

RECONSTRUCTING JOHN HICK'S THEORY OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM: A  
CHINESE FOLK RELIGION'S PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

Hick's pluralist assumption has remained the most knowable model of religious pluralism in the last few decades. Many have, from the perspectives of various major world religions, questioned his notion that the teachings of all religions are derived from the same Absolute Truth and that salvific-end is one, yet little attention has been paid to the traditions that he graded as unauthentic and non-valuable according to his soteriological and ethical criteriology. The purpose of this thesis was to demonstrate the exclusiveness of Hick's model by describing a tradition called "Chinese Folk Religion" that does not fit into his definition of 'authentic religion'. As the study suggested, his understanding of the world religious situation is over-generalised and simplified, and his particular criteriology does not treat all traditions fairly or pluralistically. As a response, this thesis proposed a more inclusive theory that also integrates the currently disregarded tradition into the interpretation.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Literature Review

#### 1.1.1 Research background

Religious pluralism can be understood as a position which assumes a plurality of religions to be true simultaneously, meaning there are at least two distinctive religions that are able to lead their followers to a salvific-end. It is in opposition to the exclusivist position that assumes only one religion to have a soteriological function or the inclusivist position that allows other religions to be soteriologically effective, but at the same time maintains that there is one religion which contains more truths significantly. Before arguing about religious pluralism, however, it is necessary to clarify which model we are referring to. For instance, some may accuse the pluralist position of ignoring historical conflicting truth-claims, yet such accusation is in fact inapplicable to the theories under the category of 'open religious pluralism' – these theories argue that human can never be certain of the authenticity of a religious truth-claim, let alone the existences of contradictions between them (Yandell, 1993, pp. 193). Different models can have very different understandings for the term 'pluralism', thus the different pluralist assumptions. As Heim believes, although some

scholars have chosen to regard themselves as 'pluralists', what they actually propose are quite different from the more common understanding of the position<sup>1</sup>.

Therefore, although Hick's (1989*a*) model is often regarded as the most influential, it is quite different from some other existing models theoretically. According to Yandell's (1993) classification, Hick can be understood as a kind of 'descriptive religious monist', a position supporting the idea that "every religious tradition teaches the same thing, or at least that everything that is doctrinally important to one religious tradition, as one actually finds it, is logically compatible with what is doctrinally important to every other religious tradition" (p.190). This is contrary to Heim's 'descriptive religious pluralist' assumption that "there are different religious traditions and that these traditions embrace distinct and often mutually incompatible doctrines" (ibid, p.189). In addition, as Cornille (2008) suggests, Hick's model can also be treated as a neutral approach which "attempts to develop a notion of the transcendent reality beyond that of any particular religion" (p.122). In this sense, it is distinct from other confessional approaches which, on the contrary, assume that "there is no ultimate reality higher than the one addressed within one's own religious

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<sup>1</sup> According to Heim (1995), "The decision to focus on Hick, Smith, and Knitter follows this logic, since one could hardly find three writers more prominent or influential in advancing the pluralistic perspective... There are some other significant Christian voices... who speak out of Asian cultures. I find them to be on somewhat different wavelengths than my three primary subjects, despite their own willingness to be identified in some way as 'pluralists'" (p.8).

tradition" (ibid, p.128)<sup>2</sup>.

As a brief introduction, Hick's (1989a) model is a philosophical, meta-theory attempting to provide the best explanation for the world religious situation<sup>3</sup> from a pluralist point of view. Part of his major arguments involve the assumptions that the 'Golden Rule' he describes is the central theme or foundational moral principle for all authentic religions<sup>4</sup>, and that the only valid path to salvation/liberation is to act/think according to this 'Golden Rule'. These assumptions imply that there are unauthentic, soteriologically non-valuable religious traditions/phenomena existing, which he also explicitly agrees. However, what he really wishes to demonstrate is that, although some manifestations can be unauthentic or non-valuable, the religions themselves are still true (or, as we will discuss shortly, 'mythologically true') – the manifestations that conflict his descriptions are merely a misapplication of what these religions truly teach. In other words, as a pluralist, Hick quite clearly wants to suggest that all religions are able to lead their followers to a salvific-end, except the 'pre-axial' or 'primitive' traditions that have yet evolved into a soteriologically effective stage. The approach of using the 'Golden Rule' to grade the authenticity of religious

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<sup>2</sup> Hick's model may also fall into the category of "non-realist." Basically, it is a dualistic position that affirms a noumenal, trans-categorical Transcendent on the one hand (Ultimate Reality in itself), and the phenomenological God on the other (Ultimate Reality as experienced). For details, please see Smart (1993b, pp.60-66).

<sup>3</sup> The term 'world religious situation' is more commonly seen in the literatures concerning religious pluralism than the more grammatically correct 'world's religious situation' (e.g., Hick, 1980a, p.18), and is therefore used in this thesis.

<sup>4</sup> By 'authentic religion' it means the religious tradition that is fully capable of leading its followers to the limitlessly better religious-end.

traditions/phenomena can be referred to as 'Hick's (soteriological/ethical) criteriology'.

As a meta-theory of religion, Hick also attempts to describe the common nature of all religious traditions, which includes the viewpoint that the achievement of salvation/liberation is the ultimate concern of all religions, that salvation/liberation must be some sort of religious-end that happens in another realm of reality, or that to believe in a religion is to have total faith in its doctrines. Although these descriptions are not crucial to his major arguments, they represent how Hick and some of his critics understand what religion is and how it 'normally' functions. In addition, they are also responsible for the reasons why Hick's critics would consider his theory undesirable and inapplicable.

### **1.1.2 Objective and originalities**

This thesis, then, is to investigate the above arguments and descriptions by establishing a dialogue with a religion, namely 'Chinese Folk Religion', that does not fit entirely into Hick's explanatory theory. Such a research interest is based on two major hypotheses:

1. Not only its manifestations, but Chinese Folk Religion itself would be graded as unauthentic and non-valuable according to Hick's criteriology;
2. Chinese Folk Religion does not fit into Hick's descriptions of what religions must be and how they would function.

The first hypothesis is referred to the common understanding that, contrary to the 'Golden Rule' Hick describes, the central moral ideal of Chinese Folk Religion is more of a conditional, self-centred concept, and that the main reasons to practice this religion is not to reach the limitlessly better religious-end, but to fulfil certain this-worldly, secular wishes. The second hypothesis, on the other hand, is referred to how Hick and Chinese Folk Religion understand religious identity, spiritual attainment and commitment differently.

As a response, this thesis examined the above hypotheses and attempted to answer the following questions:

1. Is Hick's assumption supported by sufficient evidence? If not, what are the reasons for him to make such assumptions? In other words, if his theory is, as some critics suggest, unverifiable, what does he try to achieve by

proposing such an unverifiable theory?

2. Given that his theory does grade Chinese Folk Religion as unauthentic and non-valuable, is such an exclusion helpful to achieve his goals? If not, should we offer Chinese Folk Religion an equal status instead? How can we accomplish such a task?

Therefore, the main objective of this thesis was to verify the hypothesis that Hick's theory would put Chinese Folk Religion in an inferior position and, if the hypothesis is proven to be true, to reconstruct his model so that it can treat Chinese Folk Religion equally. Hick's theory was chosen because, as Chapter 4 would argue, his neutral approach is the more idealistic and effective way to solve interreligious conflicts and his explanatory theory is by far the most systematic and thorough. Therefore, if we can 'fix' some of his assumptions so that his theory can truly treat all religions equally, it would then be the best model that can encourage and enable us to understand and respect other faiths pluralistically.

During the project of proving the main hypothesis and reconstructing Hick's model, this study has accomplished the following tasks, which all involve the proposals of various original arguments or findings:

1. Identified the reasons why Hick's theory has put certain religious traditions in an inferior position, and demonstrated that it is not his original intention to do so;
2. Summarised, systemised and categorised the existing criticisms of Hick's theory, and identified their common problems or limitations;
3. Demonstrated that the said problems or limitations cannot be addressed from the perspective of an institutional religion that Hick's theory approves explicitly;
4. Proposed an original approach that can effectively define and identify Chinese Folk Religion;
5. Provided a thorough and systematic definition of Chinese Folk Religion which involves the identifications of its major religious beliefs, structures and functions;
6. Demonstrated the conflicts between Hick's pluralist assumptions and Chinese Folk Religion;
7. Resolved the conflicts by reconstructing his assumptions about salvation, his criteriology to grade religions, and his approach to understand a religion;
8. Justified the reconstructions by defending Chinese Folk Religion from



the potential accusations that it is superstitious, superficial or syncretistic.

For the significances of the proposals of these original arguments and findings, please see section 10.2. The rest of the Literature Review section will further discuss the theoretical issues involved in the project, the key literatures on Hick's theory and Chinese Folk Religion, the reasons to consult the selected literatures, and the 'gap' between the existing studies.

### **1.1.3 Key literatures on Hick's theory of religious pluralism**

As a critically acclaimed theologian as well as a philosopher, Hick has published a wide range of notable works, many of which – especially the more recent ones – are about his pluralist vision, which include *God Has Many Names: Britain's New Religious Pluralism* (1980), “Religious Diversity as Challenge and Promise” (1985*b*), and *The Fifth Dimension: An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm* (2004*b*). There are also a number of works that aim to further support his arguments, such as “Whatever Path Men Choose is Mine” (1980), *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (1985*a*), “The New Map of the Universe of Faiths, from God and the Universe of Faiths” (1989*b*),

*The Rainbow of Faiths: Critical Dialogues on Religious Pluralism* (1995), and “The Possibility of Religious Pluralism: A Reply to Gavin D’Costa” (1997). Nonetheless, as Emmanuel (2011) points out, his position and vision are not entirely consistent, with the most noticeable change being the shift from Western to Indian thought (pp.127-128). Therefore, when speaking of Hick’s theory of religious pluralism, many are in fact referring to his “*magnum opus*” *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989a), because, as Cheetham (2003) puts it, it contains the summation of Hick’s “lifetime’s scholarship and philosophical reflection,” and, more importantly, the most systematic presentation of his argument for the pluralist assumption (p.132). For this reason, this thesis also treated *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989a) as the major reference of his proposal, even though his other publications would also be mentioned and discussed, where appropriate.

In order to explain his pluralist assumption, the next Chapter also consulted the works by Cheetham (2003) and Eddy (2002) in addition to Hick’s own publications. It is because, unlike the other critics who intend to evaluate his assumption from the perspectives of certain religions or propose a different pluralist theory, Cheetham and Eddy tend to explain and comment on Hick’s thoughts in a more neutral and thorough manner. Cheetham’s (2003) work, for example, does not only discuss all of Hick’s major arguments related to religious pluralism, but also Hick’s earlier thoughts that

might have influenced the construction of his pluralist theory. Certainly, Cheetham and Eddy are not the only two notable critics of Hick's ideas. For instance, Loughlin (1991) or D'Costa's (1991) review of Hick's pluralist assumptions is often considered more critical, but the former tends to focus only on certain parts of Hick's proposal and is hence less thorough, while the latter takes a clear stand against the pluralist position and is hence less objective.

Chapter 3 and 4 looked into the potential shortcomings of Hick's theory by discussing the criticisms and literatures that have a stronger and clearer agenda compared to that of Cheetham and Eddy, such as questioning the possibility of practicing religious pluralism (e.g., D'Costa, 2000; Cornille, 2008) or demonstrating how Hick's theory does not treat their own religious traditions fairly (e.g., Heim, 1995; Makransky, 2005a). Besides the more notable criticisms, Chapter 3 also focused on Heim's (1995) theory of multiple religious-ends, mainly because such an alternative pluralist model is meant to be a direct challenge to Hick's. The major assumptions of Heim's theory are that different religious traditions would lead their followers to different religious-ends, and that there is no universal denominator for all religions. These assumptions allow Heim to deal with the problem of conflicting truth-claims without 'diminishing' any of them into mere myth like Hick does. This is the main reason why many scholars prefer his model over Hick's, for it is believed to be able to

save more religious referential values and leave world religions, or, to be more precise, Christianity and Buddhism, as they are.

One may argue that Eddy (2002) and Cheetham (2003) have contributed a more thorough review of Hick's project, while D'Costa (1991; 1993; 1996; 2000), on the other hand, is by far the harshest and most dedicated critic of Hick's pluralist assumption. Other notable critics of Hick's theory include Sinkinson (1995; 2001), Mbogu (2006), Kellenberger (1991) and Emmanuel (2011), whose arguments have attracted considerable attention in various fields. Therefore, Heim's model is chosen not because he is the most significant or influential critic of Hick, but because he has suggested an alternative, confessional pluralist model that functions differently from that of Hick in many ways. As Chapter 4 demonstrated, many Buddhist scholars have used Heim's model as an example to indicate why a confessional model is more preferable than Hick's neutral approach, most notably Makransky (2005*a*) who attempts to develop a Buddhist pluralist theory based on Heim's framework. In other words, Heim's model is introduced to help describing a different and fairly knowable approach to explain the world religious situation as well as evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the confessional and neutral assumptions, and, more importantly, to support my proposal in section 9.5 that the salvation for Chinese Folk Religion may be a different yet equally authentic form of salvific state – this thesis would adopt and

expand Heim's theory of multiple religious-ends in order to offer an equal status to Chinese Folk Religion.

Besides Makransky, Chapter 4 also looked at how Abe (1995) attempts to integrate Mahayana Buddhism into the discussion of religious pluralism, for his proposal is a typical example of how Buddhist scholars are criticised of stressing too much on certain Buddhist concepts, which is what we would try to avoid when reconstructing Hick's soteriological and ethical criteriology. Moreover, his decision to implement the neutral approach – which is a rather unpopular position among the pluralist thinkers – also makes his theory more relevant to our discussion. In fact, according to Keenan et al (2008), the Buddhist approach to understand other faiths is intrinsically more neutral than confessional (p.102). However, it is the fact that most of the Buddhist scholars engaged in the interreligious dialogue (e.g., Makransky, 2005a; Bloom, 2007; Tsuchiya, 2005a; O'Leary, 2002) are more inclined to the confessional position, or Heim's model in particular.

#### **1.1.4 Background and key literatures on the studies of Chinese Folk Religion**

There are quite a number of scholarly studies on contemporary Chinese religion, within which some are focused on Chinese Folk Religion in particular, although they

may prefer a different term such as 'popular religion in China' or 'Chinese cults', as if it is a kind of folk religious custom or social-religious reality in China rather than a specific religion. Some of the more notable scholars are Feuchtwang (2001; 2003), Thompson (1969; 1973), Werner (1922) and Ching (1990; 1993). These scholars, however, tend to focus more on surveying the social or historical realities of Chinese popular religious beliefs and less on the methodological issues, even though they have also tried to provide a definition of their own. For instance, as Feuchtwang (2001) clarifies at the beginning of his work:

This is a book about Chinese popular religion. A sensible reader will ask:

What is that? What is its name? We have come to expect of religions that

they can be named like identities of nations or cultures or at least that they

can be understood as doctrines. But in this case these sensible questions

must be given a disconcerting answer because it has no name. This is not a

religion of a Book. Nor is it the named religion of China – Daoism. That

religion, with Daoist philosophy at its heart, comes closer to the popular

religion I shall be describing than do the other religions identifiable in

China... In fact 'religion' here is simply a category, not a singular thing...

This book will show that it is a distinctive institution. Whether it is a

recognisable religion, you will have to decide for yourself (p.vi).

Feuchtwang did not seem to have given a concrete answer to the very debatable question as to what 'Chinese popular religion' exactly is, but as the above passage implies, this 'distinctive institution' he speaks of would be the collective body of the religious practices, rituals, beliefs and cults his book describes. In other words, all the social-religious realities he surveyed are in fact the definition of this particular 'religion'. This approach is quite common, especially when the research interest is to describe the religious behaviour of the 'Chinese folks' rather than the methodological issues involved. Chamberlain (2009) – one of the very few Western religionists who uses the term 'Chinese Folk Religion' – has also decided to define it by the deities and gods it contains. Other scholars who adopt this approach include Burkhardt (1982), Jordan (1972), Adler (2002) as well as the ones mentioned earlier. However, while their studies may provide some valuable information about the historical or anthropological realities in China that could be categorised as 'religious', they would offer little help to understand what Chinese Folk Religion really is from the methodological perspective – we know that it is "not a religion of a Book," nor is it Taoism, but what is it exactly?

In fact, there are plentiful sinologists that have attempted to answer this

particular question, which include the more influential scholars such as Freedman (1974), De Groot (1892<sup>5</sup>), Granet (1975), Watson (1976; 2002) and Yang (1967), as well as some Chinese scholars such as Jiang (2006), Hou and Fan (1994), Li (1998) and Ma (2004). Recently, a number of new arguments and perspectives have also been proposed by various Chinese sociologists, historians, and anthropologists. Before we can select any of these literatures, however, we must first understand the problems that make defining Chinese Folk Religion so difficult.

According to some Chinese contemporary social historians (e.g., Zhang, 2009; Lin, 2008b; Liu, 2009), although Chinese Folk Religion has always been the biggest religious tradition in China in the sense that it is believed to have the largest number of followers, it is very often ignored or even suppressed by the governments. As Lin (2008a) argues, since the tradition is still defined as 'feudal superstition' politically, it is not at all protected by laws in contemporary China (pp.491-492). During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), many of the temples and statues were destroyed, and people who were found worshipping deities or conducting folk religious rituals at home would be condemned and punished (Zhu, 2009, pp.53-54). Fortunately, after the "Reform and Opening" in December 1978, the ban of folk religious activities was revoked first among the costal cities such as Guangdong and Fujian, and then

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<sup>5</sup> De Groot's classic *The Religious System of China* is actually comprised of six volumes (1892-1910). Nonetheless, his major arguments about the definition of Chinese folk religion are all included in the first one.



Mainland China (ibid, pp.54-55). Moreover, although the tradition had been brutally suppressed for almost 30 years (1949-1978), it is still the most popular religion until today (ibid). As Wang and Ding (2008) state in their paper, within the city district Li-cheng which is only 53.37 km<sup>2</sup> in size, there are as many as 251 Chinese Folk Religion temples, but only fourteen Buddhist and five Taoist temples (i.e., 270 temples in total). Other scholars such as L. Q. Chen (2008) or Zhu (2009) also support the idea that the majority of the religious believers in contemporary China are in fact the followers of Chinese Folk Religion rather than Buddhism, Taoism or Confucianism.

The Cultural Revolution may not have lessened the popularity of this religious tradition, but it has certainly created some obstacles for those who wish to study it scholarly. Among the academia, the number of studies that focus on Chinese Folk Religion is still highly limited compared to that of the other five 'official religions' (Zhang, 2009, pp.26-27). As Zhu (2009) understands, the influences of Chinese Folk Religion are very often ignored by the Chinese religionists because the religion is excluded from the official historical records and is considered a kind of 'feudal superstition' by the government (p.44). In a country where religious matters are considered sensitive, scholars often have to be extra careful while studying and writing about a subject related to such 'feudal superstition' in order to avoid troubles.

Since the official socio-economic vision in the past five years happens to be 'construction of harmonious society', many Chinese scholars who are interested in studying Chinese Folk Religion have chosen to explain how the studies may help to establish a more harmonious society in China<sup>6</sup>, even though such a relationship seems to be rather irrelevant to the subject they actually study. This, however, is only one of the reasons why it is so difficult to study this religion scholarly.

For the Western scholars, who do not have to worry about writing freely, their studies should presumably be more helpful or reliable. Nevertheless, as some Chinese scholars suggest, these 'Western studies' have in turn contained several theoretical problems. For instance, according to Liu (2009) who has reviewed a significant number of these studies from the methodological perspective, many of them have mistakenly divided the religions in China into 'elite religions' and 'folk religion', thus the incorrect observation that folk religion was passively derived from or deeply influenced by those elite religions, while in reality it is in fact the one that has actively influenced the latter. Such 'misunderstanding' is caused by the concept that 'Folk Christianity', for example, is to be understood as a religious tradition derived from the

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<sup>6</sup> A recent publication *Gu nyuè-Wénhuà Y Míngjī n-Xīny ng Yánjiù* (2008), for example, has contained as many as 27 scholarly articles that mention the relationship between folk religion and the establishment of harmonious society. This tendency can also be witnessed in the recent issues of the more important Chinese academic journals such as *Religious Studies* and *China Religion*, as well as other literatures that peculiarly relate folk religious studies to the strengths of communism and the theories proposed by Chairman Mao (e.g., Pu, 2008, pp.50-60), or the ones that argue for the unification of China and Taiwan while discussing the history of Guan-di worship (e.g., Dai, 2008, pp.423-425; Wang & Ding, 2008).

more institutional churches, and therefore Chinese Folk Religion is also definable in the same fashion. This is why Ge (2009*b*) strongly believes that Chinese religious studies in the West are indeed 'Western religious studies in nature' (pp.174-177).

That being argued, treating Chinese Folk Religion as a distinctive religious tradition is by no means less problematic. As mentioned, if Chinese Folk Religion is not to be seen as a part of Buddhism and Taoism, then it is believed to have the largest number of followers in China. However, while it may be true that it has the largest number of believers, the beliefs and activities involved can be quite diverse. As an example, although Guan-di worship is witnessed in many parts of China as well as certain Chinese communities overseas, the purposes and formats of the worship are many. Traditionally, Guan-di is seen as a protector of soldiers, policemen, and even outlaws, but in some parts of China, he is treated mainly as the protector of fishermen or as the god of wealth (Z. Q. Chen, 2008; Li, 2008). And as Ward (1985) describes using the example of South China fishermen, although there are some widely spread traditions such as ancestor worship or funerary ritual, other religious practices are not only regional, but also highly changeable and personal (pp.73-77). In fact, even Feng and Li (1994) who are willing to treat Chinese Folk Religion as an independent tradition have admitted the phenomenon that its contents are changing quite rapidly (p.8). If so, then how could anyone legitimately group all these different religious

practices and beliefs under the umbrella of a single religious tradition? And if it is defined merely by the religious practices or beliefs that could not be found in any other religion, how is it different from folk religion in general?

'Folk religion' in the West is often understood as "the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion" (Yoder, 1974, pp.1-15).

In Asia, Japanese religionist Anesaki is generally considered the first scholar who applied the term 'folk belief', and his definition was soon widely adopted by the academia including the authoritative *Heibonsha World Encyclopaedia* (1985), it writes, "Popular religion is referred to the regional folk beliefs that involve no doctrine or institution. It is also called folk cultural religion, folk religion or heritage belief" (p.558). In China, *Cih i* (1989) – a comprehensive dictionary of Chinese characters – has provided a more detailed definition, it writes, "[Folk religion is] a kind of popular belief, behaviour or superstition towards certain spiritual concepts or materialised objects. Unlike religion, it does not involve any authoritative leader, doctrine or organisation, and does not encourage any spiritual formation" (p.5120).

These descriptions seem to be quite applicable to Chinese Folk Religion, except the implication that it is not a religion. Either way, we can readily suggest that the nature and structure of folk religion is somewhat different from the religions Hick describes.

His approach to identify what a religion believes by interpreting its authoritative scripture or what its spiritual leader has taught, for example, would clearly be inapplicable to any folk religion, for it has, by definition, contained neither an authoritative scripture nor spiritual leader. In a sense, given that what this definition describes does exist, it has put the universality of Hick's interpretation of religion into question – Chinese Folk Religion does not have to be unique for such a question to make sense. If, however, we are to further identify Chinese Folk Religion so that we may prove that at least one of these 'folk religions' does exist, then the problem would still remain unresolved – this definition still has not told us what Chinese Folk Religion is. Having an authoritative scripture, for instance, is certainly a characteristic of Christianity, but it does not provide any information as to how we may identify it, because other religions also have an authoritative scripture. It is the belief in Bible, Jesus Christ or trinitarian theology that makes Christianity distinctive and recognisable. According to the same logic, then, it would seem that we must define Chinese Folk Religion by its beliefs or practices, that is, the contents that make it distinguishable from all other folk religions.

In fact, as Liu (2009) points out, although Chinese Folk Religion involves so many different beliefs and practices, there is actually a 'common order' shared by all of its regional sects (pp.1-11). If such a 'common order' or shared system of beliefs

does exist, then it may very well serve as the definition we desire. Unfortunately, what makes defining Chinese Folk Religion so challenging is that we cannot define it this way either. It is because, according to some religionists, especially those who do not think Chinese Folk Religion should be treated as a religion, most of its major beliefs or practices can also be found in other institutional religions.

As a response to this issue, Chapter 5 suggested my own approach as to how we can define and identify Chinese Folk Religion effectively, which is a methodological issue quite essential to this thesis. The Chapter first discussed the works of certain more influential yet traditional scholars such as Freedman (1974), De Groot (1892<sup>7</sup>), Granet (1975), Watson (1976; 2002) and Yang (1967), as well as the more contemporary theories proposed by certain Chinese scholars such as Jiang (2006), Hou and Fan (1994), Li (1998) and Ma (2004). Then, it proposed to identify both the Chinese traditional religious beliefs and folk religiosities that are commonly witnessed in all of the regional sects of Chinese Folk Religion and to treat them as the definition of the religion. This justifies the decision to study it as a religion, for the major argument against such an approach is that it is unidentifiable.

Chapter 6 and 7 described the religious beliefs and concepts that are commonly shared by all that can be categorised as a part of Chinese Folk Religion according to

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<sup>7</sup> De Groot's classic *The Religious System of China* is actually comprised of six volumes (1892-1910). Nonetheless, his major arguments about the definition of Chinese folk religion are all included in the first one.

the approach proposed in Chapter 5. Although certain existing case studies could help to examine the structure and religiosities of Chinese Folk Religion in later Chapters, their particular descriptions of various regional phenomena are less helpful in seeking the said commonalities. Therefore, the two Chapters have focused more on the literatures that aim at systematically summarising the beliefs or criticising the attitudes of the Chinese Folk Religion followers in general, which include the works of Li (1998), Hou and Fan (1994), Feuchtwang (2001; 2003), Berkowitz et al. (1969), Chamberlain (2009) and Adler (2002). These scholars are not necessarily the most representative, for De Groot (1967), Freedman (1974), Wolf (1974), Granet (1975) or Yang (1967) would usually be considered more knowable and influential. It is their approach to treat Chinese Folk Religion as a distinctive religion functioning independently on the same level as Buddhism, Taoism or Confucianism rather than a lower level 'folk derivation' of the three religions that makes their studies more useful and relevant to our arguments. In other words, some of the more influential literatures are not chosen because what they describe is inconsistent with the viewpoint of this thesis.

Based on certain Western criteria and understanding, earlier Western scholars tend to disapprove Chinese Folk Religion as an independent religious tradition. Wolf (1974), for instance, has argued that there cannot be such a thing as a 'Chinese

religion' because in China priests are not preachers and the elite and peasant practices are fundamentally different and independent (p.17). And although Freedman (1974) tends to believe that "all religious argument and ritual differentiation (in China) were conducted within a common language of basic conceptions, symbols, and ritual forms", his approach to treat 'Chinese popular religion' as a folk mutation of the three great religions makes it equally inconsistent with my working viewpoint (p.40).

A notable exception would be Berling (1997), who attempts to establish a dialogue between Hick's pluralist theory and what she calls the 'Chinese religious field' (p.45). However, instead of treating it as a fourth religious tradition in China, her concept is more of a 'pool' of religious elements shared by the three great religions, and Hick's model is only applied to challenge the classical exclusivist approach which she sees is the reason why the Chinese religious situation is often misunderstood (p.122). It is exclusivism that she questions, not Hick's assumptions.

Apart from the scholars mentioned above who treat Chinese Folk Religion as an independent religion, Chapter 7 also discussed how Yan (1991) and Guenon (1991) interpret the Confucian and Taoist concept of *Tien*<sup>8</sup>, for it is believed to have influenced how Chinese Folk Religion understands Ultimate Reality as well as religious dualism. By comparing *Tien* and Hick's idea of 'Real', the Chapter

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<sup>8</sup> '*Tien*' is chosen instead of '*Ti n*' (the Hanyu Pinyin of the character '天') because it is more commonly used among religionists (e.g., Fowler and Fowler, 2008, p.30).



demonstrated that *Tien* is simply too alien a concept to Hick's current explanatory theory.

Chapter 8 answered the primary research question as to whether or not Hick's model of religious pluralism would put Chinese Folk Religion into an inferior position and how we can offer an equal status to the religion. In addition to the major literatures used in the previous two Chapters, Chapter 8 also tried to explain the different soteriological concerns of Chinese Folk Religion using Kitagawa's (1967) concept of this-worldly, secular salvation. By accepting such a concept as a different yet equally preferable religious achievement, the Chapter suggested that, for Hick's model to fulfil its original purpose, it should not allow its criteriology to categorise Chinese Folk Religion as a less authentic and valuable phenomenon.

Chapter 9 further justified the reasons for offering Chinese Folk Religion an equal status as well as the reconstructed criteriology proposed in Chapter 8. Traditionally, Chinese Folk Religion is often treated as something superstitious and superficial mainly because of its functionally-oriented<sup>9</sup> nature and syncretistic<sup>10</sup> elements. To reject such a classical viewpoint, the Chapter adopted Schmidt-Leukel's (2009) 'quality defence for syncretism' and argued that the criticisms of the way

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<sup>9</sup> 'Functionally-oriented' is a term proposed by Yang (1967) to describe the particular nature of Chinese Folk Religion, and is therefore adopted in this thesis (p.25). For more discussions, please see section 6.6.

<sup>10</sup> To be consistent with the key literatures this thesis referenced, the term 'syncretistic' will be used instead of 'syncretic' (e.g., Schmidt-Leukel's, 2009, pp.69-89).

Chinese Folk Religion functions are not necessarily valid and that such criticisms, if valid, can also be applied to all other religious traditions. Schmidt-Leukel's theory was introduced not only because it is a thorough system of arguments that can help to justify the viewpoint of this thesis effectively, but also because it is meant to be a theory that explains how the existing models of religious pluralism, especially Hick's model, are not pluralistic enough.

Recently, there are an increasing number of scholars who tend to see religious syncretism more positively. For example, DeBernardi (2009) also does not find the syncretistic practices he witnessed superstitious or superficial, and his research is directly related to what this thesis would consider a manifestation of Chinese Folk Religion. However, his main purpose is not to defend religious syncretism, and his arguments are less organised or thorough than that of Schmidt-Leukel, thus the decision of adopting the latter.

As this thesis mainly aimed to establish a dialogue between Hick's pluralist theory and Chinese Folk Religion, it is also necessary to see if there is any Chinese scholar who has already participated in the discussion of religious pluralism, especially the ones that attempt to argue from the perspective of Chinese Folk Religion/Chinese traditional religions. In fact, within some of the more influential journals of religious studies in China, there are a great number of articles that have

mentioned the term 'zōngjiào duō yuán-zhī yì' (religious pluralism), but by 'religious pluralism' they often mean 'the coexistence of a plurality of religions' or 'interreligious toleration', rather than a theological or philosophical theory that concerns the explanation of the world religious situation. As an example, for She (2008) who tries to describe the 'religious pluralistic thoughts' of certain Indonesian activists, the thoughts are actually a very general promotion of interreligious toleration. And for Ma (2008) who seems to be urging that we should tolerate the religious beliefs of the others, what he mainly wishes to promote is that we should obey the laws established by the Chinese government, especially the ones that restrict religious activities. While these studies may be able to suggest certain innovative ideas as to how interreligious toleration can be achieved (e.g., restricting religious activities by laws), they are neither intended to nor have offered any reflection on the theories of religious pluralism on a theoretical level. For other scholars such as Gao (2008) who has neither included any anthropological or historical survey nor suggested any original or evaluated any existing theories concerning the methods of achieving interreligious toleration, their advocacy of toleration may not even have yielded much contribution to knowledge (also Yang, 2007; Yang, 2008).

### 1.1.5 Space and necessities for further studies

Although there seems to be quite a significant amount of researches that concern Hick's pluralist assumption as well as Chinese Folk Religion, there is little to no connection between the two. As mentioned, even when Berling (1997) appears to have integrated Chinese Folk Religion into the dialogue, what she actually intends to challenge is the exclusivist viewpoint which she believes is responsible for the misinterpretation of the nature and belief system of Chinese Folk Religion in the past.

As Chapter 4 would demonstrate, to truly review the effectiveness and reliability of Hick's model of religious pluralism, we have to examine if his explanatory theory is able to describe honestly what the world religions believe, and one way of doing so is to see if any of his ideas is incompatible with the core doctrines or central moral ideal of a particular religion. The existing researches concerning this issue, however, are all conducted from the perspectives of the religious traditions that are more institutionalised and knowable to the Western academia, and little attention has been paid to Chinese Folk Religion and other folk religious traditions with structures and beliefs more incompatible with Hick's explanatory theory. The conflicts between Hick's theory and Chinese Folk Religion are more severe and significant not only because the structures, functions and nature of the latter are alien to what Hick

describes, but also because, unlike the more institutionalised religions that Hick explicitly categorised as authentic and believable, Chinese Folk Religion would be put into the same category as all the other unauthentic, 'evil' phenomena according to his criteriology, which, as this these would argue, is the opposite of what Hick originally intends to achieve. Therefore, in order to fulfill its intended purposes, there is a need to reconstruct his explanatory theory, especially his criteriology, so that we can apply his model to understand, respect and establish a genuine interreligious dialogue with Chinese Folk Religion or any other tradition that is also degraded by or disconnected with his current interpretation of the world religious situation.

In addition to the religious phenomena that his criteriology grades as unauthentic and soteriologically ineffective, the existing debates also tend to overlook the inconsistencies between the structures and functions he expects from all religions and that of certain folk religious traditions, mainly because the criticisms or reviews of his theory are often proposed from the perspectives of the more institutionalised religions of which the structures and functions are less incompatible with what Hick describes, and thus the focus on the other problems of his pluralist assumption. However, a project to explain the world religious situation pluralistically is incomplete until it includes all that is considered religious to a reasonable degree. This is not to say that a pluralist explanatory theory must mention all existing religions (for it would be an

unreasonable and unnecessary requirement), but that the assumptions involved should not exclude any member of the world religious situation from the picture, because such a pluralist theory is supposed to be able to respect all equally.

As for Chinese Folk Religion, although there has already been a significant number of researches that treat it as an independent religious tradition or try to describe the commonalities among its regional sects, there is not yet any study attempting to identify its understandings of Ultimate Reality, soteriological concern and central moral ideal, let alone comparing them with that of other religious traditions. This, however, is not only vital to the project of integrating it into the current interreligious dialogue, but also the evaluation and, if the hypotheses mentioned in section 1.1.2 are proven to be true, the reconstruction of his criteriology, because these three concepts (i.e., Ultimate Reality, soteriology and moral ideal) are the foundation of Hick's pluralist assumption, and if we are to reconstruct his theory so that it can treat Chinese Folk Religion as an equally authentic religion, we would have to ensure that the amended criteriology has also put the said concepts into consideration. For example, in order to justify the reconstruction, we have to explain how the this-worldly, secular salvation of Chinese Folk Religion is an achievement as preferable as the limitlessly better religious-end of other religions, or how its rather 'self-centred' moral ideal is as respectable as the 'Golden Rule' Hick speaks of.

To further explain what this thesis intended to achieve, the Methodology section that follows will open with an outline of the key arguments this thesis proposed, how it examined the research hypotheses, and how it reached its final conclusion.

Afterwards, the section will discuss other methodological and practical issues involved in this study, such as the use of Chinese terms and the reasons for choosing Chinese Folk Religion over other folk religious traditions.

## **1.2 Methodology**

### **1.2.1 Outline of arguments**

Chapter 2 discussed the key ideas of Hick's model and, essentially, the reasons for him to develop a rather exclusivistic criteriology which does not approve any ideology except the one he proposes. It was learned that, by choosing a neutral position, Hick actually wants to suggest that all 'world great faiths' (i.e., major contemporary religions) are equally capable of leading their followers to what he terms as a 'limitlessly better religious-end'. Such proposal is an attempt to urge his readers to respect and recognise other faiths as an equally truthful religion, or to offer a vision that can ease the tensions between conflicting religious traditions. In other words, it is Hick's original intention to treat all contemporarily active and popular

religions equally – it would contradict his purpose if he treats any such religion unfairly. Hick supports his criteriology by quoting various religious texts, claiming that the 'Golden Rule' is soteriologically and ethnically central to the traditions the texts represent, and that such rule is too basic a principle to be proven. These are, however, insufficient to justify his theory unless all religions indeed treat such a principle as the only soteriologically relevant teaching – in that case, Hick's model would be a description of the reality.

Chapter 3 and 4 examined how his critics respond to his model in general and from a Buddhist perspective. The main aims of the two Chapters are to survey some opinions as to how we should evaluate a pluralist model as well as demonstrate that the research question of this thesis has not been raised by even the non-Christian scholars. Hick's model is mainly criticised of valuing only the 'Golden Rule' and thus degrading all other religious teachings; assuming the central theme of all religions to be identical while they are, as the critics believe, foundationally different; and implying that there is an Ultimate Reality (i.e., 'Real') higher than the one addressed within their own religious traditions. These are problematic because Hick's theory is at most eschatologically verifiable, and the only currently available criterion to evaluate his proposal is to see if it is helpful to the solving of interreligious conflicts or the establishment of meaningful interreligious dialogue. To offer such ground, a



model must be convincing to the audiences involved, yet Hick's model would be undesirable to, for example, the Christians who believe that there are other soteriologically essential religious teachings, even if they agree that the 'Golden Rule' is indeed a crucial part of the Christian teachings. Supposedly, the Chinese Folk Religion followers should find Hick's assumption even more undesirable/inapplicable if the central theme of their religion is more directly contradictory to the 'Golden Rule', let alone his other understandings of religion that are incompatible with how Chinese Folk Religion functions.

The Chapters also described how Heim (1995) tries to propose a different model, namely the theory of 'multiple religious-ends', that does not contain the said problems. This model would, however, find it more difficult to explain the problem of conflicting truth-claims, for it has affirmed more literal referential values of religious truth-claims. His rather Christocentric and thus confessional assumption also makes it a less preferable approach to adopt. This led to my later suggestion of using the idea of 'multiple criteria' to give equal weight to the original soteriological/ethical criteriology of Chinese Folk Religion without asserting the reliability of any truth-claim in the literal sense – it is to integrate the inclusiveness of Heim's particular theory of multiple religious-ends into Hick's assumption without jeopardising the strength of latter's neutral position.

Chapter 5 looked at how Chinese Folk Religion can be defined. It argues that some scholars reject the idea that it is a religion because its nature and how it functions is different from that of what some may term as 'institutional religions' – the fact that it contains neither an authoritative scripture nor a universal doctrine or that it is 'functionally-oriented' makes it challenging to be recognised as a single tradition. Such viewpoint is however unfair from the pluralist perspective, for one should not use the structures of some religions as a criterion to judge whether others are religions. This rather traditional viewpoint has encouraged Hick to define what a religion believes by interpreting its scripture almost exclusively and regard any manifestation/phenomenon that is incompatible with such interpretation as a misapplication of what the religion truly teaches. This approach is at least inapplicable to the understanding of Chinese Folk Religion, for what its followers believe would be its definition. As a response, the Chapter suggested a working viewpoint that defines Chinese Folk Religion by both the religious beliefs and religiosities involved.

Chapter 6 and 7 then described the key beliefs of Chinese Folk Religion that are considered common (but not necessarily universal). This description may not be necessary for the traditions that are reasonably recognisable, but is vital to the study of a tradition that does not have a generally accepted definition. Therefore, in addition to the materials that would serve as evidences for the later discussions of its structure

and religiosities, the Chapters also contributed a usable definition for future studies of the religion. To briefly summarise, Chapter 6 and 7 pointed out the beliefs related to the speculations that salvation, if understood in the classical sense, is not the major concern of this religion; that the central theme of its teachings is not 'universal compassion'; and that its gods/organisations do not require a strong membership/commitment from its followers. Chapter 7 also suggested to treat the concept of *Tien* as the Ultimate Reality of the religion, and concluded that certain degree of distortion is inevitable if Hick wishes to explain this concept with his dualistic distinction of 'Real *an sich*' and 'Real as experienced'.

Finally, Chapter 8 attempted to answer the main research question by first demonstrating that Chinese Folk Religion actually encourages a form of self-centredness, and then discusses if it is appropriate for Hick to disregard the values of the beliefs/religiosities involved. Basically, the said self-centredness is referred to the phenomenon of treating the pursuit of earthly fortunes for oneself as the main purpose of practicing Chinese Folk Religion, as well as the argument that the foundation of the moral teachings of the religion is filial piety, which is a form of conditional compassion. Since Hick's criteriology is essentially soteriological, the Chapter also described how salvation is differently understood by Hick and Chinese Folk Religion. It then proposed an idea of 'multiple criterion' which can offer an

equal status to the moral and soteriological ideologies of the religion, and argued that such relativist assumption is necessary if a neutral model aims to be truly pluralistic.

Chapter 9 reflected upon the previous arguments by examining if Chinese Folk Religion is merely syncretistic, secular or superstitious, but by studying such religiosities, it also further identified the religious tradition/phenomenon this thesis defined as 'Chinese Folk Religion'; demonstrated that certain preconceptions of religion are not applicable to all religions; complemented Hick's interpretation of religion by describing how some religions would function differently; and supported the argument that a neutral, pluralist assumption is not necessarily considered impracticable or undesirable by all religious audiences. Schmidt-Leukel's (2009) arguments were adopted to defend the 'syncretistic/superficial' nature of the religion, thus justifying the suggestion of grading it as an equally rational and valuable religious tradition.

The last Chapter concluded the elements of Hick's model that we had reconstructed or maintained. It was argued that his argument that menaces the strengths of the neutral approach and what he originally intends to achieve is neither his idea that some religious beliefs are literally false nor his non-confessional position, but his confessional and rather exclusivistic criteriology, which this thesis has replaced. The Chapter finished with the contributions this study may offer, which

include a usable definition of Chinese Folk Religion, a more inclusive interpretation of how the world religions function differently, as well as a practical suggestion that can help the currently 'degraded' traditions to relate to Hick's theory effectively.

### **1.2.2 Reasons for choosing Chinese Folk Religion**

Chinese Folk Religion is clearly not the only religious phenomenon that Hick's (1989*a*) criteriology grades as unauthentic and less valuable, for he has explicitly presented a long list of religious phenomena, concepts and practices that fail to meet his criterion (pp.326-327). That being said, as mentioned previously, what he originally wishes to reject are merely the 'misapplications' of the truthful teachings of the world religions. In other words, his assumption still implies that all contemporary, active religions, if practiced rightly, are equally authentic, preferable and effective in leading their followers to a salvific-end. This thesis, however, is to argue that his theory would actually put not only its manifestations, but an entire religion into the 'evil', unauthentic category, because the concepts and practices that fail to meet Hick's criterion are so central and foundational to such a religion that they cannot be seen as a mere manifestation of that religion. Therefore, in order to demonstrate the above statement efficiently, this thesis should avoid choosing a tradition that Hick has

graded as authentic explicitly (e.g., Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism), even though the critics from such a tradition may still find certain incompatibilities between Hick's theory and what their tradition believes.

As a meta-theory of religion, Hick has in fact surveyed a large number of religious traditions, all of which are categorised by him as authentic and soteriologically effective (if practiced rightly). Nonetheless, since his approach to understand what these traditions believe is heavily based on the interpretations of their authoritative scriptures and the sayings of their spiritual leaders, he has inevitably left out the religious traditions that do not involve any authoritative doctrine, scripture or spiritual leader. However, it does not mean that he intends to think any less of these traditions. Apart from not having been approved by Hick explicitly, the religion we choose must also have failed to meet his criterion and contain elements alien to what he sees as the commonalities of all religions. Preferably, the bigger and more significant are these conflicts, the stronger would be our arguments.

After surveying a number of religious traditions that he did not approve explicitly, this study learned that Chinese Folk Religion would work as a more appropriate and effective counterexample to Hick's theory, for the tension between the two appeared to be the strongest, which can be summarised as follows:

Table 1

*Conflicts between Hick's theory and Chinese Folk Religion*

	Hick's theory	Chinese Folk Religion
1.	The central moral ideal of all religions is selflessness and universal compassion.	The most important virtue of all is filial piety, which is a concept of conditional love.
2.	To achieve salvation is to transform oneself from self-centredness to Reality-centredness (that is, according to Hick's theory, selflessness).	To achieve salvation is to cultivate this-worldly self-interest.
3.	All religions treat salvation/liberation as the ultimate goal.	If the cultivation of this-worldly self-interest is not to be seen a kind of salvation, then Chinese Folk Religion does not

- concern salvation.
4. Salvation is the  
limitlessly better  
religious-end that  
happens in another  
realm of reality  
afterlife.
- Salvation happens at the  
present in this world. It is  
neither eternal nor  
limitlessly better.
5. All religions involve a  
dualistic concept of  
'Real *an sich*' and  
'Real as experienced',  
both of which are  
equally transcendent.
- The opposite aspect of the  
most transcendent *Tien* is  
the lowest-ranked Earth.
6. Authoritative  
scriptures, doctrines  
and the sayings of  
spiritual leaders  
represent what a  
religion believes.
- There is no authoritative  
scripture, doctrine or  
spiritual leader.



- |    |  |  |
|----|--|--|
| 7. | All religions expect total commitment and exclusivist membership from their followers. | Followers are allowed or even encouraged to embrace foreign beliefs and practices. It is equally acceptable to be non-religious. |
| 8. | All religions expect their followers to have total faith in their teachings.           | Followers are allowed to be agnostic.  |
- 

This thesis would demonstrate the above conflicts and, based on the argument that Chinese Folk Religion is not a tradition that Hick intends to degrade, reduce these conflicts by reconstructing some of his assumptions.

One may suggest that Shintoism from Japan, for instance, also contains similar elements that are incompatible with Hick's explanatory theory. These elements include the emphasis of family bonds, ancestor worship, and the lack of authoritative doctrine or scripture, etc. It does not require a strict membership or total commitment from its followers, and its beliefs or practices are also highly syncretistic and diverse.

Therefore, this thesis did not claim that studying Chinese Folk Religion is the only way to demonstrate the problems of Hick's theory. In fact, since there are other religious traditions that are degraded by Hick's criteriology for similar reasons, the reconstructed model this thesis developed should also be able to be applied to truly understand and establish a genuine dialogue with these traditions. What this thesis maintains, however, is that Chinese Folk Religion would prove to be most preferable for this study.

Taking Shintoism as an example, although it seems to share certain elements – including the Chinese traditional religious beliefs it adopted – with Chinese Folk Religion, its deep connection with Buddhism makes it more difficult to challenge Hick's assumptions from its perspective, mainly because, as explained earlier, Buddhism is one of the institutional religions that Hick's theory strongly promotes. Buddhism did not only shape the belief system of contemporary, popular Shintoism, it is also part of the latter especially when it comes to the concepts and practices concerning afterlife and ultimate liberation, and the core idea of Shintoism – *kami* (god) – is often considered equivalent to Buddha (Scheid, 2008; Ono, 1962, pp.6-7). As this thesis would suggest, however, Chinese Folk Religion should be treated as an independent religion on the same level as Buddhism or had even shaped the Chinese Buddhist beliefs in the first place, and Buddha is merely seen as one of the many

non-transcendent deities by its practitioners.

In addition, although popular Shintoism also seems to involve no authoritative doctrine or scripture, its organisations, shrines and priesthood are more institutionalised and are recognised by the government officially, and there are some formalised prayers and rituals that are widely practiced (Evans, 2001, pp.7-29). These are, on the other hand, not witnessed in Chinese Folk Religion.

Apart from the fact that its root is deeply related to a religion Hick clearly approves, Shintoism also concerns afterlife and religious salvation more than Chinese Folk Religion, and meditation is commonly recognised as a way to reach a salvific-end (ibid, pp.31-52).

Lastly, the self-centredness that Chinese Folk Religion encourages is responsible for the religion to fail to meet Hick's criterion, but what Shintoism promotes is in fact quite consistent with the 'Golden Rule' Hick describes. According to a Shinto highpriest:

In Shinto, all human beings are regarded as children or descendants of the kami. Therefore, we have kami nature within ourselves and are born with the capability of solving problems and of creating a life with happiness and peace for others as well as ourselves... *kannagara*, the Shinto way of

spirituality, can be shared and understood by people other than Japanese and that Shinto can contribute toward peace in the world (ibid, pp.ix; xi).

It is not to say that Shintoism can definitely meet Hick's criterion of truthful religion, but that, for the above reasons, Chinese Folk Religion should work as a better counterexample to the key assumptions Hick proposes.

### **1.2.3 A three-way dialogue between Hick's theory, Buddhism and Chinese Folk Religion**

To demonstrate that the problem this thesis wanted to investigate cannot be addressed from the perspectives of the religious traditions Hick explicitly grades as authentic, the study also discussed how the Buddhist scholars, most notably Makransky (2005*a*) and Abe (1995), respond to his theory. Two of the reasons for choosing Buddhism over other religions Hick approves are that the structure, doctrines and soteriological concern of Buddhism are more alien to Christianity (which inspires Hick's pluralist vision) than that of Catholicism or Islam, and the Buddhist critics are more involved in the debate concerning religious pluralism compared to the Confucian or Taoist scholars.

An exception would be the Hindu/Sikh critics, who are equally involved in the debate (e.g., Abhishiktananda, 1997; Sharma, 1998; Ariarajah, 1991). However, as mentioned earlier, this study was also interested in how Makransky attempts to apply Heim's (1995) theory of multiple religious-ends to offer a better position to Mahayana Buddhism – which is an approach this thesis adopted – as well as how Abe (1995) proposes a Buddhist pluralist model from the neutral position. To maintain the strengths of Hick's theory, this thesis would also apply a neutral approach, but the majority of Hick's critics tend to prefer a confessional one (e.g., Heim, 1995; Cornille, 2008).

#### **1.2.4 Is field study necessary for this research? The insider/outsider debate and further**

There are a number of reasons for this research to choose not to conduct any field study. First, it is not the studies of Chinese Folk Religion that are lacking, but the studies that try to integrate Chinese Folk Religion into the discussion concerning religious pluralism or Hick's theory in particular. There are sufficient studies of the beliefs and religiosities of Chinese Folk Religion for this thesis to reference, and the main purpose of this study is not to prove that Chinese Folk Religion contains the

expected elements, but to challenge the key assumptions of Hick's theory from the perspective of Chinese Folk Religion, even though my understandings and interpretations of those elements are often original. In other words, this study is a philosophical exercise rather than a social-religious/anthropological project. Second, one of the reasons that make Chinese Folk Religion so difficult to be defined is that, because of the absence of any authoritative scripture or leader, its practices and beliefs are highly personal and diverse. Therefore, to identify the core concepts and central moral ideal that are commonly shared by all the regional sects of this religion is not to conduct another case study, but to systemise and compare the already existing case studies and to consult the literatures that also concern their commonalities.

