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Eating Sugar, Becoming Sugar, Both, or Neither? Eschatology and Religious Pluralism in the Thought of John Hick, Sri Ramakrishna, and S. Mark Heim

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Devotees of God love to eat sugar, not to become sugar.
—Sri Ramakrishna (K 83/G 133)

John Hick is, of course, well known for his groundbreaking efforts to develop a philosophically cogent theory of religious pluralism. However, he was equally pioneering in presenting a cross-cultural theory of eschatology in *Death and Eternal Life* (Hick [1976] 1994), which drew upon the fields of philosophy, theology, parapsychology, and sociology and brought Christian views on the afterlife into fruitful dialogue with Hindu and Buddhist views. Throughout his impressively wide-ranging corpus spanning over half a century, Hick has made a powerful case for the necessity of exploring issues in philosophy of religion and theology from a global perspective.

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In this spirit of global philosophical inquiry, I will bring Hick into critical dialogue with the nineteenth-century Hindu mystic Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886). The first and second sections of this chapter provide brief accounts respectively of Hick’s and Ramakrishna’s views on religious pluralism and eschatology. The third section then highlights Ramakrishna’s contemporary relevance by arguing that his experientially grounded theory of religious pluralism has significant philosophical advantages over both Hick’s religious pluralism and S. Mark Heim’s theory of “pluralistic inclusivism,” which Heim developed in explicit opposition to Hick’s theory. Following Heim, I contend that Hick’s pluralist theory fails to honor the diversity of salvific goals posited by the various world religions, since Hick conceives salvation in vague and monolithic terms.

While Heim rightly criticizes Hick’s monolithic view of salvation, I argue that Heim’s alternative theory of pluralistic inclusivism is even *less* pluralistic than Hick’s, since Heim adopts the inclusivist—and borderline incoherent—position that every religious practitioner is equally justified in considering the salvific goal of her own religion to be ultimate while considering the salvific goals of other religions to be merely “penultimate.” Ramakrishna’s religious pluralism, I suggest, shares the strengths of both Hick’s and Heim’s theories while avoiding their most serious weaknesses. In contrast to Hick and Heim, Ramakrishna accepts the *equal* ontological reality and value of the various eschatological goals posited by theistic and non-theistic religions, including eternal loving communion with the personal God and Advaitic identity with the impersonal Absolute.

Hick’s Evolving Views on Religious Pluralism and Eschatology

In the fourth chapter of my book *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality* (Maharaj 2018: 117–50), I argued that Hick’s views on religious pluralism evolved significantly from 1970 to 1976. For present purposes, I will briefly summarize my argument in that chapter and then explore how Hick’s

religious pluralism relates to his views on eschatology. Between 1970 and 1974, Hick espoused a theory of religious pluralism based explicitly on Sri Aurobindo's Vedāntic "logic of the infinite":

For if, as every profound form of theism has affirmed, God is infinite and therefore exceeds the scope of our finite human categories, he may be both personal Lord and non-personal Ground of Being; both judge and father, source alike of justice and of love. At any rate, there is a program for thought in the exploration of what Aurobindo called "the logic of the infinite" and the question of the extent to which predicates that are incompatible when attributed to a finite reality may no longer be incompatible when referred to infinite reality. (Hick 1973: 128)¹

According to Aurobindo, the Divine Reality obeys the "logic of the Infinite" ([1940] 2006: 343), so "[i]t will not do to apply our limited and limiting conclusions to That which is illimitable" ([1940] 2006: 345). Hence, Aurobindo maintains that the Infinite Divine Reality is both personal and impersonal and both with and without form, even though these attributes appear contradictory to the finite human intellect ([1940] 2006: 343–48). The early Hick derived a theory of religious pluralism from this Aurobindonian "logic of the Infinite": since each religion captures at least one true aspect of the Infinite Reality—which is at once the "personal Lord" and the "non-personal Ground of Being"—the various conceptions of the Divine Reality taught by the major world religions are complementary rather than conflicting (Hick 1973: 128).

By 1976, however, Hick abandoned this Aurobindonian line of thought in favor of his now well-known quasi-Kantian theory of religious pluralism, grounded in a key distinction between an unknowable "Real *an sich*" and the "Real as humanly-thought-and-experienced" (Hick 1989: 239–40).² According to Hick, the conceptions of ultimate reality found in all the great world religions are different culturally conditioned ways of conceiving one and the same noumenal Real (1989: 246). Hence, at an ontological level, while the early Hick held that the Infinite Reality is *both* personal *and* non-personal, the later Hick maintained that the ineffable Real *an sich* is *neither* personal *nor* impersonal. He makes this clear in this passage from *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989):

This distinction between the Real as it is in itself and as it is thought and experienced through our human religious concepts entails...that we cannot apply to the Real *an sich* the characteristics encountered in its *personae* and *impersonae*. Thus it cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, conscious or unconscious, purposive or non-purposive, substance or process, good or evil, loving or hating. None of the descriptive terms that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperienceable reality that underlies that realm. (Hick 1989: 350)

While the early Hick understood divine infinitude as a positive, inexhaustible plenitude that exceeds rational comprehension, the later Hick conceives the infinitude of the Real *an sich* in strictly negative terms.

