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Transformation from Real-Centredness to Other-Centredness: A Levinasian Re-Appraisal of John Hick's Religious Pluralism

Xin Mao [iD]

Philosophy Department, Sun Yat-Sen University (Zhuhai), Zhuhai 519000, China; maox3@mail.sysu.edu.cn

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Abstract: John Hick's theory of religious pluralism has from its birth faced critiques regarding both its conceptual framework and its religious outlook; yet even so, his philosophy continues to challenge us to strive for a greater sense of openness and equality as regards other faiths that conflict with our own. The viability of Hick's teaching today depends on a re-appraisal that enables it to surmount its theoretical difficulties. In this paper, we re-evaluate Hick's philosophy of religion, focusing on the underlying ethical importance of his claim regarding soteriological transformation. Despite the problematic notion of the noumenal Real and its role in religious pluralism, the soteriological transformation claimed by Hick, which goes from self-centredness toward Real-centredness, reveals a commitment to self-opening and compassion towards the others. Yet we will argue that Hick only gives this ethical importance a secondary status in his philosophy of religion, which leaves open the question of the nature of the causality between the ultimate Reality and this ethical commitment. We thereby engage with the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, in search of an ethical dimension with a characteristic of infinity, which can offer religious pluralism a transcendent foundation without disregarding ethical primacy. Following Levinas, we will argue for a further transformation from reality-centredness towards other-centredness, by which messianic peace would take the place of ultimate Reality as the teleological value underpinning religious pluralism.

Keywords: religious pluralism; real-centredness; other-centredness; messianic peace

1. Introduction

The resurgence of interest in religious pluralism has brought John Hick's philosophy back onto the horizon. Four decades have passed since Hick first proclaimed his philosophy of religion as a means to open up a space for religious pluralism as an interpretation of world religions. As Chester Gillis demonstrates, John Hick may not be the first or only philosopher to have focused on religious pluralism, but he is the most "provocative" in challenging the Western Christian-centric traditions that dominated theological and religious studies before him (Gillis 1989, p. 2). In the contemporary globalized world, where religious diversity, religious pluralism, and religious tolerance emerge as essential issues in a democratic society, Hick's pluralism still challenges us to strive towards a greater sense of equality and openness with other faiths that may conflict with our own.

As a Christian living in a multicultural community, Hick's deep involvement with other religious beliefs motivated him to question the presumed "absolutism" and "superiority" of the Christian church (Nah 2012, p. 19). Subsequently, he began to explore other major world religions with sincere respect, rather than pure curiosity. Aiming at identifying the universality underneath the diversity of traditions of faiths, Hick creatively utilized Kant's transcendental philosophy to establish an interpretation of religions that affirms a core commonality behind the various religious phenomena (Hick 1989).

Utilizing Kant's differentiation between phenomenon and noumenon, Hick argues that the great world religions are religious phenomena that respond to the same "ultimate transcendent reality", the noumenal Reality (Hick 1989, p. 279). Although the specific responses from each tradition can be varied according to their unique conceptual and cultural tradition, on a deeper level they are on a similar salvific journey, a journey from self-centredness toward Reality-centredness (Hick 1993). Hick supports this claim by reference to his extensive knowledge of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhism, and Hindu traditions, which to him similarly create paths of salvation in their own contexts (Hick 1993).

Hick's theoretical framework has been the subject of numerous critiques, from philosophers and theologians alike (Heim 1995; D'Costa 1996; Rose 1997; McKim 2012; Sinkinson 2016). They primarily call into question the conceptualization of the ultimate reality and the possibility that it leads towards a real pluralism. Epistemologically impossible to characterize, the Real is often denounced as an empty notion that cannot offer a strong base for religious pluralism. In this paper, we will shift the focus of the discussion from the conceptualization of the notion of ultimate Reality, to its contextualization: namely, the transformation from self-centredness to Real-centredness. We will argue that the ultimate Reality cannot be interpreted independently from the soteriological transformation promoted by Hick. More importantly, this transformation has a paramount ethical signification that has rarely been emphasized by Hick's critics.[1]

As Hick stresses, the transformation from self-centredness to Real-centredness can be "one's deepest and most pervasive orientation", which influences the moral standard of an individual and of his/her relation to others (Hick 1993). Hick seems to imply that this transformation, even though teleologically aimed at Real-centredness, in fact matters greatly to interhuman relations. Even though Hick does not labour the point of this ethical perspective, his confirmation on the importance of inter-human relations to one's salvation validity reminds us of Emmanuel Levinas's understanding of religion. As a philosopher who promotes ethics, or in other words one's responsibility for the other, as first philosophy, Levinas claims that "my relation to God comes to me in concreteness of my relation to the other man" (Levinas 1998a, p. xiv).

