

# **John Hick's Philosophy of Religious Pluralism in the Context of Traditional Yoruba Religion**

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## Abstract

This article is an interpretation of John Hick's philosophy of religious pluralism in the context of traditional Yoruba religion. The ultimate goal of the article is pragmatic, *viz.* to provide a theoretical basis for peaceful coexistence among different religions in Nigeria. The methods adopted to achieve this objective are hermeneutical/analytical and comparative. Hick's theory is interpreted and analysed before it is applied to traditional Yoruba theology. His concept of the Transcendent or Ultimate Reality is equated with the Yoruba concept of the Supreme Being or Olodumare. Both Hickean Ultimate Reality and Olodumare are conceived as transcategorical. However, Yoruba divinities are equated with Hick's *personae* and *impersonae* of the Real: like the *personae* and *impersonae* of Hickean Ultimate Reality, the divinities are manifestations of Olodumare. This interpretative method can be used to account for differences in the conceptions of the Supreme Being among competing religions in Nigeria, especially Islam and Christianity in their conceptions of God.

## Keywords

John Hick, pluralism, Yoruba, Nigeria, Olodumare, divinities

## Introduction

The role of religions in many of today's conflicts has galvanized scholars of religion to find a way of interpreting the apparent conflicting truth claims of various religions that lead to mistrust. Many hypotheses have been suggested to reconcile these conflicting truth claims. John Harwood Hick's philosophy of religious pluralism is one of such hypotheses (Hick 1989).

Hick reinterpreted what he considered to be one of the most important beliefs in the major religions of the world - the affirmation of Ultimate Reality - so as to reconcile the two main notions (personal/impersonal) as perceptions of the same Reality. Hick's pluralistic hypothesis belongs to a type of religious pluralism called 'identist' pluralism, as compared with 'complementary'/'deep'/'differential' religious pluralism. Identist pluralists, such as John Hick (Hick 1989), Wilfred Cantwell Smith

(Smith 1967, 55) and Paul Knitter (Knitter 1985, 184) see different religions as identical, though with apparently different conceptions and interpretations. Differential/complementary pluralists such as John B. Cobb Jr. (Cobb, Jr. 1975, 46) and David Ray Griffin (Griffin 2005, 67) recognise that the Ultimate Realities perceived by the religions may be different and each of the Realities may be unique. On the surface, the conceptions of the Realities may even be contradictory, but as Whitehead, the process philosopher who inspired identist pluralists said, "A clash of doctrine is not a disaster - it is an opportunity" (Whitehead 1964, 266). This suggests that the apparent contradictions could become complementary. Therefore 'differential' pluralists are "pluralistic soteriologically and perhaps also ontologically" (Griffin 2005, 24). Anything that is 'soteriological' has to do with 'salvation', that is, how the individual or society can be delivered from current problems. Hence to say that differential pluralists are pluralistic soteriologically is to say that they affirm many ways through which the individual or society can be saved.

Hick's pluralistic hypothesis has generated a wide variety of reactions among philosophers of religion and theologians worldwide. Both his critics and admirers acknowledged the plausibility of his suggestion, but with some objections. Hick developed his hypothesis in the Western context, but with the possible application to the world at large. Thus there have been attempts to critically apply his insights in different parts of the world. The present article makes such an attempt in the traditional Yoruba context. Although the ultimate purpose of this endeavour is pragmatic - to provide a theoretical basis for peaceful coexistence among different religions - the immediate aim of this article is theoretical. It is a conceptual interpretation of Hick's pluralistic theory in the traditional Yoruba context.

In the following (second) section, Hick's theory is presented. Since Hick's theory is primarily concerned with the Ultimate Reality in the religions, a correspondent belief in Yoruba Traditional Religion is presented in the third section. An explicit interpretation of Hick's theory of pluralism in the Yoruba traditional context is made in the fourth section. The fifth section is the conclusion.

Religious pluralism should be conceptually differentiated from religious plurality and religious relativism. Religious plurality refers to "the fact of difference" (Archard

1996, 1) or “the empirical reality of diverse religious systems in the world” (Demarest 1991, 135). David Tracy distinguishes the two thus: “Plurality is a fact. Pluralism is one of the many possible evaluations of that fact” (Tracy 1987, 2). Religious pluralism should also be distinguished from religious relativism. The latter is “the claim that no religious belief is absolutely true” (O’Keeffe 1996, 62).