Not surprisingly, the theory of religious pluralism Hick derived from this quasi-Kantian ontology differed substantially from his earlier Aurobindonian theory. According to the later Hick, the “divine *personae* and *impersonae*” of all the world religions are phenomenally true but noumenally false, so the religious practices based on these phenomenal conceptions of the Real are all equally capable of leading to salvific transformation (1989: 246). By contrast, the early Hick maintained that all the world religions capture different *ontologically real* aspects of one and the same Infinite Reality. The early Hick thereby accounted for the salvific efficacy of all religions without appealing to a Kantian noumenal-phenomenal ontology.

Hick first presented his views on eschatology in *Death and Eternal Life* (Hick [1976] 1994; hereafter DEL), which he seems to have written shortly *before* he embraced the quasi-Kantian model of religious pluralism. Accordingly, in DEL, he implicitly invokes the Aurobindonian “logic of the infinite” to explain how the Divine Reality can be personal and non-personal at the same time:

In a finite entity, personality and impersonality are mutually incompatible. But why should they be incompatible in the Infinite? The Eternal may be—and has in fact been experienced as being—personal...without this genuinely personal character exhausting its infinity, so that the same Reality may also be—and has in fact been experienced as being—the Ground of Being, the Depth of Being, Being-Itself, the Abyss, the Void, the *Ungrund*, the Absolute of advaita Vedanta.... (DEL 32)

Tellingly, Hick grounds his “global” theory of eschatology in his religious pluralism, arguing that “the great faiths of east and west permit, and by their convergent permission even point towards, a common conception of human destiny” (DEL 34). He divides his theory of life after death into two main components: “pareschatology,” which concerns the intermediate state of the soul after death but before the attainment of final salvation, and “eschatology” proper, which concerns the final state of salvation. According to Hick’s pareschatology, while fully perfected souls directly attain the final state of salvation, souls that are not yet perfect—comprising the vast majority of us—remain for some time in an intermediate “dream-like” state in which they confront their unconscious desires and fears and undergo pleasant and/or unpleasant experiences in accordance with how they had lived on earth (DEL 414). After remaining in this intermediate state, unperfected souls will have to be reborn again until they become ethically and spiritually perfect. While Hick’s theory of rebirth in DEL has strong affinities with Vedāntic and Buddhist theories of rebirth, Hick’s theory differs from these Eastern theories in two respects. First, while Vedāntins and Buddhists typically hold that souls are reborn in a physical body only here on earth, Hick suggests that souls are reborn either on earth or in other spatiotemporal worlds. Second, while Vedāntins and Buddhists hold that we have all had previous lives, Hick claims in DEL that “our present life is our first” (DEL 417).

Notably, Hick upholds universal salvation, the doctrine that everyone, without exception, will attain salvation eventually, either in this life or in a future life (DEL 242–63). However, his account of the final state of salvation in DEL is ambiguous. On the one hand, in line with his religious pluralist position, he claims that the eschatologies developed in different religious traditions are “essentially open-ended,” in that none of them are literally true, but they all nonetheless point “in the same direction” (DEL 427), toward an “unknown” final eschaton that we cannot fathom with our finite minds (DEL 458). From this pluralistic standpoint, Hick places theistic and non-theistic religious conceptions of salvation on an equal footing.

On the other hand, in the final chapter of DEL, Hick sketches a distinctly *theistic* picture of the eschaton as a “perfect community of mutually open centres of consciousness” who stand in a loving relationship with the

“Ultimate Reality” (DEL 462). Indeed, he explicitly notes that his language of a “relation” between the individual soul and the Ultimate Reality “implicitly rejects the *advaitist* view that Atman *is* Brahman, the collective human self being ultimately identical with God, in favour of the more complex *vishishtadvaitist* interpretation of the Upanishads, which is in turn substantially in agreement with the christian conception of God as personal Lord, distinct from his creation” (DEL 464). However, this theistic conception of final salvation contradicts his own pluralistic thesis that theistic and non-theistic religious traditions point in the “same direction” toward an unknown final eschaton. By conceiving the eschaton in theistic terms, Hick proves to be less of a religious pluralist than a theistic inclusivist who holds that religious traditions like Advaita Vedānta are fundamentally mistaken in conceiving salvation in non-theistic terms.³

In subsequent works, Hick resolved this internal tension in his eschatology by rejecting the theistic conception of final salvation he had endorsed in DEL. In *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989), he refers to *all* religious conceptions of final salvation—be they theistic or non-theistic—as “eschatological myths,” which he defines as “imaginative pictures of the ultimate state” that are not literally true (1989: 355). In line with his religious pluralist position, Hick no longer conceives the eschaton in theistic terms, instead defining it in very general terms as “a limitlessly good fulfilment of the project of human existence” (Hick 1989: 361n8). Nonetheless, he claims that the eschatological myths of various religions are “valid” to the extent that they promote the “transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness” (Hick 1989: 355).

