesus was God incarnate. Theravada Buddhists, on the other hand, do not regard the religious ultimate as an ontologically distinct creator at all. And even within, say, the Buddhist family of traditions sharp differences emerge: followers of Jodo-Shinshu (True Sect of the Pure Land) Buddhism maintain that salvation/enlightenment is attainable simply through exercising faith in the Amida Buddha and the recitation of the nembutsu, whereas Zen monks reject as illusory any worldview which implies dualism and hold that enlightenment or satori (viz. a direct, unmediated apprehension of the ultimate nature of reality which transcends all distinctions) is to be attained only through rigorous self-discipline.

What are we to make of such conflicting claims? Questions stemming from religious pluralism have become increasingly prominent in recent philosophy of religion. And this is hardly surprising, given the unprecedented exposure we have today to other cultures and religious traditions. Few philosophers have given issues related to religious pluralism as much attention in recent years as has John Hick. In a number of significant articles, and especially in the recent American edition of God Has Many Names,1 Hick has spelled out in broad terms a theory which accounts for religious pluralism by placing it within a comprehensive understanding of the nature of religious awareness in general. His views are provocative and innovative, and if accurate, would require considerable modification of many accepted beliefs about relations among major religious traditions. As such, they deserve close scrutiny. In this essay I am particularly concerned with some epistemological issues raised by

* Special thanks are due to Stephen T. Davis, Philip B. Payne, and John H. Hick for their helpful comments on an early draft of this paper. I also take this opportunity to express my deep appreciation for Professor Hick, under whom I had the great privilege of studying at Claremont Graduate School. Although we disagree on some fundamental issues this in no way detracts from my appreciation and respect for him, both as a scholar and as a person.

Hick's theory. After briefly summarizing key elements of his position, I will point out what seem to me to be significant areas of tension within his theory.

Probably most persons who are aware of the diverse claims made by various religions have concluded that since conflicting truth-claims are being made not all of the claims made by the major religions can be true. At least some must be false. Thus, it has traditionally been held that the Muslim and the orthodox Christian cannot both be correct about the question of Jesus Christ's identity. But this has always been a rather embarrassing and unsatisfactory position for some. Surely, it is said, no one tradition can claim to be true with the implication that other conflicting traditions, composed of equally sincere and pious adherents, must be false. Accordingly, numerous suggestions have been advanced about ways to take seriously the distinctive features of each tradition without necessarily concluding that any is false.

Now one way to go about this is to deny that adherents of various traditions are making truth-claims. That is, it may be argued, what initially appear to be ontological claims which are either true or false are not propositions at all; they have a quite different function in religious discourse. A significant group of theologians and philosophers have suggested that religious discourse should not be understood in terms of propositions or factually informative statements with true value but as a distinctive mode of discourse which expresses one's attitude toward life and the world or which motivates us toward certain desired forms of behaviour. And in the pluralistic context, then, the suggestion is that although the Zen Buddhist and the Muslim, for example, appear to be making incompatible statements about the nature of reality in actuality no truth-claim is being advanced by either party. Both are simply expressing alternative attitudes or responses to reality. Questions of truth and falsity are not appropriate here.

In spite of occasional comments which might incline one to place Professor Hick within this group, it seems clear that he is not a non-cognitivist about religious discourse. Hick, of course, is well known for his notion of 'eschatological verification', which was developed to demonstrate the

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1 To say that a religious tradition makes truth-claims is not to deny that many non-cognitive uses of religious discourse, or to reduce that tradition to a set of beliefs or propositions. It is simply to recognize that in each major tradition at least some assertions about the nature of the world, human beings, God (or the appropriate religious ultimate) are being made.