According to David Ray Griffin, those who accept religious pluralism accept two affirmations, a negative one and a positive one. The negative affirmation is the rejection of religious absolutism, which means rejecting the *a priori* assumption that one’s own religion is the only one that provides saving truths and values to its adherents, that it alone is divinely inspired, that it has been divinely established as the only legitimate religion, intended to replace all others. The positive affirmation, which goes beyond the negative one, is the acceptance of the idea that there are indeed religions other than one’s own that provide saving truths and values to their adherents (Griffin 2005, 3).

### **John Hick’s Philosophy of Religious Pluralism: An Exposition**

The major religions under consideration in John Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis are what he calls ‘post-axial’ religions. These include Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Chinese religions, and ‘primal religions’, to which African Traditional Religion belongs, were less considered. The selection was probably due not just to what Hick considered as the importance of the ‘World Major Religions’/‘post-axial faiths’, but also the environment in which John Hick worked at Birmingham, United Kingdom and Claremont, California, U.S.A. where the hypothesis was developed.

Hick’s concept of religious pluralism mainly focuses on the idea of the transcendent in the religions. This is not because belief in transcendence is the essence of religion, for Hick does not believe there is such essence (Hick 1989, 3 ff.). The reason for his focus on the transcendent is that in modern philosophical discussions in the West, it is a vital *religious* question, whether this belief has any significance for religion or not (Hick 1989, 6). However, Hick is convinced that this belief is very significant for any religion today, so that by focusing on it, it would help him to address “the most momentous and the most contested issue in religious discourse today” (Hick 1989, 6).

Hick's discussion of the transcendent concentrates on the traditional distinction in post-axial religions, between God's essential nature and God in relation to the creatures. However, because the idea of 'God' connotes theism, Hick prefers the terms 'Real', 'Absolute' or 'the Transcendent'. Using the Kantian epistemological distinction between a thing as it is in itself or *noumenon* and a thing as it appears in consciousness or *phenomenon*, Hick refers to the Real in its essential nature as the *noumenon* or Real *an Sich*, and the Real as humanly experienced as the phenomena. Because the Real *an Sich* is ineffable, not much can be said about it. In the words of Hick:

... it [the Real *an Sich*] 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).

However, Hick suggests that in its phenomenal manifestations, the Real is basically experienced in one of two ways, namely, a personal or impersonal way (Hick 1990, 118). This is the reason he adopts a neutral term - the 'Real'. He also adopts it because he sees it as having equivalence in various traditions, such as *Al Haqq* in Islam, the Self-existent Reality in Christianity, *Sat/Satyam* in Hinduism, and *Dharmakaya* or *Śūnyatā* in Buddhism (Hick 1989, 10 ff.).

Hick's concept of religious pluralism can be explained in five steps. First, every human knowledge of the Real has two sources: from the Ultimate Reality itself, which is beyond comprehension and language, and from the culture in which the experiencer finds himself or herself. The second step is a logical deduction from the first one: it entails the recognition that every conception of the Real is culture-coloured. Hick uses Kant's philosophy especially, but also modern psychology and sociology of knowledge to explain this. His contention here is that all revelation or manifestation of the Real is experienced, conceived, accepted and interpreted in a cultural context and from a cultural perspective. Third, the fact that the conception of the Real by every religious tradition is culture-coloured accounts for the diversity in the religious conceptions of the Real. For instance, people who till the ground usually conceive of

the Real as female, since they depend on the land which bears from its 'womb' good things for them, while people engaged in livestock keeping usually conceive the Real as male, since that occupation requires masculine characteristics such as courage, independence and assertiveness. Fourth, from steps one to three, we can infer that no religion could claim to be exclusively true, since each is formed at the interface of the ineffable Real and the culture from which the particular religion arises. However, the fifth step involves the claim that we can affirm that religions are not illusions but true, since they reflect the Real in different ways to every culture, albeit imperfectly (Hick 1989, 206).