In *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (1993), he even raises the possibility that the eschaton transcends the dichotomy between Advaitic identity and loving communion:

Each of the great religions holds that the ultimate human state—whether it is to be attained by all or only by some—is one of union or communion with the divine reality. From our present earthly standpoint the difference between union and communion seems considerable, but in that final state it may perhaps be transcended—somewhat as in the Christian conception of the Trinity as three in one and one in three. At any rate the traditions all point in their different ways to an eschaton which lies beyond our present conceptuality. (Hick 1993: 188)

Hick's final position on eschatology, then, is that we are not at present in a position to conceptualize the nature of final salvation, so we simply cannot be sure whether it is a state of Advaitic "union" or theistic "communion," or a state that transcends the union-communion dichotomy. However, in spite of the fact that Hick's views on the eschaton evolved from DEL to his later works, he consistently held, from DEL on, a *monolithic* conception of the eschaton. That is, he always assumed that final salvation must take *one* particular form, even though we cannot know precisely what form it will take. In other words, Hick consistently maintained that Advaitins, Vaiṣṇavas, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and so on will all attain the *same* state of final salvation in the end, even though their respective religious traditions conceive the eschaton in vastly different ways.

Ramakrishna's Religious Pluralism and Eschatology

Like Hick, Ramakrishna subscribed to religious pluralism, though his religious pluralism comes much closer to the early Hick's Vedāntic theory of religious pluralism than to Hick's later quasi-Kantian theory. In chapters 3 and 4 of *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality* (Maharaj 2018: 85–150), I have discussed Ramakrishna's religious pluralism at length and argued for its comparative advantages over Hick's quasi-Kantian religious pluralism. For present purposes, I will briefly summarize those chapters and then examine Ramakrishna's views on eschatology, which I have not yet discussed in detail in my previous work.

Ramakrishna's teachings on religious pluralism were grounded in his own diverse religious practices and spiritual experiences. He practiced not only the theistic Hindu disciplines of Śākta Tantra and Vaiṣṇavism but also the non-theistic discipline of Advaita Vedānta, which holds that the impersonal, attributeless (*nirguṇa*) Brahman alone is real. Even more remarkably, he also practiced both Christianity and Islam and found them to be as salvifically efficacious as Hinduism. By realizing various forms and aspects of one and the same God through all of these different

paths, he claimed to have obtained direct experiential verification of the truth of religious pluralism.⁴

Ramakrishna's spiritual journey culminated in the unique mystical experience of "*vijñāna*," his realization that the "Reality which is impersonal [*nirguṇa*] is also personal [*saguṇa*]" (*K 51/G 104*). As a *vijñānī*, Ramakrishna affirmed that "[t]here is no limit to God": the Infinite God is both personal and impersonal, with and without form, immanent in the universe and beyond it (*K 997/G 920*). He frequently remarked that the impersonal nondual "Brahman" and the personal dynamic "Śakti" are "inseparable...like fire and its power to burn," thereby indicating that the personal and impersonal aspects of the Infinite Reality are equally real (*K 568/G 550*). On the basis of this expansive spiritual realization, he taught that theistic and non-theistic spiritual philosophies are equally effective paths to realizing God. As he put it, "God can be reached through any number of paths" (*K 51/G 104*).

Ramakrishna's religious pluralism, then, derived directly from his *vijñāna*-based ontology of God as the impersonal-personal Infinite Reality. Since God is infinite, there must be correspondingly infinite ways of approaching and ultimately realizing God. As he succinctly puts it, "God is infinite, and the paths to God are infinite" (*K 511/G 506*). From Ramakrishna's standpoint, God is conceived and worshipped in different ways by people of varying temperaments, preferences, and worldviews. Accordingly, a sincere practitioner of any religion can realize God in the particular form or aspect he or she prefers.

To illustrate the harmony of all religions, Ramakrishna would frequently recite the parable of the chameleon:

Once a man entered a forest and saw a small animal on a tree. He came back and told another man that he had seen a creature of a beautiful red color on a certain tree. The second man replied: "When I went into the forest, I also saw that animal. But why do you call it red? It is green." Another man who was present contradicted them both and insisted that it was yellow. Presently others arrived and contended that it was grey, violet, blue, and so forth and so on. At last they started quarrelling among themselves. To settle the dispute, they all went to the tree. They saw a man sitting under it. On being asked, he replied: "Yes, I live under this tree and I

know the animal very well. All your descriptions are true. Sometimes it appears red, sometimes yellow, and at other times blue, violet, grey, and so forth. It is a chameleon. And sometimes it has no color at all. Now it has a color, and now it has none.”