Since the claims this thesis made about Chinese Folk Religion are based on the collection, interpretation and comparison of the results of other researches, the issue of objectivity/subjectivity should mainly apply to the religionists who conducted those researches instead of this study. Such an issue is deeply related to the insider/outsider debate, and Reat (1983) has provided an excellently written summary of all the major arguments involved. As for the two major viewpoints that favour the insider position, she describes:

One who maintains, for example, that only by being born and raised a

Buddhist can one hope to understand Buddhism, and that one's best source of knowledge is other traditional Buddhists, emphasizes the first channel of information and would be classified as a traditionalist. A less extreme form of this approach, employing the second channel, would be one which allows that an outsider may understand Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and so on, by converting and studying with traditional teachers, thereby eventually becoming an insider (ibid, p.459).

However, as Reat understands, the opposite outsider position does not only maintain that a non-Buddhist may also understand Buddhism, but that "a valid understanding of a religion can be gained only by an objective outsider," because only by remaining an outsider can a researcher obtain information objectively (ibid).

This debate is related to the question as to whether or not the researches this thesis consulted are reliable, and it seems that, if we are to take an insider position, we should at least be skeptical of the studies that are conducted by an outsider of Chinese Folk Religion. Nonetheless, instead of taking either of the above standpoints, this thesis would suggest that the situation does not always have to be one way or another, in the sense that the insider/outsider debate is not entirely applicable to the Chinese religious phenomena this thesis described.

As stated in section 1.2.2, one of the conflicts between Hick's assumptions and Chinese Folk Religion is that Hick assumes all religions to expect total commitment and exclusivist membership from their followers, while Chinese Folk Religion, on the other hand, does not require such a commitment or membership. In fact, according to this study, the followers of Chinese Folk Religion do not only put religious identity in a secondary place, but also understand the concept of religious identity differently. For them, whom they are as a religious believer is not someone who belongs to a particular, named religious tradition, but the set of religious beliefs they choose to embrace individually or the religious attitude they demonstrate. Therefore, as Li (1998) expresses, "When some foreigners ask us, 'What is your religion?' We often find it difficult to answer. It doesn't seem right if we answer 'Taoism' or 'Buddhism', because we don't actually believe in it or belong to it" (p.168). According to other researches, some may claim to be a 'Taoist' or 'Buddhist' just to satisfy the interviewers, and when pressed, many would say that they are just superstitious (see section 9.4).

The major task of this study is to demonstrate that Chinese Folk Religion (or, supposedly, other similar folk religious traditions) is often overlooked or misunderstood by Hick and the majority of his critics because the approaches or frameworks they usually use to interpret a religion are not applicable to it. Similarly,



forcing the concept of insider/outsider onto the studies of Chinese Folk Religion would also distort what this religion believes, because, according to the consciousness of its followers, there is no such thing as an insider or outsider, or, to put it differently, everyone can be an insider or outsider of this religion, and being an insider does not imply having a better understanding of what this religion believes.

That being said, this thesis actually accepted that the concern of subjectivity/objectivity is reasonable and, indeed, crucial to the understanding of a religion. Instead of blaming Hick for being an outsider, however, this thesis would argue that it is his approach and criteriology that mistakenly put Chinese Folk Religion in an inferior position. Therefore, another task of this study is to reconstruct some of his assumptions so that his theory can leave Chinese Folk Religion as it is without degrading its value or soteriological effect, and the theory of 'multiple criteria' this thesis proposed is exactly the solution to the problem of distorting the beliefs of other faiths or forcing a preconception onto the understanding of a foreign religion (see section 8.8).

### **1.2.5 Formatting and the use of Chinese terms**

This thesis conforms to the APA Style Manual, 5th Edition. The APA Style

applies to all tables, headings, numberings, spacing and referencing with the following exceptions:

1. An "Introduction" heading is included at the beginning of this Chapter;
2. Headings and subheadings are bold;
3. Chapter headings employ all capital letters.

All Chinese terms written in this thesis were italicised and Romanised using the Hanyu Pinyin system with English translations provided in parentheses the first time its appears (e.g., *míxìn* (superstition), *yùn* (luck)). To reduce the number of homonyms, tone marks were used instead of tone numbers. This also applies to literatures with Chinese titles, except when an English/Romanised title is provided by the author/publisher (e.g., Jiang, 2006). Two exceptions would be the Chinese Classics that have an official English title (e.g., *Book of Wei*, *Analects: Chief of the Ji*) and the Chinese terms that appeared within a direct quote. English translations of Chinese titles in the References section were provided in square brackets instead of parentheses, and following the rule of APA style, they were not italicised unless they are book/journal titles.

In addition, the names of Chinese authors and the Chinese terms which are

generally recognisable among religionists (e.g., Tao, Confucius, yin-yang, Xunzi, Chou Dynasty) would not be italicised, and their Romanisations would follow the commonly used spellings, which may not be consistent to the Hanyu Pinyin system. These rules also apply to the names of some Chinese deities (e.g., Guan-di, Tien Hou), for they are more commonly treated this way. This is to ensure the consistency between the Chinese names/terms used in this thesis and the majority of the referenced literatures. For example, it would be confusing if all the referenced literatures use 'Tien Hou' (e.g., Chamberlain, 2009, pp.112-119; 138-152; Berkowitz et al., 1969, pp.82-85), while the other parts of the thesis use '*Ti nhòu*' ('Tien Hou' in Hanyu Pinyin), as if they are referred to two different deities. It is also uncommon to treat any person's name as a foreign term, and as this thesis would explain, most of the deities in China were actual, historical persons, thus the widely accepted tradition of treating their names normally. Nonetheless, for any other case, priority was always given to the Hanyu Pinyin system (with English translation provided).

## **2. HICK'S PLURALIST PROPOSAL: AN INTERPRETATION OF RELIGION**

### **2.1 Introduction and justification**

To verify our hypotheses that Hick's approach to understand religion, definition of religion, pluralist assumption and criteriology are rather Christian-centred, or, to be precise, 'institutional-religion-centred'<sup>11</sup>, this Chapter will first describe his major assumption, why he thinks such an assumption is the best explanation for the world religious situation, how he attempts to grade religions using his criteriology, as well as his purposes of proposing his theory. His justification for his criteriology and purpose of proposing his pluralist assumption are important to our later arguments, for they will help to examine if it is reasonable or necessary to grade some religious traditions as non-valuable and unauthentic and if his current theory has achieved his intended goals.

### **2.2 Core idea of Hick's theory: 'Real' as the transcategorial, ultimate reality**

As mentioned earlier, Hick believes that all religions are authentic in the sense

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<sup>11</sup> Please refer to Chapter 5 for the definition of 'institutional religion'.

that they all respond to the same Ultimate Reality, and that they all have the ability to lead their followers to the same ultimately better religious-end. This idea is derived from his concepts of 'noumenal Real' (which will be referred to as 'Real', similarly hereinafter) and 'phenomenal Real', which is an adaptation of Kantian distinction between 'thing-in-itself' and 'thing that appears'<sup>12</sup>. As he puts it:

It follows from this distinction between the Real as it is in itself and as it is thought and experienced through our religious concepts 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, substance or process, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive... For whereas the phenomenal world is structured by our own conceptual frameworks, its noumenal ground is not (1989a, p.246).

As a further description, Hick (1995) also emphasises that 'Real' is beyond human conception as follows:

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<sup>12</sup> As Cheetham (2003) describes, "Hick has incorporated a Kantian-influenced epistemology into his pluralistic hypothesis. Kant drew the distinction between the perceived world (*phenomena*), and the world as it is (*noumena*). That is, the objective world is beyond our direct knowledge, but it is known through the conceptual apparatus that our minds impose on reality... Applying this model to our knowledge about a higher or transcendent reality, Hick draws the distinction between the 'noumenal' Real and the 'phenomenal' Real. That is, there is the noumenal Real (higher reality) – which is beyond human conception – and then there are the various phenomenological conceptions/apprehensions of the Real evidenced in the world's wide variety of religious experience" (p.135). For more discussion of Hick's "neo-Kantian proposal", please see Eddy (2002, pp.103-104).

A qualification has to be made to the idea of the Real *an sich* as the ultimate reality<sup>13</sup> that is ineffable in that it transcends our human thought forms.

This is that purely formal statements can be made even about the ineffable – such as, for example, that it is ineffable! But it is a logical triviality. We cannot attribute to the Real a se any intrinsic attributes... though the limitations of our language compel us to speak of it in the singular rather than the plural... Our system of human concepts cannot encompass the ultimately Real. It is only as humanly thought and experienced that the Real fits into our human categories (p.50).

From the above explanations, one may notice that his concept of 'Real' is slightly different from the idea of 'Absolute Truth' or 'Ultimate Reality'. Usually, religious believers tend to regard God as the Ultimate Reality in Christianity, or Buddhahood as the Absolute Truth in Buddhism. It is something describable and conceivable at least to a certain point. Hick's concept of 'Real', on the other hand, is beyond those human conceptions of Absolute Truth. It is not even transcendent (or non-transcendent), for it is not the sort of thing that could be either, even though he

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<sup>13</sup> Hick intentionally termed 'ultimate reality' without capitals, in order to distinguish it with the higher level 'Real'. Please see Hick (2004a, pp.8-10) for references.

would sometimes regard it as “Transcendence”<sup>14</sup> (not as an adjective, with or without a capital “T”).

In response to the many criticisms of describing the ‘Real’ as something ineffable (since Hick himself has also tried to describe it somehow), Hick (2001*c*) later expresses that he actually prefers the term “transcategorical” more than “ineffable,” he writes, “I am not fond of the word ‘ineffable’ and prefer ‘transcategorical’, meaning beyond the range of our human systems of concepts or mental categories.” In other words, the ‘Real’ is only practically ineffable because our human conception is limited. Supposedly, one can still describe the ‘Real’ as long as it does not involve any dualistic categorisation, even though humans may lack the mental ability to give such description.

The distinction between the ‘Real’ and the ‘phenomenal Real’ holds the key to Hick’s pluralist assumption. As he states in his earlier work:

Thus in expounding this situation we have to try to keep two themes in balance: the agnostic theme that we only know God partially and imperfectly [the noumenal ‘Real’], and the positive theme that we really do know God as practically and savingly related to ourselves [the phenomenal

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<sup>14</sup> For example, Hick (1989*a*) describes in the Introduction of his book that “The feature upon which I shall primarily focus in this book is the belief in the transcendent” (p.6). For other examples, please see *ibid*, pp.13-14; 172-175.

'Real']<sup>15</sup> (Hick, 1980*a*, p.106).

As previously described, Hick's interpretation of the world religious situation is not completely consistent, yet the proposal he came up with in 1989 has remained his standard pluralist vision (Eddy, 2002, p.103). As it argues:

...the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real from within the major variant ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness is taking place (Hick, 1989*a*, p.240).

As the above summary implies, the religious beliefs and claims of all "great world faiths" are in fact different responses to the same, single Ultimate Reality, even though Hick also maintains that the 'Real' he speaks of is neither one nor many (as it is transcategorical). And the reason why the "great world faiths" are so radically diverse is that human experiences are supposed to be different, thus the conflicting

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<sup>15</sup> His notion that the noumenal God ('Real') can only be known agnostically has received a number of criticisms, most notably the one proposed by D'Costa (as cited in Cheetham, 2003, pp.140-141). As a response, Hick explains in a later article that his position is not the agnosticism D'Costa describes. Please refer to Section 3.4 for the related discussion.



perceptions of the 'same' Reality. This is rather similar to what the story of *The Blind Men and an Elephant* conveys: although an elephant may 'look' different to the blind men because they had each touched a different part of it, the elephant is still one. It is just that none of the blind men has grasped a full perception of the whole elephant, thus the conflicting observations. It does not mean that what they perceived is actually different. They think that the claims of the others are false only because they all misbelieve that they have already 'seen' the whole elephant. In other words, none of their claims is false, even though they appear to be contradictory to each other.

According to Hick's assumption, we are all like the blind men in the story. We can only know the 'Real' partially and imperfectly because of our inability. We can never, for instance, understand the colour of the elephant or give a full description of what it visually looks like. That being said, our experiences are real, in the sense that they are all an authentic, phenomenal response to the animal. It is in this sense that all truth-claims of the "great world faiths" Hick mentions, however diverse they may be, are true.

It should be noticed that using the elephant as a metaphor does not mean that the 'Real' is also a conscious being. The example works the same way even if we substitute the animal with a bronze statue or any other 'impersonal' object. In fact, the 'Real' can neither be 'personal' nor 'impersonal' because of its transcategorical

property<sup>16</sup>, or, as Hick (2004b) puts it, “it is not a kind of thing at all” (p.10). This is also why his approach is regarded as ‘non-confessional’, for the ‘Real’ is even ‘beyond’ the personal God as we experienced Him, even though this does not imply a different degree of transcendency – God is still equal to ‘Real’ in that He is the theistic (or phenomenal) manifestation of it. Some also question if such a transcategorical ‘thing’ (or ‘non-thing’) can possibly exist. For instance, as Plantinga (2000) expresses:

If Hick means that none of our terms applies literally to the Real, then it isn't possible to make sense of what he says. I take it the term 'tricycle' does not apply to the Real; the Real is not a tricycle. But if the Real is not a tricycle, then, 'is not a tricycle' applies literally to it; it is a nontricycle. It could hardly be neither a tricycle nor a nontricycle, nor do I think Hick would want to suggest that it could (p.45).

Likewise Rowe (1999) also rejects the possibility of such a transcategorical concept:

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<sup>16</sup> Regarding the question as to whether the ‘Real’ has to be ‘personal’, Cheetham (2003) once discussed, “Should we therefore conclude that Hick’s theodicy requires a ‘personal’ Real? Firstly, it would not be true to say that Hick thinks that the Real is impersonal either. As we have seen, Hick wants to say that the Real transcends personality and impersonality (‘transcategorical’ being Hick’s preferred term). Secondly, Hick will respond by saying that the statement ‘God desires that we all fulfil our potential’ is something that may be literally true of the Real in its theistic manifestation but mythologically true of the Real *in itself*. Hick can therefore maintain that the Real is simply beyond our own comprehension, that it is false to anthropomorphise the Real, and erroneous to insist on a fully comprehensible substance to the Real’s ‘personality’” (p.147).

I cannot see how the Real can avoid having one or the other of two contradictory properties... even though to ask whether the number two is green or non-green may be to presuppose that it's an entity of the kind that could be green or non-green, and would thus be an inappropriate or senseless question if asked by someone who knows that no number can be green, it hardly follows that the proposition that the number two is non-green is false or in some way meaningless. Indeed the proposition that the number two is non-green is necessarily true (p.146).

In the second edition of *An Interpretation of Religion* (2004a), Hick has added quite a number of responses to the criticisms of his model including the one Plantinga and Rowe propose. As he argues, he does hold that “the Real cannot be properly be said to be either a tricycle or a non-tricycle, and either green or non-green,” because “tricycality” and “greenness” can neither be applied to such transcategorical concept positively nor negatively (ibid, p.xxi). However, since no one, as Hick sees it, would ever try to attribute being green or being a tricycle to the ultimate divine reality, the problem Plantinga or Rowe mentions is not religiously relevant – from a religious point of view, the claims that God or the ‘Real’ is non-green, non-two, a non-teapot, or a non-tricycle etc., are “trivial truths from which nothing significant follows” (ibid,

pp. xxi-xxii). That being argued, he agrees that there are indeed trivial truths that are religiously relevant and significant, such as the claim that God is personal, all-loving or all-powerful. Plantinga's mistake, however, is to assume the 'Real' to be either a personal or a non-personal reality when it is possible and in fact likely to be neither (ibid, p. xxii). As he warns, the assumption that ultimate reality must be either personal or non-personal would either reject the core beliefs of either all theist or all non-theist religions, and is therefore "unacceptable from a global religious point of view" (ibid). Hick strongly believes that the scenario that all theist or all non-theist religions are false is very unlikely because both of the two traditions have provided equally rich evidences and arguments supporting their beliefs (ibid).

Hick still hasn't explained how something can avoid having one or the other of two contradictory properties, but at least we can confirm that he does not think 'personal' must equal to 'not non-personal', or that 'good' must equal to 'not evil'. Nonetheless, what Hick really tries to demonstrate is that because Rowe or Plantinga's argument would falsify either all the theistic or all the non-theistic religions and because he strongly believes that neither case is likely or acceptable, Rowe or Plantinga must be mistaken, meaning that a transcategorical concept is possible. For argument's sake, however, even if the two critics really did falsify either all the theistic or all the non-theistic religions, it does not prove their argument invalid,

unless one can prove at least one theistic and one non-theistic religion true. Moreover, even if we are to accept Hick's assumption (except his idea that the 'Real' is transcategorical), the Ultimate Reality being personal does not necessarily prove all non-theistic religions false – although they are wrong in believing that the Ultimate Reality is non-personal, their teachings can still be mythologically true and be able to lead their followers to an ultimately better religious-end.

On the other hand, to defend Hick's idea, one may say that the notion that “the number two is non-green” has implied that it is red, blue, yellow, or any other colour but green. It is in this sense that calling the number two ‘non-green’ is inappropriate, because it is not red, blue, yellow or any other colour either. Similarly, we cannot say the ‘Real’ is ‘non-wealthy’ because it would imply that it is ‘poor’, while in reality it could be neither, just as there is no such thing as a ‘wealthy number two’ or a ‘poor number two’. The only difference here between the number two and the ‘Real’ is that there are some descriptions that can be appropriately applied to the former (e.g., an integer, a non-negative number) but there is none that can be appropriately applied to the latter. Therefore, we may also say that Hick is trying to define the ‘Real’ through negation, such as “neither personal nor non-personal” or “neither good nor evil.” This kind of negative expression does contain some meaning, just as it is meaningful to say that the number two is neither wealthy nor poor – it tells us that it is not something

that could be either.

### **2.3 Some truth-claims are mere myths: solving interreligious contradictions**

Another point worth-noting in the above discussion is that Hick does not consider religious beliefs or truth-claims to be literally true, but “mythologically true”<sup>17</sup>. The implication that all religious beliefs can be (though not necessarily) literally false is what upsets some confessional religionists the most. Catholic theologian D’Costa (2000), for instance, doubts that even our speeches about “heavenly Father” is not literally true, and criticises that such an idea would “effectively severs any ontological connection between our human language and the divine reality” (p.26). As negative as it may sound, however, Hick does not actually attempt to degrade religious claims by calling them mere “myths.” For him, myths are soteriologically essential as they can guide us to live more appropriately so that we may reach the preferable state of Reality-centredness eventually (Hick, 1989a, pp.353-361). As an example, although the Sermon on the Mount might not have happened historically, what the Biblical passages teach can still transform the readers

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<sup>17</sup> As Hick (1989a) puts it, “This relationship between the ultimate noumenon and its multiple phenomenal appearances, or between the limitless transcendent reality and our many partial human images of it, makes possible mythological speech about the Real. I define a myth as a story or statement which is not literally true but which tends to evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude to its subject-matter. Thus the truth of a myth is a practical truthfulness: a true myth is one which rightly relates us to a reality about which we cannot speak in non-mythological terms” (pp.247-248).

into a more morally rightful person. In addition, it should also be noticed that Hick does not consider any of these 'myths' to be false either. He simply holds that whether they are literally true or not is unimportant, or is at least irrelevant to salvific matters. In other words, Hick's model still allows the Sermon on the Mount to be an actual historical event, and the truth-claims of various "great world faiths" to be literally true.

The idea that some (if not all) religious truth-claims can be literally false (that is, merely mythologically true) is probably an attempt to solve the main problem every religious pluralist has to face – the puzzle of conflicting truth-claims. It is rather clear that some religious claims simply cannot be literally true simultaneously. Whether Jesus' resurrection had actually taken place, whether Moses had led the Israelites out of Egypt, and whether Siddh rtha Gautama is the son of King Suddhodana, for examples, are just some of the many historical truth-claims that can only be one way or the other. Therefore, for anyone who wishes to claim that there is a plurality of religions that are true, he must deal with the question as to why their truth-claims are conflicting each other, or at least explain why these contradictions do not matter. Part of Hick's solution, as described above, is to assume that some truth-claims are not historical facts, but mere myths. That is, according to his rather philosophical analysis, it is certain that some of these claims are literally false.

In other words, what Hick wishes to emphasise is not that things are in fact incompatible at the phenomenal level, but that they can still be perfectly compatible at the noumenal level (see Cheetham, 2003, p.137). In his book, Hick (1989*a*) describes two different types of truth-claim: (1) the historical truth-claims that can be verified by historical or empirical evidence; and (2) the trans-historical truth-claims that cannot be verified scientifically (pp.363-369). Whether the universe is eternal or whether reincarnation would take place afterlife is, as Hick believes, an example of the unverifiable trans-historical truth-claim. Apart from the more significant interreligious conflicts, Hick also affirms that there are conflicts between these truth-claims even within the same religious tradition<sup>18</sup>. That being said, the two types of truth-claim Hick described are similar in that they are both irrelevant to the matter of salvation/liberation, or, to put it more precisely, Hick strongly believes that whether a historical or trans-historical truth-claim is literally true is completely irrelevant to salvific matter in the sense that Buddhists, for example, are not required to believe in the existence of rebirth in order to achieve *nirvana*:

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<sup>18</sup> As he writes, "...some Christians do whilst others do not believe that Jesus had no human father. (It is, incidentally, an interesting complication of the map of differences that Muslims affirm the virgin birth of Jesus whilst many Christians today do not). Again, some Christians do but others do not believe that Jesus's resurrection involved a revivifying of his physical corpse. On the Muslim side there is the unresolved debate about whether the prophet Muhammad did or did not appoint Ali as his successor, a difference which lies at the root of the division between Shias and Sunnis (Hick, 1985*a*, p.89).



One should be able to recognise that a person who accepts reincarnation when one denies it, or who denies it when one affirms it, might nevertheless be closer to the divine Reality than one is oneself; and therefore that if someone is mistaken on this matter the mistake cannot be of ultimate importance... whether we do or do not live again on earth is evidently not essential to our salvation or liberation" (ibid).

Therefore, it is not to say that the truth-claims themselves are irrelevant to salvific matter, but that whether they are literally true does not matter. As Hick (1989*a*) later modifies:

...it seems implausible that our final destiny should depend upon our professing beliefs about matters of trans-historical fact concerning which we have no definitive information. It seems more likely that both correct and incorrect trans-historical beliefs, like correct and incorrect historical and scientific beliefs, can form part of a religious totality that mediates the Real to human beings, constituting an effective context within which the salvific process occurs (ibid, pp.369-370).

Again, although Hick's theory has assumed at least some religious truth-claims to be literally false, it is clearly not his original intention to degrade any of them – they can be false in that they may not be historical facts, yet they are all true in that they are able to lead us to the limitlessly better religious-end. We may therefore conclude that Hick actually considers salvation/liberation to be the major goal of following a religion, and thus anything unrelated to this goal is of lesser importance. In fact, as the next section will show, whether a truth-claim or religious phenomenon possesses positive soteriological function would serve as his only criterion to judge or 'grade' a religion. However, as the thesis will later argue, the assumption that all religions concern salvific matters as much as Christianity or other religions Hick prefers is in fact debatable – although Chinese Folk Religion also involves ideas related to the issues of religious-end (e.g., rebirth, apotheosisation), reaching a better religious-end is not the major purpose for its followers to get religiously involved. In other words, it is not only Hick's approach that may have diminished the values of some religious traditions that will be put into question, but also his more basic preconceptions about what religion is and how it functions.

Hick's notion is quite different from what we usually mean when we say a religion or a truth-claim is true. Even though some may consider certain religious claims to be metaphors or insist that they should be interpreted allegorically (e.g.,

Catholic Apostolic Church), few would go as far as calling them mere “myths” or literally false (Flegg, 1992, p.207). However controversial it may be, it is nonetheless a possible (if not the best) explanation of how a plurality of religions can be true simultaneously given that some of their truth-claims are in contradiction. Though as a criticism, even D’Costa (2000) tends to see it as a reasonable explanation, he writes, “This is indeed the effect of Hick’s mythologizing hermeneutic: it seems to ignore or deny the really difficult conflicting truth claims by, in effect, reducing them to sameness: i.e., they are all mythological assertions” (p.27).

#### **2.4 Soteriological and ethical function as the key to judge religions**

Although Hick wishes to include as many kinds of religious traditions as possible under the umbrella of ‘authentic religion’, it would also be a mistake to simply say that he considers all religious traditions true. Quite on the contrary, there are traditions he intentionally excludes. Hick (1989*a*) as a pluralist has avoided calling any religion “false” explicitly, yet his theory does imply that some traditions are less preferable, or “primitive,” “evil” and “less civilised” being the terms he has applied (pp.313-314; 326). Before discussing this, it is necessary to first look at his theory of grading religions.

As Eddy (2002) comments, "Hick has always refused to allow his pluralist inclinations to lead him into the abyss of sheer religious relativism. He has consistently maintained the importance of being able to make some type of judgment about particular religious phenomena" (p.104). This, however, is as challenging as the task of solving the puzzle of conflicting truth-claims. With what criterion may one determine which religions are 'better' or 'more authentic'? If we do, after all, consider some traditions to have contained more truths, what difference does it make compared to the inclusivist position?

In the early eighties, after surveying most of the "great world faiths," Hick had finally come up with a theory. Basically, his approach is to examine if a religion or a 'religious phenomenon' possesses the soteriological function to lead the person involved to salvation/liberation:

Let us begin by noting the broad common pattern in virtue of which it makes sense to attempt a comparative study of religions. For unless they had something in common it would be impossible to compare them, still less to grade them on a common scale. They do however in fact, I suggest, exhibit a common structure, which is soteriological in the broad sense that it offers a transition from a radically unsatisfactory state to a limitlessly better

one... religious phenomena – patterns of behavior, experiences, beliefs, myths, theologies, cultic acts, liturgies, scriptures, and so forth – can in principle be assessed and graded; and the basic criterion is the extent to which they promote or hinder the great religious aim of salvation/liberation (Hick, 1985*a*, p.69, 86).

One thing we should keep in mind is his idea of a “common structure” of the religions he speaks of. As the next Chapter will show, it is one of the more criticised concepts of his model, mainly because it is believed to be the product of an over-generalised, purposefully distorted or inaccurate interpretation of world religions – as his critics strongly believe, there is simply no common denominator between different religions, and the claim that such common denominator exists would not only conflict the reality, but also offend all religions equally. In fact, one of the major goals of this thesis is to also show that Chinese Folk Religion is different from the ‘common/standard religion’ Hick describes. Nonetheless, the major difference between my criticism and the ones proposed by various Buddhist scholars, for example, is that they still agree that Buddhism has taught the common denominator Hick speaks of; they just do not agree that it is central to Buddhism or that other differences between Buddhism and Christianity are as religiously

insignificant or irrelevant as Hick considers. As I argue, Chinese Folk Religion, however, is a tradition that has even taught something contradictory to such a common denominator. But first, let us look more closely at Hick's idea of the said common denominator, or, in his own terms, the "Golden Rule."

In his later "*magnum opus*" (1989*a*), Hick has hardened his tone and is more certain that his criteriology is correct:

It has been self-evident, at least since the axial age, that not all religious persons, practices and beliefs are of equal value... Accordingly the basic criterion must be soteriological. Religious traditions and their various components – beliefs, modes of experience, scriptures, rituals, disciplines, ethics and lifestyles, social rules and organisations – have greater or less value according as they promote or hinder the salvific transformation (pp.299-300).

As his argument implies, if a religious tradition does not promote the said salvific transformation at all, then it would have utterly no value according to the criterion. In other words, if such a tradition does exist, then we can confidently say

that Hick's model allows some religions to be totally non-valuable or even false<sup>19</sup>. In

fact, besides the above notion that "not all religious... beliefs are of equal value,"

Hick has explicitly described some traditions that he believes have failed his test:

...we can readily list actions and patterns of behaviour which are good and evil respectively under this criterion. Nazism, for example, appears somewhere within the outskirts of the spreading network of overlapping phenomena covered by the concept of religion. But whereas the other 'secular faiths' of Marxism, Maoism and Humanism contain important elements of good as well as evil, Nazism taken as a whole appears retrospectively as unambiguously evil: for in conceiving and carrying out the Jewish holocaust it gave vent on a vast scale to the darkest and most destructive distortions of human nature (ibid, p.326).

Hick further describes many other religious phenomena that are, according to his criteriology, unauthentic responses to the 'Real', which include the outcaste status within Hindu society, the burning of brides because of an insufficient dowry, the cutting off of a thief's hand under the *shariah* law in Muslim dominated countries, the

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<sup>19</sup> In his more recent article, Hick (1997) has used the term "not authentic" to refer to various traditions he found evil (p.162).

“savage persecution” of the *Bah'ais* in Iran, the direct involvement over several generations of the dominant Christian churches in massive racial oppression in South Africa and in grossly oppressive regimes in South America, and the failure to accord proper human recognition to the Palestinian people in the state of Israel etc. – as he puts it, “the list is virtually endless” (ibid, p.327).

Even if we are to accept his criteriology, Hick's judgement may still be questionable – certain groups of Muslims, for instance, would consider cutting off of a thief's hand to be a ‘good’ tradition, for it can benefit the community or even the thief himself (“What does the Religion of Peace Teach about Stealing”, n.d.). That being said, even though practically the judgement may have to be subjective, it does not mean that Hick's basic criterion is also biased. Also, as his theory implies, even a secular tradition such as Marxism or Maoism can effect the salvific transformation he speaks of. On the one hand, this would make his pluralist scope more inclusive in that even non-religious traditions can have the potential to lead their followers to the limitlessly better religious-end, but on the other, this risks diminishing religions into mere ethical concerns or guiding principles (see D'Costa, 2000, pp.22-39).

Hick's criteriology is both soteriological and ethical. Soteriologically, it evaluates if a phenomenon, teaching or behaviour can facilitate a salvational transformation, while ethically it examines if it is morally rightful. The two criteria are therefore



closely related, for being morally rightful is, as Hick believes, the major way to transform oneself to Reality-centredness. As this implies, even praying, worshipping or meditating would not get us closer to salvation/liberation if such practice does not encourage us to be a morally better person. This is why it would not be Hick's (1989a) original intention to exclude Chinese Folk Religion from the scope of 'authentic religions', for he is willing to allow even Communism to have possibly contained some Absolute Truth – apparently, he wishes to give credit to as many traditions or belief systems as possible (pp.308-309). It is true that he has regarded many Christian, Hindu and Muslim phenomena as evil, but he clearly wants to maintain that these traditions are essentially good, or that their core teachings are consistent with the “Golden Rule” – he does not want to reject the authenticity of Islam, for example, even when many of its beliefs/practices are considered unauthentic (or mythologically false). For this reason, it is unlikely for him to be willing to disregard Chinese Folk Religion, especially when it did not encourage as many persecutions as Christianity or Islam in history. Although praying (in the traditional sense), glorifying deities or meditating is rare among its followers, such practice, as Hick's theory suggests, is not required to reach the limitlessly better religious-end. Therefore, if Chinese Folk Religion is not meant to be excluded from such a pluralist model, then it would be necessary to see if we can expand the criterion so that it can be valued equally.

Hick has put quite some efforts to explain and support his ethical viewpoint especially in his most recent publication *Evil and the God of Love* (2010, pp.169-192). Nevertheless, the “Golden Rule” he repeatedly mentions is rather simple and has remained unchanged, of which the principle is that “it is good to benefit others and evil to harm them” (Hick, 1989*a*, p.313). In other words, it can be understood as a kind of unconditional benevolence, or as Hick puts it, “universal compassion” (ibid). Hick affirms that this “Golden Rule” is commonly taught by all traditions he considers “great world faiths,” that it is our true nature to act in accordance with it, and that by acting in accordance with it we would be able to live in alignment or establish a closer relationship with the ‘Real’ and eventually reach the limitlessly better religious-end just like those great teachers and saints in religious history (ibid, p.312).

In order to support his argument, Hick has quoted many religious or philosophical teachers who he thinks have taught the “Golden Rule,” which include Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad, Confucius, and Mencius etc. (ibid, pp.309-313). As he argues:

In principle, then, and to considerable extent in practice, we can separate out basic moral values from both the magical-scientific and the metaphysical

beliefs which have always entered into their application within particular cultures... Implicit within these [great world faiths] we can discern the utterly basic principle that it is evil to cause suffering to others and good to benefit others and to alleviate or prevent their sufferings (ibid, p.312).

Apparently, what he wishes to demonstrate is that the “Golden Rule” is the universal foundation or core idea of the teachings of the “great world faiths.” And since he believes that these faiths all consider the practice of the “Golden Rule” the basic requirement to achieve salvation/liberation, such practice must be the basic requirement to achieve salvation/liberation – this argument quite clearly presumes the teachings of these “great world faiths” to be believable.

It is in general acceptable for a theological theory to presume certain religious beliefs or doctrines to be true. The problem for Hick to do so, however, lies in that he is trying to argue how we can verify the authenticity of a religious faith almost in a pure philosophical sense<sup>20</sup>. Therefore, it would be questionable for him to justify his criterion by saying that it is commonly taught by certain religious traditions, and then use that criterion to grade and prove this very same group of traditions authentic. This

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<sup>20</sup> As Cheetham (2003) describes, “Here, we are tending to concentrate chiefly on the pluralist perspective as a theology or spirituality of religions rather than a philosophical theory about religion, but it is the latter that Hick defines his hypothesis as” (p.164). For further discussion, please see Section 2.5.

is almost like claiming that what these traditions teach is true because what they teach is true. Especially when he also agrees that there are a large number of other traditions that encourage the opposite, he must give further explanation as to why the teachings of those traditions are evil, and why the ones he prefers are good. This is one of the reasons why his model is biased or even Christian-centred, because he is basically saying that the core teaching of Christianity, which he personally belongs to, is true, and therefore the other religions who also promote the same teaching must be true. Cheetham (2003) also notices that “[Hick] does not claim to sit on a mountain top overlooking the various religions”, and argues that he has in fact “reflected from the ground upwards,” and has developed his model, especially his soteriological criterion, from a Christian perspective (pp.161-162).

Hick (1989a) does realise that his begging the question would be critically challenged, thus the following expression:

This is so fundamental and universally accepted a principle that it is seldom formulated... One cannot prove such a fundamental principle. It is too basic to be derived from prior premises: the whole of our moral discourse hinges upon it. When, to take an extreme case, we discover individuals who are completely amoral and who see nothing wrong in, for example, inflicting

gratuitous terror and pain on a child, society can forcibly restrain them or try to control them by fear of punishment, but it cannot compel them to feel for themselves the morally evil character of such behaviour. We regard them either as insane or as lacking in an important human quality. In the end we can only say that it is human to sympathise with others in their miseries and joys and that without this fellow-feeling there would be no morality and therefore no society (p.312).

From the relativist perspective, the above passage still hasn't explained why such principle should be considered fundamental, or why it is a bad thing if there is no morality and society. Even if morality is necessary, the situation Hick speaks of would at most result in the absence of the morality he defines. As mentioned, there can be religious believers who think that controlling one's citizens by fear of punishment is necessary for the well-being of the majority, that cutting a thief's hand off would forbid him to sin again and hence help him to reach a better religious-end, or even that it is actually more human to be selfish. It is completely fine to hold his moral view, but then Hick would have to admit that his view involves certain degree of subjectiveness. Claiming that "one cannot prove such a fundamental principle" does not prove such a principle indeed. If it is not proven, then his further argument that

“following such principle would increase the likelihood for one to be saved” would also be questionable. Alternatively, Hick may make his proposal more ‘religious’ and justify his criterion by explicitly assuming certain religious teachings to be correct, but as we will see shortly, it would in turn contradict his original purpose of proposing the pluralist theory.

This problem of Hick’s criteriology is in fact the major concept this thesis intends to discuss. As I argue, it is rather unfair to the traditions that would be graded as less authentic or less valuable according to his theory, given that he has yet provided enough evidence to justify his exclusiveness. Certainly, such a concept would not be problematic if all religions have met his criterion (in that case, his theory would indeed be a honest description of the world religions), but there is a problem if not only some religious manifestations/phenomena, but also a religion itself is graded as less authentic – as this thesis will demonstrate, there is at least one religious tradition that has fallen into that category.

## **2.5 Functionality and practicability of Hick’s model**

Seemingly, it would be fairer to see what Hick intends to achieve before criticising his ideas. If, for example, his model is not meant to offer equal statuses to

all religious traditions, then it would be unfair to blame him for not doing so.

As mentioned above, it is not his original intention to suggest a new, universal faith. Rather, his mission is to propose the “best explanatory theory” for the world religious situation:

As I've always insisted, the hypothesis is offered as the 'best explanation', i.e. the most comprehensive and economical explanation, from a religious point of view, of the facts of the history of religions. A proffered 'best explanation' is not a proof, because it is always open to someone else to come forward and offer what they believe is a better explanation. And so the right response of someone who does not like my proposed explanation is not to complain that it is not proved but to work out a viable alternative (Hick, 1995, p.51).

Cheetham (2003) agrees that Hick's model is in essence a “second-order philosophical exercise or a meta-theory” rather than a “first-order discourse” (pp.159-167). As he understands, this is perhaps the only way for a pluralist theory to “facilitate the equal validity of all” and genuinely “speak for itself” instead of suggesting yet another “global spirituality” (ibid, p.164). Having said that, Cheetham

also believes that “Hick does not just want us to remain unaffected by his pluralist perspective on religion”, and characterises his practical proposal as: “Stay put in whatever (salvific) faith you belong to, but keep one eye on the other faiths because they are your (equally legitimate) fellow travellers towards the Ultimate” (ibid, p.165).

Up to this point, we may further conclude that what Hick intends to achieve is to propose the most comprehensive and economical explanation of the world religious situation and to urge the followers of various “great world faiths” to respect each other’s tradition as an authentic response to the ‘Real’. These two proposals are in fact closely related, because the main reason why we should consider the faiths of the others authentic or legitimate is that Hick’s explanation is likely to be true. In other words, if, for some reason, we believe that his explanation is unlikely, then we would have no reason to consider other faiths legitimate, at least not because of Hick’s suggestion. In addition, if we can suggest a more comprehensive explanatory theory, then Hick would have to agree that it is a better theory, because by “the best” he meant “the most comprehensive (and economical)”.

A pluralist model shall be as comprehensive as possible because it is preferred (if not supposed) to have the function of resolving interreligious conflicts. Though not necessarily the only way to do so, suggesting the possibility that there is a plurality of



religions that are able to lead their followers to a salvific-end is certainly one way to convince them to mutually respect each other and provide basis for peaceful and meaningful dialogue. Therefore, if there are traditions that a pluralist model does not consider authentic, then suggestively, the model would not help us to respect those particular traditions equally, let alone establishing a fair relationship or dialogue with them. At the very most, it may convert some followers of these unauthentic traditions into a practitioner of the 'Golden Rule' or a believer of the more authentic faiths such as Christianity or Buddhism, provided that they did not originally hold a very strong faith towards those unauthentic traditions (otherwise, they would probably find Hick's theory biased, untrue, or insulting). Nevertheless, it is also an understandable approach for Hick to disregard some particular traditions to make way for his criteriology and avoid relativism as well as postmodernism<sup>21</sup>. The question is, is the disregard necessary and fair? Is it possible to have a more comprehensive theory without being too relativistic or postmodern? Why must a pluralist avoid being relativistic, postmodern or agnostic<sup>22</sup> anyway?

In fact, although it is said to be a neutral, second-order philosophical theory, Hick (1989a) himself has also mentioned what he thinks his model may be able to

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<sup>21</sup> Cheetham (2003) believes that by providing his own modernist and absolutist metanarrative, Hick's position is in fact "terribly un-postmodern" and may be accused by the postmodern critics of eliminating "real diversity, relativity and difference" (p.159).

<sup>22</sup> As we will see in the next Chapter, Hick does not want to admit that his ideas are agnostic in any sense.

achieve. First, while explaining his ethical criterion, he expresses, "...if all human beings lived in accordance with it [the Golden Rule] there would be no wars, no injustice, no crime, no needless suffering" (p.312). This is, however, a pure humanistic concern. Religiously speaking, even if an exclusivist theory would encourage wars or other earthly sufferings, it could be ultimately better if it will lead more souls to the salvific-end. As a reflection on the neutral pluralist position, Schowobel (1992) argues:

The pluralist approach that associates itself programmatically with interreligious dialogue seems to see the possibility of such a dialogue only by bracketing, reinterpreting, or relativizing the particular truth claims of particular religious traditions. This immediately provokes the danger that a dialogue which suspends religious truth claims cannot even develop into a dialogue of religions, but turns into a dialogue of cultural traditions based on principles such as universal tolerance and respect, whose foundation is very often not to be seen in the religions themselves but in a humanist critique of all religions (p.33).

Nevertheless, Hick has also tried to suggest the potential functions of his theory

on the religious aspect. While discussing his view on conflicting trans-historical truth-claims, he writes:

My far from original suggestion, then, concerning issues of trans-historical fact is (a) that they should be fully and freely recognised as matters on which directly opposed views are often held; (b) that – although by no means everyone ranged on either side of these disagreements will be able to accept this – the questions are ones to which humanity does not at present know the answers; (c) that this ignorance does not hinder the process of salvation/liberation; and (d) that we should therefore learn to live with these differences, tolerating contrary convictions even when we suspect them to be mistaken (Hick, 1989a, p.370).

Though this appears to be a mere practical suggestion, it actually implies that his model has the ability to encourage religious believers to live with differences and tolerate contrary convictions, because the reason for them to do so is that Hick's assumption is likely, which is that ignoring the contradictions between trans-historical truth-claims would not hinder the process of salvation/liberation. Supposedly, then, if someone does not think his assumption is likely, Hick's model would be unable to

convince him to follow the above suggestion (again, it does not mean that such person would not tolerate contrary convictions for some other reasons). As we will see, there are in fact religionists, including Christian scholars, who do not think his assumption that some doctrines are mere myths is likely, even though Hick's argument does favour the "great world faiths" (or "post-axial religions" as another term Hick often applies) including Christianity. As Eddy (2002) comments, although Hick's challenge implies that the correct response to his proposal is to suggest a better one and that we should not complain that his assumption is not proved, the fact that it is not proven would make it less convincing or appealing because it has offended both the modernist and postmodernist religious views (pp.201-202). That is, it is in practice a failure, or, in Eddy's words, "Hick's religious pluralism is ultimately unsuccessful with respect to its intended purpose" (ibid, p.204).

Apart from providing a necessary basis for interreligious dialogue and mutual respects, Hick also believes that his practical suggestions have the potential to effect certain positive social transformations. As a concluding remark, he writes:

And so the kind of spirituality that is appropriate to the hopeful and stirred by a sense of joy in celebration of the goodness, from our human point of view, of the ultimately Real. Ethically its central theme should be the

love/compassion to which all the great traditions call us; and in our sociologically conscious age this is likely to be increasingly a politically conscious and active *agape/karuna* which seeks to change the structures of society so as to promote rather than hinder the transformation of all human life (Hick, 1989a, p.380).

As argued, however, whether following his practical suggestions can effect such an ultimately better social change would depend on whether his pluralist assumption is correct. If it is mistaken, then it is possible that the Christian exclusivist position, or, more precisely, the Christian mission that is based on an exclusivist religious view, will actually be more preferable, because it can lead more souls to the heavenly place. That being said, the reason why we have to focus on the convincingness or practicability of a pluralist model is that the assumptions that concern metaphysical matters are not yet proven empirically, it may be a pluralist assumption, an exclusivist assumption, or an atheist assumption. Given that none of these theories is fully proven, the only choice left is to prefer the one that appears to be the most likely or the one that offers the best promises. Therefore, the criticisms we will discuss in the next two Chapters are proposed from either these two perspectives. In other words, the critics are not rejecting Hick's assumption because it is false, but because it seems to be

unlikely, undesirable, or inapplicable.

## **2.6 Summary of Hick's proposal: a religiously philosophical theory**

It is difficult, if not impossible, for a pluralist theory to impress all kinds of audiences. While it may not be completely inevitable, in most cases it is rather true that one can either lean towards, for example, the absolutist, modernist and confessional positions on the one hand, or the relativist, postmodernist and neutral positions on the other. If, for example, one proposes an absolutist assumption, then supposedly it would be rejected by a relativist (unless he is convinced to an extent that he is no longer relativistic). Therefore, what this thesis intends to achieve is not to reconstruct Hick's assumption so that it may attract more audiences, but to speak for those who have not yet received enough attention, that is, the followers of a tradition Hick's theory grades as 'less authentic' and 'less valuable'.

To summarise, Hick assumes the "Golden Rule" to be the sole criterion to grade religion for several reasons. First, he believes that the sacred texts of all "great world faiths" have expressed such idea. Second, he believes that it is a principle so foundational that cannot be further proven, and it is only human to agree with it. Third, the assumption that the central themes of all "great world

faiths" are identical would help their followers to recognise each other's faiths as an equally effective pathway to salvation/liberation. Lastly, the implication that all other conflicting criteria/teachings are soteriologically irrelevant is the best way to avoid the problem of conflicting truth-claims. Therefore, to suggest a different criteriology that can offer equal status to the traditions Hick currently disregards, Chapter 8 will respond to all these four reasons.

Hick's theory is basically an interpretation of religion, or, in fact, a definition of what he sees as 'authentic religion'. Besides his major arguments, he also believes that the major concern of all religions must be salvation/liberation, and that the main obstacle for interreligious peacefulness is the conflicting truth-claims. By using Chinese Folk Religion as an example, this thesis will suggest that these descriptions are not true for all religious traditions. Since Hick has explicitly excluded many 'evil' traditions from his definition of 'authentic religion', it would be unfair to say that he is unaware of the existences of such outsiders. What we can say, however, is that although it does not quite fit into his definition, Chinese Folk Religion is not a tradition Hick originally intends to discredit.

In the next Chapter, we will see that many scholars engaged in the dialogue related to religious pluralism tend to believe that a pluralist model is preferable only if it can provide a ground for genuine interreligious dialogue. As described in the

previous section, this is also what Hick intends to achieve – at the very least, he quite clearly wishes to persuade his readers to establish a peaceful relationship with the religiously others and to stop thinking any less of their faiths. However, as his critics argue, even the followers from the religions he explicitly grades the highest (e.g., Christianity, Buddhism) would find his assumption unacceptable, for it has allegedly diminished the values of some of their doctrines. If this is true, then his model would most certainly fail to help anyone to establish a mutually respectful dialogue with the traditions he grades lower. Therefore, unless one is willing to disregard Chinese Folk Religion both theoretically and practically, a model should be more useful and meaningful if it does not omit the traditions it does not need to omit. Part of the purposes of the next Chapter, then, is to discuss why a pluralist model would be undesirable if it fails to serve certain functions.



### 3. EXISTING CRITICISMS OF HICK'S PLURALIST THEORY

#### 3.1 Introduction and justification

In the previous Chapter, we have seen that his approaches to suggesting a universal denominator for all religions, assuming the Ultimate Reality as something ineffable/transcategorical and diminishing religious truth-claims into mere myths can be quite debatable. In fact, many of the criticisms we will discuss shortly are related to these three debates. Basically, the critics of Hick's model try to argue that what the world religions teach are different; that contrary to what Hick suggests, salvific-ends are many, not one; that Hick's pluralist assumption is cognitively empty, therefore his suggestion is undesirable or impracticable; and that at least some religious truth-claims are more than merely mythologically true.

The main purpose of this Chapter is to demonstrate the potential limitations of Hick's model, so that when we attempt to reconstruct his explanatory theory later, we may also try to minimise such weaknesses. As explained in the Literature Review section, this Chapter will focus more on the criticisms and theory proposed by Heim (1995), mainly because: (1) his pluralist assumption is meant to be a direct challenge to that of Hick's; (2) the Christian and Buddhist scholars we will discuss tend to prefer

his confessional approach over Hick's neutral position; (3) by studying his alternative model, we may learn how Hick's model can be amended; and (4) his particular theory of multiple religious-ends is able to respect equally the different conceptions of salvation of Chinese Folk Religion.

Another purpose of this Chapter is to provide the basis for our later arguments.

Although the criticisms of Hick take many forms, it appears that none of them has attempted to question his assumptions – especially his criteriology – from the perspective of the traditions he rejects. In addition, they also seem to have certain preconceptions of religions similar to that of Hick, possibly because these critics also treat institutional-religion such as Christianity or Buddhism as the standard form of religion – these preconceptions have deeply shaped their understandings of what religion is, how it would function, and how we should interpret it. If this is true, and if Chinese Folk Religion is really a religion that functions differently from what they presume and is graded as less authentic by Hick's model, then it would be necessary to integrate it into the discussion, even though we may come to a conclusion that it is in fact reasonable to disregard it at the end.

### 3.2 Heim's Model of Multiple Religious-ends

Heim's theory can be considered an attempt to save the most referential values for all religions by proposing the possibility of multiple religious-ends. This alternative assumption is meant to help explain how conflicting religious truth-claims can be literally true simultaneously without being self-defeating. As Heim believes, only by regarding the Ultimate Reality described by world religions, especially the reality of Trinity, as the most ultimate and literal truth, can we have a truly pluralistic interpretation of the global religious situation. Seemingly, then, Heim's theory is at least partially Christian-centred, for he has quite clearly assumed the theology of Trinity to be fully true, and has offered to use this particular Christian doctrine as a criterion to verify the beliefs of other religions.

Before introducing his own pluralist assumption, Heim (1995) has first described his understandings of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, he writes:

Exclusivists believe the Christian tradition is in sole possession of effective religious truth and offers the only path to salvation. Inclusivists affirm that salvation is available through other traditions because the God most decisively acting and most fully revealed in Christ is also redemptively

available within or through those traditions. Pluralists maintain that various religious traditions are independently valid paths to salvation (p.4).

By emphasising the word “independently,” however, Heim has altered the more general definition of pluralism in order to support his argument. As introduced earlier, pluralism is generally defined as the view that there is more than one religion that have taught the ultimate truth, and that they are all able to lead their followers to salvation (almost all existing pluralist models would fit these two descriptions, including Heim's). That is, the religious-end for these followers can still be the same, and it is possible that what their religions teach are mere different responses to the same Ultimate Reality. If the religious-end they promise and their teachings are ultimately identical, it would be quite inappropriate to regard them as ‘independent’.

However, according to Heim, only by affirming different religious paths to be independently valid, may we consider a viewpoint pluralistic. In other words, Heim's definition of religious pluralism is narrower than the one mentioned. This is in fact the core idea of Heim's argument, and is also the reason why he considers Hick's position inclusivistic rather than pluralistic, as Hick's model seems to assume religious-end to be one rather than many, despite the fact that Hick has affirmed the idea – although only on the mythological level – that most world religions contain genuine teachings

about the Absolute Truth (ibid, pp.13-43).

It may be unfair to have a different definition of 'religious pluralism' and then criticise someone of being not pluralistic, but Heim has nonetheless explained why his own position should be more desirable. As he believes, Hick's assumption is cognitively empty, for it is a claim that "corresponds to no differentiated set of circumstances at all" (Heim, 1992, p.213). According to Heim, Hick's model is not even by principle verifiable, for it is impossible to imagine a situation that can verify his hypothesis that there is one single noumenal yet ineffable 'Real' beyond all religious beliefs<sup>23</sup> (ibid, pp.212-213). Therefore, in order to develop a cognitively meaningful model that can truly leave religions as they are, Heim has proposed his own hypothesis of multiple religious-ends.