In the five steps outlined above, Hick, in Kantian terms, distinguishes the Real in its unperceived sense (the *noumenon*) from the Real as perceived by each religious tradition (the *phenomena*). Hick claims that this distinction is neither an innovation of his nor an imposition on the religions from Kantian philosophy. He gives evidence of the distinction from the major world traditions (Hick 1989, 236 ff.; 1990, 117). For instance, in Hinduism, the distinction is made between *nirguna Brahman* (the *Brahman* without attributes and beyond human language) and *saguna Brahman* (the *Brahman* with attributes, known in human religious experience as *Ishvara*, the personal creator and governor of the universe). Similarly, in Buddhism, there is the distinction between *dharmata dharmakaya* (the Ultimate *dharmakaya*) and the *upaya dharmakaya* (the *Dharma* known as the personal *Amida*, the Buddha of infinite compassion). What is more, the scripture of Taoism, known as *Tao Te Ching*, makes the distinction at its beginning thus: "The *Tao* that can be expressed is not the eternal *Tao*." In Judaism, the Kabbalist Mystics note the difference between *En Soph* (the absolute divine Reality) and the God of the Bible. In Islam, the distinction is made by the Sufi Mystics between *Al Haqq* (the Real, which is the abyss of the Godhead underlying the self-revealing Allah. In traditional Christianity, the distinction is made between God *a se* (in his essential nature) and God *pro nobis* (in relation to his creatures). In like fashion, Meister Eckhart distinguishes between the Godhead (*Gottheit/deita*) and God (*Gott/deus*) (cited in Mojsischi and Summerrell 2011). Paul Tillich also discusses the "God above the God of theism" (Tillich 1980, 190) and Gordon Kaufmann talks of "the real God" and the "available God" (Kaufmann 1972, 86).

### Traditional Yoruba Theology

At the beginning of the academic study of Traditional Yorùbá Religion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by explorers and missionaries, its nature was confusing to them (Peel 2003, 302). The closest spiritual world to the people that the Westerner could see in their day-to-day lives was that of 'living-dead' ancestors. Then there were deities/divinities commonly worshipped in rituals, sacrifices, prayers and festivals, among others. The worship of 'God' was apparently quite uncommon, as there were no temples, sacrifices or rituals in his/her honour. If not because of the usual mentioning of 'God' in 'native' talks, the belief would have been decidedly declared non-existent. In fact some Western thinkers were even convinced that Africans generally cannot conceive God. When the fact on the ground disproved this, different terms were used to describe the traditional concept of God, such as 'the high god' and 'the withdrawn god'.

The problem became complicated when it was observed that 'the high god' receives no worship, whereas the divinities (including the spirits encompassed in animism, the deified ancestors and other gods) do. The popular names for these divinities are *Irúnmalè* and *Òrìsà*. The former could be shortened to *Imalè*. T.F. Jemiriye also mentioned *Imolè*, which may be a variation of *Imalè* (Jemiriye 1998, 25). E.B. Idowu interpreted *Imalè* as *Èèmò tí ñ be nílè* ('The supernormal beings of the earth'), suggesting awesomeness, eeriness, the *mysterium tremendum* and to be contrasted with *Òrìsà*, which he described as "prosaic and homely" (Idowu 1977, 61). In English, apart from the term 'divinities', these spiritual beings are sometimes referred to as gods and spirits.

Oduyoye interpreted the Yorùbá concept of the divinities as "... patrons, patriarchs, *principes* - who are first hero worshipped and then deified" (Oduyoye 1971, 30). However, Oduyoye's comment indicates a lack of discrimination in the categories of the divinities; for it is not true that every divinity is a hero deified. Instead, 'hero-divinities' belong to only one of the three categories of divinities. The three are primordial divinities (or divinities from heaven), deified ancestors, and personified natural forces/phenomena (Idowu 1973, 172; Awolalu and Dopamu 1979, 73). In the first category are the primordial divinities. These had been with God before the

creation of the earth, so that their origin is obscure. They include *Òbàtálá* (*Òrìsà-nlá*), *Òrúnmílà*, *Èsù* and *Ògún*. Awolalu includes *Oduduwa* among the primordial divinities, although he also acknowledges him (her?) as a deified ancestor (Awolalu 1979, 25). Secondly, there are the deified ancestors such as *Sàngó*, *Òrìsà-Oko* and *Ayéłala*. These were originally human beings who due to their extra-ordinary or mysterious lives had been deified or (to use a Christian theological term) ‘canonised’. They have ceased to be ancestors and have absorbed the attributes of divinities. Thus were *Sàngó* and *Jàkúta*. In the third category are the natural forces and phenomena that are personified. In this category are rivers such as *Òsun* in Oshogbo, mountains such as *Olosunta* in Ikere-Ekiti, *Ìyámòpó* in Ìgbèti and *Àdásóbo* in Kishi, the earth, lagoons, the sea, trees and wind.