To highlight the ethical importance of Hick's religious pluralism and begin an ethical re-orientation of the discourse around religious pluralism, we will re-address Hick's theory from a Levinasian perspective: this not only makes it possible to seek value in Hick's religious pluralism, despite its theoretical deficiencies, but also brings Levinas's ethics to the centre stage of the discourse on religious pluralism. With this perspective acknowledged, we will set out the path of development of a new religious pluralism through introducing the Levinasian notion of illeity, pluralism, and messianic peace. Through his uncovering of the profound ethical significance of one's relationship to the divine, Levinas shows us that the universal ground is attained only through "messianic peace", rather than any ontological claims of truth (Levinas 1979, p. 22).

In the following sections, we first recount Hick's exposition of the soteriological transformation and the role he assigns it in establishing religious pluralism. Then we extrapolate its ethical significance and argue for the essentiality of the interpersonal aspect of this transformation, before turning to Levinas to argue for the importance of a further transformation toward other-centredness. We then elaborate on what Levinasian other-centredness can provide for religious pluralism, and how it may lead to a "messianic peace" within the plurality in order to tentatively develop a new theory of religious pluralism.

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[1]　Robert McKim mentions this briefly in his work, but does not affirm moral or intersubjective value of the transformation (McKim 2012).

2. John Hick on Self-Centredness and the Transformation towards Reality-Centredness

With his endeavour to find universal transcendental foundation for the world religions, Hick observed religious practices in "mosques, synagogues, gurdwaras and temples", analysing their transcendental claims and their "divine reality" (Hick 1980, p. 5). Hick strove to prove that the path to salvation is not exclusively Christian; God, he remarked, would not ask "that men must be saved in such a way that only a small minority can in fact receive this salvation" (Hick 1993, p. 22). To provide theoretical support for his effort to affirm the spiritual reality of faiths other than Christianity, Hick turns to Kantian transcendental epistemology, from which he draws the concept of a divine noumenon. In his famous distinction between phenomenon and noumenon, Kant defines the noumenon as the reality that does not dependent on human perceptions, whereas the world of phenomena is that which only appears through human sensibility (Kant 1998). Hick developed this Kantian formulation as a means to explain the varied religious experiences in human history. Despite the dissimilarities of the claims for divine found in different traditions, he argues, they are all in fact manifestations of a single ultimate Reality (Hick 1989). According to Hick, the noumenal Real can be experienced "through different human receptivities" in the forms of various divine phenomena, and these different experiences become formulated through different systems of religious concepts (Hick 1993). While religious conceptions themselves are finite, the ultimate Reality that grounds these finite phenomena is infinite and cannot be captured by any single religious tradition alone.

Hick draws upon his extensive knowledge of different religious conceptions to identify structural similarities between different religious phenomena, where these similarities ground parallel ideas of "salvific transformation in human life" (Hick 1989, p. 15). In other words, the implicit awareness of the Real results in soteriological transformation, and this transformation is visible in the major postaxial religions. More exactly, the transformation is deemed to be a transformation from self-centredness toward Reality-centredness; and this "transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness" is found in all the great religious traditions (Hick 1989, p. 167). Hick describes this transformation as a process of the human subject freeing him/herself from "self-concerned ego" and accepting the "oneness" of humankind (Hick 1989, p. 316). Through their common recognition of this process of transformation, the mature religions are able to recognize the equal spiritual validity and "liberative potential" (Schmidt-Leukel 2012, p. 25) of other religious traditions, and this is the basis of religious pluralism.

From the outset, Hick's theory of religious pluralism has faced criticism, both for its theoretical framework and its religious outlook. Notably, many scholars have found the notion of ultimate Reality problematic, drawing attention to the apparent contradiction in Hick's argument whereby he acknowledges the inaccessibility of the noumenal Real but at the same time claims that various deities are a "phenomenal manifestation of the Real" (Rose 1997, p. 106). Kenneth Rose questions whether the Real, falling as it does beyond any cognitive capacity of humanity, could possibly play any role within Hick's theory. For Rose, the notion of the ultimate Reality seems to be empty, conveying no meaning in any language system; yet his religious pluralism relies precisely on this seemingly empty notion (Rose 1997). D'Costa, meanwhile, argues that Hick's reliance on the "cognitive status of religious language" contradicts his pluralism that allows "differing views of truth" (D'Costa 1996, p. 228). If the Real is unknowable, all of the religious claims about this Real should be deemed fake. In this sense, the ultimate Reality does not lead toward pluralism, but instead towards a total denial of every particular religious metaphysics, whether theistic or nontheistic.