2 I understand truth to be a quality of propositions such that a proposition is true just in case the state of affairs to which it refers obtains; otherwise it is false. Strictly speaking, of course, it is propositions and not religions which are true or false. But there is an extended sense in which we can speak of religions as true or false. Let us think of a 'defining belief' of a given religion R as follows: p is a defining belief of R just in case one cannot be an active participant in good standing within R and not accept p. It seems clear that each tradition has a set of defining beliefs (there may, of course, be considerable dispute over what is to be included within this set). I suggest that we speak of R as true just in case its defining beliefs are all true, and conversely, R is false just in case they are all false. And in cases of mixed truth value among defining beliefs R will be true to the extent that its defining beliefs are true and false to the extent that its defining beliefs are false.
factually informative nature of Christian theistic discourse.¹ And while it is true that his earlier defence of cognitively meaningful religious discourse was carried out within the Christian tradition, in a recent article he has clearly affirmed his belief that at least some truth-claims are being made by followers of the various religions.² In the same article Hick recognizes that there are significant conflicts between some of the claims being made and that three levels of such conflict can be distinguished. First, there are differences in claims about certain historical facts which carry significant theological implications. Did Jesus have a human father or not? Did Jesus actually die on the cross or did he just appear to die? On the second level are what can be called 'quasi-historical' or 'trans-historical' differences in claims, of which the acceptance or rejection of the doctrine of reincarnation is given as a prime example. Differences on both of these levels are over questions of 'fact', and although in practice it may prove impossible to resolve such disputes, in principle it should be possible to do so.

But the most significant differences are on the third level, for it is here that we encounter '...differences in the ways of conceiving and experiencing, and hence also of responding to, the divine Reality'.³ And the major difference here is between those who conceive of the divine as personal and those who conceive of it as nonpersonal. Do statements expressing differences on this third level constitute conflicting truth-claims? Some of Hick's terminology suggests that statements on this level do not constitute ontological claims which are true or false but are to be understood in functional terms as linguistic tools which are efficacious in achieving the soteriological goal of 'transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness'.⁴ This is especially the case when he refers to beliefs or doctrines as 'images' or 'conceptions' of the divine, or 'visions of reality', or 'linguistic pictures' or 'maps of the universe'. But it would be misleading to label him as a non-cognitivist on such account, for he does recognize that there are truth-claims being made in the various ways in which humans conceive of the divine.⁵ And this is significant, since it follows that questions about truth and falsity regarding fundamental claims made by various traditions cannot be avoided. Certainly religious traditions can be evaluated on other grounds, but if truth-claims are being made then clearly a major consideration in evaluating a religion is the question of the truth value of its fundamental beliefs.

If the major religions do make at least some truth-claims and if some of these claims seem to be incompatible with each other, then should we not

³ Ibid. p. 487.
conclude that some of the basic claims of at least some of the traditions are false? Not necessarily, according to Hick. The traditional ‘Ptolemaic’ view of religions, which sees one’s own tradition as exclusively true and others as false, must be abandoned. No longer can we think in terms of the truth of one religion and the corresponding falsity of others which seem to conflict with it. What is needed, he maintains, is nothing less than a ‘Copernican revolution’ in our thinking about religions.

And the Copernican revolution in theology must involve an equally radical transformation of our conception of the universe of faiths, and the place of our own religion within it. It must also involve a shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the center to the thought that it is God who is at the center and that all the religions of mankind, including our own, serve and revolve around Him [p. 36].

God (or, as Professor Hick prefers, the Eternal One or the Real) is to be recognized as being the centre of religious awareness, with the various conceptions of the divine in the many traditions being all reflective of the one divine reality. The suggestion itself is not particularly new (several commentators have pointed out similarities here with certain Advaitin themes). But what is somewhat unique is for someone of Hick’s stature, well versed in the techniques of analytic philosophy and having an informed concern for epistemological issues, to defend this thesis.

Hick is suggesting that ‘...the great religions are all, at their experiential roots, in contact with the same ultimate divine reality....’1 Now Hick is certainly not a polytheist; he is not suggesting that Yahweh, Allah, Shiva, Amida Buddha, etc., all exist as separate and independent deities. Nor is he, strictly speaking, a theological relativist. For he holds that the different religions all reflect the same divine reality. But if this is so, why the bewildering diversity in conceptions of this one divine reality? Hick has a twofold answer to this question which brings us to the heart of his theory.