There is no doubt that the divinities are gods, although acknowledged by the Yoruba to be less than the Supreme God (*Olodumare*). Scholars were hesitant to say that the divinities were creatures because they (the divinities) share some aspects of the divine nature. Idowu, Awolalu and Dopamu would rather say that the divinities ‘emanated’ or were ‘engendered’ by *Olódùmarè* (Idowu 1973, 169; 1977, 62; Awolalu & Dopamu 1979, 72). The Yoruba expressions about the origin of the divinities are ambiguous. Nevertheless, we should not forget that these are myths, and so would be greatly misunderstood if taken literally. We believe the purpose of giving a supernatural origin to the divinities is simply to point out their difference in kind from humans.

Is Yorùbá Traditional Religion then monotheism, polytheism, animism or ancestor worship, as some other aspects of the religion seem to suggest? Idowu (1973, 165) and Awolalu and Dopamu (1979, 16 ff.), three of the greatest writers on traditional Yorùbá religion, use the terms ‘polytheism’ and ‘pluralism’ almost interchangeably, although they disagree on whether or not they are applicable to traditional Yorùbá religious belief. Awolalu and Dopamu characterize polytheism/pluralism as quantitative, to which Idowu disagrees.

Idowu took his meaning of ‘polytheism’ from Paul Tillich who regarded it as “a qualitative and not a quantitative concept. It is not a belief in a plurality of gods but rather the lack of a unifying and transcending ultimate which determines its character”

(Idowu 1973, 166; Tillich 1957, 246). This quotation reveals an apparent contradiction when compared with the interpretation of Awolalu and Dopamu for whom polytheism is a quantitative concept. The existence of the many divinities led Awolalu and Dopamu to infer that Traditional African Religion is in a way polytheistic (Awolalu & Dopamu 1979, 17). Idowu explicitly rejects this latter claim (Idowu 1973, 168). The second part of Tillich's statement that polytheism is "the lack of a unifying and transcending ultimate which determines its character" led Idowu to conclude that African Traditional Religion is monotheistic, although with qualification:

I conclude that the religion can only be adequately described as monotheistic. I modify this 'monotheism' by the adjective 'diffused,' because here we have a monotheism in which there exist other powers which derive from deity such being and authority that they can be treated, for practical purposes almost as end [*sic*] in themselves (Idowu 1973, 135).

### **An Interpretation of Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis in the Yoruba Traditional Religious Context**

The thesis of this article is that what Idowu refers to as 'diffused monotheism' or *Olódùmarèism* is identical in content and explanation with what Hick means by his concept of pluralism. Awolalu and Dopamu are therefore correct when they state that "the Supreme Being is the cohesive, unifying and supernatural ultimate that holds the religion together." This is because the divinities have no "absolute existence" (Awolalu & Dopamu 1979, 17). Idowu's 'diffused monotheism' is in no way different from the philosophical explanation given of the difference between the Real *an Sich* and its manifestations in Hick.

How do we make the metaphysical distinction between the Real *an Sich* and its manifestations in Yoruba Traditional Religion? The absence of abstract thinking in the Yorùbá conceptualisation of the Supreme Being might suggest that the concept cannot be identified with the Hickean ultimate Real. The latter is presented in abstract, Western philosophical garb, whereas the Yorùbá one is embedded in myths, folktales, songs and proverbs, among others. Idowu has suggested that the reason for the Yoruba conceptualising the Supreme Being in such a concrete manner is that they do

little abstract thinking (Idowu 1977, 39). I believe Idowu is mistaken in this, but that Sogolo is correct in pointing out that the Yorùbá do not conceptualise God in an abstract manner because they simply believe that God cannot be fully conceptualised. This is illustrated in the kingship system among the Yoruba, where the King (*Oba*) can only be approached indirectly through his chiefs. He continues: “he [God] is by his very nature too incomprehensible to the human mind” (Sogolo 1989, 125). Sogolo is however mistaken and contradicts his earlier statement when he later asserts that “God in African religion, is not transcendental” (Sogolo 1989, 125). It is the transcendent character of God that makes him incomprehensible, and this is similar to what Hick refers to as the ‘Real’, ‘transcategorical’ or ‘ineffable nature’ (Hick 1989, 350).