Even though Heim seems to dislike Hick's idea that there is a single noumenal 'Real' working behind all religious traditions, it does not mean that he is also against the more general pluralist idea that all religions are responding to the same Ultimate Reality. In fact, as the core idea of his arguments in *Depth of the Riches* (2001), all genuine religious beliefs are actually different manifestations or responses to the same reality of Trinity, within which Christianity may have represented that reality most

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<sup>23</sup> Which, according to Cheetham (2003), is an unfair accusation, he writes, "Nevertheless, are we imposing unreasonable requirements on Hick's hypothesis? In a sense, the demand that he must specify exactly what the noumenal Real is like is too simplistic and naïve" (p.143). As he further argues, it is indeed possible to verify Hick's assumption indirectly through experiences. For more discussions, please see ibid, pp.142-144.

fully, he describes:

All the religions are striving (or should be) for a Trinitarian synthesis. This synthesis would link a spirituality of the silent, empty God behind God, a spirituality of a personal deity, and a spirituality of mystical union, forgetful of all distinction (p.153).

Therefore, Islam, on the one hand, would have reflected the spirituality of a personal deity; while Buddhism or Hinduism, on the other, would be a response to the spirituality of transcendent mystery. Only Christianity that contains the theology of Trinity, as he argues, would have fully represented all three dimensions mentioned (ibid, pp.174-197; also Makransky, 2005a, p.193). The next Chapter will discuss some Buddhist responses to this somewhat belittlement of non-Christian traditions, but what matters here is his belief that all religions are indeed responding to the same trinitarian reality. That is, according to Heim's hypothesis, it is not the Ultimate Reality, but the religious-ends that are many<sup>24</sup>.

The major argument of Heim's (1995) model is that, although there are many

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<sup>24</sup> As Heim (1995) argues, "The tension between 'religious truth is one' and 'religious aims and fulfillments are various' is roughly analogous to the tension between rationality and value orientation in philosophy which Rescher addresses. I suggest that an adequate perspective on religious pluralism requires a similar attempt to give both their full due" (p.145)

religions that are able to lead people to a salvific end, those ends are nonetheless independent and different (pp.144-152). Therefore, although, according to some interpretations of Christianity, it is believed that only baptised or at least confirmed Christians may reach the heavenly place afterlife, this, however, has not at all contradicted the Buddhists' belief that they can attain *nirvana* without becoming a Christian. In other words, the truth claims of world religions may be closely related, as they are all responses or manifestations of the same trinitarian reality, but the paths and goals they provide to their followers can still be different. Certainly, there are views that the Christian and Buddhist religious-ends are conflicting, but for Heim, these are not what a true pluralist should agree with, he writes:

So, for instance, Hick will say that nirvana and communion with God upon death are contradictory beliefs. Then he contends we have only three options. All such religious faith is nonsense; one is true and the others false; or the true content of religion is on a plane far above the terms of such contradictions. But this all depends on a non-pluralistic assumption. Nirvana and communion with God are contradictory only if we assume that one or the other must be the sole fate for all human beings. True, they cannot both be true at the same time of the same person. But for different people, or the

same person at different times, there is no necessary contradiction in both being true (ibid, p.149).

Instead of accepting that some (if not all) religious beliefs are only mythologically true like Hick does, Heim has chosen to save the referential values of all religions by claiming that their beliefs are literally (or historically) true (ibid, p.148). But by doing so, Heim may have again distorted the meaning of 'contradiction' in order to support his theory. Originally, if two statements are logically contradictory, then even if there are times or people that do not consider them inconsistent, they are still objectively contradictory. In other words, some religious-claims are contradictory not because they cannot all be true at the same time of the same person, but because they cannot all be true at the same time. True, even though there are claims that only Christians may end up in Heaven or that only Muslims may end up in Heaven, these claims are not necessarily contradictory – according to Heim's assumption, even if it is true that Muslims cannot reach the Christian Heaven, it is still possible that they will reach the Muslim Heaven instead. But how about the more exclusivist claim that all non-Christians will end up in Hell? Wouldn't it directly contradict the Islamic belief that Muslims can go to Heaven? Is Heim implying that the Hell described by the Christians can be the Heaven described



by the Muslims, or that these exclusivist claims are simply false? Although he did not explicitly respond to this question, his idea of multiple religious-ends does imply the latter statement – some religious claims, especially the exclusivist ones, are not true at all, that is, Muslims will not end up in the Christian Heaven, but they will not (necessarily) end up in Hell either. The claim that the Christian Hell can be the Muslim Haven would simply be too relativistic and inconsistent with the idea of independent pathways and destinations.

The inevitability of conflicts between religious claims on the literal level is what drives Hick to take a non-confessional position and argue that religious beliefs are not literally true. But then, Hick would have in turn sacrificed some religious referential values which Heim tries to save by all means. This is perhaps the biggest dilemma in choosing between the neutral and confessional approaches, for both positions have contained a serious bane.

According to Cornille's (2008) definitions of the two positions, all existing theories of religious pluralism must be based on either the assumptions of a neutral or confessional Ultimate Reality – it can only be one way or another (pp.122-135).

Hick's idea of 'Real', for instance, is basically neutral, in the sense that Ultimate Reality is transcendent and beyond all humanly concepts, and that all religious traditions have contained more or less a partial reflection of the 'Real'. In other words,

the actual Ultimate Reality in itself is supposedly more ultimate than the ultimate realities taught by the world religions, because its true essence is ineffable. Heim's interpretation of the Ultimate Reality, on the contrary, is confessional in that the ultimate realities the world religious traditions proposed are already the Ultimate Reality fully. That is, the God the Biblical traditions describe, for example, is already the most ultimate 'being', in which no other 'thing' can be more transcendent than Him. The confessional position also maintains that religious beliefs, such as the doctrine of Trinity, are literally true. The following sections will discuss the major criticisms of Hick's neutral approach, and see if adopting the confessional path is the best way to overcome the said problems.

### **3.3 Basic limitation of Hick's practical suggestion: to whom it would seem convincing?**

As suggested previously, by proposing his pluralist assumption, Hick actually wishes to encourage his readers to also adopt his pluralist vision, although such practical suggestion is not to be seen as a part of his model. Similarly, Heim also believes that his model may serve certain functions somehow. On the theoretical level, Hick and Heim try to make either a neutral or confessional pluralist assumption that

can explain the current religious situation, or more precisely, to argue that most existing religions, if not all, are authentic. Regarding their practical suggestions, they have both described how and why we should understand the religious traditions of the others and establish a meaningful, genuine dialogue with them. Apparently, this practical suggestion is supported by their pluralist assumptions, in the sense that the suggestion would only be advisable and desirable for the ones who consider their assumptions likely – if one does not think that other religions are equally authentic pathways to salvation/liberation, there would be no reason to respect other religions in the way Hick or Heim suggests.

For this reason, it is necessary to first examine how convincing their pluralistic assumptions are, or to whom their assumptions would look convincing to, before discussing in what situations their practical suggestions can be applied. Chapter 2 has raised several questions concerning Hick's interpretation of religion, as well as some preconceptions he makes about religion. These include the preconceptions that all religions put afterlife salvific matter as their main concern, that being an authentic follower of a religion is to have complete faith in its doctrines, that all religions can be represented by some form of authoritative doctrine, that all 'genuine' religions teach that the way to attain salvation/liberation is to transform oneself from Self-centredness into 'Reality-centredness', and that the core teachings of all 'genuine' religions are

basically the same. Heim's theory also shows an affirmation of the first three preconceptions, though on the contrary, he strongly disagrees that all religions would, potentially, lead their practitioners to the same religious-end. According to his understanding, the salvific-ends suggested by Christianity and Buddhism, for example, are independent and different. That is why he has proposed the theory of multiple religious-ends, so that we can respect other religions as they are without distorting what they teach like Hick did.

Nonetheless, the said preconceptions about religion are not entirely applicable to Chinese Folk Religion. For example, although it also seems to contain beliefs concerning some form of salvation, salvific matter is neither central to its dogma nor what motivates its followers to be religiously involved. In other words, apart from the accusation that Hick has unintentionally diminished the value of Chinese Folk Religion, this thesis will also question the very foundation of his explanatory theory – Hick may argue that religions without soteriological promise are unauthentic, but he cannot claim that salvation is the major concern of all religions (unless unauthentic religions are not religions). If Chinese Folk Religion really does not concern salvific matters in the way Hick expects, then his explanatory theory would not be thorough enough, for it did not describe an existing religion that functions differently<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> To be fair, Hick has indeed described the 'pre-axial' or 'primitive' religions that do not concern salvific matter in the way he considers 'civilised'. However, as I would argue, a contemporarily active

Though for different reasons, Heim also does not think Hick's pluralistic assumption is more likely. Although he stresses that the main reason for his model to be more desirable is that it would be able to save more religious referential values than Hick's, Heim (2001) has also described certain differences between Christianity and other religions in order to show that what they teach and the salvific-ends they provide are not the same, as he argues:

We can certainly point to great figures in varied religious traditions who exhibit some common moral and spiritual qualities. But we can hardly deny the different textures of these achievements. The examples are clearly not identical, however similar selected items may be... We may speculate about convergence on a metaphysical plane between, say, Buddhist "saints" and Jewish "saints." We may be able to specify some similarities in the effects of their practices. However, the premise of the whole discussion is that we have no difficulty generally distinguishing between them to begin with, for they are embedded in communities, practices, images, and doctrines that are distinct... To know one is not to know the others. Each is a "one and only," and their religious ends are many (p.27).

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and popular religious tradition like Chinese Folk Religion would hardly fit those descriptions. For details, please refer to section 3.8.

As his expression suggests, Heim actually believes his interpretation of the world religious situation is more likely, for the differences between the potential achievements promised by world religions are so significant, which again shows that Heim tends to understand religious claims more literally. Otherwise, if they are merely mythologically true as Hick suggests, then even if what these claims literally imply are different, their soteriological functions can still be identical. Therefore, if Heim's assumption that most religious claims, especially the ones that fit into the doctrine of Trinity, are literally true, then his hypothesis that religious-ends are many is likely to be true; otherwise, if some religious claims, especially the ones that contradict each other, can be literally false, then Hick's hypothesis of a single religious-end would be more likely (than Heim's). The question is, how do we know whether the said religious claims are literally true or not?

It would be a misunderstanding to claim that Heim's pluralist assumption is Christian-centred because of its affirmation of Trinity, for the Trinity he speaks of is not exactly the one Christianity teaches – we can at most argue that his suggestion as to how we can understand religions is inspired by the Christian trinitarian doctrine. His Christian-centredness actually lies in his assumption that Christianity has contained the fullest truth. As he expresses, the idea that some Christian doctrines can

be literally false is “a cost to the traditions that I do not want to pay”<sup>26</sup> (ibid, p.157).

Presuming certain religious beliefs to be true would inevitably lead to the dilemma of either choosing the path proposed by Hick that affirms a neutral, all-transcendent Ultimate Reality or stuck with the puzzle of contradicting religious truth claims like Heim does (see section 3.1). Apparently, there are two ways to avoid the dilemma: (1) being more inclusivistic (i.e., less pluralistic) and consider all religious beliefs of the others to be false unless they do not contradict the beliefs of our own religions; (2) examine if there can be a pluralistic position that does not assume at least the conflicting truth-claims to be literally true. By adopting the first approach, a theory would be criticised for being biased or at least, in Heim's case, Christian-centred<sup>27</sup>. As Hick (2004*b*) always emphasises, although we may verify religious beliefs with self-evidencing experiences, members from other religious traditions may also claim to have such experiences (pp.173-176). How can we prove that the self-evidencing experiences of the others are not genuine? Especially when literal contradiction is involved, how can we examine which one of them is more trustworthy? Hick's solution, as discussed, is to check if they are consistent with the neutral, 'Golden Rule' he describes.

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<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, if some Christian beliefs are literally false (or true only on the mythological level as Hick's theory implies), then no matter how devastating “the cost” is, those beliefs are still false. The problem remains that there is yet a generally accepted conclusion as to whether the core beliefs of world religions are literally true.

<sup>27</sup> In the next Chapter, we will see how the Buddhist scholars criticise Heim's assumption for being Christian-centred and how they try to amend it into a fairer model.

Although Hick's criterion for verifying religious truth-claims seems to be more neutral (i.e., not Christian-centred), it is not problem-free either. The two major reasons for Hick to believe in his own criteriology are that all the 'great world faiths' have taught such principle, and that such principle is so universally accepted and foundational that one cannot further prove it. However, as argued previously, even Hick has admitted that there are a significant number of religious positions that do not maintain the said principle. Supposedly, then, the audiences who do not agree with such principle should find Hick's theory unconvincing. In fact, when explaining his idea that some historically-based claims are not literally true, Hick (1989a) also admits that the assumption would be unattractive to some exclusivists<sup>28</sup>. To be fair, it is not Hick's duty to persuade every kind of audiences, nor is it his major purpose to win audiences – persuasive or not, his main intention is to propose the best explanation for the world religious situation. There is however a major problem if his theory is not exactly the best (i.e., most comprehensive) – in that case, he would have upset some audiences for nothing.

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<sup>28</sup> As he writes, "For some adherents of each tradition such claims are fundamental articles of faith, not properly open to investigation and not subject to possible revision in the light of either existing or new evidence. This is indeed typically the position not only of the relatively uneducated majorities but also of many learned believers who are conservative in outlook. We therefore cannot maintain that it is psychologically possible for everyone to tolerate differences concerning the historical components of their tradition... it remains true that for many other believers they are of the essence of their faith, and that for such persons the pluralist vision may well at present be inaccessible (Hick, 1989a, p.365).



### 3.4 Criticisms of lacking verifiability

Heim is one of the many critics who question the verifiability of Hick's assumption. As he argues, although Hick's hypothesis is non-falsifiable, it is unprovable either<sup>29</sup>. As a critic who rejects Hick's pluralist position more strongly, D'Costa also believes that Hick's assumption makes the verification of religious expectations impossible, and even accuses Hick for being "transcendentally agnostic"<sup>30</sup>.

In Hick's defence, being unverifiable does not imply invalidity. It is true that some of his assumptions have lacked verifiability, but it does not prove that he has failed to describe the reality. In other words, it is perfectly possible that we do not need to participate in any religious practice or establish a relationship with the 'Real' in order to attain salvation/liberation. In fact, as discussed in Chapter 2, it is actually Hick's intention to avoid making any 'first-order' religious statement and present a

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<sup>29</sup> As he argues, "Hick contends that no purposeful relation to "the Real," in its generically philosophical form or in its cultural forms as "God," "Brahman" or "Dharma," is necessary for appropriate relation to it. Salvation then does not require intentional relationship with the Real in any of its forms, and is not affected by varying concrete human religious goals... If he is correct, then this would only reinforce the conclusion that in the contrasting religious beliefs of different traditions we have accurate indications of different eschatological destinies and experiences for those who follow different faiths... The unitive state which lies on the ultimate horizon, at which point perhaps human beings pass beyond "experiencing as," is the same point at which human beings themselves pass away. If this is meant finally to be the moment that confirms Hick's hypothesis, the hypothesis is on safe ground. By definition there is no one there to know the result" (Heim, 1995, p.31, 40-41).

<sup>30</sup> "Transcendental agnosticism," according to D'Costa's (1991) definition, is the tendency to "affirms the transcendent divine Reality over against naturalistic positions, while refusing to state that the eschaton may eventually be theistic rather than non-theistic, in however minimalist a sense. The transcendental agnostic prefers to remain agnostic on this question – and by implication, agnostic as to the ultimate nature of the transcendent reality" (p.7; also *ibid*, 2009, pp.10-12).

'second-order' philosophical theory, so that he may maintain neutral (i.e., unbiased) while interpreting the world religious situation.

It is also unfair to regard Hick's position as agnostic just because he did not provide much information about the 'Real' he speaks of. As Hick (1997) argues, "Agnosticism in this context is the view that the Ultimate is either personal or non-personal but we don't know which. That the Ultimate is ineffable means that it is beyond the scope of our human conceptual systems, including the personal/impersonal dichotomy" (pp.165-6). We can still, for instance, experience the ultimate nature of the transcendent reality. It is simply ineffable because no language or concept can truly describe it. Nonetheless, as a second-order philosophical hypothesis, it is rather true that Hick has never attempted to explain more precisely what salvation/liberation would be like. Although he does not explicitly reject the describable concept of heaven, *nirvana*, or the oneness with Brahman, the limitlessly better religious-end he speaks of must be 'beyond' all these concepts mentioned by the world religious traditions (Heim, 1995, pp.37-38). Hence, if such ultimate religious-end is indescribable, how do we know if it is something better? Is the concept 'better' here equivalent to the general understanding of the word 'better', which is a describable human concept, or is it something also beyond common understanding? If it is beyond common understanding, how do we know it is

something that we would desire? In this sense, then, Heim's notion that "there is no one there to know the result" is more than putting verifiability into question – there is also no one there to know if Hick's spiritual suggestion (i.e., transforming into Reality-centredness) would lead us to somewhere we want to be. This is perhaps another limitation of the neutral approach – the confessional pluralists, on the contrary, would have no problem in giving great details as to what the religious-end would be like<sup>31</sup>.

Besides the above limitations, Cheetham (2003) also realises that Hick's theory is vulnerable to the criticisms from both modernists and postmodernists<sup>32</sup>. That being said, he nonetheless indicates that Hick's rather ambiguous idea of the 'Real' may be the only way to prevent a pluralist model from becoming a "first-order view in its own right" or being exclusivistic in nature (ibid, p.163-164). The drawback of this position, however, is that it has not provided any cognitive information as to what we should actually do to achieve salvation/liberation (except being selfless) as well as how 'limitlessly better' the religious-end really is. As Cheetham comments, it is merely an

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<sup>31</sup> For other discussions of the alleged agnostic tendency of Hick's concept of the 'Real', please see Kellenberger (1991).

<sup>32</sup> As he explains, "It might seem that Hick's theory sounds pretty postmodern in that it also affirms the validity (on a mythological level) of the various 'truths' within the different religions. Moreover, the idea that the various religious truth-claims might be envisaged as 'relative', or contextually formed and influenced, is certainly something that Hick seems to espouse. On the other hand, Hick's pluralism is not really postmodern because it does seek to provide an overall explanation and hypothesis concerning religious diversity. In this sense, Hick is providing his own grand metanarrative. So, Hick finds himself caught between critics who accuse him of denying the possibility of absolute religious claims and reducing them all down to a relative status, and (postmodern) critics who accuse him of proposing a modernist or absolutist metanarrative that eliminates real diversity, relativity and difference" (Cheetham, 2003, p.159).

“acknowledgement of a fact or state of affairs that has no corresponding life-changing effect” (ibid).

Nevertheless, if Hick's hypothesis about the nature of 'Real' is correct, then we can never describe what salvation really is, and we would never know if it is something we would desire. What is given though is that neither his nor Heim's hypothesis is empirically provable, Heim's promise may be more attractive to at least the audiences who accept his confessional assumption, because at least we know something about the heavenly places we may end up in. But is Hick's theory really as unverifiable as Heim and D'Costa claim?

Seemingly contradictory to the concept that 'Real' is indescribable, Hick has nonetheless argued that it is by theory verifiable from the eschatological perspective<sup>33</sup>. According to him, there are actually two kinds of verifications – direct and indirect – within which most religious truth claims can only be verified indirectly (Hick, 1989a, pp.177-180). Similarly, his pluralist assumption is also not meant to be verified directly. Although the statement that 'non-Christian can also attain salvation', for instance, is not yet proven at this stage, it will be verified eventually in the eschaton. That is, these are something verifiable by principle. As a matter of fact, according to

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<sup>33</sup> According to D'Costa, Hick's defense is somewhat contradictory to his allegedly 'agnostic' assumption, or, as he puts it, there are “tensions generated in Hick's post-Copernican position between the idea that the Real cannot be known in itself, and his claim that religions make cognitive claims about the Real that are in principle eschatologically verifiable” (as cited in Cheetham, 2003, p.140).

Popper's (1970) theory of hypothetico-deduction, even scientific hypothesis can never be 'confirmed', because there is always the possibility that a future experiment will prove it false. For example, although the evolutionist assumption is currently regarded as 'fact', it is a common understanding that the assumption is still possibly false, no matter how unlikely it may be. Therefore, if Hick's theory is by principle verifiable (and thus falsifiable), it should be more than acceptable as a scholarly assumption.

As mentioned, it is not Hick's intention to win audiences, but, given that his assumption is only eschatologically verifiable (i.e., unverifiable at the present), it would appear to be more preferable if the assumption is convincing, because the 'functions' or effects of an unverifiable assumption is the only criterion to determine its value. If, for example, the Chinese Folk Religion followers do not think Hick's description about religion is convincing or consistent with their beliefs, it would be difficult to use his model to convince them that other religions are equally respectable and authentic – the best pluralist model should not be just a model that can persuade Christians, for instance, to respect Chinese Folk Religion equally, but also the one that can persuade the followers of the latter to respect Christianity equally. However, it appears that Hick's model is unable to do both, for it has either accidentally/intentionally assumed Chinese Folk Religion to be unauthentic. The next section will further discuss why such functions are crucial to whether a pluralist

model is desirable.

### **3.5 Contribution values as the criterion to evaluate a pluralist assumption**

Hick (1995) has defined his model as an 'explanatory theory', and argues that "the right response of someone who does not like my proposed explanation is not to complain that it is not proved but to work out a viable alternative" (p.51). Nonetheless, despite the challenge Hick proposes, Eddy (2002) has still chosen to question the applicability and contribution value of Hick's theory rather than propose an alternative model or discuss the likeliness of Hick's explanation<sup>34</sup>. As Eddy himself admits, "In response, I would want to emphasize that, generally speaking, I affirm the validity of this [Hick's] theoretical distinction. It is in the practical application of it that problems arise" (ibid, p.177).

In fact, it is quite a common tendency for religionists to evaluate the applicability or contribution value of a pluralist model rather than examine whether it is philosophically possible. Cornille (2008), for instance, has opposed the standpoint of Hick's neutral approach mainly because she believes it would impoverish genuine interreligious dialogue or hinder personal religious growth (pp.123-125). Heim (1995),

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<sup>34</sup> Eddy is well aware of Hick's challenge, and has explained why he does not think a critic must propose a better alternative model. For references, please see Eddy (2002, p.204).

in addition, also argues that the concept of multiple, confessional Ultimate Realities/religious-ends is more advisable because it would save more religious referential values than the singular, neutral Ultimate Reality/religious-end proposed by Hick (pp.53-70). This idea is supported by Eddy (2002), who believes that Hick's pluralism is 'guilty' of spreading 'monotheist complacency' on the practical level (p.197). Or as Quinn (2000) comments, Hick's model is 'phenomenally polytheistic' and 'noumenally non-theistic', and thus would not contribute much for the development of an authentic theology of religious pluralism (p.164).

Despite that he is supposed to be on the opposite side, Hick has nonetheless shown the similar tendency. As he states in *The Fifth Dimension* (2004b), his model would help to provide a more thorough description of this universe that neither modern science nor traditional religious beliefs has been able to completely describe (pp.1-2; 259-60). Or as Hick criticises in a book review of *The Depth of the Riches* (Heim, 2001), Heim's rather inclusivistic position is actually "less inclusive than the traditional version," and therefore "challenge of religious pluralism becomes even more acute" (Hick, 2001a, pp.399-435). Also, as a conclusion of a talk given in Norwich, he has urged the audiences to reject religious absolutism and hold a more pluralistic viewpoint because it would help to diminish interreligious conflicts and bring peace to humanity (Hick, 2001b). To summarise, many religionists studying

religious pluralism, either the supporters of a neutral or confessional approach, tend to evaluate a model or theory based on the contribution it can potentially make or how useful it can be to solve interreligious conflicts or enrich dialogue.

It is true that many theorists, such as Hick (1989*a*) or Heim (1995), are trying to solve the problem of religious pluralism, but by 'solving the problem of religious pluralism' it does not intentionally mean bringing peace to humanity. Rather, it is to make a reasonable yet very often empirically unverifiable hypothesis that explains why there are so many religious traditions in this world, each with very different historical or trans-historical truth-claims. Since it is very often something untestable at least in the scientific sense, the concept involved is quite similar to traditional religious beliefs in that their validities are always more crucial than what profits they promise. If a religious belief is true (in all senses), then whether it would offer something good to our society or not, it is still true – it remains true even if what it conveys is purely evil and destructive. That being said, it is also true that many would choose to follow a religion because the promises it makes sound most attractive. Especially when the core hypotheses made by the theorists of religious pluralism are often empirically unprovable, it is quite a reasonable attempt to support a model that is most profitable to all humanity or certain social/religious groups. Therefore, the actual problem would arise only when the validity or reliability of a model is rejected



because of the contribution value it lacks.

Regarding the theories of religious pluralism, there are a few contribution values the critics tend to concern the most. First, a model is considered less preferable if it is too Christian-centred (i.e., biased). As Smart (1993) describes, there are Christian pluralists who attempt to understand other religions by seeking Christ in their doctrines (p.60). However, according to Driver (1987), this kind of Christocentric task is “certainly Western,” a bit ‘crusading’ even, just that their biggest opponent is now the ‘godless communists’ rather than followers of other religions (pp.206-208). Hick also points out that “the Christian superiority complex supported and sanctified the Western imperialist exploitation of what today we call the ‘third world’” (as cited in Thomas, 1992, p.49). He has therefore made an example by proposing a neutral interpretation of religion, so that Western values or beliefs are no longer forced on the people from the ‘third world’. Such principle is indeed honourable – what this thesis tries to demonstrate is only that his model did not fulfil such promises.

What worth-noting, though, is Driver’s implication that contemporary theologies tend to see atheists as enemies. Although he is mainly referring to the exclusivists and ‘patriarchal inclusivists’, the same can also be applied to Hick’s model. Hick (2004) does attempt to make his theory as neutral as possible, though it is still a theistic assumption in that he does not think naturalism or other non-spiritual, atheist

positions are preferable, mainly because they do not contain the 'cosmic optimism'<sup>35</sup> he speaks of (pp.13-18; 173-174).

In terms of practicability, then, we may say that his theory, however neutral it may seem, can at most attract the audiences who are religious. For the atheists/agnostics who do not believe in the existence of any salvific-state or do not agree that what religions encourage are actually good (e.g., Russell, 2007, pp.81-82; Dawkins, 2006, pp.317-348) they should find it difficult to consider Hick's assumption likely. Therefore, given that no pluralist assumption can be attractive to all audiences, it is necessary to develop a model that can at least speak for the ones who are not treated equally by any existing theory. After all, one of the major functions of a pluralist model is to help one to understand, respect and establish dialogue with the religiously others, but the existing models are quite unhelpful to solve the conflicts between the religious and the non-religious, or between the 'great world faiths' and the 'primitive, less authentic faiths'. The question is, if this would somewhat contradict the seemingly more basic task of having the best explanation for world religious situation, should we sacrifice reliability for contribution value? In

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<sup>35</sup> As he further explains, "The idea of the universal divine goodness/love/compassion is common to Judaism, Islam, theistic Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, as well as Christianity. These are theistic forms of what I call the 'cosmic optimism' of the great post-axial traditions – their affirmation of the possibility for all human beings of a limitlessly better state grounded in the ultimate nature of reality. But this cosmic optimism is not confined to the theistic religions. In their own different ways Buddhism, advaitic Hinduism, and Taoism also share it. For they affirm the possibility of attaining a limitlessly better state" (Hick, 1995, pp.104-105).

other words, should we have a so-claimed 'most likely' explanatory theory, or should we consider more the usefulness and practicability of a model?

### **3.6 Establishing mutual respects and understandings as the preferred goal of a pluralist model**

According to Berger (2007), pluralist theories emerge not because we need them, but because we are forced to see things pluralistically, he argues, "The 'new pluralism', of course, is the result of globalization. Almost all societies are today inevitably pluralistic. Globalization has meant an enormous increase in intercultural communication. Religion has not been immune to this process of intercontinental chatter" (p.19). Although he is referring to the more general definition of 'pluralism', it is rather true that we are somehow forced to explain the existences of the religious others and to communicate with them. In this sense, then, it should be preferable to have different kinds of models that can help to establish dialogues with different neighbours.

Knitter (2003) also agrees that having dialogues of mutual enrichment is the most urgent task, and argues that for a dialogue to be considered genuine, all parties involved must have something to learn and gain, and be ready to be "questioned,"

“purified,” or thoroughly “challenged” (p.83). Christians engaged in dialogue with other believers, for instance, must be prepared to be changed and ready “to allow oneself to be transformed by the encounter” (ibid). It is about the possibility not only a Buddhist becoming a Christian, but of a Christian becoming a Buddhist. Therefore, directing everyone towards a single agreement in spiritual matters is not the purpose of initiating interreligious dialogue. Smart (1993), on the other hand, has mentioned a different pluralist position – namely ‘dialogical convergentism’ – which believes that “a true reciprocity might in the future come towards agreement in spiritual matters” (p.61). This position is not stating that all religions currently teach the same truth, but that we may find the same, Absolute Truth in the future by having genuine dialogues<sup>36</sup>. Hoffman (1993) further proposes the idea of a ‘focal point’ for models of interreligious understanding, he writes, “If it turns out that the concept [of focal point] is useful in providing part of a frame of reference within which to understand the nature of religion, then that will be sufficient justification for its employment” (p.166). The above viewpoints suggest that the major goal of interpreting the world religious situation pluralistically is to find a way to truly understand the others, be transformed by the others, or have a more thorough understanding of the Absolute Truth. Therefore, if Hick’s model does lack the functionality to help to understand members

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<sup>36</sup> In a sense, the principle of the viewpoint this thesis will suggest is similar to that of ‘dialogical convergentism’. Please see section 8.8 for further discussion.

from folk religions or other naturalist communities (let alone the possibility of a Christian becoming a follower of Chinese Folk Religion or a naturalist), what is the reason, then, to put these traditions into a secondary place? Wouldn't it be a biased interpretation of religion if it only serves the popular, institutional religions such as Christianity and Buddhism?

In addition, it is also believed that interreligious dialogue is important because it would help to have a better understanding of the Absolute Truth, and as the dialogical convergent position suggests, it does not matter if the traditions participating the dialogue currently teach any part of the Truth, because eventually we will come up with an answer by learning from each other. According to this view, even if Hick (1989*a*) strongly believes that his assumptions are likely, it would still be helpful to have a model that can allow us to communicate with Chinese Folk Religion or other traditions he considers less authentic (p.327), just to gather more information before generating any theory about religions.

In Hick's defense, he does not think 'treating all fairly' is to consider every single religious tradition (if naturalism is a religious tradition) equally authentic. Rather, it is to give the best explanation for the current religious situation, even if it involves the rejection of some traditions. Also, as Schowobel (1992) warns:

The pluralist approach that associates itself programmatically with interreligious dialogue seems to see the possibility of such a dialogue only by bracketing, reinterpreting, or relativizing the particular truth claims of particular religious traditions. This immediately provokes the danger that a dialogue which suspends religious truth claims cannot even develop into a dialogue of religions, but turns into a dialogue of cultural traditions based on principles such as universal tolerance and respect, whose foundation is very often not to be seen in the religions themselves but in a humanist critique of all religions (p.30).

In other words, similar to Hick's idea, Schowobel also thinks that it is more important for a pluralist model to try to offer the best, most honest interpretation of religion(s), even though making interreligious dialogue possible can still be a preferable by-product.

Nonetheless, as mentioned earlier, the main reason why many critics have focused on the contribution value of a model is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to empirically prove or falsify a pluralist assumption. For example, although Hick's theory is verifiable by principle, it is practically unverifiable until it is too late – when the eschaton comes, it wouldn't matter anymore if we accept his model or not.

Therefore, it is quite reasonable to evaluate a model based on its functionality or to amend a model for the sake of contribution, because it is the only thing we can do.

Having said that, Hick's model being practically unverifiable does not mean that we cannot examine how likely his hypothesis is – he does not claim that his interpretation of religion is absolute truth, but the best explanation. For this reason, in order to amend his theory or, so to speak, make his theory more inclusive, we should take into consideration the issues of functionality as well as possibility – but is Hick's theory really the most likely?

### **3.7 Criticisms of assuming a universal denominator**

To avoid having the problems of diminishing the values of religious beliefs, Heim (1995), as we have seen, has chosen to affirm the ultimacy of the existing religious beliefs. That is, most religious beliefs or truth-claims are literally true, and there is nothing more ultimate than the Ultimate Reality the world religions speak of. Religionists who hold this standpoint include Heim (1995), Dupuis (2002), and Makransky (2005*a*), within which Heim's model of religious pluralism that aims to “save the greatest referential value for the largest number of religious experiences” is regarded by Cornille (2008) as “one of the more systematic attempts to develop a

Christian understanding of ultimate reality capable of recognizing the truth of other religious traditions within itself' (p.128).

Quite similar to the inclusivistic position, Heim believes that Christianity, which he spiritually belongs to, represents the fullest understanding of the Ultimate Reality, while all other world religions have merely shed light on relatively less portion of the truth<sup>37</sup>. As Hick (1989a) expresses, this kind of confessional approach would inevitably construe beliefs and concepts of other religious traditions in its own terms and fail to solve the puzzle of conflicting trans-historical truth-claims (pp.1-2; 365-71). Nonetheless, according to Cornille's (2008) defence, Heim's model has at least "recognized the religious particularity from which all of this unfolds and moreover called for other religions to develop their own theological understanding of the unity and interconnection of religions within their own particular conceptions of ultimate truth" (p.129). In other words, Cornille favours Heim's assumption not because it is more likely, but because it is believed to be able to let religions remain as they are.

Hick's theory is also criticised by Heim (1995) for being exclusivistic in nature, he argues:

The pluralistic perspectives view themselves as more valid than any other

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<sup>37</sup> Heim has actually been inclined to a Christian inclusivistic assumption. In his later work *The Depth of the Riches* (2001), he states, "I am a convinced inclusivist" (p.8). For Hick's criticism of Heim's position in this book, please see Hick (2001a).



accounts of religion. This is an appropriate type of conviction (if concretely incorrect) from an orientational pluralist's perspective. But pluralists refuse to recognize any other orientations, from which alternative perspectives would be reasonable. What the pluralist in this sense maintains is that there are no legitimate perspectives from which it makes sense to have any other conviction... Thus pluralism repeats the dynamic of the strong exclusivism it opposes: those who disagree are not rational or not worthy or both (p.143).

This implies that if a pluralist does not admit the possibility that his/her model is mistaken, that model would by definition become exclusivistic. However, even if the attitude of promoting such a model is strongly exclusivistic, the standpoint of that particular model can still be pluralistic. Religious pluralism is not about the level of confidence in one's own theory, but the confirmation of the authenticity of world religions. According to this more general definition, then, as long as a model confirms that there is more than one authentic religions in this world, that model should be considered a model of religious pluralism. Therefore, the request that a pluralist should admit the possibility that his/her model is wrong is not only unreasonable, but also irrelevant to the studies of religious pluralism. In fact, Heim's own "multiple

ends/fulfilments" model has also rejected the possibility of Hick's "single, common end" hypothesis (ibid, pp.144-152).

Nonetheless, Heim has considered Hick's position exclusivistic not only because he assumes "a metaphysical dogma that there can be but one religious object," but also because of his "soteriological dogma that there can be but one religious end" (ibid, p.23). Therefore, Heim has proposed a possibility of multiple religious-ends, which he sees is truly pluralistic (ibid, pp.144-51). As the next Chapter will show, Buddhist scholars tend to prefer Heim's model over Hick's because they also believe that the religious-end Buddhism speaks of is not identical to the Heaven Christianity promotes. In other words, the criticism of a common denominator is more of a concern of possibility rather than functionality – the idea of a common denominator is unlikely because the Christian and Buddhist teachings are simply too distinctive and are therefore probably not derived from the same Reality.

However, in order to defend himself from this particular criticism, Hick (2009) points out that the 'Real' he speaks of is neither one nor many, for either concept ('one' or 'many') is derived from human concept, and 'Real' is beyond any human concept and thus ineffable<sup>38</sup>. Eddy (2002) also believes that it is not Hick's original

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<sup>38</sup> Hick has also criticised Heim's so-called 'multiple religious-ends' for being too Christian-centred, which is at the very most inclusivistic. For more details, please see Hick (2009).

intention to propose a common denominator for all:

Hick's common soteriological structure argument has been taken by many of his critics as evidence that he is working with a questionable 'common core' definition/theory of religion. However, Hick has explicitly stated that he rejects a "common essence" definition/theory of religion in favour of a "family resemblance" view, wherein there are "no characteristics that every member must have" (p.104).

That being mentioned, Hick has indeed suggested that all 'world great faiths' he surveyed promote the exact same 'Golden Rule', and that they all teach that to achieve salvation/liberation is to transform from self-centredness into Reality-centredness. In addition, no matter what 'Real' actually is, Hick's theory still implies that all religious beliefs or truth-claims are interpretations or perceptions of the same Ultimate Reality. In this sense, the 'Real' that Hick proposes is at least singular, if not one. That is, there can be no other 'Real' except the one he speaks of, and all the religious beliefs he considers authentic are related or pointing to this and only this 'Real'. Nonetheless, even if Hick did propose a common denominator for all, it does not necessarily mean that the assumption is unlikely. Regarding the claim that

the teachings of world religions are distinctive and different, Hick has explained that it is not so if we do not interpret them literally. This is in fact quite a reasonable explanation for the existence of conflicting truth-claims – some of them are simply not true in the literal sense. However, one must not forget that Hick did not allow all religious claims to be literally false – the ‘Golden Rule’ he promotes is meant to be understood literally. This is also deeply related to his argument that some literally false truth-claims can be mythologically true, for ‘mythologically true’ is referred to the teachings that encourage the ‘Golden Rule’ and are hence soteriologically effective. However, even if the religions he surveys did consider such principle literally true, how does Hick know that it is the only religious teaching that must be true literally?

Regarding the likeliness of Hick's assumption, this thesis would accept that it is the best explanation to allow some religious claims to be literally false, thus the adaptation of Hick's neutral position. What we will reject, however, is his implication that the ‘Golden Rule’ must be the sole criterion to judge whether a religious teaching is valuable. To avoid relativism, Hick has proposed such rather absolutistic criteriology, but by doing so, he has made his theory vulnerable to many other criticisms. As Chapter 8 will argue, in order to maintain the strengths or achieve the intended goals of choosing the neutral approach, it is actually necessary and even

appropriate to have a more relativist assumption.

### **3.8 Criticisms of assuming religious beliefs to be mere myths**

Similarly, Cornille (2008) also believes that, although proposing a common denominator would seem to be able to provide a better ground for interreligious dialogue, it would in fact discern religious truth and growth<sup>39</sup>. An idealistic interreligious dialogue, according to Cornille, should involve a “creative and constructive engagement of one’s own highest criteria of truth with those of the other” (ibid, p.124). The common denominator Hick proposes would therefore impoverish dialogue rather than aiding it, or even “contradict religious self-understanding,” for his idea has degraded all existing religious truths to something inferior to such denominator while those truths are traditionally regarded as the most ultimate. Having an interreligious dialogue would be somewhat pointless or unnecessary if none of the religious truth-claims held by the world religious traditions is literally true, and we have already known the only teaching that matters (i.e., the ‘Golden Rule’) anyway.

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<sup>39</sup> Her argument is quite similar to the question we raised about the assumption that treats one religious teaching as the sole criterion to judge all religious beliefs, she writes, “Yet whatever plausibility and truth it may have for any believer or group of believers can be derived only from within the normative teachings of their particular religion. If, for instance, Muslims regard the transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness a valid criterion in dialogue, this would only be insofar as they can root it in Koranic revelation or in the tradition of the Prophet... To this it should be added that believers are not on the whole inclined to subordinate their own religious criteria to any common religious denominator” (Cornille, 2008, p.124).

Apart from impoverishing interreligious dialogue, Cornille also supports Heim's criticism that all existing religious beliefs would "lose their referential value in reflecting or pursuing particular religious ends" if they are considered to be reflecting the same, singular 'Real' (ibid, pp.122-3). It is because religious teachings and practices, according to Heim (1995), can only maintain their referential values by affirming their distinctive beliefs toward salvation, liberation, or certain truth-claims (pp.23-34). As Heim sees it, it is the reality that most religious believers do not consider their beliefs merely mythically true, but true in all senses. Hick's model in particular would therefore not only diminish the referential values of religious beliefs, but also be unrealistic and unable to deal with the actual situation. That is, Hick's ideas of a common religious-end and that religious truth-claims are not (necessarily) literally true would probably be considered false and unacceptable by the ones who strongly believe otherwise.

Similar criticism is raised by Cobb (1999), who argues that the concept of an all-transcendent, neutral Ultimate Reality would produce "a new form of imperialism" and thus impair dialogue as well as the significances of all religious traditions and their beliefs (p.105; 147). Thus, claiming that there is something more ultimate than any belief proposed by the world religions would make having faith in those beliefs rather meaningless, because none of them could have described the Absolute Truth

accurately.

In addition, as D'Costa (2000) believes, by rejecting the ultimacy of the teachings of world religions, Hick has voluntarily diminished religious beliefs into not only myths, but also mere ethical concerns or guiding principles (ibid, pp.22-39).

According to his interpretation, this position is not only "ethically agnostic," but even "Enlightenment exclusivistic" (ibid, p.26; 30). Most religious traditions, as Hick

believes, have shared some very similar ethical concerns or guiding principles, which is probably true, but these principles are very often not the core or essence that makes

those religions a religion. The concept of being selfless, for instance, is not that

religious in itself. The guideline for living the rightful life is based on certain religious

beliefs, not the other way around. Believers of the Jeudo-Christian traditions who

oppose homosexuality do not hold that viewpoint because homosexuality is morally

wrong, but because their scriptures say so. To put it differently, as D'Costa implies,

more often than not the moral codes proposed by world religions are accepted not

because they are considered to be consistent to the secular universal values, but

because they are taught by the religious authorities.

Furthermore, there are also critics who believe that diminishing truth-claims into mere myths is not only undesirable, but also unlikely to be true. Eddy (2002), for example, tries to question the validity of this idea on the theoretical level:

Thus, contrary to Hick's claim, I would suggest that while his neo-Kantian noumenon-phenomenon motif is one possible way of trying to explain the apophatic-cataphatic phenomenon in the Christian tradition, it is neither the only way nor the best way. A theory that does not inherently privilege one over the other is to be preferred (p.176).

As he further argues, Hick's assumption is actually incompatible with the Christian perception of apophatic-cataphatic relationship, and thus creates a 'false dichotomy' that does not correctly respond to the 'available evidence' (ibid, pp.175-6). Similarly, Ward (1994) also criticises Hick's attempts to detach Ultimate Reality from any humanly concept and to imply that the existing descriptions of the Ultimate Reality are not literally true (p.313). These arguments are however based on the assumptions that traditional Christian thoughts are true, and that traditional Christians are conceiving God as the Ultimate Reality rather than something subordinate to the Ultimate Reality (Eddy, 2002, p.175-82). In other words, they reject Hick's hypothesis not because of the contribution value it lacks, but because it is incompatible with their understandings of the reality.

However, it would be unfair to focus only on the negative effect of assuming religious beliefs to be literally false. As mentioned, the hypothesis that some religious



beliefs are merely mythologically true is basically an attempt to explain how conflicting truth-claims can be true simultaneously. Although the confessional assumptions are said to be able to save more religious referential values, it appears that they would find it more difficult to offer any equally convincing explanation. As argued, Heim's idea of multiple religious-ends is able to explain how the claims that "only Christians/Muslims will be saved" can be both true, but would fail to deal with the more exclusivist claim such as "all non-Christians/Muslims will end up in Hell." Hick's theory, on the other hand, would have no problem in explaining the existences of such exclusivist claims – they are simply not true in the literal sense. In fact, according to his criteriology, they are not even mythologically true, because these claims would not effect the soteriological transformation he speaks of, and are therefore "not authentic responses to the Real" (Hick, 1997, p.162). Accepting the possibility that some religious beliefs are not literally true is thus inevitable if we wish to offer a reasonable explanation for the existing of conflicting truth-claims. If it is inevitable, then it would be unfair to criticise Hick for not being able to affirm the literal ultimacy of all religious beliefs. It is only the reliability of his absolutistic assumption about the 'Golden Rule' that is questionable, not his basic implication that some religious beliefs are literally false.

### 3.9 Problems of being undesirable and impracticable

Cornille (2008) quite clearly makes her arguments in favour of the theories based on a confessional Ultimate Reality, or Heim's position in particular. While criticising Hick's theory for being 'unobtainable', 'undesirable', or even impossible "under any condition," she has, on the contrary, considered the problems of proposing a confessional Ultimate Reality acceptable<sup>40</sup>, and even regarded Panikkar's<sup>41</sup> expression as "a powerful testimony" (ibid, pp.126-7; 129-30; 131). She supports the confessional approach in the following conclusion:

It is true that such an understanding of other religions from within one's own conception of ultimate reality entails a certain degree of domestication of the other, it may fairly be said that this is an inevitable condition of the irreducible particularity of all religious perspectives. It is the recognition

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<sup>40</sup> For example, regarding the issue that a confessional approach may risk distorting truth claims or beliefs of the other religions into its own 'domesticated' understanding, she responds, "This does not necessarily imply a simple reduction of the distinctive truth of the other to one's own established teachings. Both Heim and Makransky affirm the validity and truth of teachings that are not fully ingrained or developed within one's own tradition, and that thus allow for the possibility of genuine dialogue and growth. Him insists that this theology of religious ends allows for the recognition of 'unique, religiously determinative and final truths of the sort that the religions themselves claim' and that this 'widens the dialogue by allowing that it may reveal not only variations on one theme and one result but sharper challenges and crucial options'... It is thus clear that a confessional understanding of the interconnection of all religions does not preclude genuine dialogue" (Cornille, 2008, pp.130-131).

<sup>41</sup> Panikkar is a theologian who specialises in interreligious dialogue and holds a position quite similar to Heim's. According to his understanding, it is practically impossible for a Christian to accept a concept more transcendent than Christ, as Christ is regarded by all Christians as the most ultimate reality. He also believes that Christ is represented by other religions in different forms or names. For details, please see Komulainen (2007).

that all participants engage in dialogue from their own conceptions of the interconnection of religions, and that each engages the other from within their own hermeneutical framework, which forms the basis for the balanced and sincere exchange that occurs in genuine dialogue (ibid, pp.132-133).

Cornille is basically basing these arguments on two major beliefs. First, she believes that the domestication of the truth claims of other religious traditions is inevitable and thus acceptable. Second, she strongly believes that the confessional approach would provide a much better basis for interreligious dialogue than the neutral approach. However, she has not explained why it is theoretically impossible for any religious believer to accept the truth of another religion without referring it to his own religious beliefs. Rather, she seems to assume that it is phenomenally impossible because, as far as she is concerned, all religious believers can only interpret the truths of the others from their own perspectives. As Chapter 9 will try to demonstrate, there is actually a common viewpoint that the Chinese Folk Religion followers are able to accept the claims of other religions unconditionally. If that is the case, then her particular criticism of the neutral position would be questionable, because some may not need to engage in dialogue from their own conception, meaning that Hick's model would not necessarily impair genuine dialogue more than

Heim's model does.

Interestingly, Cornille (2002) has also mentioned the phenomenon of 'simultaneous belonging' in China:

In the end, most religious traditions expect a total and unique commitment, if not from their followers at large, at least from their specialists or spiritual elite. Whereas the Chinese might have experienced a sense of simultaneous belonging to Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, scholars or monks of each of these traditions were expected to demonstrate unswerving and single-minded commitment to their own tradition (p.3).

This idea is reemphasised in her later paper (2003) concerning double religious belonging:

The abandonment to a transcendent reality mediated through the concrete symbols and rituals of a particular religion. Surrender is thus not to the ultimate as such, but through – and in the end – to the teachings and practices embedded in a concrete religious tradition (p.44).

At first glance, it is rather strange for one to deny the possibility of genuine multiple religious belonging right after making the claim that some Chinese have been belonging to a plurality of religious traditions simultaneously, as if this phenomenon should not be taken account of. That being said, what Cornille really tries to express is that all religious believers, according to her observation, can only commit to one particular religious tradition because total religious commitment is by definition the spiritual surrender to one religious tradition. In other words, for the Chinese who are believed to have belonged to Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism simultaneously, they are not pursuing the spiritual and religious attainments purposefully promoted by these religions. In fact, Cornille (2008) has further supported this argument by sharing her own religious experiences:

Insofar as my experiential life is largely shaped by my own religious tradition, its beliefs and practices and the range of experiences generated by them also function as an epistemic norm in the process of interreligious empathy. This means that all empathic understanding of the other religion is always colored, to some extent, by the experiences generated within one's own tradition (p.170).

It is, however, quite arbitrary to conclude that empathic understanding of the other religion is always coloured mainly because she, as a Christian, has personally experienced so – it is possible that there are people who can understand the beliefs of other religious traditions empathically without colouring them, unless one can provide sufficient alternative evidences that speak for us all. But again, Cornille could argue that those who are able to understand other religions without colouring them are not devout enough to their own religions and thus should not be treated as a counterexample. Here we should notice that her viewpoint involves certain preconceptions about being religious: (1) all religions require a total commitment and surrender; (2) teachings and practices of world religions are distinctive and different, therefore to accept the ideas of other religions is to have incomplete faith in that of our own; and (3) the main purpose of belonging to a religion is to pursue some sort of ultimate spiritual attainment.

These preconceptions are rather common, and are expressed by not only the critics of neutral approach, but also the supporters of a neutral approach including Hick himself. As a conclusion for his major argument, Hick (1989*a*) argues in quite an absolute sense that:

We have to ask concerning these primary affirmations whether they conflict

with one another. They conflict in the sense that they are different and that one can only centre one's religious life wholeheartedly and unambiguously upon one of them – upon the Vedic revelation, or upon the Buddha's enlightenment, or upon the Torah, or upon the person of Christ, or upon the words of the Qur'an; but not upon more than one at once (p.373).

Seemingly, no matter what pluralist position one stands for, it is almost a consensus that religions do require their followers to centre their life wholeheartedly upon one and only one of them, and that this requirement is reasonable and necessary. Having said that, in his more recent publication about interreligious encounters, Schmidt-Leukel (2009) has challenged these traditional viewpoints, and tried to demonstrate that genuine multiple religious belonging is possible. As he points out, multiple religious identities should be regarded as a singular concept rather than a plural one – there is no such thing as a compartmentalised 'half French and half Lebanese', but only a "mixture that is unique to every individual" (ibid, p.47). Multiple religious belonging is not to have several identities such as 'Buddhist' or 'Christian', but to have faith in one single mixture of beliefs. After all, faith is by nature a personal matter. Even for two persons who come from the exact same religious denomination, what they actually believe can be quite distinctive (ibid,

pp.55-8). In other words, multiple religious belonging can be seen as a commitment to a single, personal spiritual path that involves elements from different religious traditions.