First, the various conceptions of the divine found in the major religious traditions represent culturally conditioned human responses to the one divine reality.

The basic hypothesis which suggests itself is that the different streams of religious experience represent diverse awarenesses of the same transcendent reality, which is perceived in characteristically different ways by different human mentalities, formed by and forming different cultural histories... One then sees the great world religions as different human responses to the one divine Reality, embodying different perceptions which have been formed in different historical and cultural circumstances [pp. 83, 11].

In part, this is simply an expansion of Hick’s earlier views on religious epistemology. Hick holds that religious experience is basic to religious epistemology. And, like all experience, religious experience is inherently

interpretative, that is, it is a distinctive form of ‘experiencing-as’.\(^1\) Faith is said to be the interpretative element in religious experience. The same themes which are prevalent in his early discussions of religious epistemology (e.g. experiencing-as, cognitive freedom, epistemic distance, etc.) are prominent in his discussions of religious pluralism. In the context of pluralism, then, Hick is building upon what he takes to be the irreducibly interpretative element in religious experience and crediting various historical and cultural factors with influencing how members of different religious traditions experience the one divine reality.

The divine presence is the presence of the Eternal One to our finite human consciousness, and the human projections are the culturally conditioned images and symbols in terms of which we concretize the basic concept of deity (p. 53).

That history and culture influence religious traditions is hardly a controversial thesis. The more interesting and difficult question concerns the extent of such influence. And here Professor Hick is somewhat unclear. For in spite of terminology suggesting that religious traditions are ‘formed’ and ‘conditioned’ by cultural factors,\(^2\) he presumably does not wish to espouse a reductionistic view which would explain religion simply in terms of socio-cultural influences. For the bulk of his discussion seems to presuppose that the divine reality is really ‘out there’, so to speak, and that in experiencing religiously the great saints and prophets were actually experiencing an independently existing divine reality. So, while on the one hand Hick wants to account for differences among religions on the basis of cultural influences, he cannot give too much credit to such factors or he will end up with a reductionistic account which will not acknowledge any religious experience as sufficiently clear to constitute solid evidence for the independent existence of the divine reality.

The second part of Hick’s answer lies in his distinction between the divine reality as it is in itself and the divine reality as it is experienced by historically and culturally conditioned persons.

To develop this hypothesis we must, I think, distinguish between the Eternal One in itself, in its eternal self-existent being, beyond relationship to a creation, and the Eternal One in relation to mankind and as perceived from within our different human cultural situations... Thus the many gods are not separate distinct divine beings, but rather different *persona* formed in the interaction of divine presence and human projection [pp. 52–3].

Kant’s distinction between *noumenon* and *phenomenon* is adapted (and used in a most non-Kantian manner) to illustrate this point.

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2 Hick states, ‘And, in short, we are so formed by the tradition into which we were born and in which we were raised that it is for us unique and absolute and final’ (*God Has Many Names*, p. 57). Cf. pp. 52–3.
Summarizing this hypothesis in philosophical terms made possible by the work of Immanuel Kant, we may distinguish between, on the one hand, the single divine noumenon, the Eternal One in itself, transcending the scope of human thought and language, and, on the other hand, the plurality of divine phenomena, the divine personae of the theistic religions and the concretizations of the concept of the Absolute in the nontheistic religions... The Eternal One is thus the divine noumenon which is experienced and thought within different religious traditions as the range of divine phenomena witnessed to by the religious history of mankind. The philosophical framework here is Kantian, but with the proviso that the phenomenal world is the noumenal world as humanly experienced. The result is the distinctively non-Kantian thesis that the divine is experienced (rather than postulated, as Kant believed), but is experienced within the limitations of our human cognitive apparatus in ways analogous to that in which he argued that we experience our physical environment.