In like manner, one who constantly thinks of God can know God’s real nature; he alone knows that God reveals Himself to seekers in various forms and aspects. God is personal [*saguna*] as well as impersonal [*nirguna*]. Only the man who lives under the tree knows that the chameleon can appear in various colors, and he knows, further, that the animal at times has no color at all. It is the others who suffer from the agony of futile argument. (*K 101/G 149–50*)

Like the chameleon which appears in various colors and sometimes has no color at all, God manifests in various forms and aspects to different spiritual aspirants. While most people make the mistake of thinking that the chameleon only has the color which they see it as having, the man always sitting under the tree sees that the chameleon has various colors and, hence, that everyone is partially correct. The colorless chameleon corresponds to the impersonal Brahman, while the chameleon with various colors corresponds to the personal God or Śakti, and it is clear that Ramakrishna does not privilege the impersonal Brahman in any way. As we saw earlier in this section, he consistently maintains that the impersonal Brahman and the personal Śakti have equal ontological reality. The man sitting under the tree represents the *vijñānī*—such as Ramakrishna himself—who has realized both the personal and impersonal aspects of God and hence affirms on the basis of his own spiritual experience that all religions are salvifically effective paths.

I have argued at length elsewhere that Ramakrishna’s religious pluralism has a number of philosophical advantages over Hick’s quasi-Kantian religious pluralism (Maharaj 2018: 117–50). According to the later Hick’s quasi-Kantian theory, the personal and non-personal ultimates taught by the world religions are different phenomenal manifestations of the same unknowable Real *an sich*. Since the various religious conceptions of the ultimate reality have only phenomenal status, they do not pick out any real feature or aspect of the noumenal Real itself.

Ramakrishna, in stark contrast to Hick, maintains that personal and non-personal conceptions of the Divine Reality capture different *ontologically real* aspects of one and the same Infinite Reality. Hence, as we have seen, while the later Hick maintains that the Real *an sich* is *neither* personal *nor* impersonal (Hick 1989: 350), Ramakrishna maintains that the Infinite Reality is *both* personal (*saguṇa*) *and* impersonal (*nirguṇa*), and much more besides. Ramakrishna, then, would have rejected the later Hick's quasi-Kantian view in favor of the *early* Hick's Aurobindonian view that the Infinite God is “both personal Lord and non-personal Ground of Being” (Hick 1973: 128). While Ramakrishna accords full-blown ontological reality to the ultimates of the various religions, the later Hick fixes an ontological gulf between the Real *an sich* and the different phenomenal conceptions of the Real.

As a result, Hick—as many scholars have noted—fails to take at face value many of the central truth-claims of the world religions.⁵ By downgrading the personal and non-personal ultimates of the various religions to phenomenal status, Hick does violence to the self-understanding of most religious practitioners, who believe in the literal reality of their respective ultimates. As George Mavrodes puts it, “Hick's view suggests that almost all of the world's religious believers are wildly mistaken about the objects of their worship and adoration” (Hick 2001: 69n6). Anticipating this objection, Hick insists that “these divine *personae* and metaphysical *impersonae*...are not illusory but are empirically, that is experientially, real as authentic manifestations of the Real” (1989: 242). Mavrodes' point, however, is that most religious believers take their respective ultimates to be not only “empirically” real but also ontologically real, while Hick takes all such religious ultimates to be ontologically *false*. A major advantage of Ramakrishna's *vijñāna*-based religious pluralism is that it conceives the personal and non-personal ultimates of the various world religions as ontologically real aspects of one and the same Infinite Divine Reality.

With respect to pareschatology, Ramakrishna agrees with Hick in accepting rebirth. However, while Hick leaves open the possibility that we are reborn either on this earth or in some other spatiotemporal world, Ramakrishna assumes that we are reborn in a physical body only here on earth, which he refers to as the “*karma-bhūmi*,” the place where we engage

in action in order to work out our *karma* (*K* 172/*G* 209). Moreover, as I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Maharaj 2018: 241–280), the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth play a crucial role in Ramakrishna’s response to the problem of evil. According to Ramakrishna, God permits evil “in order to create saints” (*K* 37/*G* 98). Through the experience of good and evil in the course of many lives, we gradually learn to combat our own evil tendencies and cultivate ethical and spiritual qualities that bring us closer to the goal of eternal salvation that awaits us all. Interestingly, when Hick first formulated his “soul-making” theodicy in *Evil and the God of Love* (1966), he assumed a one-life-only paradigm, which numerous scholars have rightly criticized, since a single lifetime is generally insufficient for the soul-making process to come to fruition.⁶ In later works, however, Hick came closer to Ramakrishna in appealing to the doctrine of rebirth in order to explain how all of us will eventually salvation through a process of soul-making that takes places in the course of many lives (Hick 2006: 194–200).

As I suggested in the previous section, Hick’s mature position on final salvation has two main features. First, his conception of final salvation is monolithic in that he assumes that everyone will attain one and the same state of salvation. Second, he remains noncommittal about the precise nature of final salvation, referring to it in general terms as “a limitlessly good fulfilment of the project of human existence” (Hick 1989: 361n8).