Schmidt-Leukel is nonetheless aware of the possible criticisms of such a position. Basically, as he realises, multiple religious belonging is undoubtedly a kind of religious syncretism which many religionists see as an 'illicit contamination', a 'threat' or a 'danger', as 'taboo', or as a 'sign of religious decadence' (e.g., Cornille, 2002, pp.94-95; 2008, p.64; 94; Pye, 2004, pp.59-67; Rescher, 1993, pp.90-95). On the theological aspect, it would risk corrupting or distorting religious truth; spiritually, it may suffer from religious superficiality; and for philosophical concerns, syncretism has assumed conflicting truth claims to be simultaneously valid and is therefore self-defeating. In Chapter 9, we will look at how Schmidt-Leukel (2009) responds to these viewpoints in detail in order to justify my approach to offer an equal status to Chinese Folk Religion, even though the religion may be syncretistic.

Regardless of whether it would hinder spiritual growth or the pursuit of ultimate salvation/liberation, it is the fact that multiple religious belongings exist. In addition to the examples given by Schmidt-Leukel which include a Christian who claimed to be able to practice Buddhism without combining the contradicting elements of the two or other Christians who report to have engaged in spiritual practices from other



religions (ibid, pp.65-66; p.68), the believers of Caodaism in Vietnam, Cheondoism in Korea and I-Kuan Tao in Taiwan are all examples of having faith in a singular tradition that contains beliefs derived from a plurality of religions. Similarly, although the Chinese Folk Religion followers are very often seen as syncretists who believe in Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism simultaneously, what they spiritually belong to can still be a singular system of faith, namely "Chinese Folk Religion." If so, then the criticism that Hick's model is 'unobtainable', 'undesirable' or 'impossible under any condition' would at least be inapplicable to the said Chinese religious situation.

### **3.10 Conclusion: the 'Christian-centred' interpretations of religion**

To conclude, it is argued that the only workable criterion to evaluate a pluralist model is to examine if it can offer a fair ground for mutual respects and understandings between religions, which is also what Hick intends to achieve. His critics have however disagreed that his theory can serve such a function because his non-confessional assumptions are considered 'agnostic', cognitively empty, religiously impassionate, and offensive to the original beliefs of all religions, thus the accusation that it is undesirable and inapplicable. In a sense, what this thesis will demonstrate is a different viewpoint that his model is also undesirable and

inapplicable for the Chinese Folk Religion followers, but not for the reasons the critics propose – his neutral hypothesis that may discourage total spiritual commitment, for example, is assumed to be more acceptable in the said Chinese context. What puts the religion in an inferior position is mainly his criteriology, for it is believed to be contradictory to the central theme of what the religion teaches. Such criteriology is, on the other hand, at most considered not central to, rather than contradictory to, the Christian teachings.

In addition, Hick and the critics we discussed also tend to use Christianity as a model to understand other religions. Apart from the preconceptions described earlier, there are other commonly held conceptions that religions can be completely represented by certain scriptures and doctrines, that salvation/liberation must be some kind of an eternal status and would mainly serve its function afterlife, and that to follow a religion is to have total faith in its teachings and truth-claims. For example, while arguing for his ethical criterion, Hick (1989*a*) has presented an enormous amount of quotations from the Bible, the Qur'an, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, the *Anushana Parva*, the *Ahanti Parva*, the *Samyutta Nikaya*, the *Sikhsasamuccaya*, and the *Sutta Nipata*, as if interpreting certain authoritative religious texts is the best way to define a religion, despite that he has also mentioned a great number of religious phenomena which are inconsistent with

the criterion he proposes (pp.317-325). In other words, he tends to believe that these particular religious phenomena – such as the destructive wars or the burnings of heretics and witches – are not to be considered a valid representation of a religion (ibid, p.372). However, if there are religious traditions that are not entirely compatible with the preconceptions mentioned above (e.g., not representable by any authoritative scripture), then we may say that these preconceptions/descriptions are, in a sense, Christian-centred in nature, for they all seem to connote that Christianity must be authentic, and that all other authentic religions must have the same structure and function in the same way as Christianity<sup>42</sup>. As this thesis will demonstrate, Chinese Folk Religion, however, is believed to be a tradition that does not concern salvation/liberation in the same way as Christianity, that does not require any exclusive membership or total submission, and that is not representable by any authoritative doctrine/scripture.

Our other goal, then, is to contribute something new to the current debate and try to demonstrate that the said conceptions about religion are not entirely true if Chinese Folk Religion is to be treated equally; that it is necessary to have a theory that can treat Chinese Folk Religion equally so that we may establish a genuine dialogue with it – although such theory is not necessarily better, it can, on the practical level, serve

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<sup>42</sup> Eddy (2002) also agrees that Hick's hypothesis is most certainly Christian if Christianity is to be understood as a "more experimental forms of Christianity," and often uses the term 'Christological conclusion' to refer to Hick's theory (pp.203-204).

the functions Hick's model currently lacks; and that theoretically, we will at least have a more thorough understanding or description of religions if we establish a dialogue with Chinese Folk Religion, even though eventually such description does not regard it as a valuable/authentic religious tradition. In other words, even if we are to disregard such tradition, it is at least necessarily to explain more the rationale of disregarding it. Hick and the critics we discussed, however, have focused rather exclusively on the institutional religions most knowable to the Western world.

Although Hick (1989*a*) has also described certain 'pre-axial' religions or existing religious phenomena that are less authentic or simply evil, those descriptions are quite inapplicable to Chinese Folk Religion – Hick tends to believe that these 'primal' religions would evolve into the better 'post-axial' religions once the idea of ultimate salvation/liberation has emerged, but this can not explain why Chinese Folk Religion, which is popular among the educated and is contemporarily active in the communities where Christianity or Buddhism is also reachable, did not transform into a 'post-axial' tradition he describes (pp.22-29). Therefore, on the theoretical level, although Hick has every right to consider Chinese Folk Religion less authentic, it is more appropriate if he can at least refer to this particular tradition or such like before offering an explanatory theory that is aimed to be universal.

That being said, it is possible that the above concerns have already been

addressed or resolved by the Buddhist scholars who belong to a religion so distinct and different from Christianity. The next Chapter will hence discuss the Buddhist responses to Hick as well as Heim's pluralist theories.

## 4. BUDDHIST RESPONSES TO HICK'S PLURALIST ASSUMPTION

### 4.1 Introduction and justification

This Chapter will further discuss the criticisms of Hick's pluralist assumption from the Buddhist perspective. As argued previously, Hick's models and the criticisms mentioned are somehow Christian-centred, especially when it involves the questions as to what religion is and how it should function. Supposedly, then, if a model or criticism is developed by a Buddhist scholar, it would at least be non-Christian-centred. Even if these models or criticisms in turn put Buddhism in a more superior position, we should have a more thorough and neutral evaluation of Hick's model by integrating their viewpoints into the discussion.

The major difference between the Christian and Buddhist critics is that the latter tend to agree more with Hick's argument that we must seek a common ground for interreligious understandings, even though most of them reject the one Hick suggests. Abe (1995), for example, strongly believes that a common denominator is needed, yet he does not think the Christian and Buddhist teachings are fundamentally identical as Hick suggests. The Buddhist scholars we will survey also unanimously disagree with Hick's idea of a common religious-end. The second popular criticism from them is

that the pluralist models proposed by the Christian theorists have distorted certain Buddhist doctrines or have even put Buddhism in a rather subordinate position. This criticism also applies to Heim's confessional assumption, even though Heim rejects both a common denominator and religious-end.

The main purpose of this Chapter is to see if these non-Christian critics have responded to the questions we raised previously, that is, is Hick's criteriology fairly justified? And is his definition/interpretation of religion comprehensive enough? We will also pay more attention to Makransky's (2005*a*) argument, for it is a good example of how we can adopt Heim's idea of multiple religious-ends to offer an equal status to Buddhism and presumably Chinese Folk Religion.

#### **4.2 Common ground for interreligious understanding**

Some of the contemporary scholars we will discuss who approach the problem from a Buddhist perspective are Bloom (2007), Tsuchiya (2005*a*), O'Leary (2002), Harris (2002; 2005), Schmidt-Leukel (2005*b*; 2005*c*), Abe (1985; 1995) and Makransky (2003; 2005*a*; 2005*b*)<sup>43</sup>. Generally, almost all of these scholars have attempted to find a common ground between Buddhism and Christianity, regardless of

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<sup>43</sup> These scholars were not necessarily a Buddhist themselves. Schmidt-Leukel (2005*c*) and Harris (2005), for example, have responded to the debate as a Christian.

their theoretical positions. As Schmidt-Leukel (2005a) presents, Bloom, Abe and Makransky, for instance, have all with a very similar approach try to suggest how the Buddhist concept *dharmakaya* can be understood in Christian terms, even though they may have based their understandings on the teachings of different Buddhist sects (pp.172-173). In response to Schmidt-Leukel's review (2005c), Makransky (2005c), a Mahayana Buddhist, claims rather affirmatively that "'God' and '*dharmakaya*' point to the same transcendent reality because God and *dharmakaya* are functionally equivalent" (p.207). This may look quite consistent with Hick's (1989a) idea of a universal denominator, although Makransky is with Heim (1995) while rejecting Hick's concept of a common religious-end.

Seeking the common ground between the two religions from a Buddhist perspective may serve two purposes. First, it is believed that learning from other religious traditions would help to understand one's own religion better, and that finding the common ground between the two religions is essential for the task – there must be something related or similar between the two religions, otherwise there should be little reason to believe that we can understand our own religion more thoroughly by studying the others. Second, proving that there is something common between different religions can, from their point of view, support the pluralist



assumption that there is more than one religion that teaches the truth<sup>44</sup>.

That being said, the Buddhist scholars would seldom deny that there are theological differences between Christianity and Buddhism. While reviewing Heim's model from a Mahayana Buddhist point of view, Makransky affirms that the two religions contain very different understandings and concepts of religious-end, ultimate reality (God or *dharmakaya*), and way that leads to salvation or liberation<sup>45</sup>. Which leads us to one of the challenges the Buddhist scholars raise against Hick's pluralist model: although Hick's assumption that most religions can lead us to a good religious-end is probably true, the teachings of the non-Christian traditions (e.g., Buddhism) are very often misunderstood or distorted in order to fit the vision of the Christian-centred assumption.

As an example, Smart (1993), who has quite thoroughly compared the similarities and differences between the two religions on most aspects, argues that the Western theories of religious pluralism that he consults have sometimes ignored the original meanings of certain Buddhist concepts (pp.20-25). The idea of 'one noumenal

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<sup>44</sup> For example, as a reinterpretation of Heim's (1995) model, Makransky (2005b) argues, "...a Mahayana Buddhist would be inspired by patterns of Christian communion and learn from Christianity with regard to the very reality that he understands himself to engage in Buddhist practice... a Buddhist would be motivated to improve his understanding of liberation, ultimate reality and praxis in part through discussion and argument with Christian theologians and saintly practitioners, discussions that take note both of analogues and differences between Buddhist and Christian understandings of the natures and roles of love, wisdom, devotion, communion and emptiness (p.199).

<sup>45</sup> While discussing the differences between Christian and Buddhist soteriology, Makransky (2005a) writes, "Christian traditions... tend to focus intensively on the love and communion aspects of participation in the ultimate reality. Mahayana traditions that I have received, while profoundly integrating those two aspects, focus more intensively than Christian traditions upon the wisdom-emptiness aspects as the centre of soteriology, the very source of liberation" (p.195).

Reality' proposed by Hick, according to Smart, is incompatible with the rejection of substance in Buddhism, and the theistic concepts such as 'the centrality of the feeling of absolute dependence' would conflict the non-theistical Buddhist assumption (ibid, p.21). Nevertheless, despite there are seemingly unresolvable conflicts on every aspect, Smart is optimistic about the effectiveness of interreligious dialogue, and urges that it is important to understand other religions from their perspectives (ibid, pp.10-11). This attitude is quite common for the scholars who interpret religious pluralism from a Buddhist perspective. Senauke (2005a), for instance, affirms a 'common ground' between Christianity and Buddhism in regard to the ways they purify sins or sufferings, even though he also admits that how they interpret the concept of original sin are different (pp.242-243).

It is therefore necessary to make clear the distinction between 'common ground' and Hick's idea of 'common denominator'. The affirmation of the former concept, on the one hand, should be understood as the affirmation that some Buddhist and Christian teachings are very similar, and that a Buddhist may use the particular Buddhist idea to help to understand that of Christianity; the latter concept that Hick proposes, on the other hand, should be understood as the assumption that there are some foundational teachings being taught by all 'great world faiths', and that these teachings are identical. In other words, Smart and Senauke tend to agree that there are

certain common grounds between Christianity and Buddhism, but reject the idea of a common denominator.

### 4.3 Criticisms of distorting Buddhist doctrines

On the same boat as Senauke, Makransky (2005*a*) also argues that the Christian pluralists have somehow distorted the teachings of Buddhism for the sake of proving their assumptions likely. Although he supports Heim's model quite strongly, he is nonetheless unsatisfied with his Christian-centred conclusion that ignores certain aspect of Mahayana Buddhism<sup>46</sup>. As a response, he tries to emphasise that the ultimate reality is differently understood by Buddhists and Christians, and that Buddhism has also responded to the ultimate reality on all three dimensions; Heim mistakenly 'degrades' Buddhism only because he has failed to understand it from a Buddhist perspective (ibid, pp.190-198). That is, Makransky still agrees with Heim in that different religions would lead to independently different religious-ends; he simply disagrees that Buddhism contains less truths than Christianity. This position is

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<sup>46</sup> For example, he once expressed, "Heim as a Christian theologian isolated three dimensions of the Trinitarian God that he understands diverse religions to engage: the 'impersonal', 'iconic' and 'communion' dimensions... From a Christian perspective, Heim argues, Buddhists and Advaitan Hindus tend to focus intensively (and more exclusively) on the first dimension (the transcendent mystery), Muslims on the second (submission to God as other), while Christians integrate all three dimensions most fully within the third dimension (communion with God in Christ). In that characterization, Heim does not pay much attention to Mahayana Buddhist practices of communion such as those described in the previous section" (Makransky, 2005*a*, p.193).

consistent with Abe (1995), Harris (2005), Baier (2005), and Gross's (2003) viewpoints, within which Gross, for example, has accused 'Westerners' for misunderstanding the true meaning of 'non-theism', while at the same time affirms that Buddhism also contains an idea quite similar to the Christian understanding of transcendent existence<sup>47</sup>.

Since part of Heim's assumption is in opposition to Hick's, the scholars who adopt Heim's model would have rejected at least part of Hick's pluralist theory. The claim that the state of *nirvana* and the Christian salvation are completely distinctive and different, for example, would be incompatible with Hick's implication of common religious-end. In an article that discusses how Buddhism and Christianity understand human existence differently, Harris (2005) responds directly to Hick's position and argues that although the two religions do, as Hick says, promote some forms of 'cosmic optimism', the ways they promote it are completely different (pp.37-38). She nonetheless reaches the common conclusion that learning from Buddhism would still help Christians to have a more comprehensive understanding of the ultimate (ibid, pp.51-52).

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<sup>47</sup> As Gross (2003) argues, "North American Buddhists tend to assume that beings whom they cannot access with their senses, beings who apparently have no empirical existence, do not exist in any way and that this is the meaning of 'nontheism'. But classically, Buddhist nontheism is not about the relative non-existence of such beings, but about their absolute non-existence" (p.92). Nonetheless, in regard to the significances of spiritual practices, Gross also believes "There seems no reason to assume that the inner experience of a Buddhist petitioning for general well-being or for help on the spiritual path is significantly different from that a Christian praying to God or the saints for similar things" (ibid, p.93).

Similarly, Mbogu (2006) also agrees that most Christian theologians, including Hick, have misinterpreted the true meaning of 'emptiness' (p.78). Although Hick has later responded to this problem and suggested that the 'Real' is in many ways similar to the idea of 'emptiness', he is in turn being too Buddhist-centred by drawing too heavily on the concept of Zen Buddhism (ibid, p.79). In other words, these scholars are unsatisfied with Hick simplifying, generalising or distorting Buddhist ideas, which include Abe (1995, pp.17-88) who supports the idea of a neutral Ultimate Reality rather than the more common confessional one.

#### **4.4 Makransky's criticisms of the common religious-end assumption**

As a Buddhist scholar who has examined Heim's theory quite thoroughly, Makransky (2005a) does not only evaluate the model, but also reconstructs it to fit the Mahayana Buddhist perspective. In terms of the advantages of the concept of multiple religious-ends, he believes that it can "motivate strong interest to learn from other traditions as other means of connection to the same liberating truth cherished by one's own tradition," which, according to him, is "a basis for reverencing others' encounters with liberating truth on a par with one's own" (ibid, p.192). As he sees it, the ultimate mission of all religious traditions is to lead their followers to salvation/liberation, and

the distinctiveness of the religious-ends they speak of is utmost important to their identities – these specific and distinctive teachings are needed to “retain their importance within a dialogue of mutual learning” (ibid, p.192).

Although he has not thoroughly criticised Hick's model in specific, Makransky has nonetheless expressed his disagreement on the idea of a common religious-end<sup>48</sup>. The reason for him to disregard Hick's model is clear: he believes Hick's idea that Christians and Buddhists would attain the very same religious fulfilment/end is simply false. Regarding the demerits of Heim's model, as mentioned earlier, Makransky has merely challenged Heim's understandings of Buddhism, rather than questioning its more basic assumptions. In other words, Makransky supports quite strongly Heim's model on the theoretical level; he is simply unsatisfied with the claim that Christianity responds to the Ultimate Reality more thoroughly than any other religion, including Buddhism, which Makransky belongs to. Therefore, in order to amend Heim's model so that it can treat all religions, or at least Buddhism and Christianity, equally, he attempts to explain why he thinks Buddhism has also reflected all three dimensions of the Ultimate Reality, or *dharmakaya*, even though

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<sup>48</sup> As he puts it, “But although the Buddhas guide, bless, inspire and quicken receptive persons in innumerable ways, they are not understood by Buddhists to be omnipotent, which means that persons must realize emptiness in the fullest way through some specific procedure of investigation or pointing out passed down in living tradition by a qualified guru, lama or Zen master that is not finally fulfilled simply by Buddha's (or God's) grace. It is for this reason that I shy away from any theological pluralism that assumes Christians and Buddhists attain the very same religious fulfillments and ends in spite of specific differences in practice, especially with reference to Buddhist transmissions of remarkably effective ways to bring receptive persons to stable recognition of the empty nature of all experience, the very essence of freedom in Buddhist terms” (Makransky, 2005a, p.198).

Buddhism is generally understood as a religion that does not involve a total submission to God, or a communion with the divines, the second and third dimensions Heim (2001) describes (pp.174-197). As an example, although, unlike Christianity, Buddhism did not stress on any 'dual' relationship that links to God's unconditional love, it nonetheless contains a 'non-dual' concept that is different but equally transcendent<sup>49</sup>.

Makransky's model of religious pluralism is in many ways similar to Heim's, except that it is developed from a Mahayana Buddhist perspective and is intended to reclaim an equal standing for Buddhism. In terms of theoretical basis, it supports the idea of multiple religious-ends and the belief that by learning from the others, we can have a more thorough understanding of the Ultimate Reality taught by our own religion. Nonetheless, compared to Heim and other religionists who hold the similar position<sup>50</sup>, Makransky is less optimistic about the benefits of participating in the practice of other religions. As he argues, a genuine belief in Christianity would inevitably hold oneself back from a true realisation of the empty nature of the Buddhist reality (*dharmakaya*), and a genuine realisation of Buddhist teachings would

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<sup>49</sup> As Makransky (2005a) explains, "Buddhist teachings of unconditional compassion and love, in turn, are profoundly informed by that specific kind of wisdom. Deep Buddhist compassion, it is taught, is compassion elicited by the wisdom of emptiness that understands how beings suffer through bondage to a duality that is created by their own minds. Deepest compassion is non-dual awareness suffused with a tone of compassion that has transcended even the distinction of 'self' and 'other'" (p.196).

<sup>50</sup> For instance, in response to Heim's 'confessional' position, Cornille (2008) expresses quite optimistically, "While a certain openness to the truth of the other religion is a necessary condition for dialogue, it is dialogue itself that often leads to theological creativity and an attempt to enrich one's conception of ultimate reality by welcoming as much as possible what is expressed in other religious traditions" (p.132).

in turn obstruct one to establish a full relationship with God (ibid, p.197). In addition, although he deeply believes that real religious-ends are many, he has, with a pinch of salt, never argued that all religious-ends are equally favourable<sup>51</sup>. In other words, the religious-end of Buddhism can still be more desirable than the others. That being said, regarding interreligious dialogue, he is with the idea that there are only rewards in doing so; it is just the practices of the others that may hold us back.

In a sense, then, Makransky's viewpoint is similar to that of Hick, Heim and the critics we discussed in that they all tend to see enabling one to understand or establish a genuine dialogue with other religions as the necessary function of a pluralist model. Although I disagree with Eddy's (2002) comment that Hick's model is a failure just because it cannot serve the functions he expects, I would agree that it is desirable if we can alter Hick's theory so that it would serve the functions it currently lacks (p.177). Not being able to effect any spiritual transformation to his readers, for example, is not an inherent problem of Hick's philosophical assumptions, but such effect can still be desirable. As for this thesis, the major goal is to try to have a pluralist theory that can treat Chinese Folk Religion more fairly, may it be an amended version of Hick's model or a completely different theory. This is in principle

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<sup>51</sup> As Schmidt-Leukel (2005a) comments, "(Makransky) holds that both religions can learn from each other so long as they accept an authentic salvific value of the other without necessarily admitting a full soteriological equivalence" (p.25). Nonetheless, Makransky has neither argued that the Buddhist liberation would be a more desirable religious-end. In fact, he has simply discussed the differences of the two without deciding which is more favourable (please see Makransky, 2003; 2005a).



similar to what Makransky attempts to achieve, even though his task is, as I would argue, easier and more tolerable to the Western pluralist thinkers because it is almost a consensus that Buddhism must be a reasonably true and believable religion.

Makransky's approach, then, is to presume Mahayana Buddhism in particular to be as true and believable as Christianity and amend Heim's model so that it no longer puts Buddhism in an inferior position, which involves making an alternative assumption that Mahayana Buddhism has also fully reflected the Absolute Truth in all three dimensions Heim speaks of and explaining how Mahayana Buddhism is different from what Heim describes.

Therefore, in order to offer an equal status to Chinese Folk Religion, it seems that the most important task is not to make Hick's model a first-order confessional discourse, but to presume Chinese Folk Religion to be equally true and believable and reconstruct the assumptions that are responsible for putting it in an inferior position – Hick's model has allegedly disregarded Chinese Folk Religion not because it is a second-order meta-theory or has assumed a neutral, common denominator, but because its criteriology and description of the world religious situation imply that Chinese Folk Religion is an immature and less authentic religious tradition. In fact, as the next section will show, there are Buddhist scholars who agree that a common denominator is preferable and necessary; they just do not think the one proposed by

Hick is fair.

#### **4.5 Abe's 'positionless' position: 'no common denominator' as the only common denominator**

As Heim's theory of religious pluralism is believed to be able to save the most referential values of all religions, it is comprehensible that a significant number of Buddhist scholars prefer his model over Hick's. Nevertheless, there are still a few Buddhist positions that function closer to Hick's model. Tsuchiya, for instance, agrees with Harris's (2005) arguments that there are fundamental differences between Buddhism and Christianity in regard to the concepts of sin, ego, prayer and meditation, but at the same time emphasises the possibility that the ultimate goal of the two religions can be the same<sup>52</sup>. He also believes that only by finding a way that goes beyond the contradictions may the union be realistic.

On the other hand, although he clearly rejects the assumption that we can identify what is common to all religions, Abe (1995) nonetheless proposes a model

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<sup>52</sup> As a response to Harris's comments, Tsuchiya (2005*b*) briefly states, "It is at this point of comparison that we become aware of the two distinct, possibly contradictory, religious orientations... A Buddhist Christian dialogue cannot bypass these radical examples from both traditions. I accept the possibility that not only the starting point but also the ultimate goal of Buddhism and Christianity could be the same. This union, however, is not authentic unless it shows a way to go beyond the theoretically contradictory and practically confrontational difference that we find in the Buddhist and Christian orientations" (pp.82-83). To see his original arguments that Harris responds to, please read Tsuchiya (2005*a*, pp.53-64).

that affirms a common basis (pp.46-50). Seemingly self-contradictory, what he really wishes to argue is that by positively affirming that there is no common denominator between world religions, we can be “free from all human presuppositions and conceptualizations” (p.47). According to him, both the ‘positive’ assumption of some sort of common denominator for all religions (e.g., Hick, 1989*a*; Smith<sup>53</sup>) which he calls ‘the monistic unity view’ and the ‘negative’ rejection of any common denominator (e.g., Heim, 1995; Cobb<sup>54</sup>) which is referred to as ‘negative non-existence view’ have failed to provide a firm basis for reaching a true unity of world religions (Abe, 1995, pp.47-49). This is because, as Abe argues, both positions have failed to escape from dualism, and therefore, in order to overcome this almost dilemmatic situation, he chooses to positively treat the negative statement that ‘there is no common denominator’ as the common basis<sup>55</sup>.

Abe regards such ‘non-dualistic stance’ as a ‘positionless position’ or a

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<sup>53</sup> In order to seek a universal faith that is able to unite all religious believers, Smith argues that a certain degree of ‘theological surrender’ would have to be made. Or as he puts it, “(Christians) will have to be willing to let go of their traditional beliefs that their religion or even their Christ is superior to and normative for all others” (as cited in Abe, 1995, p.49). This is what Abe finds unacceptable, as it “does not fully admit the distinctiveness or uniqueness of each religion united therein” (ibid, p.50). For details, please see Smith (1972; 1991) for the arguments that explain why the ‘surrender’ is necessary.

<sup>54</sup> To object Hick or Smith’s attempt to find a common focus for all, Cobb (1984) has indeed concluded quite clearly that “shifting terminology to the transcendent or the absolute does not help. The problem is the quest for what is common. Truly to accept pluralism is to abandon that quest... Hence, we should take them all seriously, as far as possible in their own terms, and allow each to challenge our beliefs and assumptions. That is a better way to a world theology than the effort to determine what is common to all” (p.172).

<sup>55</sup> As he puts it, “...on the basis of a positionless position, each religion is fully realized in its distinctiveness and yet is critically judged by other religions. This non-dualistic stance indicates an affirmative and positive common-denominator stance, but it is essentially different from a mere affirmative stance of the common denominator of all religions – precisely because it is beyond the polarity of the affirmative and the negative stances and is realized through the realization that ‘there is no common denominator for world religions’ (Abe, 1995, p.50).

'standpoint that is free from any standpoint' (ibid, p.47). He further supports his 'positionless' position with the idea of 'zero':

When we overcome monistic unity or oneness, we come to a point where there is neither one, nor two, nor many; instead, it is a point that is appropriately referred to as 'zero'... Monistic unity is a kind of unity that lacks the realization of 'zero', whereas non-dualistic unity is a kind of unity that is based on the realization of 'zero' (p.48).

According to some interpretations, however, Abe's position isn't as 'positionless' as he claims. Generally speaking, 'positionless' simply means you do not have any position. In other words, a 'positionless position' is rather logically or linguistically ambiguous, if not impossible. Having said that, if we are to put aside his seemingly problematic terminology, then his suggestion to treat 'no common denominator' as the only common denominator can still be practicable.

As Abe sees it, the biggest problem of affirming a common denominator of all religions is that there is no common denominator of all religions. In fact, the arguments mentioned earlier that concern the contrasts between Buddhism and Christianity can be seen as the evidences for this assumption. If there is really no

common denominator, then his rejection of Hick or Smith's assumption is of course correct. The actual problem of his argument lies in that he also opposes Cobb's idea that we should not attempt to look for a common denominator. In defence of Cobb's (1999) position, he has made such a suggestion because he does not believe in the existence of a common denominator (pp.95-111). If a common denominator really does not exist, then his suggestion is quite perfectly reasonable – why should we look for something that does not exist? While also believing that there is no such common denominator, Abe (1995) nonetheless argues that we should still look for a common denominator, or as he puts it, a 'common basis' for accepting religious pluralism (pp.49-50). This is however unfair, for Cobb did not suggest that we should not look for a common ground for accepting religious pluralism, but that we should not look for a common denominator because it does not exist. Perhaps Abe is right about Cobb being unable to find a common basis for accepting religious pluralism<sup>56</sup>, yet it does not mean Cobb is against the search of such a common basis.

More importantly, although Abe tries to maintain that his position is more neutral or 'positionless' than that of Hick and Cobb's, he in fact still has a position (there is no common denominator) as well as a standpoint (we must look for a common basis for accepting religious pluralism) which are obviously in opposition to the position

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<sup>56</sup> As Abe (1995) comments, "Cobb is one of the unique theologians who, openly accepting the pluralistic situation, is trying to maintain the fullness of Christianity. As I said above, however, I do not see a firm basis for accepting pluralism in his theology" (p.50).

and standpoint that claim otherwise. This is perhaps one of the drawbacks for challenging the existing pluralist models from a Buddhist point of view, for they may have based too heavily on the Buddhist languages that are not meant to be interpreted in general sense. As Schmidt-Leukel (2005*a*) expresses, "It may be true that Mahayana Buddhism, more than any other religious tradition, has affirmed the need for transcending all concepts... this has hardly functioned as a criterion in the assessment of other religions" (pp.174-175). Or as Cornille (2008) comments, "But on closer inspection it [Abe's idea] may also appear as a distinctively Mahayana Buddhist conception of reality, which focuses on emptiness [zero] as the middle way between affirmation and rejection of ultimate reality" (p.126).

#### **4.6 Common tendencies of the Christian and Buddhist viewpoints**

To be fair, for the scholars that do not believe in a common denominator of all religions, it is quite reasonable for looking at religious matters from the perspective of the religions they belong to. There is nothing wrong with suggesting a philosophical description that explains the world religious situation from a Buddhist-centred perspective, as long as that the assumption involved is possible and meaningful. Perhaps Heim is right when he claims that Christianity represents the Ultimate Reality

more thoroughly than all the other religions<sup>57</sup>. We shouldn't criticise his model merely because it puts Christianity in a more superior position – it could be the reality that Christianity has given the most thorough description of the Ultimate Reality. The actual problem is that we do not know which of these assumptions is true, because all of them are currently unverifiable. That is why the critics we discussed tend to evaluate a model based on whether it is helpful, desirable or practicable rather than whether its assumption is likely.

In fact, pluralists also tend to oppose the exclusivist position not because it is believed to be false or unlikely, but because it is less helpful to the solving of interreligious conflicts. That is, we are still unable to tell which religious claims are true, and hence we can only pick the one that is most likely to help. However, if a religious belief is true, then even if it will bring the worst kind of disaster to our world, it is still true. It is therefore arbitrary to accuse Hick for proposing the possibility of a common denominator, unless one can prove this hypothesis false.

Nonetheless, as mentioned earlier, these assumptions are very often unverifiable, thus we can only examine if they have 'misunderstood' the teachings of a particular religion or if they have failed to offer much to the solving of interreligious conflicts.

This seems to be the only criterion one can apply while evaluating a model of

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<sup>57</sup> Besides Makransky's criticism mentioned previously, please see Heim (2001, pp.174-197) for the particular part of his theory that affirms the superior position of Christianity in reflecting the Trinitarian Ultimate Reality.

religious pluralism, but what if there is a model that does not assume the unverifiable? Is it possible to have a model that does not involve any unverifiable assumption, yet is able to fulfil the desirable function of a pluralist theory? Why must a pluralist model assume any religious belief to be true anyway? If the main purpose of promoting the pluralist position is to make genuine interreligious dialogue possible or to encourage interreligious tolerance, would a model be more widely applicable if it is offered as a mere practical suggestion that is even more neutral and non-religious than the one Hick proposes? As we attempt to develop a model that can respect Chinese Folk Religion equally, we will come back to these questions and discuss if it is possible and preferable to have an even more neutral and, so to speak, 'agnostic' pluralist assumption.

Assuming the unverifiable is an inevitable standpoint for the Buddhist scholars mentioned, for they have to at least assume some Buddhist teachings to be true. Moreover, for the ones who engage in interreligious dialogue, it is commonly assumed that it would only be fair if they also consider the teachings of other religions true. For instance, as he compares Augustine's theology with Buddhist teachings, Makransky (2005*b*) has attempted to show how Buddhist key ideas can also be found in Christian doctrines, written in Christian languages<sup>58</sup>. Similarly, although Senauke

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<sup>58</sup> For example, while discussing the source of the salvific power, Makransky (2005*b*) argues, "Although, as we have seen, Buddhist anthropology differs considerably from Augustine's, a Buddhist



still affirms that there are theological differences between Buddhism and Christianity, he nonetheless expresses that the spiritual roots of the two religions are one<sup>59</sup>.

Together with the examples given previously, it is obvious that the Buddhist scholars do assume at least some Christian teachings to be true – for the ones who believe in Buddhism, claiming that some Christian ideas are consistent with Buddhist doctrines is no different from claiming that those Christian ideas are true. On the same page, Christian scholars who engage in interreligious dialogue also tend to assume some Buddhist teachings to be true, thus the idea that we may have a more thorough understanding of the Ultimate Reality by learning from the others. Fernando (2005), for instance, strongly believes that Buddhism can also lead one to salvation (pp.223-224). O'Leary (2002) also explicitly claims that the existence of double religious belongings has already “demonstrated that there is no fundamental contradiction between the gospel and the Buddha's path” (p.29). And although they may not totally agree with the statements, Harris and Cornille are at least certain that we can understand the Absolute Truth more thoroughly by studying the teachings of

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response to this problem is profoundly similar in one respect. For Buddhists, as for Augustine, there can be no freedom from bondage unless something transcendent intervenes. Only someone beyond such conditioning can point the way beyond it. Only someone who fully embodies that transcendent, unconditioned dimension of being could reveal it to others, and demonstrate the way for others to be released unto it” (p.9).

<sup>59</sup> In response to Fernando's (2005) criticism, Senauke (2005*b*) makes the following conclusion, “And yet... in my heart, I feel that the distinction I am drawing between my view and Kenneth Fernando's view is merely a theological difference. We hold our faith quite differently, and could compare and contrast from now until the cows come home. But I feel that our common spiritual root is selfless love. The teachings of Christ and Buddha go beyond words and ideas to the heart of things... Either way is the path of peace, if only we give of ourselves completely” (pp.256-257).

other religions<sup>60</sup>, not to mention Christian pluralists such as Hick or Heim who would most certainly affirm the validity of other non-Christian beliefs.

It seems to be the only right thing to do – to assume that other religions also teach something true – although there are significant contrasts between them. But what if some of them are actually false? If a pluralist model is to really treat all equally and consider all assumptions possible, wouldn't assuming a belief to be true reject the possibility that it is false? To be more precise, is it essentially necessary for a pluralist to assume the naturalist or atheist belief to be false? Are we saying that it is unnecessary to establish genuine dialogue with the naturalists and solve the conflicts between us, or that the naturalist assumption is simply too unlikely and immoral to deserve a position in a pluralist model? If it is the latter, then Dawkins (2006, pp.317-348) or Hitchens (2007, pp.173-194) would strongly beg to differ.

In Chapter 3, we learned that although some of Hick's assumptions are religious in a sense, his major idea is generally regarded as a 'second-order' philosophical explanation, and is criticised by Cheetham (2003) for being unexcited, not useful, and failing to give anyone passion to adopt his pluralist position (p.167). Supposedly, then,

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<sup>60</sup> After discussing Rodrigo and Pieris's experiences/comments on multiple religious belonging, Harris (2002) concludes, "Pieris in fact holds together the need for rootedness in one religious tradition and the need for plurality of insights into Truth. It is not a case of multiple belonging or dual belonging but a search for the Word that goes beyond structures, mediated through the language of one's own faith in encounter with that of others" (pp.90-91). Also consistent with this idea, Cornille (2008) writes, "These differences may offer a promising opportunity for genuine dialogue and growth... It is thus not surprising that many Christians engaged in the dialogue with Buddhism experience little conflict between the Buddhist and the Christian spiritual paths and find in Buddhist practices an occasion to enrich their own spiritual growth" (p.53).

if a model is even more non-religious than Hick's and attempts to give equal weight to the naturalist position, it would be criticised more strongly for these reasons. It is not my intention to go as far as proposing a completely non-religious model, but if one wishes to at least suggest to consider a 'pre-axial' tradition to be equally preferable and authentic, he not only has to respond to the question as to why the said model is necessary or beneficial, but also why the existing models did not treat these traditions equally. That being said, if one can successfully offer equal status to such traditions, others may then adopt the approach and attempt to take on the more difficult task, that is, to treat naturalism or atheism equally.

Apart from assuming that the Buddhist doctrines must be true, the scholars engaging in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue also tend to stress more on the consistencies between the two religions than the differences. For example, although Schmidt-Leukel (2005*b*) is aware that Buddhists and Christians perceive the roles of religious mediators differently, he nonetheless believes that there is something consistent on the higher level<sup>61</sup> – the Buddhist idea of non-attachment and the Christian idea of loving involvement are not necessarily conflicting, for they can be complementary and mutually qualifying. By recognising both Buddha and Christ to be “authentic mediators of salvific transcendent reality,” a theory may “transform and

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<sup>61</sup> As he argues, “In any case, the fact that the criteriological emphasis of Buddhism and Christianity in their assessment of other potential mediators of transcendence is different, does not necessarily entail a claim to superiority” (Schmidt-Leukel, 2005*b*, p.175).

enrich the followers of both" (ibid, p.175).

However, as Heim (2001) argues, although it could be true that the two religions are consistent in some ways, it should definitely not be forgotten that very often it is the unresolvable contradictions that cause the conflicts between religions (p.27). For the pluralists who are already tolerant, they would most certainly have little problem in accepting the Hindu claim that Jesus is merely one of the many *avatara* (Schmidt-Leukel, 2005b, p.171), but for other Christians who hold an exclusivist position, the claim would be quite difficult to bear, for it has seemingly insulted the uniqueness and transcendency of Christ. On the other hand, the Christian claim that Jesus is on the same level of divinity with God is in turn one of the many reasons why some Muslims consider Christianity false, or, at the very least, not entirely true. It seems to lead us back to the more basic question: why do we promote religious pluralism in the first place? And whom do we intend to persuade?

If the mission of promoting religious pluralism is to entertain not only the elites, but also the general public, then celebrating the consistencies between the world religions is not necessarily the best approach, for it is not the main concern for general religious believers – general Christians, for example, are not rejecting the fact that Buddhism can also bring peace to the world (e.g., Fernando, 2005, pp.222-225), or that its teaching can make us a better person (e.g., Makransky, 2005b, pp.5-7); they

are rejecting Buddhism as a religion because some of its truth-claims are considered inconsistent with certain Christian doctrines. Even Heim's confessional ideas may be considered unacceptable by some, for it seems to have explicitly contradicted the Christian belief that there are only two outcomes when the judgement day comes – you either go to the Christian Heaven or you do not. And if you do not go to the Christian Heaven, then wherever you may go, it is supposed to be the limitlessly worst religious-end. This traditional idea, however, is quite clearly inconsistent with Heim's claim that all promoted religious-ends are equally desirable. From a pluralist perspective, Heim's assumption is likely and fairly desirable, but is the promotion of religious pluralism intended to persuade those who are already liberal and tolerant, or the others who are relatively traditional, especially the most extreme exclusivists?

#### **4.7 Responses from the perspective of a less authentic religion**

The major difference between interpreting Hick's model from the perspectives of Buddhism and Chinese Folk Religion is that the former is very clearly regarded as an authentic religion that can effect the soteriological transformation Hick describes, while the latter is not. In addition to my argument that it is unable to meet Hick's criterion, the study may also help to show that Hick and his critics tend to understand

religion from the perspective of an institutional religion. In fact, even if Chinese Folk Religion really fails Hick's test, his criteriology can still be correct – it could be just that what Chinese Folk Religion teaches is simply “not an authentic response to Real” (Hick, 1997, p.162). It would, however, still be discussable if his definition of religion or the way he understands religion is based on referencing how Christianity and other ‘world great faiths’ function and does not reflect how Chinese Folk Religion works – an explanatory theory is entitled to consider any religious tradition false, but it would not be pluralistic or fair if the very foundation of the theory, that is, how one should approach and understand religions in the first place, tends to favour certain religious positions. It would be even more questionable if the religious position one favours is the one he or she personally belongs to.

One example of the allegedly institutional-religions-centred preconception is the belief that salvation/liberation is the main concern for all religions. As suggested in the Introduction, the major difference between exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism is their standpoints on whether the followers of other religions can also attain salvation/liberation. From the general pluralist point of view, it is not only believed that the followers of other religions may achieve salvation/liberation, but also that all religions are able to guide people to either the same or different salvific-ends. For examples, as a theologian who strongly believes that there is no fundamental

contradiction between Buddhism and Christianity, O'Leary (2002) quite explicitly claims that "all religions have to do with salvation and healing" (p.40). And although Cabezon disagrees that religious teachings are all about salvation and express that "all teachings are at best only provisionally or relatively true if and in so far as they can be used to guide people to Enlightenment," he did not reject that such guidance is essential to all religions (as cited in Schmidt-Leukel, 2005a, p.172).

Although it is not always about whether the others could also obtain salvation, the reality about salvation is very often the main focus of the discussions concerning religious pluralism. Heim's (1995) model, for instance, is strongly based on the hypothesis of religious-ends (pp.144-151). And when Makransky (2005a) interprets Heim's model from a Mahayana Buddhist perspective, the discussions are also heavily focused on the salvific qualities of Christianity and Buddhism (pp.189-199). The issue of salvation, Enlightenment or any other possible religious-end can hence be considered the most important issue for the said religionists who concern the explanation of world religious situation. However, as this thesis will argue, Chinese Folk Religion is one of those religious traditions which do not concern religious-end or afterlife as much as Christianity or Buddhism does. May the purpose of proposing a theory of religious pluralism be making a hypothesis that honestly describes the world religious situation or convincing the audiences to respect the faith of the others

mutually, it is questionable if a model has either intentionally or mistakenly excluded certain groups of people or religious phenomena from the picture<sup>62</sup>.

Some scholars who concern interreligious dialogue are in fact well aware of the existences of such positions. For example, Tanaka's (2003) description of a 'Buddhist' he encounters is quite similar to the Chinese Folk Religion followers we will study, he says:

A woman in her late seventies suffering from cancer stands in front of the image of *Kannon-sama* (Avalokiteshvara). All medical treatments have failed and she is told that she has perhaps one year to live... She has not arrived at a doctrinal Buddhist understanding of what happens to her after death... There are thousands of people like her at Buddhist temples throughout the world. And they equally represent the living Buddhist traditions of today along with the meditating monks and nuns (pp.106-107).

As the above passage shows, because the sick woman is categorised by Tanaka as a 'Buddhist', her alternative way of practicing Buddhism is understood as a

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<sup>62</sup> During a personal interview with Hick (March 5, 2009) regarding Chinese Folk Religion, he almost instantly identified the religion as authentic and valuable. It is also claimed that he has strongly suggested the Western readers to learn from 'Chinese traditional religion' which he sees is very tolerant and even pluralistic (see Hick, 2005, p.9).



manifestation of “not arriving at a doctrinal Buddhist understanding.” While his idea that we should also consider her acts as an equally valid representation of Buddhism is tolerative and admirable, I must however disagree with the approach that forces the woman under the umbrella of Buddhism, because what she did is quite irrelevant to what traditional Buddhism teaches. Rather than regarding her as a Buddhist who did not arrive at a doctrinal Buddhist understanding, I suggest that we should consider her an individual religious believer who has already arrived at an equally recognisable understanding of her own religious beliefs. After all, we cannot be certain that she did not understand the Buddhist doctrine correctly, but only that she did not understand the Buddhist doctrine as we understand it. At least from a pluralist point of view, it is possible that her understanding or action is more Buddhist, or that her understanding or action is not meant to be Buddhist.

Since Hick clearly grades the core teaching of Buddhism as an authentic response to the ‘Real’, the Buddhist scholars may not find the rationale for his criteriology offensive, and that is why they tend to focus more on other problems of Hick’s theory, such as the problem of treating the ‘Golden Rule’ as the most essential Buddhist idea or claiming that the religious-ends of Christianity and Buddhism are the same. Makransky’s (2005*a*) viewpoint, for instance, is an attempt to give equal status to the particular Mahayana Buddhist position he belongs to – his theory has neither

concerned the allegedly unauthentic/non-valuable traditions nor Hick's general understanding of religions (e.g., the understanding that all fully-developed religions would treat salvific matters as their ultimate concern). That being said, Makransky's response has nonetheless shown us how one may offer equal status to a non-Christian tradition by adopting Heim's theory, which we will further discuss in Chapter 8 and 9.

To restate the major aims of this research, it is to demonstrate that Hick's theory has put Chinese Folk Religion in an inferior position because: (1) his preconceptions about religion and his approach to define/understand a religion are inapplicable to Chinese Folk Religion; and (2) his criteriology implies that Chinese Folk Religion is an unauthentic and non-valuable religious tradition. The rest of this thesis, then, is to show that Chinese Folk Religion has indeed been graded as unauthentic and non-valuable for the above reasons, and that such grading requires further justifications. The thesis will also suggest ways to respond to the issues, which include the proposal of the idea of 'multiple criteria' and integrating the Chinese Folk Religion's conceptions about religion, morality and salvation into Hick's interpretation of the world religious situation – it will be argued that Hick's current understandings of these concepts are inconsistent with that of Chinese Folk Religion, thus not a thorough enough explanatory theory, even if Chinese Folk Religion is to be graded as unauthentic and non-valuable. The approach to base his understanding of a

religion heavily on scriptural interpretations, for example, would result in distorting what Chinese Folk Religion believes or mistakenly forcing its followers into other religious categories, for it is not recognisable by scriptural interpretation. The next Chapter will therefore commence the study of Chinese Folk Religion by arguing how it should be understood and defined.

## 5. DEFINING CHINESE FOLK RELIGION: TOWARDS A WORKING

### VIEWPOINT

#### 5.1 Introduction and justification

Chinese religious studies have attracted increasing attentions from the Western academia in the last hundred years, and contemporary Chinese religionists have started to reconsider the reliabilities of such researches and theories. According to Ge (2009a), although Western scholars are without question studying the religions in China, these are in fact 'Western studies' rather than 'Chinese studies', as the scholars tend to apply Western models and methodologies onto their theories (p.1-3). Ge further indicates that what the Western and Chinese scholars have studied are often different, especially when it comes to '*Zh ngguó mínji n z ngjiào*' ('Chinese folk religion') or, as some may prefer, '*Zh ngguó mínji n xiny ng*' ('Chinese folk belief').

Basically, Ge believes Chinese Folk Religion has been ignored or understood wrongly by the Western or even some Chinese scholars. Based on the traditional definition of religion, the so-called 'Chinese folk religion' is often defined as the mere 'left-over' of the fully developed religions such as Buddhism, Taoism or Confucianism – much similar to 'Folk Christianity' to Christianity – and is therefore

considered irrelevant or less helpful to the scholarly studies of Chinese traditional religions (Zhu, 2009, pp.46-48). That is why many religionists who study Chinese religion in general (e.g., Yu, 2005; Adler, 2002) have chosen to stay focus on the 'three great religions in China' and simply treated Chinese folk religion as some cultural-religious customs or 'lay form' of the three 'elite' religions rather than an independently-functioning religious tradition itself.

Nonetheless, as some Chinese scholars (e.g., Zhu, 2009; Lin, 2008*b*; L. Q. Chen, 2008) try to argue, Chinese Folk Religion is not only a fairly independent religion, but also the most influential and important religious tradition in China. According to their studies, the majority of the religious believers in China are in fact the followers of Chinese Folk Religion rather than Buddhism or Taoism, even though they may claim to be a Buddhist or Taoist – the number of 'genuine' Buddhists or Taoists in China is lower than what some have estimated (Zhu, 2009, p.55; L. Q. Chen, 2008, pp.6-8). It is therefore a mistake to put this 'biggest religious tradition in China' in an inferior position or treat it as the 'folk version' of the three great religions, for it is in reality a distinctive and influential religion (*ibid*)<sup>63</sup>.

The question as to whether Chinese Folk Religion should be studied and

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<sup>63</sup> Similar to Zhu's (2009) observation, Adherents.com (2005) also seems to support the idea that most of the religious believers in China should be counted as the followers of 'Chinese traditional religion' and estimates its number at 394 million, which is more than the total number of the world Buddhist population (376 million) or all the other primal-indigenous religions believers added together (300 million).

understood as a religion is greatly determined by the definition of religion. As L. Q. Chen (2008) describes, religion is classically treated as something 'institutional' and is expected to contain certain authoritative doctrines and scriptures, spiritual leaders, institutional systems and behavioural guidelines (p.12). If religion is to be defined this way, then Chinese Folk Religion would be excluded from the definition, for it does not contain the said elements.

There is no right or wrong definition of a term, but a definition should be reasonable, sensible and relevant to the problem one is dealing with. If a research merely aims at describing the realities of Chinese folk religious phenomena from a historical perspective, it should be acceptable to avoid the puzzle of arguing for its quality as a religion, because such behaviours can be understood as a social-cultural mixture of religious traditions in this case. However, if our aim is to discuss its functionality or religiosity, then it would be unsatisfactory if the tradition is not defined precisely. Does it refer to all religious activities that are practiced by 'the folks', which include everything that also belongs to the three great institutional religions? Or is it, on the contrary, all the religious matters that do not belong to other named religions in China? If it is the latter, then how could it be validly treated as an independent religious tradition, and how is it different from folk religion in general? These questions are critical if one attempts to discuss the characteristics of Chinese

Folk Religion as if it is an independent religion.

This Chapter will introduce the major methodological issues related to the studies of Chinese Folk Religion, the problems of studying this particular religious tradition, and the scholarly arguments that concern its definition. Finally, as a response to those arguments, I will suggest an approach that can identify this very religion as well as its followers. Basically, it would be an approach that tries to eliminate the limitations of two existing models by defining Chinese Folk Religion on two aspects simultaneously<sup>64</sup>. Moreover, in relation to the questions raised previously, I will also explain why the traditional or 'Western' approaches to understand a religion are responsible for Chinese Folk Religion being treated unfairly.

## **5.2 Theories of defining Chinese Folk Religion**

As mentioned in the Literature Review section, the studies of Chinese Folk Religion is said to be hindered in China. Therefore, although it is also argued that certain Western scholars have applied the 'wrong approaches' to their studies, their research has still outnumbered the ones conducted by local scholars, and their impacts and influences to the latter are significant. Especially when it comes to the aspect of

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<sup>64</sup> The approach I developed has also been published in the journal *Asian Philosophy*. For reference, please see Wong (2011, pp.153-170).

research methodology concerning the studies of folk religion, many contemporary Chinese scholars would have to reference the theories proposed by the Western pioneers, within which the models by Freedman (1974), De Groot (1892), Garnet (1975), Watson (1976; 2002) and Yang (1967) may have received the most attentions<sup>65</sup>.