By making this distinction Hick claims to be able to maintain consistently both (i) that the conceptions of the divine reality in many religions are actually different and even conflicting, and (ii) that these various images are human responses to and reflective of the same single divine reality. Certainly if both (i) and (ii) can be maintained consistently then it makes good sense indeed to reject the idea that any one tradition can be true and other conflicting traditions false. For all traditions will be partial reflections of the same reality.

The implications of Hick’s thesis are far-reaching indeed. The Copernican revolution here results in a kind of equality among religious traditions in that no one tradition can claim to be exclusively correct or true, and certainly no single tradition can claim to have a definitive or exclusive revelation from God (p. 48). And what seems to follow inevitably is a reinterpretation of certain key doctrines. For example, the orthodox Christian understanding of the divine Incarnation must go, for Hick correctly observes that if Jesus was literally God incarnate it is very difficult to escape from the conclusion that the Christian revelation is definitive and the Christian religion uniquely correct (p. 19). Accordingly, Hick suggests that we reinterpret the Incarnation as a ‘mythological idea’ which indicates that Jesus is ‘...our sufficient, effective, and saving point of contact with God...’ (p. 75). And, presumably, similar reinterpretation of certain exclusivist doctrines of other faiths will also be necessary.

In evaluating Professor Hick’s theory it is important to recognize that his is essentially a second-order, or ‘meta-religious’, theory about the nature of first-order religious traditions. That is, he is not proposing an alternative religion or religious apprehension but is suggesting a comprehensive theory about religions and religious apprehensions which claims that, despite appearances to the contrary, all religious traditions are culturally conditioned.
human responses to the same divine reality. It seems, therefore, that the adequacy of his theory will be a function of at least two factors: (i) the accuracy with which the theory reflects and the ease with which it can accommodate the various religious traditions, and (ii) the internal consistency and plausibility of the theory itself. Although Hick’s theory is attractive in several respects, it seems to me to be vulnerable on both of these accounts.

(1) Since Hick’s theory is a second-order theory about the nature of religions it seems clear that to the extent that certain major religious traditions do not find their views adequately accounted for on Hick’s analysis the theory is called into question. Now in such a case it may be that Hick’s theory is correct and that those traditions which do not find themselves satisfactorily accounted for must simply amend some accepted beliefs. But given that his is a second-order theory about these very traditions, surely in such a case the burden of proof lies with Professor Hick. Thus, if there are significant elements of a religion which clash with Hick’s analysis this *prima facie* counts against his theory.

Now there certainly seem to be aspects of major religious traditions which cannot be accounted for neatly on Hick’s theory. Let me illustrate with examples from Christianity and Buddhism. Certainly most orthodox Christians accept the traditional understanding of the Incarnation, in which it is held that Jesus was both God and man. Regardless of what we may happen to think of this doctrine, it can hardly be denied that orthodox Christianity comprises a significant religious tradition and that the doctrine of the Incarnation is central to this tradition. But, as noted above, the traditional understanding of the Incarnation cannot be maintained on Hick’s theory. Thus we are encouraged to reinterpret the Incarnation in mythological categories. Orthodox Christians, of course, will simply respond by denying that any such reinterpretation is necessary. Now the christological issues involved in this dispute are largely beside the point; what this example does show, however, is that Hick’s theory has difficulty being regarded as an adequate *general* theory about religious traditions since it cannot accommodate the orthodox understanding of the Incarnation, which is a central element of a significant religious tradition. Similarly, it is hard to see how the Zen notion of *satori* can be satisfactorily accounted for on Hick’s theory. *Satori* is said to be an immediate, direct, unmediated apprehension of ultimate reality which transcends all dualism and dichotomies. Any kind of apprehension which implies dualism is rejected by Zen as less than ultimately real. This, of course, gives *satori* an absolutely unique and unrivalled status among religious experiences. Professor Hick recognizes the Zen claims for the exclusivity of *satori*, but he goes on to suggest that ‘...even the apparently direct and undistorted awareness of reality /which *satori* claims/ is still the conscious experience of a human subject, and is as such influenced by the interpretative set of the cognizing mind’ (p. 85). In other words, not even
satori is to be granted such exclusive status for it too is partially the product of interpretative activity and the influence of the surrounding culture. Again, Hick may well be correct in his assessment of satori (one may well wonder whether the notion of satori is at all coherent) but this is largely beside the point. The problem here is that Hick’s theory cannot accommodate the Zen notion of satori as this is understood within the Zen tradition. Accordingly, Hick advocates a reinterpretation of satori. But the Zen Buddhist will almost certainly not accept Hick’s description of satori since it eliminates what is central to the Zen tradition – the claim to a direct, unmediated apprehension of reality which transcends all distinctions. In both cases mentioned above Hick can accommodate troublesome doctrines by reinterpreting them so as to eliminate problematic elements; but the price of such reinterpretation is that the reinterpreted doctrines bear little resemblance to the doctrines held in the respective traditions. And this surely counts against his theory as a general theory of the nature of religious traditions.