Drawing an epistemological model out of Kant's cognitive theory, and applying it to religious beliefs that are highly sensitive to cultural and historical contexts, is indeed problematic. However, simply to challenge the conceptual validity of the notion of Reality is not sufficient to refute the significance of Hick's pluralism, as another important part of Hick's hypothesis concerns the transformation evoked by awareness of the ultimate Reality. To know the Real is impossible, but a criterion for applying the term can be reached through observing the change in orientation manifest in the transformation from self-centredness toward Reality-centredness. The admitted difficulties with

the conceptualization of ultimate Reality do not efface the importance of the transformation from self-centredness to Real-centredness, and this transformation itself promises to provide a foundation for pluralism. The impossibility of knowing the ultimate reality does not necessarily deny the possibility of striving in the direction of transcendence. We can conceive of a form of transformation that moves away from self-centredness and toward Reality-centredness, approaching the ultimate Reality yet without definitively grasping it. This leads us to look more closely at the nature of the transformation itself, which is described as a "sudden or gradual change of the individual from an absorbing self-concern to a new centring in the supposed unity-of-reality-and-value" (Hick 1989, p. 36).

According to Hick, self-centredness not only indicates a lack of knowledge or consciousness of other forms of faith, but also an exclusive belief in one's own soteriological path. One can be fully aware of or even very knowledgeable about other faiths but still claim one's own faith to be the only truth. Hick takes the exclusivist tradition in Christianity as an example of such self-centredness on an even deeper level. For Hick, the Christian exclusivists often claim that "one particular religion" (Christianity) holds ultimate truth, and that others have only "inferior approximations" compared to this (Hick 1997, p. 161). Historically, in the case of Christianity, the privileging of one's own religious belief also results in patronizing others, and tends to end with their economic and political exploitation (Hick 1989, p. 372).

Challenging the Christian exclusivists, Hick studies the history of many religious traditions to demonstrate that one can observe a similar development from preaxial toward postaxial religion among all the world's faiths. In this process of development, a shift of focus is shown from keeping "life going on an even keel" toward a betterment of "the human situation" (Hick 1993, p. 135). According to Hick, even though the "pre-axial" (the "pre-literate") religions had spiritual potentiality, they often were only devices to protect society, maintaining a "cosmetic and social order" (Hick 1989, p. 27). Through the Axial age, we see the emergence of an individualism that values each person's self-consciousness beyond his/her role in the communal totality. With this self-consciousness, a transcendental relation between each believer and the divine becomes possible. Hick thus perceives a soteriological development in the postaxial religions, whereby a transformation in the attitude toward the "ultimate unity of reality and value" (Hick 1993, p. 33) takes place in the course of history. He maintains that each tradition advances along the process of transformation through a progressive recentring around the divine reality which can be expressed in many ways:

> faithfulness to the Torah, discipleship to Jesus, obedient living out of the Qur'anic way of life, the Eightfold Path of the Buddhist dharma, or the three great Hindu margas of mystical insight, activity in the world, and self-giving devotion to God. (Hick 1993, p. 136)

However, given the modern developments in the traditional religions and the newly emerging religious movements in the contemporary world, reliable criteria with which to evaluate one's spiritual relatedness to the Real are not always ready at hand. Hick thus claims that the transformation from self-centredness to reality-centredness must be confirmed by the "moral fruits" that the soteriological transformation produces (Hick 1989, p. 14). According to Hick, the transformation that underpins religious pluralism can be observed through its effect on one's relationship to others (Hick 1993). Love, justice, and consciousness are the major results brought about by the transformation, and hence they are the main manifestations of reality-centredness in human life. From this we can see that, for Hick, the aspects of the "Real-as-manifested-within-human-experience" are mainly ethical human relations (McKim 2012, p. 89), and hence his religious pluralist theory of transformation from self-centredness toward real-centredness has an ethical importance which extends beyond any theoretical questions regarding the notion of ultimate Reality.