In order to define and separate the religious phenomena that they witness in China from other known religious traditions, Western religionists in the past (e.g., De Groot, 1892) have tried to draw a line between the so-called 'elite religion' and 'peasant religion', in which the latter is represented by all religious beliefs, concepts and practices that are derived from or simply do not belong to any institutional religion, or, in other words, elite religion. The terminology is based on the belief that institutional religions are mainly followed by social elites, while all the other religious traditions that do not involve any authoritative doctrine, scripture or organisation are mainly practiced by the lower-class peasants. In addition, it is also believed that the peasant religious practices or concepts are more or less degenerated from the elite religions, that is, although these practices or concepts are not taught by the elite religions, they are nonetheless the folk mutations or variations of what those elite

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<sup>65</sup> In fact, according to Jiang's (2006) survey of the essential literatures concerning Chinese Folk Religion, the Japanese scholars have actually influenced the Chinese academia more than the Westerners. Many Japanese terms such as *minzoku shinrai* (folk belief) or even *shukyo* (religion) were directly adopted by the Chinese. That being said, Jiang also realises that the influences from Japan have been diminishing in the last few decades as the studies from the West gain more attentions (pp.204-214).



religions teach. For the above reasons, Dutch sinologist De Groot has chosen to focus on studying the elite religions only, as he believes the source of the peasant religions is embedded in these elite religions anyway (ibid, pp.1-2). Similar categorisation can still be witnessed in the works of some Western scholars, such as Adler (2002) or Fowler and Fowler (2008), who aim to describe the 'popular religion' of China in general<sup>66</sup>.

Nonetheless, as more anthropological materials are revealed, there are scholars who begin to question such a traditional viewpoint. According to Granet's (1975) analysis of the religions in China, for example, peasant religion is actually the one that had influenced the elite religions (p.97). This is evidenced by the phenomenon that many Chinese traditional concepts such as filial piety or fidelity are strongly emphasised in certain Buddhist scriptures written in China, even though these concepts may have contradicted some core ideas of Buddhism (ibid; also Hou & Fan, 1994, pp.230-259). Freedman (1974) also rejects the terms 'peasant religion' and 'elite religion', for he believes the teachings or practices of that nameless religious tradition found in China are in reality embraced by both the peasants and elites, and therefore it would be mistaken to define it by the identity of its followers (pp.19-32;

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<sup>66</sup> Sometimes the term 'elite religion' may not be simply referred to certain institutional religions such as Buddhism or Taoism, but also the folk religious beliefs and rituals that have been practiced or systemised regionally by the intellectuals or government officials. Please see Ward (1985) for more details.

also Zhu, 2009, p.47).

However, since our task is to analyse the beliefs and religiosities of Chinese Folk Religion, it is rather irrelevant as to whether or not it is the one that had influenced other Chinese religions in the first place. Also, even if it is only followed by certain social group (e.g., peasants), this would still be insufficient to qualify it as a religion. Having said that, the scholars who choose to adopt the categorisation of 'elite religion' and 'folk religion' would usually try to offer a more detailed definition for both terms. For example, according to Chen (2003):

Folk Taoism should be considered a quasi-religion that involves charity association, religious association, secret association and any religious belief that are created by the people themselves... Official Taoism, on the other hand, is referred to the religious tradition that is based on the beliefs in animism, deities, philosophical Taoism, *Yi* (Changes), yin-yang, concept of the five elements, *Book of Wei*, medicine, fortune-telling and witchery. It is also a naturalistic religion that concerns immortality, spells as well as earthly benefits (p.70).

Although this kind of definition that is based on belief contents may help to

describe folk religion (or, in this case, 'Folk Taoism') and Official Taoism more clearly, it is still unable to help identify precisely what their differences are, because most of the belief contents of Official Taoism listed above (e.g., beliefs in deities, fortune-telling etc.) are also witnessed in Folk Taoism. In other words, what use are these definitions if they cannot effectively distinguish the two religious traditions from each other?

Other than defining Chinese Folk Religion by the identity of its followers or belief contents, some Chinese scholars try to define it by its structures. On the one hand, there are arguments that Chinese folk belief is in essence 'a form of belief' rather than a religion. For instance, as Zhao describes:

'Folk belief' can be referred to a lot of things. It is a popular belief phenomenon that is in opposition to the traditionally and socially predominant religions... It exists among the folks, and is different from the traditional religious beliefs. Some of them have a relatively stable organisation. It is usually accepted by a large amount of people who live in the same region or community (as cited in Lin, 2008*b*, p.51).

Wang also expresses a similar viewpoint, he writes, "The so-called 'folk belief'

is different from the institutional religions in that it does not involve any systematically ritual, scripture, organisation and leadership... it is a form of belief that contains certain internal structure and self-operating logic" (ibid, p.51). Basically, these definitions tend to treat Chinese Folk Religion as a phenomenon rather than a religion, mainly because it is structurally different from the major institutional religions. The upside of this approach is that we may avoid the problems of defining it by the identity of its followers. This is especially helpful if the main purpose of a study is to understand the religiosities of certain social group, namely the 'participants of Chinese folk religious phenomenon', rather than separate them from other 'elite religious believers'. This approach is adopted by Hou and Fan (1994), who attempt to study Chinese Folk Religion as some sort of 'religious consciousnesses'. And although Zhu (2009) strongly believes that Chinese Folk Religion should be regarded as the most important religious tradition in China, he also claims ambiguously that it is 'the religious tradition of all Chinese people', and that it is a kind of 'social ideology' (pp.44-47). The downside of this approach is therefore obvious – Chinese Folk Religion is not to be treated as an independently functioning religion.

Adopting the concept of 'diffused religion' developed by Yang (1967, pp.136-137; 176-177; 296), Li (1998) tries to propose a different model that regards Chinese Folk Religion as a religion. In response to the definition of 'religion', he first

expresses:

When some foreigners ask us, "What is your religion?" We often find it difficult to answer. It doesn't seem right if we answer "Taoism" or "Buddhism," because we don't actually believe in it or belong to it... The fact that we simply can't tell what our religion is has reflected the core of the problem, which is that the question is asked wrongly. Westerners tend to ask what religion the others believe because they think supernatural belief must exist in a form of religion. If they can understand that the beliefs of the others may not be a 'religion', and change the question to "How is your religious belief?" We would then be able to give an answer easily (p.168).

As he further argues, the folk belief in China is a very complex religious mixture, in which some Buddhist and Taoist ideas have formed an important part, but there are also elements that do not belong to any other religion. Ancestor worship, as an example, has existed long before the founding of Taoism, which suggests that these folk beliefs are more than a product derived from or a mixture of other Chinese institutional religions (ibid, pp.168-169). As Z. L. Huang (2008) strongly argues, many folk religious practices (e.g., Guan-di worship) were actually established by the

folks first, and then being integrated into Taoism as well as Buddhism later (pp.47-48).

Therefore, the traditional approach that puts Chinese Folk Religion under the umbrella of Taoism is simply mistaken (ibid).

The fact that there are elements in Chinese Folk Religion that did not belong to other Chinese religions is quite important, for they may very well serve as the definition of this nameless religion. After roughly describing what he sees as the nature of Chinese popular religious belief, Li (1998) tries to justify his assumption that it should be treated as a religion by adopting the concept of 'diffused religion' (p.169). As he describes, 'diffused religion' is a kind of cultural-religious belief system of which the belief contents are mixed with everyday life with no significant differentiation, and is a tradition that involves no systematically doctrine, authoritative scripture, or strictly organised institution (ibid). He then calls this tradition "Chinese Folk Religion," and lists the beliefs and practices that have been 'diffused' into the culture and everyday life of its believers, which include ancestor worship, deities worship, seasonal ritual, cultural ceremony and etiquette, incantation, and worldview (ibid, p.170). As he concludes, it is unfair and indeed mistaken to use the Western criterion to determine whether Chinese Folk Religion is a religion, for the Western concept of religion is developed by using the institutional religions knowable to the West as models, which are in every aspect alien to the Chinese religion he describes

(ibid, pp.168-170).

In his earlier publication, however, Li (1992) actually expresses that Chinese Folk Religion may contain some form of doctrine, which is integrated into the everyday life of its believers instead of a scripture (p.180). This standpoint is supported by Jin (1995; 2007, pp.352-356), Zhang (as cited in Ge, 2009, pp.184-185) and Wang (1997), within which Wang has also named this tradition “Chinese Folk Religion,” and describes its ‘doctrines’ as the belief of deities, ancestor spirits and ghosts; certain seasonal celebrations and rituals; organisations that based on region or family; as well as a systematic worldview and cosmology. As Lin (2008*b*) comments, Wang’s approach affirms the ‘religion quality’ of Chinese Folk Religion from an essentialistic perspective by emphasising its distinctive belief contents and differences with other folk religions (p.52).

Lastly, there are also scholars who suggest that Chinese Folk Religion is meant to be defined ambiguously:

In order to define Chinese folk belief and study its interrelationship with Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, we can actually apply a lazy approach, which is to include everything that exists outside the official religions, such as folk religions, secret denominations, and folk customs,

into the ambit of Chinese folk belief. An indistinct definition would work better than a precise one, as it simply can't be precise (She, as cited in Liu, 2006, p.24).

Liu also agrees with this viewpoint and adds that Chinese folk belief must be studied in a dialectical and dynamical manner (ibid, p.28). And although L. Q. Chen (2008) tends to believe that there is no intrinsic difference between Chinese Folk Religion and other folk religions in the world, he nonetheless expresses a similar view that folk religions usually contain the 'extensiveness' to tolerate and integrate all kinds of religious beliefs they encounter, and that this 'extensiveness' should be treated as its major characteristic (pp.11-2).

### **5.3 The dilemma of defining Chinese Folk Religion**

For a historical or anthropological study of Chinese Folk Religion, it is acceptable to include all religious matters that exist outside the realms of any other 'official religions'. However, if the research is to describe and, so to speak, prove the existence of Chinese Folk Religion as a religion that does not fit into Hick's pluralist interpretation, we would have to at least explain on the theoretical level how the study



subjects can be treated as the members of the same religious collective. As Lu (2006) concludes in the conference mentioned above, for a religious tradition that does not involve any official doctrine, scripture or organisation<sup>67</sup>, how we define it would depend on what we attempt to study.

In fact, for the contemporary Chinese scholars who are also interested in studying the beliefs and religiosities of Chinese Folk Religion, they tend to define it by its essentialistic concepts shared by most of its followers, much similar to Li's (1998) approach we previously discussed. The concepts described by these scholars are quite consistent, which suggests that, although they did not form into any authoritative doctrine or scripture, these concepts are considered something general or foundational in the sense that they are supposed to be witnessed in at least a significant number of regional sects. The concept concerning the departee, for example, is quite widely accepted. As Cheng (2006) describes:

The basic concept of Chinese Folk Religion is the affirmation of the existence of ghosts and the awe towards them... although ghosts are

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<sup>67</sup> Fairly speaking, some may argue that Chinese Folk Religion has indeed involved some form of organisation as well. For example, as Zhang and Lin (2008) understand, the Seventh City Gate Guan-di Temple in Quanzhou is functioning as the biggest Guan-di worship institution within the region, and has also at least 70 temples in other countries such as Taiwan, Singapore and Philippine (pp.253-5). However, it should be noticed that this organisation is by no means the official 'church' for Guan-di worship sect. That is, there are many practices of Guan-di worship in China that have no connection with the Seventh City Gate Guan-di Temple (e.g., Feuchtwang, 2001, p.110; 113).

regarded as an omnipotent being, it is also believed that they would respect the power of morality, and fear the saints or good people (p.205).

The above statements imply that the concept is generally held by the followers of Chinese Folk Religion (i.e., not the followers of a particular regional sect). The same goes for Hou and Fan (1994) who tend to describe the 'religious consciousnesses' of the Chinese folks in general, as if such descriptions are applicable to the majority of these Chinese folks. If 'doctrine' is to be understood as the belief or concept held by all members of a religious collective, then one may suggest that Chinese Folk Religion does in fact contain a doctrine, or, to be more precise, a different kind of doctrine.

Apart from religious beliefs, the emphasis of certain virtues – which include loyalty, bravery, benevolence, righteousness, etiquette, wisdom, and honesty – are also considered something foundational. According to Yang (2008), the main reason for Guan-di to become one of the most popular deities in China is that he is believed to have demonstrated most of these virtues (pp.17-8; X. X. Xu, 2008, pp.120-125; Y. H. Xu, 2008). Z. L. Huang (2008) also supports the idea, and further points out that the most important vision of Chinese folk belief is to instruct people to behave in a

good way (pp.406-7)<sup>68</sup>.

Other beliefs and concepts that many scholars consider popular and general include the worship of deities and ancestors, the beliefs of fortune-telling and feng-shui, the use of propitious charms and ornaments, the concept of *Tien*, as well as a 'distinctive' cosmology/worldview (Li, 1998, pp.170-8; 203-8; Wu, 2009, pp.85-8; Feng & Li, 1994, p.8; Z. L. Huang, 2008, pp.406-7; Z. Y. Huang, 2008, p.47). Nonetheless, some of these concepts (e.g., feng-shui, ancestor worship etc.) are too taught by the three great Chinese religions. As Teiser (1996) puts it, "None of the examples of Chinese popular religion is defined primarily by beliefs that necessarily exclude others" (p.23). How, then, can one identify the subjects of this study, namely 'the followers of Chinese Folk Religion', based on the concepts that can also be found in other traditions? If someone witnessed a religious phenomenon and attempts to describe it to us, saying, "It's a tradition that believes in a sacred book called *Bible* and a divine figure called Jesus Christ," no one would be able to tell whether it is Catholic or Protestant – identification is impossible unless one can provide information that is sufficiently distinctive.

Similar to the approach to define Chinese Folk Religion by its non-institutional

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<sup>68</sup> One may then claim that such moral code or instruction would pass Hick's ethical criterion, for it also intends to effect positive personal transformation. However, as I will argue later, 'behaving in a good way' is not necessarily equal to 'benefiting the others', because not everyone considers acting selflessly the best way to behave.

structure, some believe that they can identify it by describing the religious attitudes demonstrated by its followers (see Lin, 2008*b*, p.51), within which Lin (2008*a*) has summarised the findings by Jia (2003), Wu (1996) and Zheng (1999) and concluded ten major attitudes, which include spontaneity, utility, liberty, complexity, 'folklority', regionality, ethnicity, tenacity, 'grassroots-ness', and the willingness to accept foreign religious beliefs (pp.496-498). However, the downside of doing so is that, just like the non-institutional structure, these religious attitudes are also demonstrated by the followers of other folk religions as well. That is why Lin merely regards the phenomenon as a 'quasi-religion' or 'a form of belief' rather than a religion (ibid, p.495). Wu (2009), who emphasises more on the compatibility and utility of Chinese folk belief, also expresses rather ambiguously that these religiosities are demonstrated by Chinese religious believers in general, not the followers a distinctive religion in particular (pp.283-285).

As mentioned, whether Chinese Folk Religion is a religion would greatly depend on the definition of 'religion'. If religion is to be seen as a set of beliefs rooted in certain authoritative doctrine, scripture and institution, then, according to our understandings so far, Chinese Folk Religion is most certainly not a religion. However, if we are to define 'religion' more broadly as a system of thoughts that concerns beliefs in supernatural matters, religious practices and a moral code, then it may have

a better chance to qualify. In fact, as Berkowitz, Brandauer and Reed (1969) try to argue from the structural-functionalistic point of view, Chinese popular religion can be seen as “one of many structurally related elements, usually called ‘institutions’, in a society,” in which the term “institution” is referred to “patterned behaviour of people within the society which is usually directed toward one sphere of social activity” (pp.1-2). Also attempting to give more credits to the Chinese religious phenomenon he witnesses, Yang (1967) defines religion as follows:

[Religion is] the system of belief, ritualistic practices, and organizational relationships designed to deal with ultimate matters of human life such as the tragedy of death, unjustifiable sufferings, unaccountable frustrations, uncontrollable hostilities that threaten to shatter human social ties, and the vindication of dogmas against contradictory evidences from realistic experience. Such matters transcend the conditional, finite world of empirical, rational knowledge, and to cope with them man is impelled to seek strength from faith in such nonempirical realms as spiritual power inspired by man's conceptions of the supernatural (p.1).

It appears that Yang's definition is able to treat Chinese Folk Religion as much as

a religion as other 'world great faiths', and is therefore quite preferable for this study.

That being said, even if it is able to qualify some folk religions as an equally legitimate religion, it is still unable to help identifying Chinese Folk Religion – the definition merely tells us what religion is, but not what Chinese Folk Religion is. In other words, if we are able to distinguish Chinese Folk Religion from any other religious tradition, then we may treat it as a religion using Yang's definition, but we must first find a way to distinguish it.

We may conclude that the approaches to define Chinese Folk Religion by its structure or beliefs are problematic, for these structure and beliefs are also witnessed in other religious traditions. The question that needs to be asked is what if we take both elements into account?

#### **5.4 A working viewpoint for this thesis**

As I suggest, for the nature and purpose of this thesis, we may combine the advantages of both approaches to identify the subjects we wish to study – Chinese Folk Religion can be regarded as a distinctive religious tradition with a system of beliefs that concerns Chinese fortune-telling, feng-shui, the concept of *Tien* etc., of which the structure is non-institutional, and the followers would demonstrate what we

may roughly call the 'folk religious attitudes'. In this case, those who worship the Buddhist deities by offering burning incenses or meat dishes, for instance, would be treated as Chinese Folk Religion followers rather than Buddhists or folk religion believers in general – they are not treated as Buddhists because they perform the practices 'folk religiously'; and they are not just general folk religion believers because the concepts and rituals involved are Chinese. On the contrary, for those who practice Buddhism mainly for the attainment of ultimate liberation, they would be treated as Buddhists rather than Chinese Folk Religion believers because they do not demonstrate the said folk religious attitudes. To put it differently, in respond to the argument that its beliefs are also witnessed in other religious traditions in China, its folk religiosities would work as its identity; and regarding the concern that other non-Chinese folk religions may also have such folk religiosities; its Chinese religious beliefs would in turn work as its identity.

The dilemma of defining Chinese Folk Religion is that if it is defined by the beliefs alone, it would overlap with the three great religions; and if it is defined by its religiosities or structure, it would then overlap with other religious phenomena that show the similar religiosities or structure. The 'combined approach' I suggest, on the other hand, would at least be able to single out the religious phenomenon we attempt to study. Since it also takes into account its religious beliefs and concepts, the

definition should satisfy the critics (e.g., Lin, 2008*a*; Wu, 2009) who believe that one cannot simply regard religiosities or religious attitudes as a distinctive religious tradition; and since religion can be defined more broadly as a system of belief and ritualistic practices related to supernatural matters, it should be acceptable to treat Chinese Folk Religion – which is now distinguishable – as a religion, even though it does not involve any authoritative doctrine, organisation or scripture.

Although I have mentioned several beliefs, concepts, practices, structure and attitudes that are believed to be related to Chinese Folk Religion, I have not yet provided a thorough descriptions of any of them. The actual task of defining this religion will be accomplished in the remaining Chapters as I describe and discuss its characteristics – the descriptions of its ‘functionally-oriented’ nature, for example, will become part of its definition, even though the main purpose of the discussion is to examine the position of such nature in Hick’s theory. The next two Chapters will first attempt to describe its general beliefs and concepts (i.e., the contents that may also be found in the three great religions), so that we can at least have a better idea as to what this thesis refers to. These descriptions are normally unnecessary, for they are not directly related to the main arguments of the thesis – when Makransky (2005*a*) tries to establish a dialogue between Heim’s model and Mahayana Buddhism, he does not have to describe the general beliefs of the latter, because we are supposed to have a



basic understanding of what he is referring to, and when he supports his argument by referencing certain Mahayana Buddhist doctrines and scriptures, we know that these doctrines and scriptures are supposed to be a legitimate representation of what the tradition teaches. The description of the general beliefs of Chinese Folk Religion is however essential not only because we cannot simply refer to any authoritative scripture, but also because the academia does not even have consensus as to whether it is a distinctive religion, let alone its teachings. That being said, apart from helping to identify the phenomenon I speak of, the descriptions will also serve as the starting point of suggesting the incompatibilities between Chinese Folk Religion and Hick's pluralist interpretation. The discussion of the concept of *Tien* in Chapter 7, for instance, will help to examine how the religion concerns the ideas of Ultimate Reality and salvation, which are two key ideas of Hick's theory.

### **5.5 Conclusion: a pluralist approach to understand other faiths**

It is by no means a common approach to define a religion by the religious attitudes its followers demonstrate, but if we are to adopt the, so to speak, 'classical Western approach', we would certainly come to a conclusion either that Chinese Folk Religion is not a religion or that it is unrecognisable.

As argued, Hick has particularly used his scriptural interpretations to support his soteriological and ethical criteriology. He appears to be implying that his Quranic interpretations, for instance, are to be treated as the sole representations of what Islam truly teaches, and that the Islamic phenomena that contradict his understandings of the Qur'an (e.g., to cut off the thieves' hands) are less authentic responses to the 'Real' (Hick, 1989a, pp.322-325; 326-327). What is meaningful is that if we are to apply the approach I suggested to define and understand Chinese Folk Religion, then from the perspective of such viewpoint, these Islamic phenomena should also be treated as a legitimate representation of Islam; and if they are as much as a part of Islam as the Qur'an, Hick would need to further justify his criteriology by explaining why the ideas behind these phenomena are presumably less reliable<sup>69</sup>.

Apart from using his scriptural interpretations as evidences, Hick also believes that the ethical principle he speaks of is intrinsically true almost in a secular sense, that is, the principle is true not because it is imposed by a higher power (ibid, p.312). If that is the case, however, how can he possibly convince those who disagree with such principle to believe that it is more trustworthy? If Hick is to justify his criteriology by implying that it is consistent with the religious texts (which is supposedly imposed by a higher power), he would need to explain why the 'evil'

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<sup>69</sup> Please see Chapter 10 for further elaboration.

religious phenomena he describes are less reliable than their respective scriptures; and if he is to imply that the principle is intrinsically true regardless of whether any religion has taught it, then he should further justify the reason why he can be so certain that it is true – his notion that “one cannot prove such a fundamental principle” would simply be unconvincing for those who deeply believe that the fundamental principle is something else.

Although he does not think they are ‘authentic’, Hick has clearly taken into consideration the religious phenomena he finds evil, because such phenomena are without question parts of the concurrent religious situation. Therefore, even if we are to understand Chinese Folk Religion as merely ‘a form of belief’ or religious phenomenon rather than a religion, it should be something that deserves some attentions both because it is different from either the ‘pre-axial’ or ‘post-axial’ religions Hick describes and because it is claimed to have as many as 394 million followers (see footnote 63). This Chapter was not intending to prove that it is indeed a religion (for it is not something that can be proven), but to suggest a workable approach to identify and distinguish it from other religious phenomena, so that we may establish a dialogue between it and Hick’s theory in the rest of the thesis.

## 6. GENERAL BELIEFS OF CHINESE FOLK RELIGION

### 6.1 Introduction and justification

As defined in the previous Chapter, Chinese Folk Religion can be understood as a religion that contains elements from Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism or other Chinese traditional beliefs, of which the followers would hold their beliefs or practice the rituals in a 'folk religious' manner – it is something that can only be identified by taking both its beliefs and religiosities into account. Nonetheless, we have also seen that it is quite debatable as to what Chinese Folk Religion is or what beliefs it contains. Chapter 6 and 7 will therefore provide a rather systematic description of its general beliefs. Such description will contribute a usable definition for future studies as well as the later arguments in this thesis. Basically, the discussions of its 'functionally-oriented' concepts and moral code will be applied to evidence the 'self-centredness' of its central theme, while the beliefs concerning afterlife and *Tien* will help to suggest the inconsistencies between how Chinese Folk Religion and Hick understand salvation and Ultimate Reality. An alternative approach would be to initiate the major arguments as soon as we discuss such beliefs and concepts, but due to the highly debatable and rather confusing nature of the definition of the religion,

my approach should prove to offer a clearer structure of arguments.

One of the reasons that make defining this religion so difficult is that it is believed to be highly diverse and localised in the sense that different regions or communities may have very different rituals, beliefs and deities. However, as Fowler and Fowler point out, there is still “a good deal of commonality of beliefs” that “lies at the root of all Chinese popular religion”<sup>70</sup>. This is supported by Adler, who argues that the religion is “difficult to summarize, but there are certain commonalities”<sup>71</sup>. This Chapter, then, will attempt to describe these commonly shared beliefs. In fact, if there is nothing common in what they believe, we should have no reason to consider them the members of the same religious tradition in the first place<sup>72</sup>.

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<sup>70</sup> As they write, “One common theme that stands out is the acceptance of the supernatural world that is beyond ordinary existence yet inextricably involved with it. The reciprocal needs of deities and ancestors on the one hand, and the basic needs of the living on the other, lie at the root of all Chinese popular religion” (Fowler & Fowler, 2008, p.225).

<sup>71</sup> As an example he mentions, “One of these [commonalities] is the division of the spiritual world into gods, ghosts, and ancestors, none of which is ontologically distinct from living human beings: all four groups are manifestations of *qi*, and all follow the same natural principles” (Alder, 2002, p.113).

<sup>72</sup> Despite the implication, I have no intention to suggest that my descriptions will be universally applicable to all regional sects of Chinese Folk Religion, for it is most certainly not true, and is rather irrelevant to our arguments – a religious phenomenon does not have to be widely witnessed to be considered a part of the world religious situation. What I do imply is that there are scholars who suggest that the beliefs I will describe are held by a significant number of Chinese religious believers they have studied. These clarifications are important both because matters related to Chinese Folk Religion are highly debatable and because it is particularly necessary for this thesis to avoid making over-generalised claims – it would be absurd to criticise Hick of over-generalising the world religions on the one hand, and over-generalise Chinese Folk Religion on the other.

## 6.2 Heaven, hell and the present world

Possibly derived from the teachings of Buddhism<sup>73</sup>, Chinese Folk Religion tends to believe that man would end up in heaven if they have performed morally rightful deeds during his life, and would receive various painful punishments in hell if their behaviours are considered evil (Hou & Fan, 1994, p.179). As Fowler and Fowler (2008) describe:

Death is followed by passage through these hells over a very long period, in order to reap retribution for evil deeds. But once through the hells, the soul is ready for rebirth. With a vibrant belief in ancestors, and a knowledge of their inevitable fate in the hells, much ritual and worship is dedicated to assisting their paths – not only of known ancestors, but also of unknown ghosts, who may well visit earth with malevolent intent (p.230).

Though he tends to treat Chinese Folk Religion as a 'peasant cult' – a position we rejected previously – Day (1969) has nonetheless provided a similar description, he writes:

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<sup>73</sup> In fact, the concept of heaven and hell has already existed in China long before the arrival of Buddhism. However, it is often believed that Buddhism had indeed added some elements to the existing concept. For references, please see Hou and Fan (1994, p.174-175).

The judgment of the soul in the courts of hell is by far the dominant feature of the peasant concept of what will happen to him after he dies. Mingled with this is the doctrine of yin-kuo, or law of retribution, familiar to us as the law of karma in India, together with the law of transmigration or cycle of rebirth, also brought from India in Buddhist sutras (p.117).

As their descriptions suggest, it would be inaccurate to claim that Chinese Folk Religion does not concern salvific matters or that its practices are completely irrelevant to the reaching of better religious-end – its believers still appear to believe that conducting certain good deeds would lead them to a better rebirth or at least less punishments in hells, and that some rituals are able to ‘assist’ the deceased in the spiritual world. Looking more closely, however, the main purpose to perform such religious practices is still not to help the practitioners to reach a better religious-end – it is the non-religious behaviours (i.e., behaving according to certain moral code) that mainly determines one’s fate afterlife, and the said rituals are performed to assist the already deceased, not the practitioners themselves.

Although Christianity, for example, may also urge its followers to behave rightfully, the way to salvation is commonly believed to be established by having a spiritual relationship with God, may it be the confirmation of faith or other

worshipping acts. That is, it tends to assume that merely conducting morally rightful deeds is not enough to attain the Christian salvation – traditional Lutheranism even goes as far as claiming that salvation is awarded by faith alone (Melanchthon, 2004, p.6). At the very least, there seems to be a consensus that having faith in God/Christian doctrine or participating in certain religious practices would probably help one to achieve salvation.

On the other hand, Chinese Folk Religion does not seem to consider being religiously involved a requirement to reach a better religious-end in the sense that one does not have to have faith in any religious belief/divine being or perform any religious practice to receive a more favourable judgement afterlife. According to Hou and Fan (1994), this is the main reason why the Buddhist teaching that one must become selfless and desireless to achieve *nirvana* “has never interested the Chinese folks,” for what they seek from a religion is merely happiness and fortunes in their present life, not a limitlessly better religious-end (p.174). In other words, it is believed that Chinese Folk Religion has indeed contained ideas about how we may reach a salvific-end afterlife, but it is not what its followers intend to pursue by getting religiously involved. As Hou and Fan argue, it is their nature to avoid discussing matters related to death, for they believe the meaning of life is to do well and focus on the present (ibid, p.170).



In regard to the spiritual world, Chinese Folk Religion tends to portray it as an extension of the human world (ibid, pp.184-194). The spirits living there (e.g., deities, ghosts) would still need food, shelter and money to survive, thus the popular practice to burn incenses, paper money and other daily necessities to the spirits concerned.

With the exception of incense, they would write the name of the 'receiver' on the paper goods and burn them to ashes in a tin bucket or incinerator, assuming that the named spirit would receive them and be able to put them into use (ibid, p.185; 187-188). These paper goods include cars, clothes, and all sorts of luxury items, reflecting the idea that life in the spiritual world would function similar to that on earth. This also explains why more paper goods and money would be burned during traditional festivals such as Chinese New Year, Qingming and Mid-Autumn, for the spirits would also need to celebrate these fetedays (ibid, p.188). As Liu (2008) describes, there are more worshippers in Dangyang City who appear in various temples to burn the said sacrifices to Guan-di – the more popular deity in the region – during the first week of Chinese New Year, Ghost Festival, Qingming and Guan-di's birthday (pp.283-284). However, he also learns that the main purpose/motivation for worshipping Guan-di is not to satisfy the deity, but to wish for protection or peacefulness during the fetedays (by satisfying Guan-di). It is evidenced by the phenomenon that the worshippers would be more likely to visit the temple when they

have encountered certain earthly problems (e.g., health problems) or are about to make important decisions (ibid, p.283).

Another phenomenon reflecting the belief that the human and the spiritual worlds are functionally similar is the concept of a bureaucratic government operated by deities. Inspired by the Chinese situation that men are always under control by the government officials on earth, deities are also conceived as occupying positions in a celestial human government (Hou & Fan, 1994, p.180). Liu (2003), who regards Chinese Folk Religion as “a nameless but active religion,” has given a detailed description of this concept. As he understands, there are thousands of deities working in the celestial government, all under the leadership of the supreme Jade Emperor (p.377). Guan-di, Bei-di and Tien Hou are popular deities of the middle rank, while Tudi (God of Earth) is on the lowest level (ibid). According to Liu, these deities make up a hierarchical pantheon that reflects the worshippers' view of Chinese official imperial structure (ibid, pp.374-378). For those who seek helps from deities, they would act in the same way the people in the past would act when they seek helps from local government officials, which include kowtowing, kneeling, and gold/food offering (ibid, p.378). This is also reflected in the setting of temples, in which the buildings are very often identical to a traditional government office, with the statue of deities situated at where an official would sit (Jordan, 1972, p.40).

Nonetheless, as Fowler and Fowler (2008) realise, there are some exceptional deities who simply do not fit in the bureaucratic system, they describe:

The deities of popular religion, then, do not by any means always conform to the bureaucratic pattern... They arise from all kinds of bizarre backgrounds – robbers, unmarried women, virgins, suicides, military expertise, reputable and disreputable characters, even gamblers and murderers, for example... like two sides of a coin, the official deities exist alongside popular ones, providing overlapping responses to the needs of the Chinese people (p.229).

Female deities are considered unbureaucratic because in early China, government officials are with almost no exception male, while robbers, murderers and such like are more clearly not a position in any government system. Feuchtwang (2001) also supports this opinion quite strongly, he writes:

The imperial metaphor was not just bureaucratic. There are too many cases of female and unbureaucratic gods to hold to any theory of gods' equivalence to a governmental bureaucracy... What I am now proposing is

that local temple cults do not repeat the same authority and its imperial ideology, let alone correspond to its bureaucracy. They convey an alternative vision of the same cosmos, a more militaristic one (p.59).

The existences of such unbureaucratic deities may very well support their arguments, but even if the celestial government is functioned differently, it can still be consistent with the idea that, for Chinese Folk Religion, the environment and living patterns in the spiritual world is very similar to that on earth; it is only the political situation and social norms that are different.

The idea that spiritual beings would live like humans helps to understand why the followers of Chinese Folk Religion would place priority on their well-being on earth. Since it is believed that the spirits would still need various daily necessities and luxury items to have a desirable life, their needs and that of the livings are in fact similar – they both wish to live better at the present. Therefore, it can be interpreted as an idea that what happens at the present is more important, for we can only live in the present – it is pointless to keep working for a better future if we do not enjoy the present. Certainly, if it is believed that the afterlife can be more enjoyable (i.e., salvation) than that on earth, it would make more sense if we place our priority on reaching a better religious-end, but for Chinese Folk Religion of which even the

divine beings are believed to be somehow living like humans, a “better religious-end” is in fact not that different from a good life on earth. This also explains why the Chinese Folk Religion followers do not concern salvific matters as much as the members of some institutional religions.

One may argue that, since they also appear to believe in some sort of rebirth system, being reborn into a child of a wealthy family would at least be a less miserable religious-end than reborn into, say, a cockroach or a piglet in an intensive pig farm, and therefore it should still be more desirable to try to reach that less miserable religious-end. However, we must not forget that a more favourable afterlife judgement is not awarded by participating in any religious activity, but behaving according to the rather secular moral code. For this reason, it is reasonable to be sceptical about whether they have strong wish for a salvific-end, but even if they do, it is still not what motivates them to be religiously involved. In other words, somewhat contrary to Hick's understanding of the more civilised ‘post-axial’ religions, salvation is not the major concern or emphasis of Chinese Folk Religion, unless it can be understood as the pursuit of earthly fortunes (see Chapter 9).

### 6.3 Gods and other spiritual beings

Although local deities can be different from place to place, there are certain gods that are widely worshipped, within which Kuan Yin, Guan-di and Tien Hou are believed to be the most popular (Berkowitz et al., 1969, pp.82-85). According to Berkowitz et al., divine beings can be divided into local and household deities, and each category can be further subdivided into three different types (ibid, pp.76-81). For local deities, there are *shén* (gods) whose duty is to drive away ghosts or other evil spirits from the village; *dàwáng* (king) whose power is comparatively limited, and have the responsibility to respond to the earthly requests of the villagers; and, lastly, Tudi or Earth Gods whose major duty is to maintain the perfect balance of soil and other natural elements. For household deities, there are Kitchen Gods, Door Gods, and, again, Earth Gods, whose duties are to secure the cooking area, the entrance, and the ground respectively. The identities of the *shén* or *dàwáng* may change in different places, but the structure of this worship system suggests that, regardless of their ranks, no god or deity is omnipotent, thus the necessity to worship a plurality of deities to fulfil different needs – if there is a god that can satisfy all our needs, there should be no point to go to a second one<sup>74</sup>. In addition, the worship system also reflects the

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<sup>74</sup> In fact, there is another theory which may explain the phenomenon. According to some observations, Chinese Folk Religion is somehow a tolerant tradition which does not expect its followers to have total

general belief that different deities possess different specialities, even though higher rank *shén*, such as Kuan Yin or Tien Hou, may possess a more diverse power and can meet a variety of needs (Chamberlain, 2009, pp.112-119; 138-152).

Moreover, the imperfectness of Chinese deities also supports Hou and Fan's (1994) argument that the worshippers tend to imagine gods as human-like beings<sup>75</sup>.

While discussing the nature of Jade Emperor who is believed to be the supreme governor of the whole heaven, Fowler and Fowler (2008) discuss some of his deficiencies. They argue that although being portrayed as the ruler of the heavenly government, Jade Emperor is often unsuccessful, and is even ridiculed and cheated by other deities (ibid, p.230). He is also presented as an opportunist or impostor sometimes. This is quite consistent with our previous assumption that, no matter how supreme they are, gods or deities in Chinese Folk Religion are in essence a human-like being with supernatural powers.

Nonetheless, gods are not the only beings who live in the spiritual world.

According to Adler (2002), there are at least three more types of beings that also inhabit the spiritual world: ancestor spirits, ghosts and *lín*g (see next paragraph for

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faith in the existence or the power of a deity. In that case, even if a deity is believed to be all-powerful, the followers would still have reason to seek help from a second god. For details, please see the discussion in Chapter 9.

<sup>75</sup> As they describe, "For Chinese folks, gods are not an all transcendent being who only shows His power in the shadow; they have all sorts of desires, distracting thoughts as well as emotions – they are not the kind of spiritual being that has no human need. In China, gods have all got an earthly name as well as spouse. They celebrate birthday and festivals; they enjoy delicious food and Chinese opera; and they love to be praised or even bribed. In other words, they are exactly the same as humans on these aspects" (Hou & Fan, 1994, p.70).

discussion; pp.113-117). This may seem confusing at first, for the soul of our departed relative (ancestor spirit) is traditionally regarded as a ghost in the West, but for Chinese Folk Religion, ghosts are not necessarily the souls of a departed human. They are more like spiritual beings formed by the spirits of animals, plants, natural phenomena or even social phenomena and evil thoughts (Hou & Fan, 1994, p.200). Some of them are named according to their appearances (e.g., 'big head ghost', 'long face ghost', 'one leg ghost', etc.), some for their preferences (e.g., 'smoker ghost', 'gambler ghost', 'alcoholic ghost', etc.), while others are named after the locations they inhabit (e.g., 'toilet ghost', 'water ghost', 'mountain ghost' etc., *ibid*, pp.200-201). And for the non-humanly ghosts, there are 'divine dog', 'ghost of words', 'tree ghost' and 'earth worm' etc. (*ibid*). As Hou and Fan argue, the wide range of the types of ghosts implies that everything – which includes object, thought, or even a phenomenon – has contained a soul, or consciousness (*ibid*, p.201). This somewhat animistic concept would help to elaborate my later argument that *Tien* – literally translated 'sky' – is neither the spirit of a natural phenomenon nor a personal being.

*Líng*, on the other hand, is more of an abstract concept. According to Feuchtwang (2001), it can be understood as some kind of spiritual force, although sometimes it is also a conscious being (which is not that difficult to comprehend, given that even a



phenomenon can possess soul). As Feuchtwang believes, *ling* is only referred to or possessed by ghosts or the middle level of gods; other gods of the heaven or animal spirits would never be called *ling* (ibid, p.84). Nevertheless, when it is the extraordinary effectiveness the Chinese folks speak of, then even the most supreme deities can possess *ling* (ibid, p.85). Adler (2002) also understands *ling* as a kind of supernatural power, and uses it to explain what he considers the most significant difference between gods and ancestors, he writes:

The phenomenological distinction... is that gods have more numinous power (*ling*) than ancestors, and can therefore influence a community wider than just a single family... From this flows the sociological distinction... that ancestors are worshipped by only a single family (whether nuclear or extended), while gods are worshipped by a larger community. Both gods and ancestors can be appealed to for protection, but neither group is omnipotent or totally benevolent. Gods may be jealous of their power, and ancestors may take revenge on living family members for insults or slights (p.116).

Based on the above understandings, Adler (ibid) argues that ancestor spirit and

ghost are actually two sides of the same token, he says:

Gods and ancestors are both *yang* phenomena (deriving from the *hun*, or *yang* soul). Ghosts, on the other hand, are *yin* (deriving from the *po*) and always cause trouble. While ancestors generally affect only their own family, they sometimes cause trouble for another. In that case, the one family's ancestor is, to the other family, a ghost (p.117).

Nonetheless, when explaining the natures of the inhabitants of the spiritual world, Li (1998) stresses that ghosts are not necessarily evil (p.181). Just as heroes and saints who can become deities under certain circumstances, ghosts can also transform into gods if they have performed certain amount of good deeds that are beneficial to human beings (ibid). Quite consistently, within the many types of ghosts described by Hou and Fan (1994), there are also ghosts that possess a kind heart (p.200). As they believe, that is why some ghosts are worshipped by the Chinese Folk Religion followers, for they can actually 'function' like a deity, only with less power (ibid). Li (1998) also affirms that ghosts are being worshipped in China, and explains that being worshipped is one way to transform into gods (pp.181-182).

Since being worshipped is one way to reach a better religious-end, it may seem

that reaching a better religious-end is also a purpose for performing a religious practice – although the worship would not help the worshippers to reach a better religious-end directly, they may have the wish that they would also be worshipped when they have died. Therefore, it is fairer to say that the purpose for the Chinese Folk Religion followers to perform religious practices is not to help the practitioners to reach a better religious-end, but it is possible that the practitioners may be wishing that they would be benefited soteriologically from the same practices in the future.

That being said, we should also take into account the idea that even ghosts can turn into gods, that is, the identities or statuses of spiritual beings are changeable rather than eternal. The concept of 'religious-end' is quite Western in nature, in the sense that the journey of one's life is often believed to be progressing linearly. For Christianity, if a soul is raised to a heavenly place afterlife, it would presumably be its final destination. The same may go for some Eastern institutional religions such as Buddhism, which assumes that once a person has attained *nirvana*, he should no longer be reborn into a being of lower status. There are certain exceptions, but it is a common concept that, ultimately, the spiritual journey would reach an end.

For Chinese Folk Religion, however, our life is more like an ongoing journey in the sense that the idea of a final destination is uncommon. Apart from the belief that it is possible for a spirit to earn a more respectable position or that normal souls would

be reborn afterlife, it is also believed that a deity can be degraded to a less powerful being of lower rank. According to the story of *Journey to the West* (Wu, 2003), for instance, all four disciples of Tripitaka are believed to be former deities who have been degraded to (or reborn as) mortals because of certain misconducts<sup>76</sup>. This may also help to explain why the Chinese Folk Religion followers do not concern salvific matters as much as what Hick expects. As argued, Western religious believers tend to assume that salvation is the best possible religious-end, and that the saved souls would remain in a limitlessly better destination for eternity. With that concept in mind, it would only be normal if they put priority on reaching such a salvific-end. However, for those who believe that even the status of a powerful deity is 'degradable', then it would be reasonable if they do not consider becoming a more powerful spiritual being or having a more favourable rebirth ultimately important, for none of these would last forever. This also supports our earlier assumption that the Chinese Folk Religion followers tend to focus more on the wellbeing at the present, for it is possible for even the best afterlife living condition to get worse (see Chapter 8 for further discussion). Therefore, the notion that "all religions have to do with salvation" would be rather biased or over-generalised if we are to consider Chinese Folk Religion a religion, or, to put it differently, if salvation is to be understood as some form of a final destination

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<sup>76</sup> One of the disciples – often referred to as "Monkey King" – is considered a very popular deity the Chinese Folk Religion believers worship. For references, please see Lai (1994), Feuchtwang (2001, p.52; 61), as well as Mackerras (1997, pp.22-25) for discussions of the possible origins of the worship.

of which the condition would not normally get worse, then the concept of salvation is not applicable to the belief system of Chinese Folk Religion.

#### **6.4 Apotheosis of historical figures**

The belief that it is possible for a human soul to transform into a deity also offers insights of the basic moral code of Chinese Folk Religion. As Thompson (1969) puts it, “regardless of the origin or significance of the deities, they are nearly all humanized by the popular religion... they are not merely anthropomorphic, but they were actually human in their earlier term, just like the ancestor-gods” (p.56).

Feuchtwang (2001) even claims that almost all of the Chinese deities can be traced to and identified with historical, documental biographies (p.3). Nonetheless, he also stresses that these are not to be confused with saints. As he understands, saints are historical persons who sacrifice their lives for religious faith. Chinese deities, on the contrary, are “not accompanied by a belief in a supreme truth, nor by relics of their bodily existence. They were often martyrs, but to a loyalty, not a faith” (ibid, p.4).

These ideas are consistent with our earlier notion that Chinese Folk Religion is a more human-centred religion because it emphasises the importance of the wellbeing of our life on earth, that many gods were once humans and are human-like beings, and that

the moral code it promotes is more secular than religious.

Taking Tien Hou as an example, there are several official historical accounts suggesting that she was once a historical person living in Fujian (Watson, 2002, pp.166-167). Besides the name "Tien Hou" which literally means "Heavenly Empress," she is also called "*M z*" in Taiwan and "*m*," "*Niángm*" or "*M niáng*" in China, all mean "mother" literally (Liu, 2002, p.225). According to Watson's (2002) research, Tien Hou was born in 960 as the daughter of a Fujian fisherman (pp.166-167). Many locals believed that she has the power to guide fisherfolks back to the town's dock from violent gale. After her ascension in 987, Fujianese were the first to build temples and worship her as a deity (ibid). As Liu (2002) learns, although some worshippers may be aware of the historical origin of Tien Hou, it is not the fact that she did exist, but her particular supernatural power that encourages the worship and makes her a popular deity (p.225). The Tien Hou cult is a typical case of functionally-oriented worship: to protect people, who work on the dangerous seas. Hence her major worshippers are fishermen, "boat people" and the poor owners of small sampans (Yang, 1967, p.73). Watson (2002) also witnesses this phenomenon, and points out that non-fishermen were less attracted to the Tien Hou cult during the earlier period (p.192). This supports Yang's idea that each deity in Chinese Folk Religion is believed to possess a speciality, and that deities are worshipped mainly for

the special functions they serve<sup>77</sup>.

This 'functionally-oriented' defined religious practice, however, is more like a reciprocal system – while the human worshippers may gain various earthly benefits from the practices, the deities gain the daily necessities or the luxuries they need in the spiritual world, alongside the possibility that they may rise to a higher rank because of their popularity (also Fowler and Fowler, 2008, p.225). This again suggests that Chinese Folk Religion is rather human-centred both because the main duty of a deity is to serve humans (thus the idea that they may get promoted if they serve the humans effectively) and because the wellbeing of a deity is somehow dependent on the humans. This is important to the review of Hick's theory in that it seems to have presented a worldview opposed to that of Hick's model.

Just as ghosts who get promoted by responding to prayers effectively, human can also be apotheosised if they have led a noble life, which involves strictly conforming to the social norms or having made great contributions to Chinese society (Li, 1998, p.182). Typical examples of such deities include Guan-di, Tam Kung and Pao Kung

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<sup>77</sup> Nonetheless, in regards to the importance of the reliability of historical accounts, the supporters of historical hermeneutics may think otherwise. Merezhkovsky (1925), for instance, has stressed that the major difference between Christianity and other pagan cults is that the latter has lacked reliable historical references, he writes, "The enormous difference between Christianity and paganism lies in the fact that the person of Christ is historically real. Modern atheistic scholars have grasped this thoroughly, and are doing their utmost to destroy the historical personality of Christ. But to destroy it means to destroy universal history, for the whole of it is about Him... If there was no Christ, there is no Christianity; it is then as much of a 'myth' as paganism. But if Christ has been, His shadow reflected back upon the whole of mankind to the very beginning of time is an historical miracle fatal to those who would destroy Him" (p. vii). According to this perspective, then the fact that many Chinese deities are historically real may be partly responsible for their popularity.

etc., who were all actual historical figures and are believed to be extremely righteous throughout their life (Chamberlain, 2009, pp.79-88; 153-157; 172-177). The historical accounts of Guan-di, for instance, are quite indisputable. As Berkowitz et al (1969) narrate:

Guan Yu was an historical figure who lived during the much celebrated Three Kingdoms Period... he was born in what is now Shansi Province in A.D. 162. As a youth, he sold bean curd and studied the classics; it is said that he could recite from memory the *Chun Qiu Zuo Zhuan* [*Chronicle of Zuo*]. Later, he met Zhang Fei and Liu Bei, and the three men took the famous Oath of the Peach Orchard, pledging to protect each other and live and die together. The exploits of the three in service to the successor to the Han throne have been chronicled in the literary classic *San Guo Zhi Yan Yi* [*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*]. Guan Yu was faithful to his oath, and in A.D. 220 was captured by Sun Quan and put to death (p.83).

Although Guan Yu had intended to protect the Han dynasty from being overthrown (which was seen as a righteous act), he failed. In other words, different from the stories of Tam Kung and Pao Kung, Guan Yu had not made a crucial,



practical contribution to his society, which suggests that behaving righteously alone is enough for being apotheosised. As Berkowitz et al describe his apotheosisation, Guan Yu “was praised for his daring feats of courage,” and “numerous honorary titles were conferred upon him and a group of popular tales and legends became associated with his name” after his death (ibid, p.84). Berkowitz et al regard his apotheosisation as a kind of “hero worship,” which became popular as early as 1594 when his worshippers began to refer to him as *Dì* (King), thus the title Guan-di (ibid). In 1856, some started to call him *Gu n-F z* (a rank equal to Confucius) for his knowledge of the Confucian classic *Chronicle of Zuo* as well as his persistence in living according to the Confucian ideals (ibid).

The story of Guan Yu's apotheosisation suggests that a human can be apotheosised solely because of what he stands for rather than what he has achieved. While Confucius is responsible for the development of a system of philosophy, Guan Yu was merely a reader who had mastered one particular classic. The fact that he has become one of the most popular Chinese deities also implies that being righteous and conforming to certain traditional Chinese values are considered utmost important to at least his worshippers. Certainly, the belief that he – as a fearsome warrior – can drive away demons and evil spirits may also be responsible for his strong popularity (see Chamberlain, 2009, p.79), despite the fact that he did not win the war. This suggests

that his popularity has more to do with his loyalty and respectful way of life. Y. H. Xu (2008), a historian particularly interested in the regional Guan-di worships, also claims that the deity was apotheosised and worshipped not because he was a good fighter, but because of his four most notable virtues, which are loyalty, integrity, bravery, and benevolence (pp.145-150).

Xu's finding implies that benevolence is also an important virtue to the Chinese Folk Religion followers, the benevolence they speak of is not necessarily consistent with the 'Golden Rules' Hick describes. To further elaborate the idea, however, we must first discuss the most common religious practice in China, ancestor worship, which involves the most important virtue of all – filial piety.