A similar difficulty can be seen in Hick’s comments on soteriology. Certainly the great religious traditions are all concerned in some sense with the theme of salvation. But Hick minimizes differences in conceptions of salvation by speaking as if all religions share a common soteriological goal and a common understanding of what constitutes salvation. Speaking of the major religions, Hick asserts,

They do however, in fact, I suggest, exhibit a common structure, which is soteriological in the broad sense that it offers a transition from a radically unsatisfactory state to a limitlessly better one. They each speak in their different ways of the wrong or distorted or deluded character of the present human existence in its ordinary unchanged condition…In each case salvation/liberation consists in a new and limitlessly better quality of existence which comes about in the transition from self-centredness to Reality-centredness.1

Now the transition from self-centredness to Reality-centredness (one is left unclear as to what exactly this means) may indeed be part of the soteriological structure of the major religions. But surely soteriology in the respective traditions includes much more than this. Can the great Pauline theme of justification, for example, or the Hindu understanding of moksha, or the Zen notion of satori be reduced to ‘the transition from self-centredness to Reality-centredness’? It appears that in order to minimize differences in soteriological beliefs Hick has adopted a kind of ‘lowest common denominator’ soteriology. But again, the result is that key soteriological concepts in various religions must be ignored or substantially reinterpreted. One is also tempted to ask here what is distinctively religious about ‘the transition from self-centredness to Reality-centredness’? It appears that in order to minimize differences in soteriological beliefs Hick has adopted a kind of ‘lowest common denominator’ soteriology. But again, the result is that key

1 ‘On grading religions’, p. 453.
soteriological concepts in various religions must be ignored or substantially reinterpreted. One is also tempted to ask here what is distinctively religious about the transition from self-centredness to Reality-centredness. Is this not a goal which any morally sensitive person (agnostic and atheist included) could adopt? If not, what is it about the Real, as the postulated ground of the different forms of religious experience, which distinguishes 'Reality-centredness' from, say, 'morally acceptable behaviour'? One suspects that soteriology comes close to being reduced to common morality; but this is something that a host of religious figures would certainly reject.

We see, then, that in an effort to accommodate certain problematic doctrines Hick is driven to reinterpretation of these beliefs. But in so doing he empties such beliefs of much of the content that they have in their respective traditions. And to the extent that this is done it *prima facie* counts against Hick's thesis as a general theory about religious traditions.