Awolalu illustrates the apparent total transcendency without immanency of God in Yorùbá religion through the Yorùbá political set up. He points out that it is the ‘numinous’ status of the Yorùbá *Oba* (king) that traditionally prohibits the subjects from going directly to him, but rather through his chiefs who act as intermediaries (Awolalu 1979, 17 ff.). This statement of Awolalu intentionally alludes to a similar interpretation of the religious system of the Yorùbá. The ‘numinous’ character of the Supreme Being prevents the Yorùbá from going directly to him, but rather through his ‘chiefs’ - the divinities. This explains why the divinities appear to receive all worship and sacrifices, without much, if any directed to the Supreme Being himself. The use of the word ‘numinous’, a cognate of ‘*noumenon*’, for the Supreme Being supports the thesis being proposed in this article: the Supreme Being is numinous (adjective) or the *noumenon* (noun). He is a “Wholly Other” (Awolalu 1979, 50).

In discussing the transcendency of God, Idowu similarly examines the idea of the numinous character of the supreme being. With regard to his transcendency he writes:

He [God] is transcendent; so transcendent is He that the fact of his immanence has received little emphasis except, of course, in the implicit understanding that He is there all the time, in control of the whole course of nature, and available to man, whenever He is called upon (Idowu 1977, 47).

However, to Idowu, the idea of the ‘holy’ in the sense of the active, swift, consuming ‘numinous’ is lacking in the Yorùbá conception of the Deity himself (Idowu 1977, 47). The concept and the feeling of awe and eeriness that the numinous feeling evokes

have been transferred to two divinities, namely, *Jàkúta*, the thunder divinity and *Sòpòná*, the small pox divinity.

The most important point for us here is that the total transcendence of *Olódùmarè*, or the 'transcategorical' nature, to use a Hickean coinage, is undeniable. This is evident in three clearly observable facts in Yorùbá religion. *First*, unlike the divinities, the Supreme Being is not represented by graven images or pictorial paintings. There might be symbols and emblems associated with him such as a circle, but not images or paintings (Awolalu 1979, 14). This is because he is unique and incomparable. *Second*, there are usually no temples dedicated to him, because he is not localised in the thought of the people, in spite of them referring to him as *Olórun* ("the owner of heaven"). *Third*, if we agree with Idowu that the proper name of God in Yorùbá is *Olódùmarè*, just as his proper name as far as the Hebrews were concerned is the unpronounceable YHWH, then the meaning of the name *Olódùmarè* itself conveys transcategoriality. As Idowu observes, it means "... One who is supreme, superlatively great, incomparable, and unsurpassable in majesty, excellent in attributes, stable, unchanging, constant, reliable" (Idowu 1977, 36).

However, there is an obvious objection to the third proposal above. A reading of Hick reveals one fact that we do not want to obscure, namely, that all personal gods, whether of explicit monotheisms such as Yahweh of the Jews or Allah of the Muslims, or polytheism such as there was in the Greek pantheon and the impersonal absolutes in Eastern religious thought, are regarded as phenomenal manifestations of the Real. This neatly categorises the Yorùbá concept of the Supreme Being as a phenomenon (the conception of God in the minds of the worshippers), and not the Real *an Sich* (the concept of God as God is in Godself or the *noumenon*), as is being suggested in this article. We do not want to close our eyes to this clear categorisation. Nonetheless, an impersonal concept of the Supreme Being is totally alien to African thought. God is thought of as being beyond human conception rather than as being impersonal. Impersonality is meaningless in this context. Moreover, as we have seen, the comparable concept to the concept of Real *an Sich* is *Olódùmarè*. For example, Parrinder observes that the myths about *Olódùmarè* are less anthropomorphic than those of divinities (Parrinder 1961, 227). This lends support to our hypothesis of seeing *Olódùmarè* as the Real *an Sich*.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that *Olódùmarè* is usually pictured anthropomorphically. For instance, in another work, Parrinder observes that as much as Africans can conceive God in an abstract manner, their myths about him are anthropomorphic. He writes: “Wise Old Africans, when questioned on this point of the absence of worship, say that God is too great to be contained in a house” (Parrinder 1982, 19). He adds: “... in myths, the Supreme Being is spoken of in a personal manner as if he were a man with a body, and often with a wife and family” (Parrinder 1982, 19). The anthropomorphic picture of *Olódùmarè* in Yorùbá thought is best summed up by Idowu when he writes that the thought of *Olódùmarè* is

... of a Personage, venerable and majestic, aged but not aging, with a greyness which commands awe and reverence. He speaks; He commands; He acts; He rules; He judges; He does all that a person of the highest authority, in whose control everything is, will do (Idowu 1977, 39).