### **6.5 Ancestor worship and the moral code of Chinese Folk Religion**

Similar to Fowler and Fowler, Hou and Fan (1994) also consider Chinese Folk Religion a human-centred tradition, but by 'human-centred' they mean the tendency that puts secular moral values in a more important position (p.56). While many would consider certain Western moral values to be rooted in religious beliefs, the moral values Chinese Folk Religion emphasises are more of a system of viewpoints that have no deep connection with supernatural or mystical belief, even though some of

these viewpoints are also stressed by religious Confucianism (ibid, p.57). The focal point of the basis of the moral belief system is believed to be the relationship between parents and their children. As Hou and Fan put it, bringing harmony and honour to the family is the most important duty or the meaning of life for many Chinese Folk Religion believers, and therefore almost all Chinese rituals, practices and moral values are built upon the concept of filial piety (ibid). They use Chinese Buddhism as an example to highlight that even such a tradition, that heavily stresses on the necessity of detaching from earthly relationship, would have to reinterpret their teachings and emphasise the importance of filial piety just to attract the Chinese folks (ibid, p.58). This supports Liu's (2009) viewpoint that the three great religions in China are actually the ones that have been influenced and shaped by the already existing Chinese folk beliefs, not the other way around<sup>78</sup> (pp.6-7). The idea that filial piety is considered the most important virtue would also explain why Guan-di worship is so popular, for his loyalty to the Han throne can be seen as a manifestation of filial piety in a broad sense (Hou and Fan, 1994, p.57).

Although the argument is debatable, the strong popularity of the practice of ancestor worship suggests that filial piety is at least an essential part of their beliefs.

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<sup>78</sup> This is also supported by Chamberlain (2009), he writes, "I say Chinese are both Buddhist and Taoist but one could also say they are neither for, as I hope is already apparent, the springs of Chinese religion are much older than these later accretions. One of these springs is Ancestor Worship, that untheologized religion which is fundamental to whatever intellectualized beliefs the Chinese profess" (p.72).

Li (1998), who also considers ancestor worship the most important element of Chinese Folk Religion, has discussed this particular practice and its significances quite thoroughly (pp.171-173). As he understands, ancestor worship connotes the belief that the soul of the ancestor would exist eternally, and that it deserves equal respect as all the other deities or gods. As the earliest religious practice in China, it remains extremely popular for thousands of years, mainly because of the strong belief in the importance of the 'continuity' of kinship (ibid, pp.171-172). The most efficient way to ensure the family or kinship lives forever is to establish the worship of a shared ancestral figure, which is, as Li believes, the reason why 'burning incense' and 'family line' are synonyms in China, for it is believed that the family blood would prolong as long as there are incenses provided to the ancestors, and hence the overriding obligation of being an offspring is to keep the incenses burning (ibid, p.173).

'Keeping the incenses burning' is not to be taken in the literal sense, because incense would usually finish burning in a few minutes – it would be too practically demanding to require anyone to stay in front of an altar all day long, just to burn a new incense every few minutes. In modern China, ancestor worship is usually performed only on special dates, most noticeably the 1<sup>st</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of each month, the birthday and death anniversary of the ancestors, as well as the day of certain festivals

(ibid, p.176). Alongside this ritual, family members enjoy a meal together after worship, which promotes and maintains a strong bond between them (ibid; also Chamberlain, 2009, p.73). As Li (1998) argues, the traditional way of performing ancestor worship is rare nowadays; most Chinese Folk Religion believers merely worship their closer relatives (e.g., parents, grandparents) at home or in front of their headstones at the cemeteries instead of the more traditional ancestral shrine (pp.175-180). He suggests that the practice has been evolved or simplified because of the modern environmental limitations, but the belief in the importance of filial piety has remained unchanged.

As mentioned, besides showing piety to the departed family members, spirit of the dead is capable of aiding as well as harming the livings. As Chamberlain (2009) describes, "The dead can provide help but they can also create problems. If the living experience bad luck or worse it may be because they have neglected their duties to their ancestors" (p.74). Chamberlain has also discussed the case of the 'family-less' spirits, he writes:

Inevitably there are the myriads of dead who have no living family to take care of their needs and provide them with their portion on feast days. They are the Hungry Ghosts. On the seventh month they are let out of Hell to

gather what scraps they can. At this time the entire community makes offerings of food and money in order to ward off the potential danger these ghosts pose (ibid, pp.74-75).

Preventing potential danger is, in a sense, also functionally-oriented. As Hou and Fan (1994) argue, although, partially, ancestor worship is practiced to show filial piety or remembrance, the ultimate concern is the same, that is, to gain earthly benefits from the practice (pp.241-245). The only real difference between ancestor worship and deity worship is that the latter can offer all kinds of fortunes, while the former would mainly offer peacefulness (by not making our life 'unpeaceful'). It is almost like saying that they strongly insist worshipping their ancestors not because the ancestral spirits are more *lǐng* (efficient), but because they do not have a choice. As an offspring, they are expected to perform the practice in order to meet social expectations or to prevent unfortunate event induced by their dead relatives (ibid, pp.241-242). In other words, from Hou and Fan's perspective, although it is true that the Chinese folks have held a strong belief in the significance of filial piety, the concept is also closely related to certain selfish wishes or expectations.

Filial piety being a selfish concept will be a key idea in our later discussion – if it is considered the most important virtue of all, and if it indeed encourages a somewhat

selfish attitude, then we may argue that the core moral belief of Chinese Folk Religion is not, as Hick assumes, unconditional benevolence or “universal compassion.”

### **6.6 Functionally-oriented religious practices**

As Liu (2003) puts it, the pantheon of Chinese Folk Religion can be understood as an ‘open system’, because new deities being introduced and unpopular ones are always being ignored, forgotten and “finally disappear from the eyes of the locals” (p.378). The main reason for replacing a deity with a new deity is that the worshippers have discovered a more effective, appropriate new set of deities (Jordan, 1972, p.175). Yang (1967) refers to such nature of religiosity as ‘functionally-oriented’:

A relevant point here is the highly eclectic nature of Chinese religion. In popular religious life it was the moral and magical functions of the cults, and not the delineation of the boundary of religious faiths, that dominated the people’s consciousness. Even priest in some country temples were unable to reveal the identity of the religion to which they belonged.

Centuries of mixing gods from different faiths into a common pantheon had produced a functionally oriented religious view that relegated the question

of religious identity to a secondary place (p.25).

Hou and Fan (1994) have observed something very similar, but they tend to value such attitude negatively. They argue that followers of Chinese Folk Religion visit a temple and 'use' a god only when they need help – their worship of deities is derived from a 'utilitarianistic way of thinking' (ibid, p.86), for these practitioners do not seek a deep philosophical enlightenment or spiritual liberation, but merely a peaceful life on earth. As a result, "they are totally different from the religious believers in the West who aim to obtain salvation. Even if they chant the Buddhist scriptures, it is only for bringing fortunes to their present life" (ibid).

Chinese practitioners can worship as many gods as possible or simply seek help from the ones they find most efficient and powerful, to optimise their gains (pp.104-107; 136-142). It is for this reason that there are hundreds of deities in this religious tradition, who are believed to be efficient in fulfilling a certain kind of need (pp.142-152). In a more positive tone, Berkowitz et al (1969) also learn that the six types of deities they describe have all got their specific duties (pp.76-81).

The case of Monkey King worship may help to further demonstrate such a functionally-oriented tendency. Although he is not the most worshipped deity, Monkey King is without question one of the most well-known. As Lai (1994) puts it,



“Every Chinese knows the *Xiyouji* [*Journey to the West*], the story of the Monkey King. It has been recited, staged, illustrated for magazines, and animated for movies and television,” and is regarded as one of “China’s Four Great Classics” (p.30). As a brief introduction to the novel, he writes, “The story of the Monkey King is made up of two originally independent parts. The first tells of the Monkey King creating havoc in Heaven. This part ends with the Buddha trapping Monkey under the Buddha’s cosmic palm;” and for the second half of the story, “Monkey, many years later, was released from captivity so that he might serve the monk Xuan-zang [Tripitaka] on the latter’s journey to the West [India] in a quest for Buddhist scriptures” (ibid, pp.30-31).

Some may see him as a mere fictional character, but in reality, his believers have built temples for him and worshipped him as a deity (ibid, p.43; also Feuchtwang, 2001, p.52; 61). This may sound absurd at first, for there shouldn’t be many fans of *Lord of the Rings* who would treat Galadriel the Elf-Goddess as an actual deity, let alone worship her. However, one must not forget that, for Chinese Folk Religion, even a thought or phenomenon is believed to have soul. Therefore, the idea that a literary imagination is spiritually real can be understood as a kind of Chinese animism, or, if we are to explain the phenomenon using Hick’s model, the story of Monkey King can also be seen as something mythologically true. As Lai (1994) argues:

We scholars may think of Monkey as nothing more than a literary creation, but the common folk of China know better. To us, a text is just a text, but to them *Journey* is more than fable: it tells of reality. The Sage Equal to Heaven [Monkey King] is a living reality, as real as St. Christopher is to an old-time Catholic. As St. Christopher still protects travellers, Monkey still answers prayers (p.43).

In an attempt to further rationalise the cult, Lai points out that there were already legends of a powerful monkey-like deity before the publication of *Journey to the West*, even though the worshipped Monkey King is certainly the one the novel narrates (ibid, pp.51-56). Hou and Fan (1994), on the other hand, tend to see all three main characters in the novel (except Tripitaka) as mere literary creations, and explain that it is actually common for the Chinese to consider fictional characters to possess supernatural power over the living (pp.150-152).

Putting the question of his origin aside, what makes the cult worth mentioning is the functionally-oriented nature it demonstrates. While one may argue that Guan-di is popular because he is noble and respectable, Monkey King is often understood as an ill-tempered, stubborn, blustery, and almost anti-social character. In other words, it is very likely that he is widely worshipped not because he is noble or saintly, but

because he is considered extremely powerful. According to the novel, Monkey King is nearly omnipotent, and possesses more supernatural power than all other deities, except Buddha (Lai, 1994, p.40). As Wriggins (1996) comments, this is why even his master Tripitaka, an actual historical figure who is believed to be a lot more enlightened than Monkey King in Buddhist terms, has never become a popular deity – the understanding of Absolute Truth would not bring him the supernatural power Monkey King possesses (pp.113-128). Therefore, when the Chinese encounter earthly problems, they would prefer to seek help from an all-powerful monkey rather than his more respectable master, even though the latter is, historically speaking, 'more real'.

The study of the Monkey King suggests that Merezhkovsky's (1925) theory is not universally applicable – as he strongly believes, the reason why Christianity has become more popular than any other cult is that Jesus is an actual historical figure (p.vii). However, as the thesis will later argue, one of the characteristics of Chinese Folk Religion that does not fit into Hick's understanding of religion is that its followers tend to see the reliability or truthfulness of a religious claim unimportant – Merezhkovsky's theory may be applicable to the Western religious situation, but what the Chinese mainly concern does not appear to be whether a deity is historically real.

Hick and Cornille (2008) also assume that to belong to a religion is to have total faith in at least its key doctrines, thus the conclusion that multiple religious belonging

is impossible. Their practical suggestions for the establishment of interreligious dialogue are also based on this assumption, that is, how we can overcome the problem of conflicting truth-claims. Nonetheless, if such contradictions are not considered a problem or if the Chinese Folk Religion followers are not required to have total faith in any belief, we may then suggest that the arguments against Hick's neutral position or the possibility of multiple religious belonging are conditional, so does the classical understanding of the meaning of being religious.

The functionally-oriented nature of Chinese Folk Religion can also be seen in its practices and rituals. Alder (2002) has given quite a thorough description of the details of different rituals, of which the major idea is to interact with the spiritual beings<sup>79</sup>. He then discusses the significance of these rituals, and argues that, although the sacrifices or gifts the practitioners offer seem to be “nothing more than bribes to spiritual officials,” there is in fact a “deeper principle of mutual obligations” (p.117). As he sees it, this principle is based on a more fundamental aspect of the Chinese worldview, that is, “the assumption that things are defined by their relationships with other things” (ibid). This is similar to our discussion that deity worship in China is a

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<sup>79</sup> As he explains, “The main ritual elements in popular Chinese religion may be conceived as ways of interacting with spiritual beings: sacrifice, divination, and exorcism... In the home it (sacrifice) is usually fruit for either gods or ancestors, or cooked rice for ancestors – just as if they were living relatives sharing the meal. It is conceived as sustenance for the ancestor, who imbibes the spiritual vapors of the food... In temples, offerings to the gods usually consist of fruit or packaged food items... Ghosts may be offered cooked food, but never in the house: a small table is set outside the back door... Spirit money is also burnt for gods, ghosts, and ancestors” (Alder, 2002, p.117).

reciprocal practice, or as Alder puts it, a “mechanism used to maintain relationships with gods and ancestors” (ibid, p.118). He also learns that the worshippers are entitled to seek help from another deity if the one they worship “is treated correctly” but “fails to improve the life of the petitioner,” and that “to experience good fortune and fail to express gratitude to the gods is an invitation to disaster” (ibid).

Whether a kind of bribe or gift exchange, the main purpose of performing these rituals is still to bring good fortunes or fewer disasters to one's family. The same goes for all kinds of festivals including New Year, Lantern Festival and Qingming, which aim to please the gods or ancestors through offerings of food, incenses and sacrifices in exchange for good fortunes and peacefulness (Fowler & Fowler, 2008, pp.237-241). This is supported by Feuchtwang's (2001) finding that the original idea of Chinese New Year celebration is to give thanks to potential destroyers (the twelve Zodiac animals) so that they would withdraw their destructive plans (p.55). This suggests that, although not necessarily a negative characteristic, Hou and Fan are right about Chinese Folk Religion that its rituals and practices are mainly functionally-oriented, and that its followers are neither seeking salvation nor spiritual liberation from participating in those practices if salvation is to be understood as a kind of religious-end or final destination. In this sense, it is not only to argue that salvation for Chinese Folk Religion is different from what Hick understands, but that it is not even

a part of the central theme of its belief system.

### **6.7 Belief in the power of altering future**

The belief in fortune-telling and future-altering practices should further demonstrate the idea that this religion is functionally-oriented. For Chinese Folk Religion, future is neither planned nor determined. With the help of charms or the alteration of feng-shui or the Five Elements, one can quite easily change the future into the way he prefers. However, the power of these future-altering practices is still limited to earthly matters, in the sense that they are seldom used to help changing one's fate afterlife. In addition, the idea that one can change his own future also implies that we can actually predict or foresee what the 'original future' would be like.

Within all the said concepts, feng-shui is believed to be the most essential, for it is often considered the source or the basis for all other future-altering techniques and beliefs<sup>80</sup>. Although its origin is debated, it is generally agreed that feng-shui was introduced before the founding of the three great religions in China, which again supports the argument that, originally, Chinese folk beliefs were not derived from the

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<sup>80</sup> As Fowler and Fowler (2008) briefly introduces, "Another facet of Chinese religion and culture that has found its way to the West is *geomancy*, or *feng-shui* (pronounced fung-shway), a practice that is at least three thousand years old... The Chinese term means 'wind and water', and just as wind and water shape the contours of the earth, it refers to the vibrant and changing energies of the land itself. It perhaps stemmed originally from the idea that ancestors had to be comfortable in their graves. Later the idea was influenced by the concepts of the *I Ching/Yijing*, *yin* and *yang* and the Five Agents" (p.260).

three religions. In fact, there is evidence suggesting that the Taoist belief of yin-yang was also inspired by pre-historical Chinese folk beliefs (Hucker, 1995, pp.203-204). If these are proven to be true, then the criticism that the folk beliefs in contemporary China are nothing more than a superficial, utilitarianistic mutation of the more sophisticated Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism (e.g., Hou and Fan, 1994, pp.153-161) would actually be unfair and mistaken.

As Fowler and Fowler (2008) further explain, the applications of feng-shui related techniques often involve the alteration of the physical setting or location of a temple, home, grave or any kind of building, for the changes would alter the yin-yang energy positively and bring success, health and harmony to whoever related to the site (pp.260-261). However, feng-shui is also considered a dangerous thing to play with, because, if it is handled wrongly by inexperienced amateurs, the final results can be extremely disastrous. As an example Fowler and Fowler describe, "if a grave were to be placed in the wrong way – just, perhaps, a few inches amiss – the well-being of all the descendants of the deceased would be adversely affected" (ibid, pp.261-262).

Regarding other future-altering techniques, Li (1998) has provided a more thorough and systematic description, which explains the concept of *mìng* (life), *yùn* (luck), Five Elements, feng-shui as well as the naming of a person (pp.205-210). These concepts are considered interrelated: the luck of one's life, for instance, is

believed to be reflected by the balance of Five Elements; and by choosing the right name for a newborn baby or changing that of a grown person, one can compensate the lacking element of the baby/person's life and change his future luck in preferred way (ibid, pp.209-210). As Li argues, the most basic idea of the future-altering techniques in Chinese Folk Religion is to bring harmony and luck to one's life by balancing the spiritual or geomantic forces (ibid, pp.206-207). In other words, the main purpose for choosing the right grave location for the deceased, for example, is to bring good fortunes to its descendants rather than the deceased, even though the latter may also be benefited from the practice (e.g., having a more comfortable place to live).

The so-called 'functionally-oriented nature' of Chinese Folk Religion can probably be witnessed in many other institutional religions. There are Christians and Catholics who would wish for money, health or other earthly fortunes when praying. Therefore, what makes Chinese Folk Religion different from them is not that its functionally-oriented nature is unique, but that such nature is so common and popular that it has formed an inseparable part of the religiosity of the religion, and that wishing for the wellbeing at the present is acceptable and encouraged.



## 6.8 Summary

Apart from identifying what I refer to as 'Chinese Folk Religion', this Chapter has described some of its natures or religiosities which are crucial to our later discussions. These include the following assumptions: (1) that the religion is functionally-oriented; (2) that the matters related to faith, Absolute Truth and salvation are often considered less important; and (3) that the core moral belief is contradictory to the idea of 'universal compassion'. The discussions of the first two assumptions will help to review and hopefully expand Hick's pluralist interpretation of religion so that it reflects the world religious situation more comprehensively and honestly, while the third assumption will help to examine if Hick's criteriology is fair.

The next Chapter will first discuss yet another concept of the religion – *Tien*. The concept of *Tien* is essential to the dialogues for three main reasons: (1) it is arguably the Ultimate Reality for the religion; (2) it is in some ways similar to Hick's idea of 'Real', which may suggest that Hick's model is more applicable to Chinese Folk Religion than expected; and (3) it is somehow related to the idea of salvation, thus the discussion may help to review the argument that salvific matters are considered unimportant. The next Chapter will take a closer look at what salvation means to the Chinese Folk Religion followers as well as reflect upon the assumptions made.

## 7. TIEN AS THE ULTIMATE REALITY FOR CHINESE FOLK RELIGION

### 7.1 Introduction and justification

A discussion of Chinese Folk Religion would not be complete without a discussion of the concept of *Tien*. Although it is by no means a common viewpoint, this Chapter will argue that *Tien* is not only an essential part of the belief system of Chinese Folk Religion, but can also be treated as its Ultimate Reality.

*Tien* (also *T'ien* or *Tian*) is generally translated as 'Heaven' by the religionists concerning Chinese religious beliefs. That being said, in order to avoid misunderstandings or confusions, there are certain differences between the Western and Chinese concepts of Heaven that one should be aware of. Heaven in the West is often seen as a location where God, the spirits of the dead or various divine beings live, that is, a non-personal spatial existence rather than a conscious being. Alder (2002) argues that from the common expressions such as 'Heaven please help us', Westerners also conceive Heaven as an anthropomorphic being occasionally, but it is uncommon to treat it as a supreme, conscious being (pp.26-27).

*Tien* for Chinese Folk Religion, on the other hand, is understood as an anthropomorphic, conscious being or even a deity who possesses power over

everything else (Loewe, 1994, pp.19-20; Fowler & Fowler, 2008, p.30). Although *Tien* is conceived as a deity, it is still distinct from all other Chinese deities, and is in fact closer to the Ultimate Reality Hick and some religionists describe.

An essential part of Hick's (1989a) thesis is to explain how his idea of 'Real' is compatible with or even equal to the Ultimate Reality taught by the 'world great faiths' so that he may convince his readers from such religions that his pluralist assumption does not actually conflict with their faiths (pp.264-269; 279-292). For example, in regards to the Mahayana Buddhist concept *Sunyata*, he writes, "When *Sunyata* is understood in this sense, as referring to the ultimate reality beyond the scope of all concepts, knowable only in its manifestations, then it is indeed equivalent to what in our pluralistic hypothesis we are calling the Real" (ibid, p.291). Seemingly, then, if the Ultimate Reality of Chinese Folk Religion can also be understood as something equal to 'Real', we may say that Hick's explanatory theory has actually managed to describe at least one crucial element of the religion; but if it turns out that *Tien* can only be understood as a confessional concept closer to what Heim, for example, has described, then it would suggest that not only Hick's criteriology or his understanding of the nature of religion, but also his neutral assumption is unable to explain this particular religious phenomenon. It is with this in mind that this Chapter will examine if Hick's theory or his concept of 'Real' in particular can be used to

explain what the Ultimate Reality of Chinese Folk Religion.

Since *Tien* is arguably related to what some may regard as the salvation for Chinese Folk Religion, the Chapter will also discuss what salvation means for its followers, so that we may see if it is consistent with what we have assumed. As I will later argue, although the religion seems to contain ideas concerning a better afterlife, this 'better afterlife' is neither meant to be achieved through religious means nor equal to the salvific-end that we commonly understand.

## 7.2 Origins of the concept of *Tien*

According to Yan (1991), *Tien* actually 'evolved' from the earlier concept '*Shàngdì*' (p.36). Literally, *Shàngdì* in Chinese means 'Lord on High', and is the official term most contemporary Chinese Christians use to refer to the Biblical God. However, it is not to be mixed up with another term '*Shén*', which solely means 'God'. *Shén* is used to refer to the Biblical God, but is also the title for Chinese deities inferior to the supreme lord *Shàngdì*<sup>81</sup>. The above viewpoint is supported by Major (1987), who learns that the term '*Shàngdì*' had been replaced by '*Tien*' during Chou Dynasty (p.223).

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<sup>81</sup> Here the term '*Shàngdì*' is referred to its original ancient meaning, which will be discussed shortly. Nowadays, '*Shàngdì*' is only used to refer to the God in Bible.

By studying *B cí* (the ancient scripture of fortunetelling), Yan (1991) realises that 'Dì' is in fact the earliest title for the origin or ancestor of all (p.36). Literally meaning 'Lord' or 'King' in Chinese, this character also represents the stalk of a flower in its ancient form (ibid). The stalk of a flower produces fruits, and the fruits nurture more stalks, resulting in a cycle of birth and the spread of a species. This is why Yan tends to believe that *Dì* is originally understood as the symbol of the origin of life and the ancestor of all human kinds; many Chinese ancestors such as *Dìjī* (The First Lord) or *Dìèr* (The Second Lord) are therefore named 'Di' (ibid, pp.36-7).

As he further argues, '*Tien*', as an ancient character, was almost identical to the word 'Di' (ibid, p.38). In *B cí*, the word '*Wáng*' (King) is sometimes written as '*Tien*', which suggests that the Lord on High and the Lord on Earth were believed to be the same being during the time of the Chou Dynasty (ibid). A statement in *Classic of Rites: Record of Smaller Matters in the Dress of Mourning* (as cited in ibid) also supports: "Dì is the 'big rite' ... Ancestor is born because of *Tien*. The rite of *Tien* represents the worship of ancestor." This passage not only claims that *Tien* is equal to *Dì*, but also connotes that *Tien* is in fact the Ancestor<sup>82</sup> in the minds of Chou people (since *Dì* is the Ancestor, and *Tien* is *Dì*).

Nonetheless, *Dì* and *Tien* are not equal anymore after the Chou Dynasty.

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<sup>82</sup> 'Ancestor' with a capital is referred to the 'origin of all' hereafter.

According to Yan, the rise of Confucianism has defined the ultimate authority of *Tien*, and formed a theology based on the obedience to this authority (ibid, p.39). During the Dynasty of Han, which had basically treated Confucianism as the principle of government, the position of *Tien* was already higher than that of the emperor (ibid). As Han philosopher called Tung Chung-shu<sup>83</sup> (as cited in ibid) wrote in his classic *Rich Dew of Spring and Autumn: Tien Gives Birth to Man*, “Tien is the one who gives birth to all human kinds. Man is born because of Tien; therefore Tien is the Grand-grandfather of human beings.” Such a viewpoint suggests that the coverage of *Tien* had become much wider than *Di* at this period, for *Di* had been degraded as the ancestor of a clan, while *Tien* was still the origin of all.

Although being regarded as the Ancestor or Lord, it does not mean that *Tien* was considered a conscious being at that time. The idea of *Ti nmìng* (Mandate of Heaven), on the other hand, seems to have suggested such an idea. As Fowler and Fowler (2008) put it:

Above all, Tien demanded moral righteousness in a ruler, and good government, for the ruler would have been chosen and, therefore, supported by him [Tien]. The ruler was, thus, a vassal of God, to whom he owed

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<sup>83</sup> Tung is a very famous Chinese philosopher, who argues for the necessity to obey the emperor based on a theological interpretation of Confucianism.

constant allegiance. The idea that the earthly ruler held his place by the Mandate of Heaven was developed by the Chou; after all, it was with such a theory that they had justified the overthrow of the Shang [Dynasty]. Consequently, the king was sometimes called Tien-tzu, 'Son of Heaven' (p.30).

Sometimes Westerners also refer to themselves as the children of the Mother Earth, but it does not necessarily imply the idea that Mother Earth is a thinking creature. In fact, it is the Chinese belief described above that "the ruler would have been chosen and... supported by him" which shows that *Tien* might have been seen as a personal being – only a conscious being may 'support' a ruler and withdraw its support if the ruler becomes morally unrighteous.

According to Hou and Fan (1994), Chinese emperors had already claimed themselves as the 'Son of Heaven' since Xia Dynasty (p.31). However, as Hou and Fan understand, it does not imply that these emperors are the actual offspring of *Tien*. Rather, they are more like a person who rules the world according to the will of *Tien* (ibid, pp.31-32). Chinese emperors have never denied that *Tien* is the actual ruler of their country, in the sense that they were only following orders, not making them (ibid, p.34). If this is true, then we may conclude that ancient Chinese did not regard *Tien* as

Lord allegorically, but literally.

Furthermore, although there is no direct evidence, it is likely that the ancient Chinese were already worshipping *Tien* before the establishment of the Chou Dynasty. Consistent with Yan's (1991) findings, Adler (2002) also believes that '*Tien*' was often used synonymously with the term '*Shàngdì*', though with a slightly different connotation – generally, *Shàngdì* was more of a deity with a personal will, while the nature of *Tien* is more ambiguous (pp.26-27). According to Adler, it is the intellectual elites who treated *Tien* as an ultimate spiritual being in the first place (ibid). Although '*Tien*' literally means 'sky', it is always referred to as a conscious being – only a few schools of Chinese philosophy would describe it as a pure naturalistic phenomenon<sup>84</sup> (ibid). Similarly, Yang (1967) also claims that *Tien* is a spiritual being who gives 'expression' to its approval of good and punishment for evil by causing a variety of extraordinary phenomena to appear in the sky, rather than the sky itself (p.108). Ancient Chinese thus worshipped *Tien* to avoid such undesirable phenomena (ibid).

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<sup>84</sup> '*Tien*' still means 'sky' in everyday usage, thus Adler's argument is probably applied to the religious '*Tien*' only. Similar to many Chinese characters, '*Tien*' is highly polysemous whose numerous meanings are not necessarily related to each other. It also means 'day', 'season' or 'weather', for instance.



### 7.3 Confucian interpretation of *Tien*<sup>85</sup>

The worship of *Tien* might have existed before the Chou Dynasty, but it is likely that Confucius and his students – who were born in the later Spring and Autumn Period – were responsible for the theorisation and dissemination of the tradition. A Confucian classic *Record of Rites* clearly states, “All things originate from Heaven [*Tien*]; human originate from the ancestor. Therefore one (should) offer food and drink to *Shàngdì*” (as cited in Yu, 2005, p.38). This passage not only connotes that *Tien*, Ancestor and *Shàngdì* are somehow identical, but also that people should worship it in the form of rite.

For Christianity, Islam and some other theological religions, worshipping a particular divine being is often believed to be helpful for attaining salvation/liberation. However, as many have argued, Confucianism does not even concern salvation to the least extent, thus the conclusion that the purpose of conducting various Confucian rites is not to attain salvation<sup>86</sup>.

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<sup>85</sup> Whether Confucianism is a religion is highly debatable, yet we may try to avoid trouble by treating it not as a theistic belief system with ultimate values supported by patterns of worship and organisation, but as a school of socio-political philosophy that contains some significant religious qualities (see Yang, 1967, p.26). Also, since *Tien* is arguably the most important idea for religious Confucianism, it is impossible (and indeed unnecessary) to have a thorough discussion of how the religion describes it in a few passages, therefore this section will merely look into the elements that may help to have a better understanding of how the Chinese Folk Religion followers conceive the concept.

<sup>86</sup> Weber (1951) expresses such idea quite affirmatively, he says, “The Confucian had no desire to be ‘saved’ either from the migration of souls or from punishment in the beyond. Both ideas were unknown to Confucianism. The Confucian wished neither for salvation from life, which was affirmed, nor salvation from the social world, which was accepted as given. He thought of prudently mastering the opportunities of this world through self-control. He desired neither to be saved from evil nor from

Confucianism may not have mentioned the term 'salvation' explicitly, but some of its religious beliefs contain a concept similar to salvation/liberation. One of the ultimate concerns of religious Confucianism is the necessity of 'Tien and man becoming one', an idea which exists in many Chinese classics, including later Confucian works (e.g., Tung Chung-shu, *Rich Dew of Spring and Autumn: Meaning of Nature*, as cited in Jin, 1987, p.104), Chinese medicine classics (e.g., *Plain Question: The Inner Canon of Huang-di*, see Chen, 2009) and even some Taoist scriptures (e.g., Zhuang-zi, *True Classic of Southern Florescence*, see Jin, 1986).

In the very beginning of *Doctrine of the Mean* (quotations of Confucius concerning the 'Golden Mean'), it says, "Mandate of Tien is the nature. Becoming the nature is the Way...*J nz* (the rightful man) is the mainstay of Tien and Earth, the sum of all things, and the parent of all people." This passage seems to imply that *J nz* is almost identical to *Tien*, in the sense that they are both "the sum of all things, and the parent (ancestor) of all people." At least, *J nz* here is more than 'a rightful man' in the literal sense, and since one of the more important teachings of Confucianism is to seek a way to self-cultivate into a *J nz*, Confucianism can be roughly understood as a religion that aims to help a person to become something that shares certain properties of *Tien*, or as Taylor (1986) describes:

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nothing except perhaps the undignified barbarisms of social rudeness. Only the infraction of piety, the one basic social duty, could constitute 'sin' for the Confucian" (p.156-157).

The act of individual religiosity is most broadly described as self-cultivation, *hsui-shen*. Self-cultivation means specifically those activities pursued with an eye to the eventual goal of the tradition itself – the goal of becoming a nobleman, *chun-tzu* [*J nɜ*]... the primary religious nature of the goal is clear, for it is that which provides access to Heaven itself (pp.22-23).

According to these interpretations, we may claim that, at least for Confucianism, *Tien* is related to the process of reaching a salvific stage or is even the goal of such process. This, however, did not tell us what *Tien* exactly is. In fact, the ambiguity of *Tien* has triggered quite some controversies. On the one hand, *Tien* is seen as a “supreme personalised force, dictating the events of nature and men, wielding the power of reward and punishment” (Yang, 1967, p.249). This view is supported by Yan (1991), who believes that Confucius has clearly regarded *Tien* as a conscious being with ultimate authority. His conclusion is based on the interpretation of certain passages in *Analects* such as *Xian Asked*: “Tien is the one who knows me the best” (ibid, p.72). This statement does appear to have pictured *Tien* as a conscious being. Another passage from *Analects: Chief of the Ji Clan* also says, “Junzi fears (respects) three thing: Mandate of Tien, ‘big man’, and saint” (ibid). As Yan argues, putting *Tien* in the same position as ‘big man’ and saint strongly suggests that it is also a thinking

being like the other two (*ibid*). Other Confucian classics that may support the idea include *Mozi: Will of Tien* (“*Tien*’s love will overwhelm all men”), *Analects: There is Yong* (“This mistake will upset *Tien*”), and *Mencius: Lilou* (“*Tien* is purely honest [righteous] therefore mankind is also born purely honest”<sup>87</sup>).

On the other hand, some may argue that *Tien*, as its literal meaning (i.e., ‘sky’) implies, is actually referred to as some kind of naturalistic force. This view is mainly supported by the interpretations of the ideas Xunzi proposes. In his more notable work *Discussion of Tien*, Xunzi strongly criticises Mencius’ theory of seeing *Tien* as morally righteous. According to his observation, human is actually born purely evil, and thus *Tien* (if any) must too be purely evil (Graham, 1989, pp.238-250). He further argues from a materialistic point of view that *Tien*, or the Mandate of *Tien*, is purely a naturalistic force, or more precisely, a law that keeps the world in shape. This law is derived from reasons rather than a personal being. Law is ultimately essential because men are born evil (*ibid*, pp.267-291).

One may argue that Xunzi should not be treated as a Confucian master, for his theory of legalism is quite different or even opposite to what Confucius and Mencius propose (*ibid*, pp.285-91). Nonetheless, even Confucius himself had once said “*Tien* does not speak”<sup>88</sup> (*Analects: Yang Huo*), which seems to suggest that *Tien* is not

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<sup>87</sup> For a bilingual database for these classics, please see *Chinese Text Project* (n.d.).

<sup>88</sup> The full statement is, “*Tien* does not speak! Seasons rotate and living things grow, did *Tien* say a

personal. However, as Yang (1967) argues, "It is probable that he [Confucius] meant Heaven could speak but need not speak, for Heaven's intentions are demonstrated by the rotation of the seasons and the growth of living things" (p.249). This viewpoint is again supported by Yan (1991), who agrees that the quote is not an evidence for the argument that *Tien* is impersonal (1991, p.72).

The existence of such a debate actually reveals that the Confucian doctrines did not offer a clear enough description as to what *Tien* actually is or whether it is a personal being – the viewpoint that the Biblical God is personal or that the Absolute Truth of Buddhism is impersonal, on the other hand, would at least be less debatable. If we are to interpret *Tien* from Hick's perspective, it is possible that *Tien* is in fact a transcategorical concept, and therefore neither the property personal nor impersonal is applicable to it. Another point worth-noting is that worshipping *Tien* seems to be helpful for the attainment of the salvific stage of Confucianism, because offering sacrifices to *Tien* is a rightful behaviour, and acting rightfully would help one to self-cultivate into a *J nz* . Therefore, in order to verify our earlier claim, we would need to examine if Chinese Folk Religion also considers worshipping *Tien* helpful for having a better afterlife.

#### 7.4 Taoist interpretation of *Tien*

Before suggesting the inconsistency between the concept of *Tien* and Hick's 'Real', it is necessary to briefly describe how the former is considered the opposite aspect of Earth. For Taoists, accommodating oneself to *Tien*, Earth and four seasons are the way to establish harmony between man and the universe (*Tao Te Ching*, Ch.4). According to Hou and Fan (1994), Laozi perceived *Tien* as something abstract yet naturalistic, rather than mystical or supernatural (p.39). Nonetheless, it remains the principle for rightfulness, and is sometimes regarded as a synonym of the Tao (ibid).

The main difference between the Confucian and Taoist interpretations of *Tien* is that, for the latter, *Tien* is no longer the ultimate being that governs the universe, but 'the nature' that exists in equal relation to Man and Earth<sup>89</sup>. Guenon (1991) has analysed this particular idea quite thoroughly<sup>90</sup>. According to him, *Tien* and Earth are considered different from Man in nature, in the sense that *Tien* and Earth are the outermost boundaries of the Cosmos, while Man is inside such Cosmos<sup>91</sup>. As he

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<sup>89</sup> Although *Tao Te Ching* has clearly connoted this idea, it is *Zhuangzi* that elaborates and discusses the thoughts in detail. As a Taoist classic, *Zhuangzi* is usually considered equally important as *Tao Te Ching*.

<sup>90</sup> In fact, his subject of interest is the particular concept of 'Triad' rather than Taoism. Nonetheless, he is aware that this concept is somehow derived from the philosophy of Taoism, and has therefore consulted and referenced all the major Taoist classics for his study.

<sup>91</sup> As he describes in details, "In reality 'inwardness' always pertains to Heaven (*Tien*) and 'outwardness' to Earth, whatever the perspective... we can see that because Heaven and Earth are the outermost boundaries of the Cosmos they actually only have one face as far as the Cosmos is concerned; and that this face is inward in the case of Heaven and outward in the case of Earth. As for their other face, it can only exist in relation to the common principle in which they are unified, and in which all distinction between inward and outward disappears, along with all opposition and even all

further interprets, everything in this world is a son of *Tien* and Earth, because everything contains something of the two: an 'essence' and a 'substance', a yang aspect and a yin aspect, a side that is 'in act' and a side that is 'in potency', or an 'interior' and an 'exterior' (ibid, p.65). That being said, Man is still different from any other thing, for He "represents the totality of all manifested beings" and "embraced his entire state of existence just as Heaven embraces all manifestation" (ibid, pp.67-68). Things other than Man, as Guenon understands, do not have this superiority.

Guenon also tries to stress that, for Taoism, Man is the product of both the nature and the divine. The term 'divine' here is referred to the opposite aspect of nature (everything has an opposite aspect), but Guenon also tends to regard it as a synonym of 'God' (ibid, p.132). Since *Tien* was already defined as the opposite aspect of Earth, and 'Earth' is not a synonym of 'nature', when Guenon speaks of 'divine' or 'God', he probably does not mean *Tien* (because *Tien* can't be the opposite of 'nature'). Therefore, his statement should be understood as "Man consists of both a supernatural aspect and a natural aspect."

Apart from the understanding that it is the outmost boundary of the Cosmos, Guenon did not give much description as to what *Tien* is. If it is merely "the outmost

boundary of the Cosmos,” it would seem to be rather pointless to give it another name (*Tien*). Nonetheless, it would be unfair to criticise him for not being able to describe *Tien* in greater details, for it is the original Taoist classics that fail to make it clear in the first place, but again, it is possible that *Tien* is simply ineffable, thus the impossibility of describing it. As Laozi puts it, “The way that can be spoken of is not the true way” (*Tao Te Ching*, Ch.1).

Regarding the implication that *Tien* may be ineffable, Hick (1989a) has tried to show that Tao is equivalent to ‘Real’, or more precisely, ‘Real *an sich*’, just like *Sunyata* (p.237). And since *Tien* is believed to be a synonym of Tao, *Tien* should by Hick’s theory also be equivalent to ‘Real *an sich*’. This, however, does not prove that the two concepts are indeed identical – it is only what Hick would want to suggest. In fact, as we will discuss shortly, the concept that *Tien* is the opposite aspect of Earth may prove to be rather challenging to be explained using Hick’s dualistic assumption.

### **7.5 *Tien* for Chinese Folk Religion**

As Major (1987) argues, *Tien* has remained a “conscious but relatively impersonal force” for Chinese Folk Religion (or ‘Chinese religion’ his preferred term) since it replaced the role of *Shàngdì* (pp.223-4). It is basically treated as a deity, but



seldom worshipped as a deity. For instance, it is uncommon to have a statue of *Tien* in a Chinese temple complex, where the statues of Buddha, Confucius and Laozi simultaneously belong. In other words, it appears that the worship of *Tien* is not (or no longer) a common tradition<sup>92</sup>.

Interestingly, the worship of Earth (Tudi), on the other hand, is still widely practiced today. According to Berkowitz et al (1969, pp.79-81) and Mills (2005, pp.350-2), Earth is often worshipped as a 'household god', together with Kitchen God, Door God or other personal deities. Earth is always presented as a human-like deity, either in the form of a small statue or 'paper god'. As Mills claims, almost all families who believe in Chinese Folk Religion would 'set' an Earth at home for daily worship<sup>93</sup> (ibid, p.351).

Although the worship of *Tien* is no longer common, the concept concerning *Tien* has not vanished. As Yang (1967) argues, it is true that the basic idea of following Chinese Folk Religion is to worship and seek helps from various spiritual beings, but all those spiritual beings are believed to be subordinate to *Tien*, and since *Tien* is the supreme power directing the spiritual world, worshipping our ancestors or any other

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<sup>92</sup> The 1,085 pages *History of Chinese Folk Religion* (Ma & Han, 2004) and the 525 pages *A Carnival of Gods: Studies of Religions in Hong Kong* (Chan (ed.), 2002), for examples, have neither mentioned such a tradition nor related any practice to the concept of *Tien*. Other scholarly literatures concerning Chinese Folk Religion also seem to witness no worship of *Tien* after the Han Dynasty except when the emperor, the 'son of *Tien*', performed an offering ceremony (Wang, 2009, Ch. 2).

<sup>93</sup> For more information on the modern tradition as well as the origin of Earth, please see Dell'Orto (2002).

spiritual being can indeed be seen as paying respect to the supreme power behind them (p.23).

In addition, when it comes to an important ceremony such as Chinese traditional wedding, which is still widely practiced today, the bride and groom would usually kowtow to *Tien* to ask for its approval for the marriage (Cormack, 2003, pp.47-60).

As Cormack understands, although the bride and groom would also kowtow to their parents, who represent their ancestors, during the ceremony, kowtowing to *Tien* is always the first step of the procedures, which suggests that *Tien*'s approval matters the most (ibid). In other words, *Tien* is still regarded as the most supreme or respectable being; it is just respected differently from other deities.

Yan (1991) tries to support such idea by interpreting certain expressions the Chinese Folk Religion followers often use: "*l oti nyê*" ("*Tien* my master," used when referring to *Tien*), "*ti nb ngmáng*" ("*Tien* helps us"), and "*ti nsh ngde*" ("*Tien* created," meaning 'inborn'), which are still heard nowadays (ibid, p.44). The most common translation of the English expression "my God" is "my *Tien*," not "my *Shàngdì*." Furthermore, when something fortunate or unfortunate happens, the Chinese may claim that it is the 'will of *Tien*' (ibid). As Yan argues, these are the manifestation of the concept that *Tien* is a personal being of ultimate authority who determines everything that happens in this universe (ibid). Similarly, L. Q. Chen

(2008) also believes that the believers of Chinese Folk Religion tend to regard *Tien* as a holy, secret, omnipresent and omnipotent power, thus the common expressions “*c ngti n y uy n*” (“*Tien* has eyes,” meaning unrightful deeds will always be punished), “*ti nzh dào*” (“*Tien* knows”) and “*ti nl*” (“justice of *Tien*,” pp.11-12)<sup>94</sup>.

### 7.6 Differences between *Tien* and other spiritual beings

Although the worship of *Tien* is rare, the worship of other Chinese deities may still reflect certain ideas related to *Tien*. For example, one of the more popular deities worshipped today is Tien Hou<sup>95</sup>, whose temples can be found in Mainland China, Macau, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore (Ruitenbeek, 1999, pp.281-329; Lee, 1990, pp.53-68). ‘Tien Hou’, literally means ‘Queen of *Tien*’, is the goddess who maintains peacefulness on the sea. However, as Watson (2002) discusses, she also possesses power over matters of clan authority in some areas of China (pp.184-186; 191-193). It is rare for a Chinese deity to possess such an authoritative power – normal deities such as Kitchen God or Door God, for instance, can only bring fortune

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<sup>94</sup> In fact, it is also common for the Chinese to use ‘*Tien*’ to refer to the ultimate beings from foreign religions. For examples of some official translations, Brahma of Hinduism is referred to as ‘*Fànti n*’, Indra of Buddhism is named ‘*Dishiti n*’, and the Catholic God is called ‘*Ti nzh*’ (‘*Tien* the Lord’). These translations suggest that ‘*Tien*’ is commonly understood as a God-like, ultimate being at least in the literal sense.

<sup>95</sup> Although some may prefer the translation ‘Tian Hou’, ‘Tian’ is indeed identical to ‘Tien’, for they both represent the exact same Chinese character ‘天’. This thesis chooses the translation ‘Tien/Tien Hou’ instead of ‘Tian/Tian Hou’ because it is more commonly used in scholarly literatures concerning the concept or deity.

to a particular family in a limited aspect (Berkowitz et al, 1969, pp.79-81). Even Kuan-yin, who is often regarded as one of the most powerful deities in Chinese Folk Religion, does not possess power that can alter the fate of a clan or race (Palmer, Ramsay & Kwok, 1995; Dong, 2002). The special power Tien Hou possesses is in fact quite similar to the power of *Tien* in that they both have the ability to determine the fate of a larger social group or, so to speak, the whole community. Tien Hou is sometimes referred to 'Mother, the Ancestor' in some regions, meaning she is also believed to have certain linkage to ancestral matters (Liu, 2002, p.225). Occasionally, she is even simply referred to as 'Niángm' or 'M niáng' (both meaning 'Mother', *ibid*<sup>96</sup>).

As the study of Berkowitz et al (1969) suggests, the relationship between Tien Hou and *Tien* is significant – although worshipping Tien Hou may bring various fortunes to the village, loss and gain are still believed to be in the hands of *Tien*, and paying respects to Tien Hou would only help to establish a relationship between *Tien* and man (pp.84-86). In other words, according to their observations, Tien Hou is more of a mediator whose power comes from *Tien*; this is consistent with the idea that *Tien* is the source of all things or an ultimate deity who governs everything<sup>97</sup>.

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<sup>96</sup> In fact, Liu has tried to argue in his footnote that the character '媽' (*m*) here does not mean 'mother' because it is pronounced 'maa5' instead of 'maal' (in Cantonese). However, according to *Lee's Chinese Dictionary* (organised by C. M. Lee, the first president of Chinese University, Hong Kong), 'maa5' (Cantonese) also means 'mother', and is usually used to refer to an authoritative female.

<sup>97</sup> It should also be noticed that the number of studies concerning the concept of *Tien* for Chinese Folk

Various studies of Jade Emperor may help to further elaborate this idea (Chamberlain, 2009, pp.167-171; Fowler & Fowler, 2008, pp.230-40). Also referred to as '*Shàngdì*' in some periods, Jade Emperor is commonly perceived as the supreme ruler of Heaven and Earth. However, this does not imply that Heaven itself is under his control. Instead, as Schipper (1993) outlines, he is more like "the One, the axis, the mediator, and the centre toward which everything converges" (p.87). The term 'Heaven' here probably refers to the heavenly government where all the deities 'work' (except *Tien*). In fact, it is recorded that even Jade Emperor, the so-called 'supreme ruler of Heaven', cannot change the will of *Tien*. As discussed earlier, although portrayed as the head of the whole heavenly government, he is very often unsuccessful and flawed, or, in other words, not ultimately powerful (Fowler & Fowler, 2008, p.230). Similar to all the other deities (except *Tien*), there are plenty of folktales narrating the origin and life of Jade Emperor. He is, for example, considered married to Tien Hou according to some records (ibid, pp.158-159; p.231).

The studies of Jade Emperor have identified some crucial differences between *Tien* and all other deities. First, there is no account narrating the origin and life of *Tien*.

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Religion is few, probably due to the limitation that we can only try to understand this religion through observations or other anthropological means, and *Tien* is no longer a part of its religious practices which we can easily witness. In other words, unlike Taoism or Confucianism, one cannot make any claim as to how Chinese Folk Religion understands the concept by simply interpreting a scripture, and therefore Yan (1991) and Chen (2008), for example, would have to study the concept by making hypotheses based on the interpretations of certain related verbal expressions. For this reason, further researches are needed to verify how common these concepts are and to have a more thorough knowledge of how *Tien* is understood by the Chinese Folk Religion followers in particular.

It is neither married nor is it mentioned in any folktale in the form of a personal deity. Second, it is believed that there is no higher authority that may alter *Tien*'s will and fate. *Tien*'s fate, if any, is probably determined by itself. Third, it appears that *Tien* is no longer worshipped as a deity. Instead, it is respected by worshipping the deities under its government. Lastly, there is no negative account of *Tien*, in the sense that it is never portrayed as a flawed being, or, to put it differently, it appears that *Tien* does not have a human personality.

Nonetheless, it is not to say *Tien* does not have preferences. As mentioned, it is believed that *Tien* would award righteous conduct and punish unrighteous ones. The common expression "it is the will of *Tien*," which is usually used to comfort or persuade individuals to accept an adversity, which suggests a strong faith in *Tien*'s decisions. Although *Tien* is 'merely' a force that governs everything in the universe, it is also morally righteous. According to some folklores and Confucian classics, complying with filial piety is what *Tien* prefers the most (Hou & Fan, 1994, pp.56-7). Therefore, it is common for Chinese Folk Religion followers to hold convictions such as "no matter what, parents always come first," "one should avoid getting hurt because his body belongs to his parents," or "one shouldn't travel when his parents are around" etc (ibid, p.57). This conviction is also shown in the obstinate belief that one must pay wholehearted respect to his/her ancestors (ibid). All of these suggest

that the will of *Tien* is ultimately authoritative and trustworthy<sup>98</sup>.

### **7.7 *Tien* as the Ultimate Reality for Chinese Folk Religion**

There are different interpretations of the concept of Ultimate Reality – even for Christians from the same denomination, some may argue that God is the Ultimate Reality, while others may consider ‘Godhead’ more ultimate. For Buddhists, Hindus, or even some atheistic philosophers, Ultimate Reality would most certainly be understood as something other than the Biblical God. However, this does not necessarily mean that the concept of Ultimate Reality is defined differently. Although different thinkers may refer the term to a different being or concept, the meaning of the term can still be identical. Nevertheless, it is only so if we really do have a consensus on the definition of Ultimate Reality.

The emphases of Hick and his critics tend to assume Ultimate Reality to be something related to salvation/liberation, and establishing a relationship with such reality would help to reach a better religious-end. This idea is in fact common. For

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<sup>98</sup> As Yan (1991) argues, it is indeed a long tradition for the Chinese to try and conform to the will of *Tien*. He sees the connection between this and the Chinese idea “universe is my heart, my heart is the universe,” and claims that the Chinese have put their trust in *Tien* because it is considered ‘natural’ (pp.72-74; 256-265). Hou and Fan (1994) also agree that *Tien* is a crucial concept for Chinese Folk Religion, and comment that, “For the Chinese folks, *Tien* is a being neither naturalistic nor personal... They believe all things are determined by their own choices as well as the will of *Tien*, though the will of *Tien* is more influential. They admit the existence of some form of ultimate power which is responsible for keeping balance and determining every event that happens in this universe” (p.84).

example, as Thurman (1984) defines, to realise Ultimate Reality is to attain perfection, salvation or liberation (pp.217-235), or as Aslid (1984) expresses, knowing the Absolute Truth and reaching the ultimate goal are the same thing, for there can be no dualism between them (pp.145-6). According to these understandings, if knowing or establishing a relationship with *Tien* is not considered helpful to attain salvation/liberation, then we may argue that *Tien*, as Chinese Folk Religion understands it, is different from the Ultimate Reality we usually speak of.