Notably, Ramakrishna differs from Hick on both these points. Ramakrishna’s eschatology is grounded in his religious pluralism and his expansive ontology of the impersonal-personal Divine Reality. According to Ramakrishna, there are two fundamentally different types of spiritual aspirants: *bhaktas* (devotionally oriented people) who strive to cultivate a loving relationship with the personal God, and *jñānīs* (rationally oriented people like Advaita Vedāntins and Buddhists) who strive for “Nirvāṇa,” a salvific state in which no sense of individuality remains. As he puts it, “those who partake of Śiva’s nature have the temperament of a *jñānī*, while those who partake of Viṣṇu’s nature have the temperament of a *bhakta*” (*K* 725/*G* 688). Accordingly, the goals of *bhaktas* and *jñānīs* are also different: “*Bhaktas* love to eat sugar, not to become sugar” (*K* 83/*G* 133). Instead of striving to merge their individuality in the impersonal

nondual Brahman, devotees prefer the bliss of loving communion with the personal God.

From the standpoint of traditional Advaita Vedānta, devotion toward the personal God is at best a stepping-stone toward Advaitic realization. On 23 May 1885, Mahimā Cakravarti, a householder with leanings toward Advaita Vedānta, asked Ramakrishna whether he subscribed to this traditional Advaitic view:

MAHIMĀ: “I have a question to ask, sir. A *bhakta* needs Nirvāṇa some time or other, doesn’t he?”

SRI RAMAKRISHNA: “It can’t be said that *bhaktas* need Nirvāṇa. There is a state in which the eternal Kṛṣṇa is with His eternal *bhaktas* (*nityakṛṣṇa tār nityabhakta*). Kṛṣṇa is Spirit embodied, and His Abode also is Spirit embodied (*cinmay śyām, cinmay dhām*). Kṛṣṇa is eternal and the *bhaktas* also are eternal (*nityakṛṣṇa nityabhakta*). Kṛṣṇa and His *bhaktas* are like the moon and the stars—always near each other. Further, I have told you that the *bhakta* who is born with an element of Viṣṇu cannot altogether get rid of *bhakti*. (*K 834/G 779*)

In this highly significant passage, Ramakrishna emphatically answers Mahimā’s question in the negative: it is not necessary for devotees to attain the Advaitic state of Nirvāṇa. Rather, salvation for *bhaktas* consists in a state of eternal loving communion with the personal God. Ramakrishna’s specific reference to “the eternal Kṛṣṇa” and “His eternal *bhaktas*” suggests that he had in mind the spiritual philosophy of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, which is based on the Acintyabhedābheda school of Vedānta. According to Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, salvation consists in residing eternally in the transcendental realm of Goloka, where liberated souls lovingly worship and serve Kṛṣṇa. In fact, all the devotional schools of Vedānta—including not only Acintyabhedābheda but also Vallabha’s Śuddhādvaita, Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita, Nimbārka’s Svābhāvika Bhedābheda, and Madhva’s Dvaita Vedānta—conceive the highest salvation not as the dissolution of one’s

individuality in nondual Brahman (as Advaita Vedāntins hold) but as the attainment of an eternal nonphysical realm (*loka*) in which the individual soul lovingly worships and serves the personal God (Tapasyānanda 1990; Maharaj 2020: 6). According to all of these devotional Vedāntic schools, this eternal *loka*, as well as God Himself and all individual souls, are composed not of physical matter but of “*śuddha-sattva*,” which is non-physical and eternal (Tapasyānanda 1990). As Sri Ramakrishna puts it, “Kṛṣṇa is Spirit embodied, and His Abode also is Spirit embodied.”

Clearly, Ramakrishna fully accepts *both* the Advaitic ideal of merging one’s individuality in nondual Brahman *and* the devotional ideal of eternal loving communion with the personal God in a transcendental realm. Moreover, he rejected the narrowness and sectarianism of all the traditional Vedāntic schools. Advaita Vedāntins deny the possibility of eternally dwelling with the personal God in a higher *loka*, claiming instead that souls who attain such a *loka*—which they usually refer to as “*brahma-loka*”—cannot remain there eternally and, hence, must eventually go on to merge their individuality in nondual Brahman in order to achieve liberation.⁷ On the other hand, followers of devotional schools of Vedānta either deny outright the Advaitic ideal of salvation or relegate it to an inferior form of salvation (Tapasyānanda 1990).

In contrast to all of these traditional schools of Vedānta, Ramakrishna grants equal value to both the Advaitic and devotional ideals of salvation. For Ramakrishna, the form of salvation we choose depends on our individual temperament and preference. Advaita Vedāntins and Buddhists⁸ strive to attain *nirvāṇa*, which he describes as follows:

In that state, one finds no sense of “I.” Indeed, who is there left to seek it? Who can describe the state of becoming one with Brahman? Once a salt doll went to measure the depth of the ocean. No sooner was it in the water than it melted. Now who was to tell the depth?...The “I”, which may be likened to the salt doll, melts in the Ocean of Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute and becomes one with It. No sense of individuality remains whatsoever. (*K 99/G 148*)

While some spiritual aspirants seek to merge their individuality in the impersonal nondual Brahman, devotees tend to prefer to retain a sense of

individuality in order to enjoy the bliss of loving communion with the personal God. Put in terms of Ramakrishna's analogy already mentioned above, devotees prefer to *eat* sugar, while Advaitins want to *become* sugar.