Of course anthropomorphism is not in any way peculiar to either the Yorùbá or Africans generally. It is found in most, if not all theistic religions, both monotheistic and polytheistic. Even in all the so-called developed religions it is present. As Idowu observes,

Man really finds little satisfaction except in a Deity who lives, who has a heart, who speaks, who hears. Centuries of metaphysical thinking have not succeeded and may never succeed in curing man of anthropomorphism in his private thought about Him. He will ever project something of himself into his thought of Him, in order to make the Unknown intelligible by analogy from that which is known (Idowu 1977, 39).

We have another support for our proposal to liken the *personae* (the conception of God as personal) and *impersonae* (the conception of Ultimate Reality as impersonal) to the divinities of the Traditional Yoruba Religion. As the *personae* and *impersonae* are products of both the Real and human perception, and thus ‘windows’ or ‘images’ through which the Real is apprehended, so are the divinities conceived in Yorùbá religion. The ‘transcategorical’ or ineffable characteristic of the Real (the *noumenon*) is what makes it imperceptible. Similarly, as Awolalu explained, it is because of the Supreme Being’s “wholly otherness” that Africans do not go directly to him, but

indirectly through the divinities (Awolalu 1981, 3 ff.); or as he puts it in another instance, "They [the divinities] exist for the purpose of bringing the Supreme Being closer to his creatures" (Awolalu 1979, 50). The same idea is being expressed when the divinities are described as offspring, intermediaries, ministering Spirits, or functionaries of the Supreme Being (Awolalu 1979, 50). Idowu expressed the same idea when he noted that the divinities are "channels through which man ... should normally approach Deity" (Idowu 1973, 171).

Another issue that evokes comparison is the ontological status of the divinities: are they objectively real, so that we can say of each that "... in addition to the many finite centres of consciousness, reason, emotion and will constituting the millions of human selves, there is another limitlessly greater such centre of consciousness which is the divine self?" (Hick 1989, 269). Answering this question in the affirmative is an essential part of religious pluralism. Hick therefore critically examines such beliefs in different religions. The question is: What is the logical implication of believing that each *persona* of the Real is objectively real and with qualities attributed to it? It is possible to accept the claim that each of them is ontologically real and thus end up in polytheism. However, there is a logical problem in the plurality of the divinities which would affect the ultimacy of the religion. Each of these *personae* such as *YHWH* of the Jews, Heavenly Father of the Christians, Allah of the Muslims, among others claims to be the sole creator or source of the universe. If each of them is accepted to be objectively real and different from the other, who among them did indeed create the universe, if any of them did?

One option is to accept and interpret each of these personae as different names of one divine reality. This has great similarity to what Hick suggests, but it is not identical to it. The problem with this second suggestion is that it is not simply the names of these gods that are different, but also the descriptions of the divine personages behind each of the names. The logical implication of this is that difference in description points to difference in essence. However, it is this conclusion that Hick rejects. He accepts the point of the first suggestion that the deities are different. He also accepts the apparently contradictory suggestion of the second that the deities are somehow identical. The formula he uses to reconcile the seemingly conflicting propositions is the essence of his pluralistic hypothesis. The formula is exemplified in an interpretation of the relations between the three persons in the Godhead in the Christian idea of the Trinity - the 'modal' construal of the trinity (the interpretation of the Trinity as manifestations of one divine reality in three forms or modes). According to Hick, the formula is also illustrated in the Buddhist *trikaya* doctrine (Hick 1989,

272). The Christian ‘modal’ construal of the trinity understands the concept of person in the Trinitarian doctrine. Father, Son and Spirit are three modes of activities of one divine reality. Similarly, in the Buddhist *trikaya* doctrine, the Ultimate *Dharmakaya* - the *Sambhogakaya* - and the *Nirmanakaya* are distinguished. The Ultimate *Dharmakaya*, somehow similar to the Christian theological concept of the Father, is the Eternal Truth or Reality of the Buddha nature - “indestructible, timeless, Absolute, the one essence in and behind all that was, is and will be ... the absolute reality, besides which there is no other reality” (Schumann 1973, 272). The counterpart belief to the personality of the Son is *Sambhogakaya*, which consists of a plurality of transcendent Buddhas. The Spirit has its counterpart in the Buddhist doctrine of *Nirmanakaya*, which consists of earthly human beings who have attained to final enlightenment and thus become vehicles of a transcendent Buddha.