As discussed earlier, although it is arguably related to some form of a salvific stage for Confucianism, *Tien* for Chinese Folk Religion is more like a deity whose major duty or function is to keep the world in a desired balance and award the rightful with various earthly fortunes. Hick may argue that awarding the rightful is no different from encouraging rightful behaviours and therefore it can also effect the soteriological transformation he speaks of, but the awards Chinese Folk Religion promise are the wellbeing at the present, and the behaviours it encourages are not exactly 'universal compassion', to say the least.

It is reasonable to assume that there must be something significant about a 'thing' for it to be considered Ultimate Reality. Otherwise, if pointing to something 'true' is enough, then philosophers may as well regard the law of identity as Ultimate Reality. What I would question is the implication that one of the criteria for qualifying



something to be an Ultimate Reality is whether it is related to salvific matters. While realising the Buddhist truths or establishing a relationship with the Biblical God is believed to be helpful for reaching a salvific-end, it is possible that what is considered ultimately transcendent for some religions is not related to salvific matters in the same way as that of Buddhism and Christianity. The main reason to regard a concept or a 'thing' as Ultimate Reality should be whether it is believed to be most supreme and authoritative in the religious sense, not whether it would effect any soteriological transformation, because the latter is not necessarily applicable to all religions.

That being said, critics may also argue that *Tien* is simply a deity similar to the Sun-God or Sky-God found in other folk religious traditions which is not as supreme or transcendent as the Ultimate Reality of Christianity or Buddhism, and therefore we can at most regard it as a "smaller scale Ultimate Reality" (Larson, 1999).

Nonetheless, the concept of *Tien* is in fact quite different from certain Sky-Gods in that the latter are often depicted as a human-like deity with folklores narrating their lives, just like all other 'lower level' Chinese folk deities<sup>99</sup>.

*Tien*, on the contrary, is never depicted as a human-like being, and there is no folklore telling the story of its life, as if there isn't any. As we may suggest, it is

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<sup>99</sup> For example, the Sun-God of Akan (an ethnic group in Ghana) named 'Odomankoma' is regarded as the lord of the universe, the totality of reality, as well as the divine breath which gives life to all (Sawyer, 1970, p.21). However, he is often depicted as a human figure and is believed to have married a Goddess called "Nyame" (ibid). The same goes for the Sky-God Olorun for African Yoruba tribes, Dionyosos for ancient Greece, and Osiris for early Egyptians, for they are all believed to have conducted deeds similar to that of humans (Eliade, 1996, pp.171-173).

possible that *Tien* was 'mistakenly' regarded as a deity only because the Chinese could not find a better way to describe it – although it was commonly worshipped before Han dynasty, it has never been understood or treated like any other deity. Since even the supreme beings such as Buddha, Confucius and Laozi are treated and worshipped in the same way as other deities, it is reasonable to claim that *Tien* – which is more ultimate than such supreme beings – should be considered the Ultimate Reality for Chinese Folk Religion, even though it is unrelated to the kind of salvation/liberation an Ultimate Reality is normally expected to be related to<sup>100</sup>.

### **7.8 Is *Tien* equivalent to 'Real *an sich*'?**

Even if we are to qualify *Tien* as a kind of Ultimate Reality, we still have to examine if it can fit into Hick's description. In fact, with the idea of a distinction between 'Real *an sich*' and 'Real as experienced', it seems that Hick (1989a) can pretty much put any conception of Ultimate Reality into either of the two categories: if a concept shares certain crucial properties with 'Real *an sich*' (e.g., *Sunyata*, Tao, Godhead), it would be equivalent to the former; and if it does not (e.g., *saguna* Brahman, personal Amida, 'available God'), the latter (pp.236-237). Nonetheless, as

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<sup>100</sup> Please refer to Chapter 9 for further explanations.

discussed in Chapter 3 and 4, we may still challenge Hick's assumption by suggesting that, even if such distinction does exist, the idea of Godhead for Christianity, for example, is in reality understood as something different from what Hick describes – it is, so to speak, not as cognitively empty as 'Real *an sich*' (e.g., Heim, 1992, p.213).

Having said that, in Hick's defence, he can easily explain that the 'cognitively non-empty' Godhead Heim describes is indeed 'Real as experienced', not 'Real *an sich*'. Therefore, in order to see if Hick's theory is applicable to describe the Chinese religious situation in this particular aspect, we would have to examine whether *Tien* can be understood as either 'Real *an sich*' or 'Real as experienced'.

First of all, if we are to apply some form of a dualistic distinction onto a concept related to *Tien*, it would be better to use the distinction between *Tien* and Earth rather than '*Tien an sich*' and '*Tien* as experienced'. However, as we have seen, Earth for Chinese Folk Religion is often understood as a somewhat 'lowly' household/local deity whose power is rather limited, while *Tien*, on the other hand, is believed to be ultimately powerful and authoritative. This distinction is quite clearly alien to what Hick proposes, for the difference between *Tien* and Earth is not that one is available to be experienced while the other is not, but that one is ultimately transcendent while the other is of a lower rank. A reasonable approach to try to describe *Tien* using Hick's model, then, is to see if there is also a distinction between '*Tien an sich*' and '*Tien* as

experienced'.

There are indeed ideas that suggest a '*Tien an sich*'. While we may refer to certain Confucian and Taoist scriptures and argue that *Tien* (or Tao) is somehow understood as an ineffable concept by the two religions, we would have to make a less reliable assumption by interpreting certain phenomena when it comes to Chinese Folk Religion. The phenomenon that all the others deities have stories or beliefs concerning their natures as well as what they have done while *Tien* alone has not seems to suggest that the latter is indescribable or that there is nothing about it which we can describe. This may not prove that *Tien* is understood as an ineffable concept, but we can at least claim that *Tien* is seldom described in the way other deities are described.

Second, it is believed that *Tien* is ultimately transcendent and beyond everything. According to the beliefs we discussed, there is no being more ultimate than or as ultimate as *Tien*, and the will of *Tien* would override the power or decision of any other being, which includes the more powerful deity such as Kuan-yin, Jade Emperor or even Buddha<sup>101</sup>. In other words, *Tien* is regarded as the 'being' of highest possible authority, which is similar to the 'unlimitedness' nature '*Real an sich*' possesses, even though 'having power' would in turn be a property of '*Real as experienced*' (Hick,

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<sup>101</sup> As the novel *Journey to the West* (Wu, 2003) depicts it, the Supreme Buddha often uses the expression "this is the will of *Tien*," meaning that "there is nothing we can do to alter it." Since there is no official doctrine for Chinese Folk Religion, stories and beliefs are very often spread in the form of novel, drama (Chinese opera) or gossip etc. In turn, these novels or dramas may also reflect what the Chinese believe. In the story *Journey to the West*, Buddha Gotama is always depicted as a human-like deity, while *Tien*, on the other hand, is only mentioned verbally by the divine characters.

1989a, pp.237-239).

Third, since there can be nothing as ultimate as *Tien*, it is also a singular concept in the sense that its ultimacy can only be affirmed by referring to it in the singular (ibid, p.249). This may also suggest that even though the interpretations are diverse, the *Tien* Confucians, Taoists and Chinese Folk Religion followers speak of are indeed the same concept. As Hou and Fan (1994) describe, "Laozi had turned the conscious *Tien* into the abstractive, naturalistic Tao. Although Tao is no longer a humanly god, it still governs the principles of human behaviours" (p.39). This implies that the *Tien* (Tao) Taoism describes is the conscious being other Chinese religious traditions describe, meaning *Tien* is not only similar to 'Real' in that they are singular, but also that they are both the Ultimate Reality 'shared' by a plurality of religions.

Furthermore, as Hick believes, 'Real *an sich*' is not something we can worship, experience, understand, or voluntarily establish a relationship with. Similarly, the phenomenon that *Tien* is no longer worshipped or treated as a deity may also suggest that it is not something we are supposed to worship or establish any relationship with, and is therefore a concept closer to 'Real *an sich*' than 'Real as experienced'.

Last but not least, although Hick is spiritually attracted to Christianity (Cheetham, 2003, pp.2-4), he, however, does not consider 'Real *an sich*' the creator of this world, for 'creating the world' is clearly a describable concept. Similarly, although *Tien* is

believed to be the 'source' or 'Ancestor' of all things, there is no literature suggesting that it is also considered the creator of this universe. In fact, according to Chinese traditional belief, there is a deity-like being called '*Páng*' (also 'P'an Ku') who is commonly regarded as the creator of the world we currently live in (i.e., he is not necessarily the creator of Heaven or Hell, Werner, 1994, pp.76-92).

### **7.9 Is *Tien* a describable concept?**

Despite the idea that the nature of *Tien* is not something we can fully describe, there is still something we can say about it. This does not necessarily mean that it is effable, for Hick has also related some concepts to 'Real *an sich*' in order to explain the concept. What is important, then, is whether the things we can say about *Tien* would imply that it is experienceable and thus closer to the concept of 'Real as experienced'.

To start with, it is believed that *Tien* can somehow be pleased by performing certain morally righteous acts suggested by but not limited to the Confucian teachings – for example, anyone who commits incest, steals or kills would be punished in the afterlife, though arguably, these behaviours have not been criticised by traditional Confucianism unequivocally. As Xiao (1988) argues, the folk beliefs of

underworld and afterlife judgments are more likely to be derived from the Taoist interpretations of the Buddhist scriptures *Sutra of the Eighteen Hell*, for such beliefs are not common until the Han Dynasty during which Buddhism spread in China (pp.34-35). That being mentioned, the Chinese Folk Religion's understandings of the underworld are not necessarily limited to the Buddhist interpretations. According to Ma (2002), the four kings of the underworld are all Chinese historical figures, which include Bao Zheng, Han Qinhu, Fan Zhongyan and Kou Zhun (Ch.2:6). In other words, the beliefs concerning these four kings are most definitely not derived from Buddhism, because Buddhism is originally an Indian religion, and all of the four Chinese historical figures were born after the establishment of the Chinese Buddhist traditions. As Ma further describes, these kings would judge the newly deceased spirits based on what they have done before death, and punish those who have acted against the will of *Tien*, even though *Tien* is not directly involved in the process of judgement (ibid). Again, this suggests that *Tien* is not the kind of deity that can work as an actual judge, but its preferences or 'will' would indirectly determine our fate afterlife.

Therefore, the second thing we may say about *Tien* is that it can be understood as just and morally righteous – as *Tien* would punish the unrightful one and reward the rightful, it is reasonable to assume that *Tien* itself is also rightful. Hick (1989a) should

agree that this particular description of *Tien* is inconsistent with his idea of 'Real *an sich*', because "we cannot apply the common ethical ideal directly to the concept of the Real *an sich*, for... this is the concept of that which lies beyond all human categorisation" (p.338). Nonetheless, since Hick also expresses that 'Real' is also just, tender, fearful and gracious in its personae, 'Real *an sich*' must be somehow related to such positive natures, otherwise it would be rather difficult, if not impossible, to imagine how the former concept can be a manifestation of the latter (ibid, p.339). If Hick believes it is acceptable to consider such positive natures a manifestation of 'Real *an sich*' yet it can remain a transcategorical concept, we may also say the same about *Tien*, that is, *Tien* as we understand it is just and righteous, but noumenally the true nature of *Tien* is not something effable. Alternatively, we may also suggest that *Tien* is simply not explainable by Hick's theory because there is no such thing as a 'Real *an sich*' and a 'Real as experienced', and the only *Tien* existing is the Ultimate Reality that is just and righteous.

Which leads us back to our earlier question: should we abandon the dualism of *Tien* and Earth just because such distinction does not fit into Hick's theory? As mentioned, if we are to stick with the conception commonly known to the Chinese Folk Religion followers, Earth is generally conceived as the opposite aspect of *Tien*. What makes such distinction inconsistent with Hick's theory is that Earth is



considered inferior to *Tien* in that it is often considered a 'low rank deity' on the same level of ancestors' spirits or the unknown dead of the area, while *Tien*, on the contrary, is more of an ultimate reality so transcendent that we cannot fully describe it or worship it (Feuchtwang, 2001, pp.40-49). From a Chinese religious perspective, it should make more senses to explain it using the concept that everything has an opposite aspect, and therefore *Tien*, on the one hand, is ultimate, powerful and authoritative, while Earth, on the opposite, is limited, weak and lowly. In other words, to argue that *Tien* is not ultimate (unlimited) because it is righteous and that 'Real/*Tien an sich*' instead of Earth should be considered its dualist counterpart would be to force a description onto the concept *Tien* which is alien to how the concept is originally understood – unlike the Christian distinction between Godhead and 'available God' (e.g., Tillich, 1952, p.189; Kaufman, 1972, pp.85-86), it is uncommon to understand *Tien* itself dualistically (because it has already got an opposite aspect – Earth).

Certainly, it does not prove Hick's theory false or inapplicable to Chinese Folk Religion, for it is in fact quite impossible to falsify his assumption before the eschaton, and he may still claim that *Tien* is just one of the many 'Real as experienced', and that the Chinese are simply unaware of the 'existence' of a 'Real/*Tien an sich*'. What we may argue is, similar to the criticisms proposed from the confessional perspective, if

we are to use Hick's idea of 'Real' to explain the concept of *Tien*, we would have to abandon or distort some of our original conceptions concerning *Tien*. We have to, for instance, accept the idea that there is actually an ultimate reality higher than the *Tien* we commonly understand.

### **7.10 Relationship between *Tien* and the idea of a better afterlife**

Another concept of Hick's theory that may be inapplicable to the concept of *Tien* is that, even if we accept the assumption that *Tien* as we commonly understand is merely a 'Real as experienced', there is still an inconsistency between how the two concepts are related to salvific matters. As Hick (1989a) believes, the reason for 'Real as experienced' to have positive natures is that it must be able to effect a soteriological transformation, and the soteriological transformation must be something positive, he writes, "For in order to be agents of salvific transformation the divine *personae* have to be just, as well as tender, fearful and awe-inspiring as well as gracious" (p.339). As we have seen, if a belief, concept or phenomenon is unable to effect such transformation, then it would be, by Hick's theory, not an authentic response to the 'Real' (i.e., not even mythologically true).

It would be arbitrary to claim that *Tien* has nothing to do with salvation at all. For

instance, based on the understanding of the materials we have covered so far, it is commonly believed that acting according to the will of *Tien* is the major, if not the only, way to avoid the punishments in hells and have a better rebirth/life in the spiritual world (e.g., becoming a spiritual being with higher status). This idea seems to fit into Hick's theory quite well, but only if we consider such an idea of 'better afterlife' equivalent to the 'limitlessly better religious-end' Hick speaks of, and if the kind of behaviour the will of *Tien* encourages can meet Hick's criterion.

Therefore, in order to suggest that even the idea of 'Real as experienced' is not fully compatible with the concept of *Tien* and that, more importantly, his criteriology would place Chinese Folk Religion in a rather inferior position, the next Chapter will continue the discussion by showing that the 'better afterlife' commonly understood by the Chinese Folk Religion followers is neither ultimate nor an end, and that the central theme of the religion is not entirely consistent with the Golden Rule or 'universal compassion' Hick describes.

## **8. INCOMPATIBILITY BETWEEN CHINESE FOLK RELIGION AND HICK'S CRITERIOLOGY**

### **8.1 Introduction and justification**

It would be questionable to simply regard Chinese Folk Religion as a tradition that does not concern salvation at all, for the validity of such statement is crucially dependent on how salvation is understood. If it is strictly defined as a limitlessly better religious-end where the status is eternal and cannot possibly get any better, then one may suggest that such a concept is not commonly understood as the central theme of the belief system of Chinese Folk Religion. On the other hand, if salvation is broadly defined as the attainment of spiritual peacefulness and happiness, then not only Chinese Folk Religion, but also Communism, Fascism and many other secular schools of thought can be said to have the ability to lead someone to salvation.

Regarding the idea of seeing secularism as a kind of new age religion, Kitagawa (1967) suggests that such a tradition often involves three major tendencies: (1) 'man as the centre'; (2) 'this-worldly soteriology'; and (3) 'search for freedom' (pp.60-62). As he understands, 'classical religions' tend to see the present world as a painful 'prison', and therefore man is supposed to want to end the sufferings by reaching the

unearthly Heaven or *nirvana* which is believed to exist in another realm of reality (ibid). The new age religions he witnesses, however, tend to see “this phenomenal world as the only real order of existence,” and “life here and now as the centre of the world of meaning” (ibid, p.61). He further describes the salvation they seek as a soteriology centred on this world, which is to find the meaning of human destiny in this world, or as he writes, “the search for adequate standards of action, which is at the same time a search for personal maturity and social relevance, is in itself the heart of the modern quest for salvation” (ibid, p.62). As Lambert (1999) comments, Kitagawa's theory is in essence a criticism of the traditional assumption that these new age traditions are nonreligious (p.310).

While Chinese Folk Religion may not fit perfectly into the category of new age religion, it has nonetheless demonstrated something similar to the three tendencies Kitagawa describes. As we will see shortly, Chinese Folk Religion is also commonly regarded as a human-centred religion in the sense that its main concern is the wellbeing in this world rather than a limitlessly better religious-end in another realm of reality. Although its followers do not seem to be searching for freedom deliberately, they tend to consider religious identity and the total faith in a religious claim less important. If these tendencies can be understood as the pursuit of another form of salvation, then we may claim that salvation is also central to Chinese Folk Religion.

However, it still does not mean that it is compatible with Hick's theory.

As Hick (1989a) proposes, "Within our pluralistic hypothesis salvation/liberation is defined as the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness" (p.303). Hick has also tried to integrate some form of this-worldly salvation/liberation into his definition, such as the freeing of "whole populations" from various political and social oppressions (ibid, p.304). In other words, it seems that he would be willing to consider the mere pursuit of wellbeing in this world a kind of salvation/liberation within his pluralist hypothesis. But again, we must not forget that his understanding of salvation/liberation is also closely related to his criteriology, he argues, "The production of saints, both contemplative and practical, individualistic and political, is thus one valid criterion by which to identify a religious tradition as a salvific human response to the Real" (ibid, p.307). Seemingly, the existence of the Chinese deity Guan-di, who is believed to have sacrificed his life for protecting the Han people and the Confucian ideals, would be a valid criterion for identifying Chinese Folk Religion as a salvific/authentic response to the 'Real'. Nonetheless, by 'saint' Hick does not mean anyone who dies for a conditional group of people (e.g., the Han people) or any ideal. Rather, there is also a criterion or an "all-important common feature" that qualifies someone as a saint, which is the "transcendence of the ego point of view and its replacement by devotion to or centred

concentration upon some manifestation of the Real, response to which produces compassion/love towards other human beings or towards all life" (ibid, p.301). His emphasis on 'whole populations' and 'all life' is derived from his understanding of the 'Golden Rule' of which a religious belief/phenomenon is considered an authentic response to the 'Real' only if it can effect or demonstrate a 'universal compassion'. The benevolence of Guan-di and the basis of the major concern as well as the moral belief of Chinese Folk Religion, however, is more of a conditional, if not a selfish, concept.

Therefore, to further examine the compatibility between Hick's criteriology and Chinese Folk Religion, this Chapter will focus on the so-called 'self-centred', 'non-salvific' nature of the religion, and to see if it can meet the criterion of a fruitful, civilised, and authentic religion according to Hick's theory.

## **8.2 Problem of Hick's criteriology from the perspective of 'evil' phenomena**

As mentioned, Chinese Folk Religion can be understood as a human-centred tradition in that its major concepts and values are based on the attempt to benefit our earthly life. It is different from some god-centred (e.g., Christianity) or reality-centred (e.g., Buddhism) traditions because the latter tend to embrace their moral codes for

they are religiously correct. Although some may suggest that there is also rationale behind some restrictions, the Muslim regulation that one must not eat pork food products or the Christian teaching that one must not worship a second god is considered correct mainly because it is derived from the faith in certain religious-claims. In other words, these behaviours are believed to be preferable mainly because the religion teaches so, not because they are reasonable. This may explain why it is less common for a non-Muslim (or non-vegetarian) to avoid pork dishes, which should not be the case if there are other strong nonreligious reasons for avoiding pork food products – conversely, alcoholic drink is hence rejected by comparatively more non-Muslims, for it is generally and non-religiously considered harmful in the medical sense. According to Warren's (2002) Biblical interpretation, two of the five great duties of being a Christian are to please God and become His servant; these are what a Christian should do purely because the Bible says so (pp.63-106; 227-271). This is not to say that Warren's interpretations represent what Christians generally believe, but that it is common to consider the Bible or the Words of God the foundation or basis of the Christian moral code. Therefore, even though DeWaay (2004) has almost rejected all the claims Warren makes, he is only arguing against Warren's interpretations, not his methodology, or as he expresses, "I urge you [the readers] to embrace the gospel on God's terms."



The reasons behind Hick's proposal of his soteriological and ethical criteriology, on the other hand, are both religious and secular. Religiously, he strongly believes that the 'Golden Rule' he speaks of is universally true and an authentic response to the 'Real' because, as he understands, the teachings of all of the religions he terms as 'post-axial' or 'civilised' are commonly based on such rule, thus the notion that it is a 'common moral requirement', a 'widespread expression', the 'basic norm enshrined in the great traditions', or that such "basic principle of universal compassion is frequently taught" (Hick, 1989*a*, p.309; 313; 326). That is why he has to quote the scriptures of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Christianity and Islam to prove that such a principle is indeed the common ground for the foundations of the teachings of these religions, and since this principle is commonly taught by these religions, the best explanation would be that the principle is true in the sense that it is an authentic response to the 'Real' and can effect the preferable soteriological transformation leading to a limitlessly better religious-end (ibid, p.313).

However, as argued previously, the above logic may have begged the question – Hick seems to imply that his criteriology is reliable because it is consistent with the teachings of the religions that are supposed to have met the criterion, but the criterion is meant to be used to verify if these religions are authentic in the first place. In Hick's defence, every theologian or pluralist is entitled to assume any religious-claim to be

true, and his argument can presumably convince the religious believers who also consider such principle the foundation of the teachings of their own religions to believe that the teachings of other religions are also true and that they are equally capable of leading their followers to a salvific-end. The main problem of his begging the question is that it may look rather unconvincing to those who do not consider such a principle the foundation of the teachings of their own religions or other religions. Especially when Hick also affirms that there are indeed an enormous amount of religious phenomena that do not embrace such a principle, there should be no reason for the followers of these 'evil' or 'mistaken' traditions to accept the idea that what they believe are false or a 'misapplication' of the Truth (ibid, p.331). In other words, if Hick's target audience are meant to be limited to those who have already accepted his major assumption, and if what he really wishes to imply is not that the 'post-axial' religions are authentic because they meet his criterion, but only that his criterion is reliable because those religions must be authentic, then, even though some may not agree with his assumption, his argument is at least reasonable. If, on the other hand, his theory is meant to support his practical suggestion on how we should understand other faiths, and if he does mean that the 'post-axial' religions are true not because he presumes them to be true, but because they meet his criterion, then his particular argument concerning the grading of religions would be quite questionable especially

for the followers of the 'evil' traditions that do not meet his criterion.

To be fair, Hick does intend to avoid begging the question by also suggesting that the principle is reliable because it is, almost in a secular humanist sense, the fundamental principle that cannot be further proven or "too basic to be derived from prior premises" (ibid, p.312). Nonetheless, one may also make the same claim about the moral belief that is inconsistent with Hick's 'Golden Rule'. How can we possibly persuade the followers of an 'evil' tradition to consider their soteriological or ethical beliefs unauthentic by saying that "it is too basic to be further proven" or that "it is taught by the religions I presume to be true"?

To further speak on Hick's behalf, he has also stressed that the religions he grades as authentic/salvific have in fact contained moral teachings other than the 'Golden Rule':

It should be emphasised that I am not here trying to expound the entire ethical teachings of these traditions, nor to describe the actual behaviour of their adherents through the centuries, but to show that love, compassion, generous concern for and commitment to the welfare of others is a central ideal for each of them (ibid, p.316).

As it implies, however, although the ethical teachings of those traditions are not limited to the one he describes, the concept of 'Golden Rule' or 'universal compassion' is, as he argues, the "central ideal for each of them." He makes this clearer in his later conclusion:

The pluralistic hypothesis points to this possibility and suggests its appropriateness but does not prescribe its detailed conclusions; and my project here is to outline that hypothesis without attempting the impossibly large task of filling in every detail of the map which it proposes (ibid, p.340).

In other words, instead of admitting that there are also authentic moral teachings other than the 'Golden Rule', he is merely expressing that there are other manifestations of the 'Golden Rule' which he did not manage to describe. In fact, as we can see from the earlier quotations, he quite clearly assumes that if a religious phenomenon is not consistent with the 'common moral requirement' or 'widespread expression' he proposes, then it would not be an authentic response to the 'Real' because it is unable to effect the soteriological transformation leading to the presumably desirable limitlessly better religious-end.

In addition, Hick also makes it very clear that the 'universal compassion' he speaks of must be unconditional, meaning that merely sacrificing one's own interests for the welfare of, say, his/her family members is not at all a manifestation of the 'Golden Rule'. For example, regarding the Augustinian and Calvinist doctrines that God would not save everyone, Hick argues, "But an act of grace which is arbitrarily extended to some and arbitrarily withheld from others cannot express the unqualified love, limitless compassion or generous forgiveness which constitutes the common ethical ideal" (ibid). Therefore, if we can show that such completely unconditional or unqualified compassion is not central to the moral ideal of Chinese Folk Religion, then we may at least suggest that Chinese Folk Religion or its core teaching is probably not authentic in the sense that it is unable to lead its believers to an limitlessly better religious-end according to Hick's theory.

### **8.3 'Self-centredness' of Chinese Folk Religion**

Chinese Folk Religion can be understood as a 'self-centred' religion for three main reasons:

1. The main idea of following this religion is to gain various 'this-worldly'

benefits for oneself;

2. The basis of its moral belief is more of a conditional, selfish concern;

3. Such 'self-centredness' is accepted and encouraged by the religion.

According to our earlier discussions, there is a common impression that the main purpose for performing the religious practices of Chinese Folk Religion – which include deity worship, ancestor worship, and feng-shui manipulation etc. – is to bring wealth, health or other earthly fortunes to oneself. Though the practices are sometimes performed for the wellbeing of one's family members, the intention can still be regarded as something selfish, for a family member is someone closely related to us, and him/her being well would often have a positive impact on our own life. At the very least, praying for the wellbeing of one's family members is certainly not what Hick would consider an act of 'universal compassion' or 'unqualified love'.

There is no account suggesting that the Chinese Folk Religion followers would normally pray for world peace or other 'selfless' issues, which is, on the contrary, more common for certain denominations of Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism, etc. This may explain why the practices of feng-shui, name-changing and fortune-telling have such an important role in Chinese Folk Religion, for they are all performed to purely optimise one's own gains. As Feuchtwang (2003) comments on the attitude the

practitioners demonstrate, “All we can say is that it is an ideology that does not promote group above individual interests, as does ancestor worship, because it expresses the interests of individuals first and secondarily of individuals as part of a group” (p.271). According to his findings, the practices of Chinese geomancy, for example, are never performed to benefit the whole community (let alone the whole populations). Quite on the contrary, as Feuchtwang learns, the practices are sometimes performed to bring disasters to the neighbours for the purpose of competition (ibid, pp.270-273). This also explains why ancestral spirit is the most worshipped subject in Chinese Folk Religion, for they are closely connected to their living offspring – the practitioners would not normally worship the ancestors of the others, unless those ancestral spirits have become a deity powerful enough to answer prayers practically.

In Chapter 6, we learned that the main requirement for apotheosis or a ‘better afterlife’ is to act rightfully during one’s life. As Y. H. Xu (2008) summaries, the four most respected virtues crucial to the afterlife judgement are loyalty, integrity, bravery, and benevolence (pp.145-150). Instead of the total submission to a transcendent being, however, loyalty for Chinese Folk Religion is more commonly understood as obedience to one’s own parents, teachers, and political leaders, probably because of the influences from Confucianism (Hou & Fan, 1994, pp.245-259). Similarly, ‘benevolence’ also does not necessarily imply compassion

towards the whole humanity. Guan-di's benevolence, for instance, is rather limited to the people of Han – according to historical records as well as popular folklores, he was quite fearsome and ruthless to his enemies on the battlefield, thus the title “God of War” (Y. H. Xu, 2008, pp.149-150).

Regarding the idea that Guan-di is also respected because he is considered the perfect living example of the Confucian ideals, Hick may argue that Guan-di being treated as a saint suggests that Chinese Folk Religion, or at least the particular ‘Guan-di phenomenon’, is explainable by his theory (because he clearly accepts the Confucian teachings as one of the authentic manifestations of ‘Real’). In response to such potential argument, the foundational moral code for at least some schools of Confucianism is actually not ‘universal compassion’, but filial piety, which is a concept of conditional love, and since it is believed that Confucianism and Chinese Folk Religion share a common moral ideal, the foundational moral code for the latter should also be filial piety.

To compare the crucial differences between religious Confucianism and Christianity, Ching (1977) has made it very clear that family love/relationship “has always been the center of Confucian life and ethics,” which “has demonstrated the nature of Confucianism itself, not only as a system of ethics, but also as a philosophy of religion” (p.97). As he further argues, “Filial piety is the first of all Confucian



virtues, that which comes before loyalty to the sovereign, conjugal affection, and everything else” (ibid, pp.97-98). Ching believes such principle is not only witnessed in religious activities such as the ‘ancestral cult’, but is also the basic model for all other social behaviours (ibid, p.98).

It is not to argue that Ching’s understandings of Confucianism must be more reliable than that of Hick. Based on the Confucian texts Hick has quoted, it appears that the idea of ‘universal compassion’ is indeed part of Confucian (or Mencius in particular) moral teachings<sup>102</sup>. However, even if the ‘Golden Rule’ is taught by Confucianism in general, it does not mean that the principle is considered most important – also based on the texts that Hick quotes, none of them has supported Hick’s assumption that the ‘Golden Rule’ is central to the moral ideal of Confucianism. Instead, according to a Confucian classic called *Classic of Filial Piety*, Confucius is believed to have said, “*Xiào* [filial piety] is the foundation of virtue, and is what all teaching grows out of” (Ch.1). In a later Chapter, Confucius restates the idea, and suggests that conforming to filial piety is the core requirement for becoming a saint and associating oneself with *Tien*, that is, the Confucian salvific-end. The

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<sup>102</sup> Hick (1989a) believes Mencius has expressed the Golden Rule ‘very clearly’, he quotes, “I say that every man has a heart that pities others, for the heart of every man is moved by fear and horror, tenderness and mercy, if he suddenly sees a child about to fall into a well. And this is not because he wishes to make friends with the child’s father and mother or to win praise from his countryfolk and friends, nor because the child’s cries hurt him. This shows that no man is without a merciful, tender heart, no man is without a heart for shame and hatred, no man is without a heart to give way and yield, no man is without a heart for right and wrong” (pp.312-313).

Chapter begins with a question asked by his student Zeng Zi: "May I ask whether, of the saints' virtues, there is any greater than *xiào*?" Confucius answers, "Of all the species in the world, human are the most precious. Of all human conduct, nothing is greater than *xiào*. In *xiào* nothing is greater than revering the father. In revering the father nothing is greater than associating him with *Tien*" (ibid, Ch.9).

It would be equally arbitrary to claim that filial piety is central to the moral ideal of all schools of Confucianism, for it is more preferable for a pluralist to avoid regarding one's own interpretation of a particular scripture as the sole, absolutely correct understanding of the teachings of every single school/denomination of a religious tradition<sup>103</sup>. According to Ching's (1977) descriptions and the passages in *Classic of Filial Piety*, however, Hick may have ignored or is unaware of the Confucian ideology that filial piety is the most important virtue of all, thus the over-generalised and fantasised notion that 'universal compassion' is central to Confucianism in general. To rephrase our earlier assumption, we may suggest that the basis of the moral code of Chinese Folk Religion is not necessarily 'universal compassion', even if its moral belief and that of Confucianism are identical.

In fact, the scholars we surveyed (i.e., those who treat Chinese Folk Religion as

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<sup>103</sup> Although it is not my intention to 'transform' Hick's model into a confessional hypothesis, this particular idea or accusation is in fact quite similar to that of Heim (1995), he writes, "Though Hick believes there are real differences among religion, he denies these differences have any important bearing on the soteriological function of each religion as a whole" (p.26). For his complete argument that Hick's assumption is absolutistic and non-pluralistic, please see ibid, pp.23-35.

an independent religion) all agree that filial piety is indeed the most important moral belief for both Chinese Folk Religion and Confucianism<sup>104</sup>. As Hou and Fan (1994) realise, the idea of filial piety is so crucial to the Chinese religious believers that even Buddhism, a religion that emphasises the complete detachment from earthly matters, would have to integrate the idea into their teachings in order to be accepted by them (p.239). Similarly, Joakim (1991) also argues that there has never been any other value considered as important as filial piety, and therefore the major foreign religions, including Islam and Christianity, have all adopted the concept so that the Chinese can find it easier to relate to their doctrines (pp.224-225).

Filial piety or family love is quite obviously more of an idea of conditional compassion, but to further suggest that Chinese Folk Religion is graded as an unauthentic/non-salvific phenomenon by Hick's theory, we would need to also examine if its manifestations or practices cannot effect the soteriological transformation from self-centredness to Reality-centredness that Hick describes.

As discussed earlier, Chinese Folk Religion can be understood as a self-centred religion in that the main idea of practicing the religion is to attain wellbeing in this

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<sup>104</sup> For example, as Feuchtwang (2001) expresses, "The accumulation of merit by a descendant for an ancestor's appointment was also possible. In other words, merit must not be understood simply as an individual achievement, it is lineal and filial. The virtues counted are indeed the standard virtues often described as 'Confucian'" (p.151). In addition, Hou and Fan (1994) have also said, "The core of Confucian teaching is to guide us to focus on the earthly social relationship and secular life based on the confirmation of filial piety. For the Chinese folks, conforming to this secular moral code is therefore the ultimate duty of being a rightful person" (p.57). For more example of such viewpoint, please see Fowler and Fowler (2008, pp.36-37; 84-85).

world for oneself or for one's family, or as Feuchtwang (2003) puts it, its practices, including ancestor worship, are in essence an ideology that promotes individual above group interests – the interests of individuals always come first (p.271). This is demonstrated by the phenomenon that the main, if not the only, purpose for performing ancestor worship, deity worship, funeral ritual, feng-shui manipulation, name-changing, etc. is to bring wealth, health and other form of wellbeing to the practitioners themselves (or 'accumulation of merit' as Feuchtwang prefers term, 2001, p.151). One may argue that some Catholics, for example, would also see prayers or other Christian practices as a mean to obtain various earthly benefits. However, when the scholars argue that Chinese Folk Religion is functionally-oriented, what they tend to imply is that the functionally-oriented nature is central to the religion, that seeking earthly fortunes is considered an acceptable or preferable intention for performing its religious practices, and that it is also acceptable or even encouraged to abandon a deity or a practice (in other words, the religious claim concerning the supernatural power of that deity or practice) if it appears to be ineffective (Liu, 2003, p.378; Jordan, 1972, p.175). As Hou and Fan (1994) learn, the religiosity of the Chinese is basically utilitarianistic in the sense that they are allowed or supposed to see religious practices as a 'supplementary' method to achieve earthly wellbeing – it is equally acceptable if they decide to not use these methods to achieve their goals and live a nonreligious life

(p.86). These ideas or attitudes are, on the other hand, unacceptable or, at the very least, not encouraged by Catholicism.

In addition, it is Hick who assumes that realising the truth of 'universal compassion' or reaching the salvific stage of Reality-centredness is the central theme for all religions that meet his criterion. That is, even if some Catholic traditions do allow the religiosities mentioned above, it would only mean that Hick's (1989a) criteriology has distorted or ignored the other equally authentic teachings of those Catholic traditions or that those traditions are actually not authentic or soteriologically effective, just like the "outcaste status within Hindu society" or the "cutting off of a thief's hand under the *shariah* law in the Muslim dominated Sudan" (p.326).

Furthermore, in terms of the manifestations of filial piety, Fowler and Fowler (2008) observe that the ideal may be responsible for various forms of oppression of women in China because filial piety does not only stress the importance of kinship, but also the superiority of male (pp.172-173). For example, if a married couple have failed to have a child, it would be traditionally seen as the wife's fault, and she "may legitimately be divorced according to Confucian theory" (ibid, p.173). Similarly, Adler (2002) also learns that unmarried women are "particularly prone to become ghosts" (the least desirable spiritual being), because "women normally become part of their husbands' family lines and are not worshipped as ancestors by their natal

families” (p.115). Apparently, Hick (1989*a*) would consider these phenomena inconsistent with the ‘Golden Rule’, for he has quite clearly graded all kinds of suppressions, oppressions, discriminations and persecutions as an unauthentic response to the ‘Real’ (p.304; 326-327).

Thus, the central theme of the ‘Chinese Folk Religion’ as described or the manifestations of its central theme do not meet Hick’s criterion, and hence cannot lead its followers to the one true salvific-end by Hick’s theory. Nonetheless, before arguing how we may try to make his assumption more pluralistic so that such Chinese phenomenon would be graded as equally authentic, we must also discuss what ‘salvation’ means for Chinese Folk Religion – it is possible that Hick’s assumption is correct and that Chinese Folk Religion is unable to lead its followers to the salvation he speaks of, but it can nonetheless lead them to a different salvation (i.e., other than the one Hick describes).

#### **8.4 This-worldly wellbeing as a conception of salvation**

Apart from the tendency to place the achievement of this-worldly wellbeing as the primary goal of being religious, Chinese Folk Religion is also considered a human-centred religion for its humanised concept of gods. As Thompson (1969)

argues, Western religious believers reject the idea that “belief in the existence of an innumerable rabble of gods and spirits can be equated with true religion” because they tend to assume that there can only be one “Source and Creator of all beings” who is “unimaginably superior to man, omnipotent and love incarnate,” thus the conclusion that “polytheism is utter blasphemy” (p.57). The gods of Chinese Folk Religion, on the contrary, “are hardly more than human being deified, possessed of mysterious and supernatural powers, of course, and yet far closer to man than to God” (ibid).

According to Thompson, while the almighty God in the West is worshipped because He is the Creator, gods in China have to provide services to man because man creates them (ibid). As Hou and Fan (1994) describe, almost all deities in Chinese Folk Religion were once an actual historical figure, such as Jade Emperor who is believed to be a ‘vigorous’ and ‘uninhibited’ Yuyang citizen called Zhang-jian, or Kitchen God who was born in August 3 (Chinese calendar) and named Zhang-chan<sup>105</sup> – to further express the human nature of Kitchen God, Hou and Fan point out that he did not only have a wife called Qing-ji (when he was human), but also six daughters commonly known as the ‘Six *Gu*<sup>106</sup> Girls’ (p.71). Since deities or gods are merely humans who

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<sup>105</sup> ‘Zhang’ here should be understood as one of the four most common surnames in China – it is probably a coincidence that Jade Emperor and Kitchen God share the same surname. The original ‘human names’ of many other deities such as Qu-yuan, Wu-zixu, Du-fu, Hua-tuo, Bao-zheng, etc. all have different surnames (Hou and Fan, 1994, p.70). For a more thorough description of the historical origins and names for over 200 deities (or 120 deities exclusive to Chinese Folk Religion), please see Chau (2009).

<sup>106</sup> ‘Gu’ (癸) is referred to the tenth heavenly stem in the yin-yang system.

become powerful spiritual beings for various reasons, the Chinese Folk Religion followers do not usually have total faith and respect for gods – according to Hou and Fan, it is rather common for them to insult, lie to or make fun of these gods, and, as mentioned before, it is acceptable to worship them only if their services are needed or stop worshipping them when they did not serve the worshippers effectively<sup>107</sup> (ibid, pp.74-75).

We will discuss further this particular religious attitude (or ‘dispensableness’ as Hou and Fan’s preferred term, ibid, pp.64-68) in the next Chapter, but for now, regarding the compatibility between their beliefs and Hick’s criteriology, we need to look into the concepts that are somehow related to the idea of salvation. Although it would seem to be easier to simply define salvation in a more traditional way (e.g., as an limitlessly better religious-end in another realm of reality) and conclude that Chinese Folk Religion does not concern salvation at all, the following sections will try to explore the possibility that it actually does concern some form of salvation, only that the concept is differently understood.

As many have argued, one of the problems of Hick’s theory is that he does not provide anything meaningful as to what ‘Real’ actually is or what the limitlessly better religious-end is like, hence the criticism that his major assumption is

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<sup>107</sup> That being said, Feuchtwang (2001) believes it is also common to give thanks to deities for their services just so they would not be upset and bring disasters to the community (p.55)



'cognitively empty'<sup>108</sup> or 'transcendentally agnostic' (Cheetham, 2003, pp.140-141).

There must be a reason for Hick to have chosen such an 'agnostic' approach, especially when he is clearly aware of its weaknesses or the potential criticisms it may attract (e.g., Hick, 1997, pp.165-166; 2009). At first glance, the strength of his approach is that it would be able to include all possible religious claims about salvation/liberation into his description without being confessional or affirming the existences of different, multiple religious-ends, so that there can be a common ground for mutual understanding and respect – not making any cognitively recognisable claim about the limitlessly better religious-end he proposes is equal to not rejecting any claim about salvation/liberation that various religious traditions have taught. However, despite the arguments that he has said absolutely nothing about the actual salvific state we are supposed to expect, the idea of 'limitlessly better religious-end' does actually imply something about such state or form of existence:

1. Such state is limitlessly better, meaning it cannot possibly get any better;
2. It is an end or final destination, meaning the state is probably eternal.

In fact, Hick (1989*a*) quite clearly assumes that such salvific-state must be an

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<sup>108</sup> In fact, Heim (1992) regards Hick's assumption as 'cognitively empty' also because he considers it an unverifiable/non-falsifiable theory (p.213).

eternal, different state lies in the future (i.e., another realm of reality<sup>109</sup>), in which the quality of existence must be limitlessly better (p.33; 36). The critics do not consider these descriptions cognitively meaningful mainly because, from the perspectives of the religions they belong or concern, these natures are more of a basic definition of salvation/liberation rather than a description, and therefore they would not argue that salvation/liberation can be limited or non-eternal, but only that the limitlessly better religious-ends mentioned by the world religions are referred to something different.

There are in fact two potential conceptions of salvation in Chinese Folk Religion, yet neither of them implies a limitlessly better, eternal state. First, as discussed earlier, we may consider its ideology of seeking this-worldly wellbeing a form of 'secular salvation'; second, we may also regard the pursuit of a 'better afterlife' as a kind of religious salvific attainment.

Regarding the first conception, we have learned that the ultimate goal or purpose for practicing Chinese Folk Religion is to achieve this-worldly wellbeing. Apparently, whether or not 'this-worldly wellbeing' can be understood as a kind of salvation would solely depend on how we define 'salvation' – according to Kitagawa's (1967) definition, for example, such secular quest would have a reasonable degree of soteriological quality. What is relevant to our current discussion, however, is how

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<sup>109</sup> His notion that his pluralist assumption can only be verified in the eschaton also seems to imply that salvation/liberation is something that happens in the future and in another realm of reality. For references, please see Hick (1989*a*, pp.177-180).

Hick defines the concept. Apart from the implication that salvation/liberation is not something that happens at the present (state) or in this world, Hick also explicitly expresses that the world great faiths “all recognise, first, that ordinary human existence is defective, unsatisfactory, lacking,” and that is why there was an ‘axial shift to soteriology’ (p.32). As he understands, the ‘pre-axial age’ is when “the conditions of human life remained essentially the same, and generation after generation lived and died within the same familiar mental horizons,” and the ‘shift to soteriology’ is a movement “from archaic religion to the religions of salvation or liberation” which happened “very approximately 800 to very approximately 200 BCE” (ibid, p.29). Based on what these descriptions imply, Hick does not intend to categorise Chinese Folk Religion, or any contemporary, popular religious tradition that appears to have developed into a somewhat stable state, as an unauthentic, non-valuable ‘pre-axial’ religion. In other words, although some phenomena, manifestations or misapplications of these religions may not be authentic, the religions themselves are still authentic in the sense that they, as a religion, are still able to lead us to the limitlessly better religious-end if we follow their teachings correctly – for instance, although the cutting off of a thief’s hand is not an authentic response to ‘Real’, Hick very clearly emphasises that it is a misapplication of Islamic teachings, and that Islam in general is still an authentic, valuable religion. For this

reason, it would be a problem if a religion Hick does not intend to exclude turns out to have a moral ideal or salvific (or non-salvific) vision that falls into his description of an unauthentic religion (which, according to his hypothesis, should not exist). To argue further, since this-worldly wellbeing or happiness is more of an ordinary human experience 'within the same familiar mental horizon' and is, in the context of Chinese Folk Religion, mainly achieved by worshipping various spiritual beings or manipulating feng-shui/yin-yang rather than having 'universal compassion', even if it can be seen as a kind of salvation according to some definitions, it is most certainly incompatible with the limitlessly better religious-end Hick speaks of.

Having said that, the second conception of salvation may still be able to qualify Chinese Folk Religion as an authentic, salvific religion, partly because it seems to imply a state of 'better afterlife' that happens in another realm of reality.

### **8.5 'Better afterlife' as a conception of salvation**

Based on our earlier discussions, it is believed that four things may happen when we enter the realm of afterlife: (1) we receive punishments in hells; (2) we are reborn as one of the many earthly beings; (3) we become a ghost or ancestral spirit with limited power; and (4) we become a deity with more power. These conditions,

however, are neither considered eternal nor exclusive. For example, as Fowler and Fowler (2008) describe, it is possible that we may become an ancestral spirit who reaps retribution for our evil deeds in hells, yet establish a reciprocal relationship with our living descendents simultaneously, and be reborn into the human world afterwards (p.230). Nonetheless, among these four afterlife fates, the most desirable one is presumably a deity with the most power, worshippers and the highest possible status/position in the heavenly government without having to receive any punishment in hell, and the main way to become such a being is to act perfectly according to the will of *Tien* during our life. Therefore, we may also say that the two conceptions of salvation are opposite to each other in the sense that the first conception implies an attainment of secular salvation through religious means (i.e., performing various religious practices), while the second conception implies an attainment of religious salvation through secular means (i.e., being a righteous person). This is another reason why the second conception is, in a way, more similar to what Hick describes, for the limitlessly better religious-end he speaks of is also a kind of religious salvation (i.e., something that happens in another realm of reality) mainly or, indeed, solely attained by acting according to the 'Golden Rule'.

That being said, as mentioned in section 6.1, the so-called 'spiritual world' for Chinese Folk Religion is commonly understood as an extension of the human world

rather than a realm of reality in a completely different dimension in the sense that the living pattern of the spiritual beings are almost identical to that of humans. They have to, for example, consume human foods or luxury items to have a good life, and as Hou and Fan (1994) argue, their 'mental necessities' would also remain the same, thus the needs to celebrate various fetedays or become wealthy and successful/powerful (p.188). In terms of the idea that there is no clear distinction between the present and the spiritual world, Alder (2002) have nonetheless offered a better description. As he believes, none of the three types of spiritual beings (gods, ghosts, ancestors) in Chinese Folk Religion are considered ontologically distinct from living human beings, for they all follow 'the same natural principles' (p.113). Alder regards such a worldview as 'non-dualistic':

While they each have their own Way – the ideal pattern or path they should follow – and there is of course a difference between the realm of the living and that of the dead, all four groups [the three types of spiritual beings and humans] are part of the natural order. Thus, in a sense, there is no "supernatural," strictly speaking, in Chinese religion (ibid).

In fact, even if we are to refer the second conception to a somewhat metaphysical

salvific-state, it is still neither eternal nor limitlessly better. As we have seen, even a more popular and powerful deity may lose his position, power and popularity if he violates the will of *Tien* or does not respond to prayers effectively – this implies the idea that nothing – not even the status of a deity – is eternal. One may argue that, even if such a desirable state is not eternal, it can still be limitlessly better in that it is the best possible fate afterlife. However, from a pluralist perspective, a salvific state should be considered limitlessly better, not because it is understood as the best possible state within the context of a religion, but because it is considered equally limitlessly better compared to that of what other religions have proposed. In other words, if we can suggest or imagine a salvific state better than the one Chinese Folk Religion speaks of, then we simply cannot say the latter is ‘limitlessly better’ (for it is limited). We can quite easily suggest or imagine such a better salvific state, such as ultimate and eternal happiness in a heavenly place, or, to speak within the context of Chinese Folk Religion, a deity with ultimate power whose status, power and existence are eternal and does not require any sacrifice (from worshippers) to have the most favourable life.

Last but not least, the second conception is also inconsistent with Hick's description because it is not attained by acting/thinking according to the ‘Golden Rule’. Although Hick tends to call the authentic soteriological end-state

'Reality-centredness', the notion that it is transformed from the non-soteriological state of 'self-centredness' implies that 'Reality-centredness' is somewhat equal to 'selfless-centredness', thus the claim that to reach the state of 'Reality-centredness' is to act selflessly or to develop a 'universal compassion'. The quotes from various thinkers that he uses to support his assumption have clearly shown such implication, such as the quote from Radhakrishnan that "our actual self must cease to be a private self; we must give up our particular will, die to our ego," or the one from Panikkar that says, "The small human individualistic self disappears and the universal *atman* now takes its place" (Hick, 1989*a*, p.37). The will of *Tien* or the major moral ideal of Chinese Folk Religion, however, is more of a 'self-centred ideology' which approves individual needs and desires – at the very least, we may say that 'universal compassion' is not commonly considered its central theme.

### **8.6 Possibilities of a more inclusive hypothesis**

To briefly summarise, it is argued that Chinese Folk Religion is unable to meet Hick's soteriological and ethical criteria both because its moral ideal is incompatible to his understanding of the 'Golden Rule' and because, no matter how we interpret them, its conceptions of salvation are still different from the one Hick describes.



Apart from 'unauthentic', 'evil', 'pre-axial' and 'uncivilised', Hick also implies that the religious traditions which do not meet his criteria are non-valuable:

Accordingly the basic criterion must be soteriological. Religious traditions and their various components – beliefs, modes of experience, scriptures, rituals, disciplines, ethics and lifestyles, social rules and organisations – have greater or less value according as they promote or hinder the salvific transformation (ibid, p.300).

This notion is, however, based on the assumption or his personal belief that a religion must be soteriological to be valuable. To support such assumption or belief, he again consults the claims from various religions and tries to show that they all have expressed a similar idea, which is in essence a presumption that these religions are true and reliable, or, to be more precise, that his interpretation of the claims of these religions is true and reliable (ibid, pp.299-300). It is somewhat similar to the assumption that a tradition is only valuable if they consider the major function of water is for drinking because the traditions he presumes to be correct all believe so; and if there is a tradition claiming that the major function of water is for washing dishes, then, according to his assumption or criterion, that tradition is mistaken and

non-valuable. The problem of such argument is that using water for drinking or washing dishes can be an equally valuable idea – using some water to wash dishes does not mean that we cannot use other water for drinking. In this sense, even if a religion cannot effect the soteriological transformation Hick speaks of, it does not mean that it is less valuable – it can still be useful in other areas or be able to effect other kind of salvific transformation. Practicing Chinese Folk Religion, for example, can still be useful for achieving this-worldly wellbeing, a 'better afterlife', or encouraging family love, even though it may be unable to effect or even hinder the salvific transformation Hick prefers. After all, not everyone would prefer the religious-end or soteriological transformation Hick describes, and it would not be pluralist to force our preference on them.