Despite its ethical significance, in his own discussions of his theory, Hick gives this ethical dimension only a secondary emphasis: the Real, after all, is the teleological goal of this process of transformation. Yet ethical relations conceived merely as a by-product of this transformation find themselves in a sometimes-precarious position when the notion of the ultimate Reality itself is under attack. Among Hick's critics, some specifically point out the possible ethical crisis implied

by Hick's theory. As Robert McKim demands, if the Real is not assigned any characteristics related to the good or the moral, "nor does it act in history", how can it be the ground of human moral relations? It is contradictory to argue for a semicausal relation between Reality and human experience, while also admitting the incompatibility of their properties (McKim 2012, p. 90). If human ethical relations need to be supported by a manifestation of the Real, but the Real is such that "nothing-substantive-may-be-said-about-it-as-it-is-in-itself", human goodness is in a certain sense dangerously groundless (McKim 2012, p. 90).

Similarly, D'Costa raises questions about Hick's theory concerning the universality of the soteriological transformation from self-centredness to reality-centredness, asking how this universalist and nonexclusive approach can be compatible with the violent nature of certain contemporary religious movements. We surely have to leave room to pass judgement on the evil of the Nazi quasireligious ideology, or the massacre of the "Peoples Temple" movement (D'Costa 1996): nevertheless, Hick's theory leaves it unclear how Reality can issue in a criterion on which to pass such judgement (D'Costa 1996, p. 226). Hick responds to this line of questioning by drawing a distinction between whether religious traditions are only "products of individual or collective egoism", or a genuine "response to the transcendent" (Hick 1997, p. 161). Yet as the transcendent here is still defined as the unapproachable Real, this response does not promise any substantive solution to such questions. Meanwhile, Hick's confidence in the postaxial religions that are "mature" remains ungrounded, especially considering religious conflicts and competitions that continue in our present time (Kong and Woods 2017).

Hick has thus not given us a satisfactory answer to how religious pluralism can be based on Reality and *therefore* ethically good. Given this, one might be tempted to argue, if the ethical criterion is the only substantial one, then it might indeed be taken as the *sole* ground for religious pluralism. In fact, considering the problems associated with the notion of ultimate Reality, circumventing the attempt to cognitively grasp the ultimate Reality might be one way to make Hick's theory of religious pluralism and soteriological transformation more convincing. If the transformation that enables religious pluralism is identified by reference to a criterion such as love and compassion toward others, including people with conflicting beliefs, might we then say the final stage of this transformation is in fact ethically oriented other-centredness?

This tentative thinking on the further transformation from Reality-centredness toward other-centredness can find strong support in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. As a philosopher who promotes as first philosophy an ethics defined as infinite responsibility toward the other, Levinas interprets religion through other-centredness. Next, then, we will bring Levinas's philosophy of religion into the picture, in the hope of finding a theoretical re-orientation that can base religious pluralism on the transformation from reality-centredness toward other-centredness. We will argue that the further transformation toward otherness could give religious pluralism a primarily ethical meaning: instead of leading toward the ultimate Real, pluralism will be seen as bringing about a certain "messianic peace" (Levinas 1979, p. 22).

3. Other-Centredness and a Religious Pluralism of Messianic Peace

Before we commence our Levinasian journey in search of a possible religious pluralism grounded on a transformation toward other-centredness, we first need to face potential questions about whether we are thereby reducing a religious issue to an ethical one, which in some sense can be seen as a secular one. Indeed, other-centredness does not seem to have sufficient spiritual validity to cover the mystical and infinite transcendence of religious experience. Is a transformation toward otherness enough to be the foundation of higher thinking among human beings? The above question can be addressed if one maintains an emphasis on infinite transcendence in the transformation from reality-centredness to other-centredness. The question then hinges on the notion of the other and its transcendent status.

It is a familiar observation that the notion of "the other" in Levinas cannot simply be presented as a particular person other than me. For Levinas, the other already loses its alterity when the other is describable and characterized by my representation of him/her. The other cannot be captured by any

category such as male or female, young or old, because any such characterization puts the other into my system of knowledge. Levinas claims that objective systems such as language and logic neutralize all alterity to the familiarity of a singular measurement in the process of formulating knowledge. Moreover, the subject, in its desire to know, also assimilates the other into part of "my belongings" (Large 2015, p. 34). The system that neutralizes and assimilates alterity thus forms a totality of the same (Levinas 1979, p. 203), a totality of immanence.