The most important analogy for our understanding of the ontological status of the divinities in Yorùbá religion is the Buddhist explication of *Sambhogakaya*. This is supposed to be understood “as mental creations, as ideations of the Bodhisattva” (Schumann 1973, 102), that is, the religious. To the religious, “his ideal becomes so vivid and alive that it takes shape as a subjective reality” (Schumann 1973, 104-105). Hick agrees with this interpretation thus: “[*Sambhogakaya*] are thus projections of the religious imagination” (Hick 1989, 273). Applied to the gods or *personae* of the Real - *Jahweh*, the heavenly Father, *Allah*, *Shiva*, *Vishnu*, etc. - it means that these “are not objectively existent personal individuals with their own distinctive powers and characteristics.; but they are not *mere* hallucinations either, without any objective source. Rather, they are “veridical hallucinations” (Hick 1989, 273).

This treatment of the gods as neither totally non-existent nor objectively real as conceived by the religions is not different from the way Idowu treats the divinities. He indirectly agrees with Richard Garnett in *The Twilight of the Gods*, in which it is cautiously stated that the divine beings (in contrast to the Supreme Being) were creations of men’s minds. To support his interpretation, Idowu cites a saying of Yorùbá Elders: “*Ibití èniyàn kòsí, kòsí imalè* (where there is no man, there is no divinity)” (Idowu 1977, 63). However, Idowu notes that we should be cautious and so not say that the divinities are totally non-existent. To a believer in them, they are real, “... so real that they have in fact been substituted for the Supreme Being in many

worships" (Idowu 1977, 63). In other words, like the Buddhist *Bodhisattvas*, in worship, the divinity of an adherent becomes so vivid and alive: his (the believer's) ideas would be encased in the divinity. The divinity thus serves as an inspiration for what the believer conceives as the ideal form of existence.

We find this phenomenon of religious experience corroborated by Wole Soyinka, an adherent of Yorùbá religion who is also a first rate intellectual in the modern world. In his own testimony, in an interview with a Nigerian Magazine, he states:

"Early in life as a child, I found that my temperament, my instinct, my spirituality leaned towards *Ògún*. He is the god of creativity, god of iron, a destructive deity, and at the same time, a creative deity because he is the god of creativity as well. He is the god of lyric, god of the song, and the god who like *Sàngó* believes rigidly in justice, and that is why people swear in *Ògún*'s artefact, metal, and for me justice is a crucial principal ... He is my personal *demiurge* ... my elder brother and he weaves a kind of protective aura around me ... He is a metaphor of existence for me" (Soyinka 1999, 29).

Soyinka's statement that *Ògún* "is a metaphor of existence for me ... a contextual metaphor" is not different from what Hick and Idowu are saying. The divinities are not objective existents; rather, they are "contextual metaphors". Judith Gleason explains the same experience in relation to Yorùbá divinities thus: "The *Orisha* [*sic*] are like immense magnifying mirrors, in which we behold ourselves as potentialities. To those who believe in them, the *Orisha* [*sic*] are guardians through whom one lives a more intense life vicariously, guides whose excess of energy leads their devotees to a more placid, a more balanced existence" (Gleason 1969, 112-113). Similarly, there is no one who knows *Sàngó* worshippers that would not agree with Benjamin Ray when he writes:

*Shango* [*sic*] devotees exhibit a personality that strongly resembles the violent, antisocial and sexually unbalanced character of *Shango* himself. A study by Wescott and Morton-Williams shows that many devotees have tendencies toward aggression and violence. Others are boisterous or highly temperamental. When *Shango*'s spirit enters his priests, they display unusually violent and erratic possession behaviour, and appear to be venting aggression impulses (Ray 1976, 71).

In other words, just as a Christian imaginatively looks at Christ intensely and struggles to be like Him, just as His cross symbolically represents and inspires the

Christian that he or she should likewise give himself or herself as a sacrifice for the good of humanity (Nabofa 1994, 19), and he or she believes Christ empowers him or her through the Holy Spirit to grow in/into his ideals, so does Soyinka and other adherents of traditional divinities look at their chosen *Òrìsà* intensely, and so become like him/her. One's context and psychological make-up contribute to the nature of one's god; and because we have different contexts and psychological make-ups, our conceptions differ.