To emphasize the equal value of both of these salvific ideals, Ramakrishna invoked the analogy of a limitless ocean:

Saccidānanda [Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute] is like an infinite ocean. Intense cold freezes the water into ice, which floats on the ocean in blocks of various forms. Likewise, through the cooling influence of *bhakti*, one sees forms of God [*sāḥkārmūrti*] in the Ocean of the Absolute. These forms are meant for the *bhaktas*, the lovers of God. But when the Sun of Knowledge [*jñāna-sūrya*] rises, the ice melts; it becomes the same water it was before. Water above and water below, everywhere nothing but water.... But you may say that for certain devotees God assumes eternal forms [*nitya sākāra*]. There are places in the ocean where the ice doesn't melt at all. It assumes the form of quartz [*sphaṭiker ākāra*]. (K 152/G 191)

By likening the forms of the personal God to ice formations in the infinite ocean of the Divine Saccidānanda, Ramakrishna makes clear that these divine forms are no less real than the formless Absolute. At the same time, he notes that the ice “melts” when the “Sun of Knowledge” rises. By “Sun of Knowledge,” he clearly means the Knowledge of nondual Brahman: upon the attainment of nondual realization, one no longer perceives any divine forms. If he stopped here, we might assume that he supports the traditional Advaitic view that ultimate salvation consists in nondual realization. Crucially, however, he goes on to remark that for certain *bhaktas*, the ice becomes “quartz” instead of melting. In other words, these *bhaktas* choose to remain in a loving relationship with an “eternal form” of the personal God. Ramakrishna's notion of “eternal forms of God” is perfectly in keeping with his response to Mahimā—already quoted earlier—that there is a salvific state in which “Kṛṣṇa is eternal and the *bhaktas* also are eternal” (K 834/G 779).

We are now in a position to appreciate the intimate connection between his eschatology and his religious pluralism. According to Ramakrishna, various theistic and non-theistic religious paths are equally capable of leading to the salvific realization of the Infinite Divine Reality.

However, he conceives this Divine Reality expansively as both the impersonal nondual Absolute (Brahman) as well as the personal God (Śakti). Accordingly, his conception of the salvific goal of all religions is equally expansive. For non-theistic spiritual aspirants like Advaita Vedāntins and some Buddhists, salvation consists in the total dissolution of one's individuality in the nondual Reality. By contrast, for spiritual aspirants in theistic religious traditions like Vaiṣṇavism, Christianity, and Islam, salvation takes the form of eternal loving communion with the personal God in a transcendental realm. Since Ramakrishna accepts the Hindu theory of various *lokas* ("realms"), I think it is plausible to assume that he would further hold that there are *multiple* theistic forms of salvation. For instance, while devotees of Kṛṣṇa can dwell eternally with their beloved Kṛṣṇa in Vaikuṅṭha-Loka, Christians can dwell with Christ or God the Father in their Christian Heaven, Muslims can commune with Allah in their Eternal Paradise (*Jannah*), and so on. In short, Ramakrishna was not only a *religious* pluralist who held that different religious paths are equally capable of leading to salvation, but he was also a *salvific* pluralist, in that he held that salvation itself takes a variety of forms, depending on the temperament and preferences of different souls.

A Plurality of Ultimate Salvations: Bringing Ramakrishna into Critical Dialogue with Hick and Heim

The contemporary Christian theologian S. Mark Heim has rightly noted that many theories of religious pluralism—including Hick's quasi-Kantian one—are based on "the largely undefended assumption that there is and can be only one religious end" (1995: 129). As we have seen in the first section, Hick holds that everyone without exception will eventually attain the same final state of salvation, even though we are not able, at present, to conceptualize the nature of this final eschatological state due to the limitations of our human intellects. However, as Heim (1995: 129) notes, Hick thereby fails to honor the diversity of the respective salvific goals taught by the various religions.

Rejecting Hick's monolithic approach to salvation, Heim advocates a "pluralistic inclusivism" (1995: 152). The pluralistic dimension of Heim's pluralistic inclusivism consists in the "contention that there can be a variety of actual but different religious fulfillments, salvations" (1995: 131). Accordingly, Heim's model strives to accommodate the theistic goal of loving union with a personal God as well as the radically different Buddhist goal of *nirvāṇa*, which involves the extinction of personality and liberation from the transmigratory cycle. In order to theorize the inclusivist dimension of his pluralistic inclusivism, Heim draws on Nicholas Rescher's orientational pluralism. According to Heim, Rescher's orientational pluralism explains how "[p]eople who rationally hold contradictory views from different orientations are each justified in thinking the other wrong" (1995: 137). Rescher's model, Heim suggests, provides a philosophical basis for the coexistence of a variety of rationally justified religious inclusivisms, each of which takes its own religious fulfillment to be "ultimate" while taking the religious fulfillments of other religions to be "penultimate" but nonetheless real and salvific in their own right (1995: 152). For instance, the Christian is rationally justified, from her own Christian perspective, in taking the Christian goal of loving union with a personal God to be ultimate and taking non-Christian religious ends—such as the Buddhist goal of *nirvāṇa*—to be lesser or penultimate achievements. However, the Buddhist, from her Buddhist perspective, is *equally* justified in taking the Buddhist goal of *nirvāṇa* to be ultimate and taking non-Buddhist religious ends—such as communion with a personal God—to be penultimate achievements. Hence, while Heim himself defends a Christian inclusivist view in the sixth chapter of his book, he is quick to point out that others would be equally justified in championing competing non-Christian inclusivisms (1995: 158–84). Heim, then, envisions interreligious dialogue as a friendly conversation among religious inclusivists of various persuasions, who would seek to "cross over' imaginatively and spiritually to see the world, however imperfectly, from another orientation" (1995: 159).