To reach a transcending alterity that breaks away from the totality of immanence, Levinas signifies the absolute alterity as "the face of the other". The face of the other does not evoke any physical or aesthetic image; rather, it eludes the ontological and epistemological world and is ascribed a certain "nudity" (Levinas 1979, p. 74). This nudity marks the other as a destitute stranger who both threatens the subject with its foreignness, and calls for care and responsibility from the subject. By delineating alterity through the encountering of the face, Levinas first releases the alterity from the immanence of being an object of knowledge; the face is singular, and it cannot be compared with any person or any other thing. More importantly, however, Levinas assigns an ethical primacy to the face of the other: through his/her face of nakedness, the other calls upon the subject to bear an infinite responsibility.

We need to be careful about straightforwardly concluding that alterity is an ethical concept, since the ethical in Levinas is different from traditional "normative enterprises" (Perpich 2008, p. 9). The ethical in Levinas is not based upon "knowing and self-presence" (Cohen 2010, p. 155), as this ethical commitment does not rely on self-conscious decisions. Being responsible is inscribed within the subjectivity of the subject without his/her awareness. The responsibility is infinite since it constantly "overflows" any accomplishment of this responsibility (Levinas 1979, p. 244). In other words, the face of the other calls forth an ever-growing responsibility because of the invisibility of the face as well as the mystical depth behind it. Therefore, ethics in Levinas has a dimension of infinity and the other is a transcendent concept with a primarily ethical significance.

In fact, God in Levinas is also signified by this otherness and ethical importance. Mendez notes that Levinas searches for the otherness of God through releasing "God from the onto-theological category" (Mendez 1999, p. 552). In his early works, Levinas tends to use the capitalized word "Other" to indicate God (Levinas 1979, pp. 92, 293). Similar to his way of setting the term "alterity" against its standard epistemological and ontological usage, Levinas opposes traditional theology, where the divine is approached through the ideas of "objectification" and "participation" (Levinas 1979, p. 77). For Levinas, participation in God's sacred life is a "denial of the divine"; "knowledge of God" is not only impossible but is also not justified without consideration for other human beings (Levinas 1979, p. 78). Thus, one's ignorance about the conditions of other human beings is entirely unjustifiable, even citing the name of God. Not only does Levinas disagree with the ontological approach towards God, he further defines religious transcendence with ethicality. He argues, the ethical other is essential to my relation to God, without whom the journey "*A Dieu*" would only be a finite "intentional aiming" (Levinas 1998a, p. xv). The infinity of God cannot be shown to human consciousness but directs us toward the other in order that we can take our responsibility for the other.

In his later works, Levinas introduces the notion of the third party and "illeity" to elaborate on the intriguing relation between the subject, God, and the ethical other. In his essay "The Trace of the Other", Levinas allows that from a metaphysical perspective, the other is invisible and transcendent, yet the face of the other engages in a "visitation" in any concrete ethical scenario (Levinas 1986, p. 354). The other needs to be considered immanently in order to maintain justice, especially when a third party comes into the picture. The third party refers to another other, who demands the subject for his/her infinite responsibility, yet between the other and whom, the subject cannot ignore the relation. With the co-presence between the other and the third party, consciousness of the subject is called upon to reach discernment for justice. To explain the Levinasian concept of politics and justice is beyond the scope of the present discussion, but with the acceptance of the necessity of the presence of the ethical other in the consciousness of the subject, Levinas acknowledges the problem of possible contradiction

between ethics and politics, which, however, opens up a new dimension for the meaning of God as illeity.

Even though justice and politics emerge because of the responsibility of the subject to the other as well as to the third party, the necessity of an objective order in justice tends to violate the original ethicality. The face of the other becomes a finite item which results in an ignorance of the uniqueness of each other. Levinas points out that, the civil servant cannot see "the tears of the other" in this political order (Levinas 1996, p. 23). To interrupt this indifference of politics and open up its institutions to the call for infinite responsibility, Levinas brings forward a religious dimension: the dimension of "illeity". Illeity is a neologism created by Levinas from the French pronoun *Il*. Illeity in Levinas functions as the condition for the irreversibility of the ethical relation after justice formulates the political order. For Levinas, illeity is a means to "hold together" the conflict between ethics and politics (Bernasconi 2005, p. 52), in the sense that it introduces a diachronic relation between the two, a relatedness without contemporaneity. This is to say, ethical responsibility demands political justice, whereas the latter defies the transcendence of the former in its indifference towards the others; yet the contradiction does not nullify this development; rather, it calls for a further movement that "reduces" the indifference to a sense of responsibility called upon by illeity (Levinas 1998b). Levinas cites from the *Talmud* to exemplify this point "before the verdict, no face; but once the judgment is pronounced, He looks at the face (Levinas 1996, p. 69)". The verdict cannot stand indifferently against the other and charity and love are given the final words.