(2) Some interesting epistemological issues surround Hick's distinction between the divine reality as it is in itself and the divine reality as it is experienced by culturally conditioned, finite persons. The Eternal One *an sich* is said to be the divine noumenon with the various culturally conditioned conceptions of the divine being the divine phenomena, or manifestations of the Eternal One in itself. Thus Yahweh, Allah, Krishna, Shiva, Brahman, Nirvana, Sunyatta, etc., are the divine phenomena (or, as Hick calls them, divine *personae*) through which the Eternal One is manifested (p. 53). Now Hick correctly observes that the distinction between the divine reality as it is in itself and the divine reality as it is perceived by humans has a long and distinguished history. Within the Christian tradition alone variations of this

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1 Perhaps this is the place to note another, relatively minor, matter. Hick has elsewhere argued at length that religious experience in general cannot be dismissed as delusory and that it is indeed rational to believe in God on the basis of such experience (see n. 10). The details of this argument need not concern us here, but what should be noted is a claim which is alleged to follow from this. Hick seems to hold that if a Christian, for example, can justifiably believe in God on the basis of religious experiences within the Christian tradition, then correspondingly, religious experiences from other traditions substantiate the beliefs of these other religions. Speaking of his argument for the reliability of religious experience, Hick asserts, 'But if such an argument holds for the Christian experience of the divine, it must also hold for the Jewish, the Muslim, the Hindu, the Buddhist, and other experiences of the divine. One must follow the Golden Rule and grant to religious experience within the other great traditions the same presumption of cognitive veridicality that one quite properly claims for one's own' (*God Has Many Names*, p. 24). There is a curious ambiguity here. Certainly one must extend to adherents of other faiths the same courtesies that one expects from them. If Hick's point is simply that once it is demonstrated that the veridicality of religious experience *in general* cannot be ruled out *a priori* then religious experience from any given tradition can in principle be regarded as veridical (provided, of course, that there are no compelling reasons to suppose otherwise) then his point is well taken. One cannot dismiss classes of experience as delusory simply because they do not come from within one's own tradition. But his comments can also be taken to mean that if it is shown to be reasonable to accept as veridical religious experiences from a particular tradition then the religious experiences of the other great traditions must also be accepted as veridical. But this hardly follows. From the fact that religious experience in general cannot be ruled out as delusory it does not follow that any particular experience is in fact veridical. Nor can we assume that simply because experiences within one tradition have been shown to be veridical that any given experience within any other tradition is veridical. Even if it is granted that religious experience cannot be ruled out *a priori* as delusory, surely reports of religious experiences should be evaluated on their own merits.
distinction are found in Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Luther, Barth, et al. And if the transcendence of God is to be maintained it seems that some such distinction is inevitable. But there is a danger here which many theologians take too lightly. In emphasizing the distinction one runs the risk of eliminating the informative nature of some religious discourse and of being reduced to theological agnosticism. This particular danger emerges when we consider the relation between the Eternal One an sich and the various divine phenomena. There are two possible interpretations of the relation between the Eternal One in itself and the divine phenomena or personae, both of which can find some support in Professor Hick’s writings.

On the one hand we can see a strong element of continuity between the Eternal One in itself and the various manifestations of the Eternal One as the divine personae. The personae do manifest and represent the Eternal One. In experiencing, say, Yahweh, or Amida Buddha, or Sunyatta the great religious figures were experiencing the Eternal One, but always in terms of a culturally conditioned divine image or persona. Many of Hick’s statements lend themselves to this interpretation.

The Eternal One is thus the divine noumenon which is experienced and thought within different religious traditions as the range of divine phenomena witnessed to by the religious history of mankind (p. 83).

When I say in a summarizing slogan that God has many names, I mean that the Eternal One is perceived within different human cultures under different forms, both personal and non-personal, and that from these different perceptions arise the religious ways of life which we call the great world faith (p. 59).

The relation between the Eternal One and the personae, then, is simply this: the personae are the manifestations of the Eternal One to culturally conditioned humans. They reflect the Eternal One, they are ‘images’ of the Eternal One.

Now if these images or personae are accurate reflections of the Eternal One there must be significant continuity between these images and the divine reality they reflect. Another way to put this is to say that the set of true propositions about a given image (e.g. Allah, or Amida Buddha) must form a subset of the set of all true propositions about the Eternal One as it is in itself. For if this were not the case then it is hard to see how the various images of the divine could be considered at all informative about the Eternal One. Indeed, there would be little reason for referring to them as images of the divine reality (the Eternal One).