Heim makes a convincing case that Hick's theory of religious pluralism is insufficiently pluralistic, since it fails to accommodate the possibility of multiple religious fulfillments. However, I would argue that Heim's alternative model of pluralistic inclusivism—which he claims is a "more

pluralistic hypothesis” (1995: 8) than Hick’s—is, in fact, much *less* pluralistic than Hick’s. After identifying two major weaknesses in Heim’s theory, I will suggest that Ramakrishna’s *vijñāna*-based theory of religious pluralism is more philosophically coherent and more genuinely pluralistic than either Heim’s pluralistic inclusivism or Hick’s quasi-Kantian religious pluralism.

First, Heim’s attempt to adapt Rescher’s model of orientational pluralism to the theology of religions lands him in a double bind. On the one hand, Heim embraces the inclusivist position that the salvation promised by one’s own religion is superior to the “penultimate” salvations promised by other religions. As he puts it, “The theist who experiences communion with God could view the entrance of others into *nirvāṇa* as a punishment, a freely chosen lesser good, or a stage on the way to eventual reunion with God...” (1995: 41). On the other hand, Heim insists that *numerous* religious inclusivisms—Christian, Buddhist, Islamic, Hindu, and so on—are equally justified from different, incompatible perspectives. Accordingly, he writes: “Recognizing a diversity of perspectives allows us to say that contradictory statements can both be true at the same time, of different persons with different perspectives” (Heim 1995: 134). Heim assumes that since *none* of us, from our finite human standpoints, is capable of gaining objective knowledge of the reality, we are all equally justified in adopting the inclusivist position that makes most sense from our particular perspective. However, Andrew Schwartz rightly questions Heim’s assumption:

If objectivity is unattainable, and all we can do is privilege our own orientation, why should we even make universal claims about reality? Is the believer really justified in making truth claims, or should a believer’s claims be limited to the breadth of their justification? That is, since justification is orientational, should universal truth claims be replaced with orientational truth claims? Do believers have an epistemic obligation to refrain or withhold from believing in universal claims? (Schwartz 2012: 63)

In other words, if Heim is correct that we cannot know reality as such, then he cannot be justified in claiming that different religious inclusivisms are “true at the same time.” The claim that “X is true” requires the

knowledge that X corresponds to a real state of affairs, which is precisely the knowledge Heim insists we do not have. Hence, Heim's Rescherian perspectivalism, far from demonstrating that multiple religious inclusivisms are true at the same time, actually justifies an attitude of epistemic humility, which should deter us from making *any* truth-claims about the ultimate reality and final salvation (Schwartz 2012: 63).

Indeed, Heim's pluralistic inclusivism borders on incoherence by upholding epistemic perspectivalism while also maintaining that multiple religious inclusivisms are simultaneously true. As Samuel Ruhmkorff puts it, "Heim's view might make us worry that the following utterance is incoherent: 'My chosen salvation is superior to other salvations, and my chosen religion is the best way to achieve it; but of course, others will rightly find their chosen salvation superior to mine, and they rightly consider their religion to be the best means of achieving it'" (2013: 517). Hence, while Heim's pluralistic inclusivism rightly acknowledges the fact that different religions posit different salvific ends, his epistemic perspectivalism prevents him from affirming the *equal validity and truth* of these various salvific ends.

Second, although Heim (1995: 175–77) claims that his pluralistic inclusivism provides a robust basis for interreligious dialogue, his theory in fact *undermines* the possibility of actively learning from religions other than our own. Heim makes heavy weather of the fact that Hick's religious pluralism does not foster genuine interreligious dialogue, since it fails to honor the diversity of religious ends embodied in the various religions (1995: 101). Unfortunately, Heim's own model of pluralistic inclusivism fares even worse than Hick's religious pluralism in fostering interreligious dialogue. By taking all religious positions to be different forms of inclusivism, Heim forecloses the possibility of mutual learning and transformation, since each participant would enter the dialogue with the preconceived assumption of the rightness and superiority of his or her own inclusivist view. As Schwartz puts it, "Ironically, while Heim is a proponent of interreligious dialogue, his so-called 'pluralism' brings about the death of all dialogue. For what good is interreligious dialogue if we can never do better than privilege our own perspective?" (2012: 66). Indeed, Heim's pluralistic inclusivism seems to bring us back to something very much like the status quo, in which each religion claims to be

in possession of the full truth while other religions possess, at best, some part of the truth. One of the primary motivations for theories of religious pluralism is to provide a philosophical framework for challenging religious chauvinism and fanaticism, which have resulted in so much conflict and violence throughout the world. By rejecting religious pluralism in favor of religious inclusivism, Heim is in danger of entrenching, rather than combatting, these attitudes of religious superiority.