Nonetheless, some conceptions of divinity that are deemed to be destructive have to be ruled out, thus the need for criteria by which to discriminate between adequate and inadequate conceptions of the Real. The benchmark we are suggesting to achieve this is the Yorùbá form of the Hickean soteriological and ethical criteria. This is not strange to the Yoruba, as they generally accept that “*Ìwà l'èsìn* (religiosity is shown in personal quality)”. *Ìwà* (character) is the highest ethical demand of Yoruba religion. Idowu points out that *Ìwà* signifies two things: ‘being’ and ‘correct personal ethos and approved moral issues’. To signify these two apparently different ideas, the word *Ìwà* in Yoruba is pronounced and spelt alike. Idowu correctly observes that this is not accidental but rather intentional: “To the Yoruba, the nature of a person's essential being determines the moral issue of life, so that it is unmistakably implied in Yoruba theology that ‘being’ and correct chemistry of being with regard to personal integration and moral attributes are so correlated that they can be regarded as synonymous” (Idowu 1971, 89).

Wande Abimbola corroborated the traditional Yoruba view that good character is essential to religiosity when he pointed out that *Ìwà* is from the verbal root *wà* (to be, to exist) “by the addition of the deverbative prefix ‘i’”. The original meaning of *Ìwà*, he interpreted as “the fact of being, living or existing”, citing an *Ifá* saying that:

*Ire Owó*

*Ire Omo*

*Ire Àìkú parí Ìwà.*

(The blessedness of money

The blessedness of children

The blessedness of longevity

Are the fruits of character) (Abimbola 1975, 293).

*Ìwà* (character) is then the “very essence of being ... the very aims of human existence ...” (Abimbola 1975, 293-294). Abimbola goes on to point out that to the Yorùbá, the essence of religious worship consists of cultivating *Ìwàpèlẹ́* (good character) - thus “*Ìwà l’èsìn*” (“religiosity is shown in character” or “*Ìwà* is another name for religious devotion”) (Abimbola 1975, 293-294).

### Conclusion

In his conception of religious pluralism, John Hick has suggested that the differences between the religions of the world are real, but that these differences should be interpreted in the light of Immanuel Kant’s insight. Kant suggested that our perception of things is more complex than we think, that is, the data of our perception do not accurately reflect objective reality. Instead, events, situations and other similar experiences that we perceive are differently selected, ordered and interpreted to be processed in our consciousness, just as we have to unconsciously choose what we are conscious of seeing and hearing among the innumerable things surrounding us. The implication of this modern epistemology is that it is not possible for us to perceive a thing as it is in itself: we have to perceive it in a context, that is, from a position.

Applied to the differences among religions, Hick has postulated that the apparent multiplicity of transcendent realities behind the religions could be seen as singular and identical, in spite of the differences in conception. Hick applies this interpretation especially to the concept of Ultimate Reality in religions. For him, the Ultimate Reality as it is in itself, in its essential nature, is distinguished from its phenomenal manifestations in different cultural contexts around the world. According to this view, it is the same Ultimate Reality that is perceived, albeit at different levels of transparency/adequacy to the Real. The criterion for assessing the adequacy of a conception of Ultimate Reality is soteriological/ethical, that is, the conception results in good character in the lives of the believers.

Using the Hickean interpretative model in the traditional Yoruba context, This article has equated *Olódùmarè* with the Hickean *noumenon*. However, the concept of *Olódùmarè* is explicitly theistic, that is, it is a notion of the Real as personal. Nevertheless, since an impersonal concept of the Ultimate Real is absent in the African, and by implication Nigerian context, this is not a problem. The article goes on to propose viewing the divinities as phenomena, revealing *Olódùmarè* - the

*noumenon*. This interpretation is not novel: it is inherent in traditional Yoruba religion, although not logically articulated in the way we have done.

In conclusion, This article suggests that in the contemporary religious scene in Nigeria, Christians, Muslims and adherents of African Traditional Religion should see themselves as worshipping the same God. 'God' is necessarily conceived differently due to the diverse contexts of revelation from which the religions come. This is the moral of this conceptual exercise.

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