But the view which posits significant continuity between the Eternal One in itself and the various culturally conditioned images of the divine runs into serious difficulty because of the great diversity among such images of the divine. For example, Hick notes that such images can be placed into two broad categories – those which conceive of the divine reality as personal (e.g. Allah, Yahweh) and those which conceive of it largely in non-personal terms.
(e.g. Nirvana, Sunyatta) (pp. 24–25, 52, 78). It is crucial to Hick’s thesis that the Eternal One (which is said to be a neutral term encompassing both personal and non-personal connotations) can be accurately conceived of in both personal and non-personal categories. Images from both traditions can legitimately be applied to the one divine reality: ‘...the divine nature is infinite, exceeding the scope of all human concepts, and is capable of being experienced both as personal Lord and as nonpersonal ground or depth of being’ (p. 38).

Now it is not just a question of whether the Eternal One can be experienced as personal and non-personal, it is a question of whether its ontological status is such that it can correctly be described as both personal and non-personal. For it may be possible for the divine reality to be experienced as personal and non-personal without necessarily being both. (Perhaps the Eternal One is able to present itself in certain situations as a non-personal ground of being.) But since the respective traditions are making significant ontological claims it seems that the divine reality must actually be both personal and non-personal if these claims are to be taken seriously. If Hick’s thesis is correct it should be possible to speak informatively of the divine reality as Yahweh, Jesus Christ, Allah, Nirguna Brahman, Sunyatta, the Amida Buddha, and Nothingness as these designations are understood within the respective traditions. Is this plausible? Does it make sense to speak of the Eternal One in both personal and non-personal categories as these are understood in the various traditions? It is not as if we were simply using alternative descriptive terms in referring to someone, as Bill Jones could be variously referred to as ‘husband’, ‘employee’, ‘tall’, ‘father’, etc. For several of the divine images seem to have clearly incompatible entailments: are the implications of the Judeo-Christian image of the divine as Yahweh, the ontologically independent, personal, creator/sustainer and righteous judge compatible with the ontological implications of the image of the Nirguna Brahman, or with the ontologically ultimate concept of Nothingness in Zen?

On this interpretation it seems that such terms as ‘Yahweh’, ‘Allah’, ‘Shiva’, ‘Nirguna Brahman’, and ‘Nothingness’ should all ultimately have the same referent. To be sure, in one sense the terms do have different meanings; they do not all share the same connotations and they can be paraphrased in different ways. Perhaps here a distinction must be made between what we can call the direct or penultimate referent of a term and the ultimate referent of the term. Thus the direct referent of ‘Allah’ is not the same as that of ‘Sunyatta’; they refer to different manifestations of the Eternal One. But if indeed such divine personae are all images and reflections of the one divine reality (the Eternal One) then it seems that they should all have the same ultimate referent – they should all denote the same Reality.
It may be tempting at this point to recall Gottlob Frege’s classic discussion of identity statements and the distinction between Sinn (sense) and Bedeutung (reference) in an effort to clarify Hick’s thesis. Frege observed that although both of the following are similar identity statements they differ in an important respect:

(A) The Morning Star is identical with the Morning Star.
(B) The Morning Star is identical with the Evening Star.

Although we now know that both (A) and (B) are true and that in both cases it is the planet Venus that is being referred to, there is a significant difference between the two statements. For (A) expresses a tautology and is obviously and necessarily true whereas (B) enunciates an astronomical discovery. In some sense, then, the meanings of (A) and (B) are the same but they are clearly different as well. Frege’s solution to this puzzle was the well known distinction between sense and reference. ‘The Morning Star’ means the same thing as ‘The Evening Star’ in that both expressions refer to the same thing: they both denote the planet Venus. But the two expressions mean different things in that they each have a different sense: their connotations differ and they can be paraphrased differently.