I would argue that Ramakrishna's doctrines of religious pluralism and eschatology share the philosophical advantages of both Hick's and Heim's theories while avoiding their primary drawbacks. Like Hick, Ramakrishna affirms the equal salvific efficacy of multiple religions. At the same time, Ramakrishna would side with Heim *against* Hick in holding that a truly pluralistic theory must accommodate multiple religious salvations. While Hick conceives salvation in monolithic terms, Ramakrishna affirms the equal reality and value of theistic and non-theistic forms of salvation.

However, I think Ramakrishna would reject Heim's foundational assumption that the acceptance of multiple religious ends necessarily entails inclusivism. Heim makes this assumption explicit in his defense of his own Christian inclusivist position: "This continuing conviction on the part of Christians that theirs is a distinctive and preferable religious end is itself a ground for the recognition of distinctively different religious fulfillments in other traditions. The two go together" (1995: 166). Militating against Heim's assumption, Ramakrishna defends a full-blown pluralist position that recognizes "distinctively different" religious fulfillments *without* privileging any one particular religious fulfillment as superior to all others. From Ramakrishna's spiritual standpoint of *vijñāna*, the Infinite Reality is both personal and impersonal, so the Advaitic aim of becoming one with nondual Brahman, the Buddhist aim of attaining *nirvāna*, and the theistic aim of attaining loving union with the personal God are all *equally* ultimate and *equally* salvific. Ramakrishna's religious pluralism also avoids the philosophical incoherence lurking in Heim's thesis that practitioners of different religions are equally justified in affirming the superiority of their preferred view of salvation. Finally, Ramakrishna's *vijñāna*-based ontology of the impersonal-personal Infinite Reality provides a much stronger basis for fruitful interreligious dialogue than Heim's inclusivist ontology. In Heim's vision, we would all

participate in interreligious dialogue as inclusivists who believe *a priori* in the superiority of our own respective religious standpoints. For Ramakrishna, by contrast, we would all come to the interreligious table as equals, eager to learn from religions other than our own, which can provide insightful perspectives on ultimate reality and spiritual practice that are either absent from, or not sufficiently emphasized, in our own religion.

For too long, academic discussions of religious pluralism have focused almost exclusively on Western pluralist theories, such as those of Hick, Heim, Paul Knitter, Raimundo Panikkar, and Alan Race.⁹ I hope I have begun to make a case for the contemporary relevance of Ramakrishna's distinctively Hindu views on religious pluralism and eschatology. Since Hick was a pioneer in seriously engaging non-Western religious traditions, I am certain that he would have welcomed nascent efforts to transform the fields of philosophy of religion and theology into truly global endeavors.

Notes

1. Hick also appeals to Aurobindo's "logic of the infinite" in Hick (1974: 153).
2. Hick first presented his quasi-Kantian theory of religious pluralism in his 1976 conference paper "Mystical Experience as Cognition" (Hick 1980).
3. D'Costa (1986: 44) was one of the first scholars to identify these "two contradictory positions" regarding eschatology in DEL. Hick (1990: 191) rebuts D'Costa's objection by arguing that he evolved away from a theistic conception of eschatology after his pluralist turn. However, I do not think Hick's rebuttal is quite to the point, since D'Costa identifies a tension between theistic and pluralistic conceptions of eschatology *within* DEL itself.
4. For details, see Maharaj (2018: 17–19).
5. See, for instance, George Mavrodes' criticisms of Hick in Hick (2001: 62–69), Netland (1986: 255–66).
6. See, for instance, Herman (1976: 287–88), McDonald (1995: 22–30), Stoeber (1992: 167–87), Maharaj (2018: 297–99).
7. See, for instance, Śaṅkara's commentary on *Brahmasūtra* 4.3.10.

8. I discuss Ramakrishna's views on Buddha in Maharaj (2018: 111–14). According to Ramakrishna, what Buddha called “*nirvāṇa*” is a negative term denoting the realization of one's “true nature as Pure Consciousness” (*bodha svarūpa*) (K 1028/G 947).
9. See, for instance, Ruhmkorff (2013) and Heim (1995).

Abbreviations

- G* Mahendranath Gupta. [1942] 1992. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Translated by Swami Nikhilananda. New York: Ramakrishna-Vedanta Center.
- K* Mahendranāth Gupta. [1902–1932] 2010. *Śrīśrīrāmākṛṣṇakathāmṛta: Śrīma-kathita*. 1 vol. Kolkātā: Udbodhan.

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