Illeity, a more neutral name for God in Levinas's discussions, signifies itself to the subject in the form of a personal order that command the subject to be responsible to the other human beings beyond what is entailed by political duty and rights (Levinas 1996). However, illeity is an enigma that resists human knowledge, hence the order from illeity to each subject does not come in the form of a conscious recognition. Unlike Hick's understanding of the ultimate Reality, illeity does not show itself in any phenomena culturally or conceptually. It has a radical detachment from any means of disclosure as it is inscribed in the subjectivity of each subject before any knowing relation could be established. This responsibility is not something that ought to be fulfilled in order to meet an end, but emerges constantly alongside the need to care for other human beings. The infinite responsibility evoked by an order from illeity towards other human beings redefines religious experience. By stressing the importance of the ethical relation as the structure on which the theological structure rests (Levinas 1979, p. 79), Levinas shows us a possible development of understanding of religion towards an other-centredness. To go towards God is to go towards the Others "who stand in the trace of illeity" (Levinas 1996, p. 64). The ultimate religious experience in Levinas thus implies a turning away from God towards a concern for the others.

This alternative way of perceiving religious experience leads to a new soteriological transformation. Compared to Hick's soteriological transformation from self-centredness to reality-centredness which stresses the ethical effectivity, yet gives ethical-importance a secondary status, Levinas reveals that the ethicality is the only possible approach towards transcendence. The contradiction between finite cognition and the infinite unknown leaves the concept "ultimate Reality" empty. The ontological and epistemological ways of disclosing transcendence relocate transcendence back within human experience, such that transcendence falls into a purely human immanence. But the infinite responsibility evades this contradiction, as it is a responsibility that the subject gained without any experience of it, which is a command that "came from who knows where" (Levinas 1986, p. xiv). In this sense, the transcendent dimension of religion does not rely on any human experience but still relates to each person; it is the ceaseless responsibility "I" have for other human beings.

This new path of conceiving religious transcendence and soteriological transformation indicates a possible re-orientation for a religious pluralism. Hick's religious pluralism breaks open the dogmatism of Christianity and demonstrates the urgency of acknowledging the equal spiritual validity of other postaxial religions. Hick appeals to Christian theologians that Christian tradition is only one of the many approaches reacting to the same transcendental Reality. Hick's theory of pluralism is based

upon one soteriological journey, that is, towards the ultimate Reality. However, pluralists such as Mark Heim points out that Hick's approach in fact only endorses a singular path towards salvation which is to be criticised for its inclusivist implication. To put in Levinasian terms, in Hick's plurality, the other is represented by neutral conceptions, in which case his/her absolute alterity is dismissed. In this sense, Hick's plurality is a pseudo plurality that has limitation in its celebration of diversity. Levinas to the contrary maintains that genuine pluralism is reached by the movement from the subject to the other where the subject takes responsibility for the other. He claims further, "the unity of plurality is peace" (Levinas 1979, p. 306). Indeed Hick's theory of pluralism does not guarantee a path to peace between conflicting faiths. In the contemporary world, knowledge about other faiths is within easy reach, the different scriptures are very widely translated; and yet religious conflicts continue. The pursuit towards ultimate Reality encourages us to know the other beliefs and respect them, yet since religious truths are very often "non-bargainable" (Hurst 2014, p. 33), the paths to truth can be at odds. If peace is only a by-product of reaching ultimate Reality, peace will be in a precarious situation.