Similarly, it may be suggested that terms such as ‘Allah’, ‘Yahweh’, ‘Brahman’, etc., all have the same referent (the Eternal One) although they clearly have different senses. It seems that some such distinction in meanings is inevitable if Hick’s thesis is to be plausible. But there is an important difference between Frege’s example and the current discussion. Frege’s example only has the force and charm that it does because relevant astronomical data had already made it plausible to believe that the referents of ‘the Morning Star’ and ‘the Evening Star’ were identical. But it is not at all clear that a similar situation holds in the case of religious pluralism. Given the great differences in connotations of terms such as ‘Shiva’, ‘Allah’, ‘Nirguna Brahman’, ‘Yahweh’, ‘Nirvana’, etc., it does not seem plausible to maintain that all denote the same divine reality. Surely the burden of proof lies with anyone claiming that the ultimate referent of each is the same.

There is an alternative interpretation of the relation between the Eternal One an sich and the various divine phenomena or personae which is not subject to many of the difficulties noted above. This interpretation minimizes continuity between the Eternal One an sich and the divine personae and holds that we do not experience the Eternal One an sich but that the object of religious experience is always some image or manifestation of the divine.

...let us explore the possibility that the immediate object of theistic religious awareness is what I shall call an ‘image’ of God, and that the plurality of such images arises from the various ways in which the divine reality has impinged upon human consciousness in its different circumstances (p. 95).

For the religious person experiences the divine, not as a general idea, but under some specific and relatively concrete divine image. An abstract concept of deity, such as the concept of 'the uncreated creator of the universe', is schematized or concretized in a range of divine images... And it is these images that inform man's actual religious experience, so that it is an experience specifically of the God of Israel, or of Allah, or of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, or of Vishnu or Shiva (pp. 105–6).

On this interpretation the distinction between the divine noumenon (the Eternal One) and the divine phenomena takes on strong Kantian implications: the religious experience of mankind is said to be limited to culturally conditioned experience of images or manifestations of the Eternal One an sich, the various divine personae. Thus the Judeo-Christian tradition experiences and worships the Yahweh persona, the Hindu tradition the Brahman persona, the Mahayana Buddhist tradition the Amida persona, etc. The Eternal One, then (much like the noumenon in Kant's epistemology of perception), is never the direct object of experience but is a postulate which is posited in order to make sense of the fact of religious experience in general.

But a host of questions confront this interpretation. If our experience is limited to the divine phenomena, can we be said to have any knowledge at all of the divine noumenon – the Eternal One? If there is no significant element of continuity between the Eternal One an sich and the various divine personae, is it at all informative to speak of the personae as images or manifestations of the Eternal One? Why postulate the existence of the Eternal One as the single divine reality behind the various personae instead of, say, maintaining a plurality of divine noumena (polytheism) or holding that some but not necessarily all personae are illusory? What would count in favour of, or count against, the various personae being images of the Eternal One? What exactly is the ontological status of the Eternal One? Does it entail ontological monism (as in certain forms of Buddhism and Hinduism) or pluralism? The chief problem with this interpretation is this: if we minimize the continuity between the Eternal One an sich and the divine personae the status of the Eternal One becomes very unclear. Not only is it unclear what (if anything) can be known about the Eternal One but the reasons for postulating the existence of the Eternal One remain mysterious. Is the Eternal One more than an elaborate hypothesis postulated to avoid concluding that perhaps all religious traditions are not in touch with the same divine reality?

IV

In this short essay I have focused upon what seem to me to be some difficulties in Professor Hick's post-Copernican revolution view of the relation among religious traditions. Whether Hick's thesis can be formulated in such a way as to avoid the problems raised here remains to be seen. Discussion over epistemological issues relating to religious pluralism is sure to continue, however, for Hick has made the Anglo-American philosophical and theological community aware of a topic that can no longer be ignored.