

John Hick, 1922-2012



John Hick was an eminent academic and scholar, who has been described by his colleagues as “one of the most – if not simply the most – significant philosopher of religion in the twentieth century” and “the greatest living philosopher of global religion”.

At University during the Second World War he converted to Evangelical Christianity, but when called up for military service he became a conscientious objector on moral grounds and joined the Friends Ambulance Unit.

In later life he moved away from his early beliefs and became a powerful advocate of religious pluralism.

He was a member of the URC for many years before becoming a Quaker in 2009, three years before his death at the age of ninety.

JOHN HICK: A PHILOSOPHER OF RELIGION'S ENGAGEMENT WITH RACIAL ISSUES

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The fear of the 'Other' is rearing its ugly head in the current volatile political climate in the UK, US and Europe. The Brexit vote to leave the EU and the election of Donald Trump as the US President, have created a mood of uncertainty and xenophobia. Racial tension is not something new, but one that was common when immigrants from the New Commonwealth countries started arriving from 1950 onwards to meet Britain's desperate labour shortage.

The purpose of this short piece is draw attention to how a world-renowned British philosopher of religion and theologian fought against racism in 1970s Britain. He was John Harwood Hick (1922-2012), H.G.Wood Professor of Theology at the University of Birmingham (1967-1982). Among his numerous publications, the edited volume *The Myth of God Incarnate* provided enormous publicity for the University of Birmingham.

John Hick was probably one of the few British academic theologians to raise the issue of racism. When Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech in 1968 created a political storm, British theologians were debating in abstract language about the implications of secular theology which dominated the theological discourse at that time. Topics such as race relations, immigration, and multiculturalism were seen as not proper subjects for academic theologians. Even before expressions such as 'academic impact' and 'community involvement' became trendy university-speak, Hick was actively engaged with what was happening on the ground.

One significant aspect that is missing in scholarly works on John Hick is an account of his practical involvement in anti-racist campaigns and community relations in the Handsworth area of

Birmingham in the 1970s, and the close link between his theological thinking and action. At a time when the arrival of new immigrants to the United Kingdom from the Caribbean and the Indian Sub-continent was causing enormous racial and communal tensions, Hick was prompted to act. Since his move to Birmingham in 1967, he had been actively involved in promoting a just and tolerant society where people of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds could live in harmony.[1] As the first chairperson of All Faiths for One Race (AFFOR), and along with John Plummer as its first director, Hick played a pivotal role in facilitating community and inter-faith relations. AFFOR was formed to provide a platform for faith leaders and members of the community to address racial and related issues that affected the newly arrived immigrants. It included members from Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities, as well as Marxists and Humanists. AFFOR campaigned against the 1971 Immigration Bill, as well as addressing the conflict between the police and young Afro-Caribbean people in Handsworth, and extended its scope by legal and other services. Hick, with Leonard Schiff, provided a character witness to a Muslim, in a well-known court case at that time.[2] He played a significant part in helping Ramgharia Sikhs in procuring a redundant church building so that it could be set up as a place of worship, as well as in getting permission from City's Planning Committee for Muslims to have a place of prayer in Birmingham.[3] As chair of various committees, Hick not only emphasized the positive contribution of diverse ethnic communities to Britain but also the value of a multi-faith syllabus in the RE curriculum.[4]

Hick not only drew attention to the raging racial politics of the time but also had the courage to expose the criminal elements within the National Front who were stirring up racial hatred. The two succinct but significant pamphlets he wrote - *The New Nazism of the National Front and National Party: A Warning to Christians* (1977) and *Christianity and Race* (1978) - encapsulated the prevalent white supremacist tendencies, the unfairness of immigration laws, the racial profiling of the West Indian children in schools which

disadvantaged them and hindered their integration. Another of Hick's important pamphlets, *Apartheid Observed* (1980), showed his commitment to wider-anti-racism outside Britain - the brutal treatment of the blacks by the white South African government. These three short essays offered not only a strident critique of the evils of racism but also a theological critique as well as practical guidance as to how to change the public perception of the 'Other'.^[5] Hick and his colleagues were also involved in organising the boycott of an all-white cricket team to England, from apartheid South Africa, who were to play at Edgbaston in Birmingham in 1970.

In his fight against racism, Hick provided leadership and collaborated with both religious and lay members of the community such as John Plummer (committed to social justice), Clare Shore (then MP for Ladywood, later Labour Cabinet Minister), David Jennings (Anglican priest), Anthony and Anne Wilson of the Cadbury Trust, Anil Bhalla (known for his work for the Asian elderly population), to name a few. Some of the influential local bishops and church leaders were reluctant to support him and were offering the traditional liberal argument that anti-racist pamphlets would be 'counter-productive'. Hick remarked in his Autobiography: "For the attitude of both church and state to the widespread British racism of the time was cautious to the point of being almost entirely ineffective and needed the uncompromising challenge embodied in people like John Plummer".^[6]

Even before the Twitter troll, some of those who were involved in protesting against the cricket tour and in the activities of AFFOR were not free from verbal attacks in print or physical attacks by racist groups.^[7] Hick himself received a physical threat, and one of his anti-racist collaborators, Maurice Ludmer, was brutally knifed by an extremist.^[8]

John Hick saw immigrants 'as much part of the contemporary British scene as those whose ancestors came from Ireland more than a hundred years ago, or indeed in the Norman Conquest nine hundred years ago.'^[9] The pertinent questions that Hick raised then are still relevant: 'Can the white British integrate themselves into the

larger human race which is now represented among us by black and brown faces from the former Empire? Can we accept and learn to rejoice in the human differences which immigration has introduced into our society. [10]

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Notes & References

[1] 'Earlier when Hick was a student at University College in Hull, he went through a conversion experience and "became a Christian of a strongly evangelical and indeed fundamentalist kind," but this stance did not last long. In 1973, some years after his move to Birmingham, Hick made a paradigm shift from a Christo-centric to a theo-centric position and eventually to a more nuanced pluralistic view of other faiths as constituting valid and genuine responses to the one ultimate Reality'. See Sharada Sugirtharajah (2012) 'The Mahatma and the Philosopher' in Sharada Sugirtharajah (ed.) *Religious Pluralism and the Modern World: An Ongoing Engagement with John Hick*, Basinstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p.2. Hick was an ordained minister of the United Reformed Church, before becoming a Quaker much later in his life.

[2] John Hick (2002) *An Autobiography*, Oxford: One World, p. 174.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp.175-6.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp.162-63.

[5] Sharada Sugirtharajah (2012) 'Introduction' in Sharada Sugirtharajah (ed.) *Religious Pluralism and the Modern World: an Ongoing Engagement with John Hick*, Basinstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p.2.

[6] John Hick, *An Autobiography*, p. 172.

[7] *Ibid* p.172.

[8] *Ibid.*, p.181.

[9] John Hick (1980) *God Has Many Names: Britain's New Religious Pluralism*, Macmillan: London, p.17.

[10] *Ibid.*,p. 27