However, we will cease to seek commonalities in recognitions of the ultimate Reality but follow Levinas to set peace as the ultimate goal for religious pluralism. Yet we do need to note that the meaning of peace in Levinas is different from the notion of a political peace. Unlike political peace, peace in Levinas is specifically described as a messianic peace. To be brief, messianism in Levinas is different from the mainstream Judaic or Christian interpretation. According to Levinas, "each person acts as if though he were the messiah" in the sense that he/she burdens the infinite responsibility for the other in order to end the suffering of the other (Levinas 1997, p. 90). Levinas differentiates the messianic peace from political peace. The latter is "issued from war" and "rests on war", which is temporary and fragile (Levinas 1979, p. 22); but the former does not rest on the end of conflicts, which rather begins with the subjectivity as "one-for-the-other". Messianic peace cannot be calculated since calculation of the amount of gain or loss is always from an egoistic, self-indulged perspective. The messianic peace presupposes political peace, as it not only opposes wars and violence, but "superposes" itself on the ontology behind war (Levinas 1979, p. 22). This is to be understood as the ontological logic of war endorses a reasoning which always begins from the consciousness of "I", where the other is only derivative. The limitation of competition and violence reaches a principle, but this principle is often only meaningful for the defeated. Messianic peace does not begin with a rational principle; rather, its initial step is inter-personal relatedness and recognition of a prior responsibility the subject has for the other.

Therefore, from the above discussions, we tentatively establish a Levinasian re-appraisal of John Hick's religious pluralism. We locate the importance that Hick endows to ethical dimensions in his pluralism theory and point out the lack of depth in his claim. Through Levinas, we confirm the transcendent possibility of the ethicality where soteriological transformation reaches its pinnacle in charity and love for the other. To give other-centredness an ultimate position in religious pluralism allows messianic peace to be the aim of pursuing pluralism rather than indulging universal truth. In this pluralism, each tradition is particular not because the incompatible truth in their belief, but because no one else can take their place to burden the responsibility for the others. This uniqueness exists in a movement from one to the other, which connects the different traditions without resting at finding similarities among them.

The religious pluralism that is established on the transformation toward other-centredness and aims at messianic peace differs from the pluralism acknowledging "complementary insights into one reality" (Byrne 1995, p. 165), which opens a possibility for a new theory of religious pluralism. With this new outlook, three major advancements may be achieved by a Levinasian re-orientation of religious pluralism. First, by stressing the importance of love for fellow human beings and the detour via responsibility for the other in the path towards God, the underpinning of religious pluralism becomes not commonalities in the manner of reasoning, but the actual giving of love and care. Violating other human beings in the name of God cannot be accepted within this new conception of religious pluralism. Second, the other-centred religious pluralism encourages concrete encounters between

human beings, rather than theoretical comparisons. Hick himself examined the history of religions in his endeavours to establish religious pluralism and demonstrate the equal manifestation of the Real within the world major religions. Such claims for equal historical development do not necessarily lead to handshakes in the encounter of two believers; yet the transformation toward other-centredness presupposes a handshake prior to any activity of theorization, which gives an ethical orientation to the process of interactions between different believers. Third, in Hick's theory, the transformation occurs within each tradition as a whole, where it implicitly ignores the singularity of each believer. In this scenario, the tradition as a whole will decide how each believer should treat other faiths. However, in the Levinasian re-orientation, each singular and particular meeting among different believers is to be recounted and emphasized. This encounter is not mediated by a neutral conception; rather, it demands a face-to-face encounter conducted with openness and love.

4. Conclusions

We have revisited John Hick's theory of religious pluralism and re-examined his discussion of the soteriological transformation from self-centredness to Reality-centredness. Through shifting our attention from the notion of the ultimate Reality to the validity of the soteriological transformation, we argued that whereas the contradictory quality of the notion of the Real hinders the success of Hick's project on theoretical grounds, the ethical importance of the soteriological transformation offers potential for further development. We argued that this transformation offers the only valid ethical criterion, and by confirming the ethical criterion, we move to search for a further transformation toward other-centredness through introducing Emmanuel Levinas's relevant discussions on religious experience, pluralism and messianic peace. We explained Levinas's interpretation of religion as the detour via the other in one's path towards the divine. Other-centredness is not only an ethical dimension understood as responsibility for the other; in Levinas it is an infinity that constantly emerges in our daily events, and which overflows any and all actions taken to fulfil it. With this further transformation, messianic peace takes the place of ultimate Reality as the teleological value underpinning religious pluralism. This paper thus shows a way to re-evaluate John Hick's theory, especially on the underdeveloped importance given to the ethical effectivity. By bringing Levinas's perspective into the discussion on religious pluralism, we confirmed the centrality of otherness and its essentiality to the possibility to peace, which hopefully can serve as a starting point for a future construction of a new theory of religious pluralism.

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