If religious pluralism is simply referred to an assumption that there is a plurality of religious traditions which can lead their followers to a salvific-end, then Hick's assumption would be perfectly pluralist. Nonetheless, if it is expected to be able to truly accept differences, then there are, apparently, rooms for Hick's model to be more pluralistic, mainly because it is unable accept the differences demonstrated by Chinese Folk Religion. That being said, since terming his assumption as 'non-pluralistic' would have somehow distorted the more common understanding of the word, it should be more appropriate or less confusing to say that it is possible to

make his theory more inclusive/comprehensive in the sense that we may expand or broaden some of his ideas so that more religious traditions, beliefs, modes of experience, rituals, disciplines, ethics, lifestyles, social rules or organisations can be graded as equally authentic, reasonable, civilised and valuable.

Fairly speaking, Hick does express that his assumption is preferable for it can make the world a better place, he writes, "And yet if all human beings lived in accordance with it [the 'Golden Rule'] there would be no wars, no injustice, no crime, no needless suffering" (ibid, p.312). Presumably, if following Chinese Folk Religion would encourage a kind of 'self-centredness', such conflicts or 'problems' would continue to exist, if not being strengthened. However, one should also realise that a world without conflicts is only what Hick personally considers 'better' – there can be different viewpoints that a world with competitions is more meaningful and exciting or that the existence of suffering is necessary for us to appreciate joyfulness. Such notion does appear to be rather relativistic at first, for it has questioned even the claims that Hick is willing to describe absolutistically. Nonetheless, what it really emphasises is not that these possible different viewpoints are equally reasonable or preferable as that of Hick, but that there are religious believers who consider these viewpoints equally, if not more, reasonable or preferable.

As argued earlier, by proposing his pluralist assumption, Hick does wish to effect

some sort of spiritual shift within each religion, that is, as Cheetham (2003) puts it, “something that takes us beyond the purely philosophical acknowledgement of the ‘bigger picture’ and into an affirmation of pluralism as an ‘immensely significant and moving fact’” (p.165). To persuade his readers to adopt such a pluralist vision and respects other religions as an equally valid pathway to salvation/liberation, he tries to demonstrate how the seemingly diverse salvific pathways proposed by different ‘world great faiths’ are basically the same, which is to act according to the ‘Golden Rule’ and transform oneself from self-centredness to Reality-centredness. In other words, the persuasiveness of such approach lies in that he seems to have affirmed the validity of the core beliefs of all religions, and, supposedly, the followers of these religions who agree with his understanding of their own religions would start to realise that other religions do not only contain some religious truths, but the very same truth.

For the same reason, however, the audiences that do not agree with his understanding should find his assumptions rather unattractive as well as mistaken. Speaking on behalf of Chinese Folk Religion or other religious traditions/phenomena he grades as evil and less authentic, we would need more than his personal interpretations of the scriptures of some religions or an arbitrary presumption that the principle he describes is ‘fundamental’ and “too basic to be derived from prior

premises” to have a good enough reason to abandon our original ‘evil’ faiths, for we do not actually consider our faiths evil and destructive. Although the emphasis of filial piety, for example, does not seem to be able to effect the soteriological transformation Hick prefers, it would not necessarily encourage something purely negative – it can possibly reinforce kinship and family love or help to recognise the importance of individuality. In other words, we may not see the cessation of our ‘private selves’ as something fruitful or ultimately beneficial, yet Hick’s theory does not allow or respect such different ideology.

A pluralist model does not have to be able to effect any radical, doctrinal changes within religions to be considered useful because it may be able to provide other functions that are productive. It can, for instance, be applied as a model to help a religious believer to understand and respect other religions or to make genuine interreligious dialogue possible. According to the discussions of the viewpoints of Cornille (2008) or other scholars who concern the appropriate approach to enrich dialogue with mutual respects (see Chapter 3), it is believed that one of the more important requirements is to be ready to be challenged, transformed, or, at the very least, be willing to accept and affirm differences. However, in the aspect of interreligious dialogue or, so to speak, the ending of interreligious conflicts, it seems that Hick’s model can at most encourage the religious believers who accept his

assumption to respect other religious positions, not because they accept any difference, but because they realise that the faiths of the others are in essence identical to that of their owns.

Again, it is not to argue that the beliefs of those 'evil' traditions are in reality equally preferable, but that by excluding them from the category of authentic, valuable religion, Hick's theory would fail to enable the authentic and 'unauthentic' traditions to truly understand and respect each other – even if it is generally agreed that recreational drug use is harmful for human society, drug prohibition may actually enhance the problems associated with drug use, while legalisation, on the other hand, may be more effective in preventing them. In other words, this thesis does not reject the viewpoint that it is meaningful and preferable to persuade and transform the followers of the 'evil' traditions and to reduce interreligious conflicts; what it questions is the ability of Hick's model to reach such desirable goal. It is therefore worth trying to expand his particular soteriological and ethical criteria as well as other somewhat exclusivist (non-inclusive), generalised understandings of religion so that we may come up with a model that can help to establish genuine dialogues with also the traditions with ideologies, religiosities or structures different from what Hick prefers and affirms. Since it is based on the reconstruction of Hick's assumptions, such a model may also suffer from the limitation of not being able to speak to the

religious mind at a more confessional level or effect any inner spiritual change of perception directly, though the more inclusive or welcoming dialogues it makes possible may just be able to achieve such goals.

### **8.7 Multiple salvific-states instead of one common religious-end**

Regarding the allegation that both the moral ideal and conceptions of salvation of Chinese Folk Religion are inconsistent with Hick's assumptions, we may try to adopt Heim's (1995) theory of multiple religious-ends and assume the idea of this-worldly wellbeing as an equally authentic form of salvation. It is 'equally authentic' in the sense that it is as true a salvation as the one Hick or other religions propose, but whether it is equally desirable would be subject to individual preferences – a pluralist model should not speak for all individuals as to what they should want.

To further discuss the two concepts mentioned earlier, there is in fact no strict difference or distinction between them, mainly because the second concept of 'better afterlife' is also based on the ideology that stresses on the importance of focusing on the wellbeing, happiness or satisfaction at the present (which is the present in the spiritual world for the spiritual beings), of which the desirable state is not expected to be ultimate or eternal. Despite the implication that it is not necessarily as desirable as

other concepts of limitlessly better religious-ends, there are indeed potential arguments that suggest otherwise. Earlier, we learned that Hick tends to agree with the 'classical' viewpoint that our life in this world is defective, unsatisfactory, lacking and full of sufferings, and hence humans are supposed to wish for a salvific-end in another realm of reality. These somewhat 'escapist' wishes, however, are not what dominate the passions of all religious believers (Kitagawa, 1967, pp.60-61; Lambert, 1999, pp.308-309). Seeing the present world as a place full of sufferings or constantly wishing for something better is not necessarily the healthiest way of thinking. Apart from the idea that the existences of sufferings may be necessary for the appreciation or enjoyment of happiness, the ideology of the pursuit of non-eternal or 'limited' wellbeing at the present can also be understood as a mindset that one should be satisfied with whatever he has got or can get. Happiness often springs from how we apprehend a situation, not what we have got – it is possible for an impoverished man to be happier than the rich if he is more satisfied with his situation. This is not to fantasise Chinese Folk Religion and claim that such sophisticated mindset is common to its followers, but to support the assumption of 'multiple salvific-states' by suggesting why the different salvific-state they believe in can also be something preferable, if not equally preferable.

As we have seen, Hick's assumption is also criticised by Heim of being



'cognitively empty' for it is not even eschatologically verifiable. Despite the argument that such criticism is rather misfired (e.g., Cheetham, 2003, p.143), Heim's model does seem to be able to offer more cognitively recognisable information about salvations/liberations because religious-ends for him are referred to the original descriptions each religious tradition proposes. In a sense, the non-eternal, 'limited' and this-worldly salvation of Chinese Folk Religion is not only empirically verifiable, but is indeed already proven. The real question, then, is whether one would be willing to accept it as a form of salvation. As a response, if a pluralist model is aimed at treating all existing, popular religions equally without any biased preconception, there should be no reason to exclude any conception of salvation unless the religion that proposes such conception is, according to certain unbiased criteria, proven to be false.

The term 'multiple salvific-states' implies that salvation does not always have to be an end state as what Heim suggests<sup>110</sup>. Nonetheless, the main reason why this thesis would prefer reconstructing Hick's model instead of simply applying the one Heim (1995) proposes is that the latter seems to be even more Christian-centred, for he says:

To realise something other than communion with the triune God and with

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<sup>110</sup> For Heim (1995), salvation/liberation should be "understood to be constitutive of final human fulfilment and/or to be the sole means of achieving that fulfillment" (p.21).

other creatures through Christ is to achieve a lesser good... Insofar as alternative ends lack or rule out real dimensions of communion with the triune God, they embody some measure of what Christian tradition regards as loss or damnation (p.44; 182).

This is, in a sense, closer to what we would generally regard as inclusivist (i.e., not pluralist), which is exactly the position Hick puts Heim into<sup>111</sup>. Therefore, what we need to adopt is only Heim's idea of multiple religious-ends; in terms of criteriology or how we should verify or interpret the issue of the validity of religious claims, Hick's neutral approach may be more suitable for having a even wider or more 'relativistic' assumption that can respect Chinese Folk Religion equally without forcing any 'Western' or Christian conception on it.

### **8.8 Multiple criteria: truly leaving religions as they are**

There are three approaches we may apply to affirm the moral ideal of Chinese

Folk Religion:

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<sup>111</sup> As Hick (2009) comments, "But Heim's proposal is in fact considerably less favourable to the people of other faiths, for it leaves them all finally at a lower level, arriving at lesser ends and forfeiting the supreme good... For him, a non-Christian's only hope of attaining the highest good is eventually, probably after death, to come to accept Christ as lord and saviour, with his or her this-life religion having served as a partial preparation for this. On this latter scenario Heim's proposal is indistinguishable from the older form of inclusivism."

1. To simply add filial piety as a criterion for verifying religious claims/phenomena, meaning that a religious claim/phenomenon should be graded as authentic as long as it is consistent with either the ideology of filial piety or the 'Golden Rule';
2. To come up with another criterion that can affirm not only the ideology of filial piety or the 'Golden Rule', but also that of at least some traditions/phenomena which fail to meet the current criteria Hick proposes;
3. To reject the idea that we need a criterion to verify the reliability of any religious tradition, for it is not the purpose of our model.

The third approach is not to assume that all religions are true, but that verifying whether certain religions are true/false may not be necessary if our major goal is to provide a welcoming ground for meaningful interreligious dialogue. Regarding the necessity of having a criterion to verify religious truth-claim/phenomenon, Hick (1989a) tends to believe that it is "self-evident, at least since the axial age, that not all religious persons, practices and beliefs are of equal value" (p.299). That is, he does not suggest a criterion because it is necessary, but because he is certain that some religious beliefs or phenomenon are proven to be less valuable – his criteriology is a mere reflection of this fact, and it is the honest reflection/explanation of the facts

about the world religious situation that is necessary. To support such an assumption, he has selected a range of religious texts that, according to his interpretation, have also implied the thought that some religious traditions (e.g., offering sacrifices to God) are mistaken, and as he further interprets, he realises that the all criteria were 'basically soteriological' (ibid, pp.299-300).

The main problem of such an approach is not that he tends to presume certain religious texts/beliefs to be reliable, but that he did not provide a sufficiently convincing explanation as to how he can be so certain that the religious claims he particularly selects, or, indeed, his own interpretation of such special selections, are absolutely reliable, while the ones he did not select or approve must be of lesser value. Though not from the perspective of a tradition graded unauthentic by Hick's theory, Netland (1991) nonetheless expresses a similar concern:

Hick's treatment of various beliefs is frequently reductionistic and he freely reinterprets troublesome doctrines so as to accommodate them within his theory. But to the extent that major religious traditions do not find their beliefs – as they are understood within the respective traditions – adequately accounted for on Hick's analysis, his theory is called into question (pp.221-222).

It is indeed preferable to have some form of criterion to provide guidance as to what we should believe or to affirm the reliability of a plurality of religious traditions. The problem, however, is that it is unlikely for any person who does not belong to all religions to possibly come up with a criterion that is able to treat them all fairly. Certainly, if, no matter how we interpret them, all existing religions really do contain the criterion Hick proposes, then he may claim that his theory is a reflection of such reality, but given that even the critics from the traditions he clearly approved have doubted his interpretations, the responses from the purely unauthentic traditions (i.e., the ones that do not contain anything which can meet his criteria) would presumably be more unforgiving. Therefore, despite the common understanding that his theory is a neutral philosophical explanatory theory in general, its criteriology is in fact more of a new religion because the claim that 'the only meaningful criterion to verify religious beliefs is universal compassion' is not found in any religious tradition/text<sup>112</sup>. In other words, his criterion is desirable if it can honestly reflect what all existing religious traditions commonly teach, but according to our interpretation of Chinese Folk Religion (and the Confucian scripture *Classic of Filial Piety* for that matter), this is not the case.

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<sup>112</sup> Although he tends to believe that it is not Hick's intention to propose a new religion, Cheatham (2003) also agrees that his model may have given some critics such impression, he writes, "Nevertheless, even if Hick's intentions are honourable, some critics have suggested that his hypothesis has the effect of overriding the self-interpretations of the religions themselves. That is, there is another agenda – a pluralistic one – that is being superimposed on the various religions" (p.160).

Such an argument does imply that our interpretation of Chinese Folk Religion should also be on equally shaky ground, because, if we are to say anything about what the religion believes, this would be based on certain questionable interpretations. Seemingly, then, such a problem would be inevitable for any pluralist explanatory theory, and it would hence be unfair to criticise Hick's model of only having such a problem. That being said, what if we do not base our criteriology on our own, personal interpretations, but on the ones understood by the religions themselves?

A pluralist model does not really have to tell us what all religions believe or which of their beliefs are false; as long as it can serve as an approach to understand and respect the faiths of all existing religious traditions/phenomena, the model should be reasonably meaningful and helpful. Based on this viewpoint, this thesis will propose the possibility of verifying religious matters with the criteria already proposed by the world religious traditions and accepted by their respective followers. If filial piety is, for example, considered the most important virtue for some Chinese Folk Religion believers, then any behaviour/belief that is consistent with such virtue should be regarded as appropriate, authentic, or helpful to the attainment of salvation to those particular believers; likewise, if the cutting off of a thief's hand is considered compatible with certain Islamic teachings, then such idea would be true from the perspective of the Muslims who believe in such ideology. If an atheist believes that a

religious claim is proven false because it is inconsistent with certain empirical, scientific or historical evidences, then we must agree that the religious claim is false in the scientific sense as that particular atheist understands it. This is the only way to be truly pluralistic if 'pluralistic' is to describe the world religious situation without forcing any preconception or personal interpretation onto the faiths of the others. In fact, this is the actual world religious situation – it is the reality that religious/anti-religious claims are considered true/false based on different criteria, and whatever criteriology we wish to superimpose on these claims would be likely to fail to be accepted by those who do not agree that it is consistent with the one their traditions teach.

It should be noticed that this theory did not consider all religious claims/behaviours equally reasonable or beneficial to humanity, but to convince or transform those who have total faiths in the so-called 'evil' claims/behaviours, we must first establish a dialogue that they would be willing to engage in. In other words, however we despise some religious beliefs, we must first affirm some values of such beliefs before their believers would listen to anything we have to say. We may still fail to convince them when such dialogue happens, but without such dialogue, our mission would not even commence. More importantly, it is possible that we have considered them 'evil' only because we are bounded by some of our moral/religious

preconceptions. By accepting the possibility that their soteriological/ethical criteriology can be something helpful to attain some form of salvific-state, we would also put aside our preconceptions and be ready to be convinced or transformed – we would never be able to truly understand or ‘give a chance’ to the ideology of Chinese Folk Religion if we already ‘know’ that the moral ideal of all authentic religions must be ‘universal compassion’<sup>113</sup>.

Speaking of the ‘Christian-centredness’ of Heim’s confessional model, we saw that it is also criticised of having distorted or degraded certain Mahayana Buddhist teachings. However, although it seems that his Buddhist critic Makransky should be a more reliable interpreter of Buddhism, there is no guarantee that his understanding of the Buddhist truths is in reality more ‘correct’ than that of Heim or Hick – it is possible that Christianity has reflected the truth most thoroughly or that ‘universal compassion’ is the only soteriologically-relevant teaching of Mahayana Buddhism. In other words, since the validity of the criteria for verifying certain religious truth-claims are themselves empirically unverifiable at the current stage, any attempt to suggest a generalised criteriology that can apply to all religions would fail to be accepted by the audiences who believe in a different system of criteria. Based on the

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<sup>113</sup> Such position is, in a sense, similar to what Smart (1993) regards as ‘Dialogical Convergencism’, as he describes, it is “the position that each religion in dialogue with its neighbors and a true reciprocity might in the future come towards agreement in spiritual matters. This position does not imply that all religions have the same truth, but in the course of world civilization might develop it” (p.61).



belief that there is no objective method to tell which system of criteria is more reliable, a single, generalised criteriology would be rather unnecessary, especially when such unverifiable assumption is evidenced to encourage more conflicts than mutual agreements.

As Abe (1995) suggests, the only way to be “free from all human presuppositions and conceptualizations” is to affirm that there is no common denominator between world religions, and there is hence no grand explanatory theory that can fairly summarise/generalise them all (p.47). Strictly speaking, the ‘multiple criteria’ proposal is more of a practical suggestion than an explanatory theory, or, to be more precise, a practical suggestion as to how we should approach and understand other faiths. It reflects the viewpoint that, no matter how we try to actually speak for all religions, such meta-theory would be inevitably biased by some conceptions, thus not genuinely pluralistic, if pluralism is to be understood as an attitude that treats all religions equally rather than a mere assumption that a plurality of religions are soteriologically effective. We can easily develop a more absolutistic theory by claiming that the ‘Golden Rule’ or filial piety is the central theme for all authentic, valuable religions, but merely suggesting a possibility would not be meaningful – following the same approach of Hick’s, the Muslims we term as ‘terrorists’ may also find plentiful religious texts or saints that justify their ‘evil’ beliefs and actions

according to their interpretations. We may have to ask ourselves why we would want to be pluralistic in the first place. As argued in section 4.6, pluralism can be understood as a response to the more conventional exclusivist position for we believe the latter is evidenced to have failed to solve interreligious conflicts. In this sense, if a namely pluralist model has in essence adopted a similar attitude or mindset as that of exclusivism, supposedly it would fail for the same reasons.

### **8.9 Weaknesses of the assumption of multiple criteria and further considerations**

Some may want to maintain that the ideology of our proposal is indeed relativistic, postmodern and agnostic, which, as a result, would fail to provide any religious guideline that can effect an inner-spiritual transformation, nor has it given an actual criterion to determine what to believe. As Cheetham (2003) expresses:

If the pluralistic vision is said to be free of dogma or a passionate commitment to 'truth', that is, if its tenets don't matter – then I don't know if we ought to become excited about it. But then, in a sense, religious beliefs should be very exciting, or else there is little use for them. However, if Hick is to excite us or give us a passion for his vision then he must relinquish the

notion that it somehow occupies an abstract philosophical place (p.167).

Compared to Hick's assumptions, the problems Cheetham addresses should be more 'severe' in our proposal, but rather than offering a passion for our vision or the religious claims we assume to be more likely, it can be the dialogue we enable that is exciting and useful, even though it may not be what Cheetham or some critics originally expected from a pluralist model. In addition, if, according to our definition, a theory can only be truly pluralistic if it remains completely neutral, then it would actually be inevitable for a genuinely neutral pluralist theory to have a certain degree of relativistic, postmodern or agnostic tendency. As Cheetham further suggests, one way Hick may solve the said problems is to reposition his theory into being a first-order discourse without striving for neutrality, but then, it would have to "take its place alongside other competing faiths," which would contradict the original purpose for promoting his pluralist vision (ibid).

As mentioned earlier, one of the reasons why this thesis is more inclined to explore the possibility of constructing a better/different neutral approach is that it is able to offer a more reasonable explanation to the problem of conflicting truth-claims. With a clear, single criterion to verify the truthfulness of religious truth-claims as well as the idea of 'mythological truth', Hick can easily explain which of the two

conflicting truth-claims is less authentic or how two literally conflicting truth-claims can be 'mythologically true' simultaneously. The assumption of multiple criteria, on the other hand, would have to interpret the problem more relativistically in that whether a religious claim is true would be based on the perspective one applies to understand the meaning of true/false in each particular situation. This may seem to be more similar to Heim's (1995) notion that conflicting truth-claims can be true simultaneously for different people or the same person at different times, which, as we have also argued, is not as effective as Hick's approach in explaining the existence of conflicting truth-claims (pp.148-152). However, by accepting a rivalry belief as an equally true assumption from the perspective of our rival, we may, during the dialogue, reach an agreement or at least have a better understanding or respect for the differences. This is different from Hick's suggestion that we may leave these conflicts aside for they are irrelevant to soteriological matters. Some religious believers do consider whether Jesus has resurrected or whether the universe is eternal something directly related to salvific matters, and we should respect such different viewpoints, even if we disagree with them. Putting the differences aside is not necessarily the best way to reduce conflicts, and recognising these differences does not necessarily increase them either – hatreds are often the products of ignorance, and ignorance mainly springs from preconceptions and self-righteousness. It is not what a pluralist

should encourage. The next Chapter will further elaborate this idea when discussing how the Chinese Folk Religion followers understand differences and foreign beliefs.

Considering that the shortcomings of assuming multiple salvific-states and criteria is a price Hick may not want to pay, an alternative suggestion is for him to maintain all of his basic assumptions, but at the same time take Chinese Folk Religion into consideration while making certain claims. In other words, it is to explain the existence of Chinese Folk Religion by accepting the consequence that, if Hick prefers to apply his theory as it is, then he would not only grade some religious manifestations/phenomena, but actually a religion as something unauthentic and non-valuable. In this case, if Hick wishes to assert that his proposal is the best explanatory theory of the world religious situation, he may further explain why there is a contemporary, popular religious tradition that does not fit entirely into either his description of the less valuable 'pre-axial religion' or the authentic 'post-axial religion'. He may also need to further justify his criteriology by explaining how he can be certain that the teachings of the religious traditions/scriptures as he interprets them must be more reliable than that of Chinese Folk Religion. He can, for instance, try to prove that the moral ideal of Chinese Folk Religion is in fact also 'universal compassion', not filial piety; or he can try to argue that filial piety can also be understood as a kind of 'universal compassion'; he can even reject the idea of

this-worldly salvation and group Chinese Folk Religion into the category of non-salvific 'pre-axial religion'. But without any of these further clarifications, his model would be, from the perspective of Chinese Folk Religion, a slightly incomplete, if not dishonest, explanatory theory of the actual world religious situation, for Chinese Folk Religion is part of that situation.

## 9. FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS: STRUCTURES AND RELIGIOSITIES OF CHINESE FOLK RELIGION

### 9.1 Introduction and justification

Even his harshest critics would not deny Hick's honourable intention and contributions to the development of religious pluralism<sup>114</sup>. As many would agree, his model is probably one of the most influential and systematic theories attempting to interpret the world religious situation from a pluralist point of view. To be fair, despite the accusation that the some of his assumptions are too absolutistic or exclusivistic, his hypotheses of a common soteriological/ethical criterion and salvific-end are not only possible, but reasonable as an explanatory theory, especially when our main presumption is that a plurality of religions are true. The only problem this thesis wishes to demonstrate is that such assumptions have treated Chinese Folk Religion unfairly, which is not his original intention – he wants to stress on that, even though some manifestations of Islamic teachings, for example, are soteriologically false, they are merely a misapplication of the core, soteriologically true Islamic teaching. He

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<sup>114</sup> For example, as D'Costa (2009) expresses, "Hick's motivations are noble. He is keen to offer a fair and balanced philosophical appraisal of how to resolve conflicting religious truth claims, to bypass the 'I am right, you are wrong' mentality, to overcome Christian triumphalism and imperialism. He has pioneered work in this area and has generated much reflective argument" (p.10).

does not want to put a popular, contemporary religion into the false/evil category because his criteriology is somehow justified by presuming the core teachings of all fully developed, civilised religions to be true. While he can easily explain that the Christian or Buddhist critics who disagree with his hypotheses have simply failed to recognise the real messages behind the teachings of their respective true religions, he would find it more challenging to respond to the religious tradition/phenomenon we discussed, for it did not emphasise the moral ideal or salvific-state he has graded authentic.

To further defend Hick's theory, it is also unreasonable to require any pluralist to be knowledgeable about all existing religious traditions, and it is perfectly possible that Chinese Folk Religion is in fact as soteriologically non-valuable as those 'pre-axial' or 'evil' traditions/phenomena, but then, his theory should be more appealing if he does not admit only the limitation that he did not describe all kinds of manifestations of the one true ideology, but also the possibility that there are some religions that have not stressed on that ideology – the latter statement does not imply that his assumption is mistaken.

Hick's model is considered systematic and thorough not only because of the detailed arguments for his pluralist assumptions, but also because it has attempted to carefully describe his understandings of the common natures of religions as well as



how they commonly function, thus the notion that it is the best (pluralist) explanatory theory of the world religious situation. Nonetheless, as this Chapter will suggest, the challenges the existence of Chinese Folk Religion poses to Hick's theory are more than a mere question to his criteriology.

In Chapter 3 and 4, it is argued that there are certain preconceptions about religion commonly held by Hick and some of his critics, which include the concepts that all religions require a total commitment and surrender, that teachings and practices of world religions are distinctive and different, therefore to accept the ideas of other religions is to have incomplete faith in that of our own, and that the main purpose of belonging to a religion is to pursue some sort of ultimate spiritual attainment. Regarding the last concept, the previous Chapter has suggested that the main purpose of 'practicing' Chinese Folk Religion is not to achieve a religious salvific-state (but a somewhat secular salvific-state), that whether one can achieve a religious salvific-state or 'better afterlife' is not determined by whether he/she is involved in the religion (but whether he has acted according to certain moral ideals during his life), and how the concept of salvation is differently understood. The first two concepts, on the other hand, may seem to be less relevant to Hick's major hypotheses, but as we have seen, they can nonetheless be vital to the evaluation of a pluralist model. Cornille, for example, tends to prefer more the confessional model

Heim proposes because, based on her strong beliefs in the above concepts, it would provide a much better basis for interreligious dialogue than Hick's neutral model (see section 3.8).

According to the approach I suggested, a definition of 'Chinese Folk Religion' would be questionable unless both its belief contents and religiosities are taken into accounts. After consulting various arguments concerning the problem of defining 'Chinese religion', Chau (2006) has also decided to include religiosities as an essential element of what he called 'Chinese popular religion', he writes, "Despite the great variety of deities worshiped in Shaanbei, there seem to be some very basic principles or postulates that inform Shaanbei people's religious beliefs and practices and form the core of their religiosity" (p.65). As he summarises, these basic postulates include:

1. That there are gods (or that it does not hurt to assume that there are gods);
2. That people should respect the gods and do whatever pleases the gods (e.g., building them beautiful temples, celebrating their birthdays) and should not do anything that displeases the gods (e.g., blasphemy);
3. That the gods can bless people and help them solve their problems;
4. That people should show their gratitude for the gods' blessing and divine

assistance by donating incense money, burning spirit paper, presenting laudatory thanksgiving plaques or flags, spreading the gods' names, and so forth;

5. That some gods possess more efficacy than others (or have specialized areas of efficacious expertise);

6. That one is allowed or even encouraged to seek help from a number of different gods provided that one does not forget to give thanks to all of them once the problem is solved (ibid, pp.65-66).

Chau believes that the above "basic principles or postulates" are valid for not only the Shaanbei worshippers, but also the 'Chinese popular religion' followers in general (ibid, p.66). Nonetheless, although his observations do support some of our previous arguments, what we would now focus on is the implication that Chinese Folk Religion does not seem to require any strong commitment or membership from its followers. The main purpose of this Chapter is to reflect upon our previous arguments by examining if Chinese Folk Religion is merely syncretistic, secular or superstitious, but by studying such religiosities, we will further identify the religious tradition/phenomenon we define as 'Chinese Folk Religion'; demonstrate that the said preconceptions of religion are not applicable to all religions; complement Hick's

interpretation of religion by describing how some religions would function differently; and support the argument that a neutral, pluralist assumption is not necessarily considered impracticable or undesirable by all religious audiences.

## 9.2 Religious practices or mere social customs?

To start with, although Joakim (1991) also claims to have witnessed the human-centred, functionally-oriented practices of Chinese Folk Religion, he doubts the practices are perhaps more of a social tradition in the sense that religious faith is not necessarily involved (p.185). Hou and Fan have expressed a similar concern, and pointed out the possibility that some petitioners may be attending churches, temples and other religious rituals just because food and money is provided<sup>115</sup>. It should nonetheless be noticed that Hou and Fan also do not affirm any value of Chinese Folk Religion and its ideology, nor do they think its followers have any intention to attain any kind of salvation/liberation. That being said, since whether or not they merely see their religious practices as social customs are crucial to the later question as to whether their attitude should be understood as a different kind of faith, it is worth

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<sup>115</sup> Hou and Fan (1994) regard such a behaviour as “eating religion” (p.116). As they describe, “‘eating religion’ is referred to the practitioners who are not that religious; they become a ‘believer’ simply to solve their financial problems” (ibid). According to them, it is quite common in China for churches or temples to offer food, clothes or even money to their followers (ibid, pp.123-126).

seeing how Ahern (1981) attempts to prove the religious consciousness of the worshippers of spiritual beings by adopting the 'open/closed practices theory'.

To briefly describe, according to the particular 'open/closed practices theory' Ahern applies, closed practices would have the following properties: each instantiation has an explicit beginning and end; people must know all the rules of the practice to take part; the rules involved can be described exhaustively; the rules are constitutive; the rules are fixed during instances of the practice; and the point of the practice is given in the rules (ibid, p.64). Open practices, on the other hand, would contain these properties: the activity is on-going and open-ended; even though people may not know the rules, they can still participate; it would be impossible to give a complete account of the rules involved; the rules are regulative; the rules can change during instances of the practice; and the point of the practice may lie outside the rules (ibid, p.65).

Ahern then tries to argue that deities/ancestors worship (or '*pai-pai*' as the Chinese term he prefers) "is in part a closed practice," meaning the worshippers are not only aware of the religious meanings of the practice, but also follow certain 'rules' of the practice because of such religious meanings<sup>116</sup> (ibid, pp.64-65). As his

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<sup>116</sup> As he describes in details, "The act called *pai-pai* is in part a closed practice. In order to perform it, and thus communicate with the god or other spirit being addressed, one must press both hands together in front of one's chest, elbows to one's sides, and, facing the image or its incense pot, bow slightly from the waist and move the hands up and down. This is the signal the two distant parties – spirits and men – recognize as necessary to start a communication. Elaborations are possible and frequently added:

informant expresses, "Contact with the gods can only be accomplished as long as the hands and body are held and moved in the proper way" (ibid, p.67). According to Ahern's analysis, *pai-pai* can be seen as a mixture of both open and closed practices in that some of its rules are compulsory of which the religious significances are known to the practitioners, while the others are more open-ended in that the effectiveness or reasoning of a practice is often subject to personal beliefs – either of these two understandings implies a certain degree of religious consciousness of deities/ancestor worship (pp.65-74).

Regarding other religious practices of Chinese Folk Religion, the religious consciousness involved may appear to be more significant. Taking various future-alteration techniques as an example, the only reason for anyone to perform such practices should be that he believes in their supernatural power. According to Feuchtwang's (2003) findings, feng-shui has never been an easy practice for common folks, for it can be quite expensive to consult an expert:

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a speech, silently or audibly made to the god; incense held between the hands and placed in the god's incense pot; food placed before the image; a kneeling posture. But these optional elements vary sidely depending on the worshipper's mood and resources, or on the kind of social occasion involved. The only constitutive rule has to do with the body position and movement adopted: to *pai-pai* is by definition to hold the hands together and move them up and down while bowing in relation to a god's image or incense pot... I never saw anyone address the gods without the body posture and hand position I have described but when I pressed informants I was told that the absolute minimum for an act to count as 'pai-pai' was a slight bow of the head. This may be the most constitutive element in the act, and element that also plays a key role in showing respect in ordinary life... I asked whether an act still counts as 'pai-pai' even though everything but the posture and gesture varies. My informants replied that contact with the gods can only be accomplished as long as the hands and body are held and moved in the proper way. The worshipper need do nothing else. Even the person's inner dispositions are irrelevant" (ibid, pp.64-67).

On three accounts those concerned with fengshui must already possess some degree of wealth; first, because they must be able to afford the expense of entertaining a geomancer; second, because they do not feel financially obliged to let their dead be buried in the communal burial ground of the town or village; third, the achievement of wealth breeds anxiety to maintain it, and fengshui manipulation is a salve to this anxiety (p.269).

Although some less popular feng-shui masters may be willing to charge less, we can at least say that the manipulation of feng-shui would cost something. Nonetheless, as Li (1998) observes, feng-shui is still an extremely popular practice in modern China, of which the practitioners (customers) range from government officials to university intellectuals (p.207). Given that, unlike ancestor worship, feng-shui manipulation is usually not a public practice in the sense that little to no social expectation is involved, it is quite unlikely that the people who pay such a fortune for the process do not actually believe in its supernatural effects. In fact, despite the assumption that some participations may be motivated by certain social/financial benefits, most of the arguments/criticisms Hou and Fan (1994) propose still imply that the religious believers they speak of do have faith in something, may it be the concept

of rebirth or the effectiveness of deities worship (pp.130-160; 166-194). Perhaps such seemingly self-contradicting notion can be explained by their concept of 'weak religious emotion' or the somewhat 'agnostic' attitude we will soon discuss (ibid, p.54).

### **9.3 The meaning of faith for a 'non-doctrinal' religion**

As mentioned, one of the many reasons why some scholars find defining the 'Chinese popular religious phenomenon' so difficult or even impossible is that it appears to have no deep connection with any authoritative doctrine or scripture. As Joakim (1991) believes, this nature is in many ways different to that of the 'Western doctrinal religions':

When people treat the one and only omnipotent, omniscience creation God as their Ultimate Reality, their faith would inevitably turn into a 'doctrinal religion'. This kind of religion emphasises on the solid faith in scriptural truth, of which authority is approved by the church... Doctrinal religion does not only stress on scriptural doctrines, but also a theology – the systematic belief towards God... 'Non-doctrinal religion' does not concern



faith in the same way... Although it is unrealistic to conclude that the Chinese folks do not concern religious doctrine at all, it is nonetheless true that they rarely think the faith in a particular doctrine or the rejection of other conflicting doctrine is a matter of life and death. The Chinese do not become religiously involved because of the faith in a belief system. Rather, it is motivated by the desire for earthly fortunes (pp.184-185).

While also agreeing on the point that Chinese Folk Religion does not contain any authoritative doctrine, Berkowitz et al (1969) tend to see it more optimistically and suggest that there can be another belief system that functions differently from doctrine, they explain:

Doctrine, a rationalized system of concepts and distinctive ethics is often, although not necessarily, identified with a priesthood and an institutionalized religious system. Dogma, on the other hand, can be viewed within strict traditionalism as another type of ethical system, "the ultimate warrant of which is taboo." Such "uncritical" beliefs represent the static element of religion and can be associated with non-theological and non-institutionalized system (p.7).

Berkowitz et al may have given a new meaning to the two concepts, for they are quite often considered synonymous, but putting the problem of terminology aside, the passage does imply that there is some form of system in the beliefs of Chinese Folk Religion (for the above response is meant to challenge the idea that Chinese Folk Religion has no doctrine and is hence a mere superstition). It is similar to our earlier findings that there are many concepts or beliefs being considered common or even universal under the umbrella of Chinese Folk Religion. Nonetheless, as it is partly an 'open-practice' in which even the ways to offer sacrifices are allowed to vary<sup>117</sup>, some beliefs may also differ in some aspects. For example, apart from the official historical account of the life of Tien Hou we previously discussed, there are in fact other conflicting, 'unofficial' versions concerning her origins or supernatural powers (Watson, 2002, pp.167-171); and although Hou Chi and Yellow Emperor are more commonly seen as the grain god and warrior-god respectively, existing accounts concerning their origins or statuses can also be highly diverse<sup>118</sup>. In addition, apart from his usual 'duty' as the protector of soldiers, policemen and gangsters, Guan-di is

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<sup>117</sup> As Ahern (1981) describes the 'open practice' nature of *pai-pai*, he says, "For example, there are general expectations for which kinds of food and ritual money are offered to various gods or spirits. But this is a matter very much open to interpretation and change. A spirit who at one time is offered ritual food and money appropriate to a ghost may later come to be offered food and money suited to a new higher status of an efficacious god. In this respect, the rules of food offerings are much like the regulative rules of etiquette" (p.68).

<sup>118</sup> According to Birrell (1993), "the myth of the Chinese deity Hou Chi may be viewed as a myth of the grain god, of the miraculous birth of a god, of the child hero overcoming attempts on his life, or of the inauguration of temple sacrifice to the grain god, and again as the foundation myth of the Chou people," while the myths of the Yellow Emperor may be interpreted as "facets of his contradictory roles of warrior-god, bringer of cultural benefits, peacemaker, avenging god, or, later in the mythological tradition, the supreme deity of the Taoist pantheon, and yet again as the amalgam of homogenized local mythic traditions" (pp.20-21).

sometimes treated as a sea-god, even though the concept is less popular (Z. Q. Chen, 2008). As Feng and Li (1994) comment, since the beliefs of Chinese Folk Religion are spread through folklores/gossips rather than an authoritative scripture, the contents of those beliefs are meant to be dynamic, and each follower is supposed to have a different, personal understanding of even the very same concept (p.10).

Before accepting the conclusion Joakim proposes which assumes the non-doctrinal and non-institutional natures of Chinese Folk Religion to be the main reason for its lack of authoritative accounts, however, it is also possible that its followers simply do not find the historical root of a deity important, or even that they do not think an authoritative account is possible – perhaps it is not the non-doctrinal structure of Chinese Folk Religion that obstructs its followers from wanting to seek the Absolute Truth, but the followers who originally do not find Absolute Truth important that shape the structure of their religion.

Feuchtwang's (2001) study of the setting of household ritual may just help to verify such assumption. According to his observation, a Chinese household is ritually defined as a unit in several ways: as a house, as a family, as part of a Tudi Gong (Earth), and of a local festival area, as part of a family and as a site or place (ibid, pp.98-99). In front of each setting of 'god's table', there are incense-burners which are identical to the ones set in local temple dedicated to other local deities. When the

householders move out, they would usually leave the 'god's table' behind; and as the new owners come in, they would take the responsibility to worship the deities already 'set' in the house. Feuchtwang notices that it is quite common for the new owners to be unaware of the origins, myths or 'functions' of those divine figures; they simply have the idea that it is their duty to serve the deities by providing sacrifices to them, but not to clarify whom the altar is representing. As he further analyses:

'Belief' in the sense of adherence to a dogmatic proposition of what is held to be true, is a key problem of Islam and of modern European, Western religion, theology and philosophy. It is not central in Chinese philosophical and religious authority and judgement (ibid, p.9).

Although it may sound rather confusing or absurd to imply that the Chinese would believe in something they do not consider true, perhaps what he tries to suggest is that they may not consider the truthfulness of a belief utmost important, thus the tendency of not needing to learn too much about a religious practice before performing it. In fact, it appears that such tendency does not only apply to practice, but also religious truth-claim. According to Liu (2003), for instance, matters concerning gods or ghosts are considered inappropriate topics for discussion even for

the Chinese elites (p.390). Hou and Fan (1994) also believe that the Chinese would avoid discussing about death and afterlife because what happens at the present is all that matters (pp.167-170).

That being said, these religious believers also seem to know quite well what 'services' various spiritual beings can provide, thus the dedicated religious involvements, and knowledge about the ability of a spiritual being can, in a sense, be understood as knowledge about afterlife, for some spiritual beings are humans who have died. Despite his observation that sometimes the worshippers may not know much about the deities they worship, Feuchtwang (2001) also believes that the supernatural powers or 'specialties' of the more popular deities are more well-known to common worshippers (p.113). As Watson (2002) describes, although many female worshippers in China are not aware of the historical origins of Tien Hou, they are often well aware of what Tien Hou can do for them (pp.193-194). Therefore, it is not that they do not concern what is true, but that the truths they usually concern are more 'functionally-oriented' – after all, as Thompson (1969) expresses, the existence of a deity in Chinese Folk Religion is meant to be proven by his supernatural powers (p.57), and since any spiritual being who can earn a place in a local temple or household altar is presumably powerful and effective, that reason alone should be sufficient enough to establish a reciprocal relationship with such a being.

Such a tendency may also be understood as a willingness to participate in any religious practice as long as there is the slightest chance that it can be effective, or there is nothing to lose. As two of the harshest critics of the attitudes of Chinese Folk Religion believers, Hou and Fan (1994) have discussed such seemingly superstitious tendency in great detail. According to them, it is in fact a 'national phenomenon' for the Chinese to worship any statue of god they see and to offer incenses (sacrifices) in any temple they come across (ibid, pp.136-142; 157). The visit often involves no interaction with other worshippers or local priests (if any), and it is common for them to worship a deity unknown to them. As shown by the official records, there are, for instance, as many as 879 temples in the small province of Guiding, each serving a different set of deities, in which at least 63 different types of gods exist (ibid, p.137); and within the well-known Fahua Temple Complex, there are even hundreds of deities co-existing (p.139). Therefore, it would only be natural for a common worshipper to not know them all. That being said, Hou and Fan still find it ridiculous for anyone to worship an unknown deity or for any temple to contain hundreds of deities simultaneously, mainly because these deities are originally from different religious traditions (ibid, pp.153-157).

Savidge (1977) also witnesses a similar phenomenon in Hong Kong, yet she tends to see it more positively:

Whenever a Chinese tries to tell a Westerner about Chinese temples and worship, he soon finds himself saying that it's all very confusing. It is. Only those who are born to it can really understand the mixture of beliefs, the existence of many deities from two different religions within the same temple, and the commonsense of worshippers who kneel before whichever god they need to ask for help... Most of the *miu* [temples] are named after Taoist gods, but they include Buddhist deities on their official lists of secondary gods. And sometimes it works the other way round (p.6).

Unless one is ready to take a somewhat postmodern/relativist stance, it would seem to be rather unfair to blame the 'Westerners'/outsiders for not seeing the logic behind such a phenomenon – it does appear to be quite chaotic or nonsense at first glance. If we are to interpret their attitudes based on the more traditional or 'Western' conception of belief/faith, the idea that 'one can believe in something without knowing what it is or a mixture of elements from different religions' would most certainly prove to be difficult to comprehend. Nonetheless, if, on the other hand, one can accept a different conception of faith or religious identity, all of these would appear to be less confusing.

#### **9.4 The ambiguous religious identity: ones who call themselves 'superstitious'**

Regarding the earlier claim that Buddhism might have integrated the idea of filial piety into their doctrines in order to attract the Chinese, Hou and Fan (1994) have further expressed that, by adding such doctrines which stress on the value of earthly love, Buddhism has clearly set itself apart from the teachings it originally stood for (pp.153-160; 239). Yan (1991) also proposes a similar viewpoint, and comments that “these folk Buddhist practices that focus on acquiring earthly benefits and fulfilling humanly desires would most definitely look ridiculous to the original teachings of Buddhism” (p.245). Yan further calls the popular settings of Chinese Buddhist temples ‘meretricious’, for they are so ‘secular’ that all the valuable religious significances of Buddhism have been lost (ibid).

Perhaps a passage written by Baker (1979) would help to further describe such viewpoint. Baker once commented that the beliefs of the Chinese folks have contained little rationality:

With this exception perhaps of the devout Buddhists, Taoists, Muslims and Christians (altogether only a small proportion of the population, though in some areas they might be in the majority), most people seem to have been



able to believe in nearly all these elements simultaneously. Or perhaps 'believe' is too strong a word for what really amounted to a willingness to practice rather than an understanding and acceptance... But Buddhism presented a far greater challenge to ancestor worship than this. The idea of re-birth is clearly contrary to the concept of a continuing ancestral spirit. Could one logically go on worshipping an ancestor who had been reborn as an animal or as another person (ibid, pp.97-98)?

First of all, in response to the example he has given, Baker may have mistakenly forced the Theravada Buddhist concept onto Chinese Folk Religion (or other schools of Buddhism for that matter). It is true that for Theravada Buddhism, there is no gap between death and rebirth; but for Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhism which are the dominating Buddhist sects in China, there is actually a concept called '*bardo*' that the soul of the deceased will 'be there' for a certain period of time before rebirth, and such an interval can last for as long as a few hundred years (Sambhava, 1994, pp.167-194). Second, according to Chinese Folk Religion and indeed Buddhism (including the Theravada school), a human soul which has failed to reach the state of *nirvana* can still be reborn as a god, or, in other words, a deity – as discussed previously, many Chinese deities were once an actual historical figure, and ancestral

spirits are sometimes considered identical to deities in terms of functionality and nature, let alone the belief that we can still interact with them or make their life less miserable even if they are being punished in hells. Therefore, ancestor worship may reflect a rather reasonable wish that our deceased family members are not reborn, but remain a spiritual being that can interact with the livings reciprocally.

Last but not least, based on the viewpoint that Chinese Folk Religion should be treated as an independent religious tradition, it is also unreasonable to criticise its ideology of being inconsistent with some Buddhist ideas simply because some of its concepts might be derived from Buddhism – it is also commonly believed that some Christian concepts are derived from certain non-Christian traditions, but it would be absurd to question the reliability of such concepts for that reason alone. Baker's perspective is in fact quite similar to Tanaka's (2003) in that they both tend to use Buddhist criteriology to evaluate the beliefs of Chinese Folk Religion, even though they also agree that the phenomena they witnessed are not Buddhist (which is exactly what they criticise). Perhaps the real problem lies in that the religious identity of these religious believers is so ambiguous that it is tempting to simply regard them as 'Buddhist', 'Taoist' or 'Confucian' who do not know their own religions very well. Using the same approach, Hick may also come to a similar conclusion that the Chinese Folk Religion followers are 'Buddhists', 'Taoists' or 'Confucians' who have

misinterpreted or 'misapplied' the 'Golden Rule' taught by their religions, but is this a fair approach to define and truly understand these 'nameless' religious believers?

Savidge's (1977) description may offer more insights:

But there's more to it than tolerance. In the *miu* [temples,] many

worshippers look on both religions as though they are one and the same.

They are unable to say whether this belief is Buddhist or that statue is Taoist.

And they are just as uncertain about their own position – often settling for

Buddhism because it's best known. Others cannot put a name to their

religion at all. They say that they just worship their ancestors and the gods

(p.6).

The above description implies that the worshippers of ancestors and deities do not normally consider themselves Buddhists, which supports our argument that it is arbitrary to put them under the umbrella of Buddhism and use Buddhist criteriology to judge their behaviours. In fact, as Li (2008) argues, asking the Chinese Folk Religion followers "What is your religion?" is to ask the wrong question, because they "don't actually believe in it or belong to it" (please see section 5.2). According to him, strict

religious belonging or identity is just a 'Western' conception<sup>119</sup> which is inapplicable to the particular Chinese religious situation he describes (ibid, pp.168-169).

Nonetheless, instead of claiming that there is no such thing as religious identity in Chinese Folk Religion, it would be better to say that the concept of religious identity is understood differently, or that Chinese Folk Religion does not require a strict sense of belonging – although Savidge's informants do not really think of themselves as a Buddhist, at least they are aware of the concept that 'Buddhist' would be an appropriate response to the question concerning their religious identity. They know what 'religious identity' means; they just do not know theirs.

Goossaert (2005) has also managed to press his informants to name their religion/tradition, only this time their answer is more confusing, they say, "I don't believe in religion, I believe in superstition" (p.19). In fact, it is quite common for the Chinese Folk Religion followers to regard their faith or religious position as *míxìn* (superstition), which include Feuchtwang's (2001) Taiwanese interviewees (p.216). In order to defend their position, however, Feuchtwang tries to explain that 'superstition' in Chinese does not necessarily carry the same meaning as that in English:

In the mainland 'superstition' is not just a negative category. It is also a term

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<sup>119</sup> It may be more appropriate to put it as 'a conception of institutional religion', because some Eastern religions may also require a strict sense of membership.

used in the various criminal codes of the People's Republic of China alongside older categories of prohibition on forming secret societies and using heterodox teachings to organise movements which cause unrest or other criminal and sexually licentious acts... 'Superstition' is a portmanteau condemnation of several aspects of popular culture as backward. It can contain anything that does not suit the ideals of a scientific and democratic governance and its project of modernisation... At the same time 'superstition' overlaps with other, less condemned terms such as 'custom' or 'culture' which are legitimate (pp.216-217).

It seems that 'superstition' is simply too negative of a word, thus he is eager to explain how his informants are not really superstitious in the Western sense. Also attempting to speak on behalf of the phenomena he witnesses, Goossaert (2005) too believes that the term must not be referred to its more common, English meaning, and that it should be understood as some form of "Chinese religion in the variety of its local expressions" which is a concept equally neutral as 'official religion' (p.19). Nonetheless, although Feuchtwang tries to argue that 'superstition' is a homograph of which some of its meanings are neutral or 'legitimate', it must have also carried a very similar negative meaning of that of the English term, thus the decision to

consider it a translation of the latter in the first place. The question is, even if it does not carry such negative meaning while being referred to the religiosity of Chinese Folk Religion, why would its followers decide to start using the term to describe their religious position?

As I would suggest, the reason is probably that they did consider their attitude to have shared some natures of what the term conveys, even though they may not see such natures as something as negative as what the Westerners understand.

Traditionally, some religionists tend to define superstition as distinct from the more preferable religions (Berkowitz et al, 1969, p.5). For example, according to Yang (1967):

[Superstition is] an uncritically accepted belief in supernatural powers and its resultant rite; it may be regarded as a part of magic in the sense that it implies not only nonempirical interpretation of natural and human events but also the human attempt to manipulate supernatural forces by either active control or negative avoidance (p.3).

Nonetheless, as Berkowitz et al (1969) argue, Yang's distinction is a "confusion" and "loose application" of a rational criterion, because "all supernatural religious

belief is non-rational in the sense that it is non-verifiable through reason" (p.5). They further suggest that, although it is often considered inappropriate in some Western religions, an 'uncritically accepted belief' can, however, be an acceptable, 'static element' of any 'non-theological' or 'non-institutionalized' religious system (ibid, p.7).

For these reasons, they believe it is "better to eliminate the term 'superstition' altogether" when discussing the nature of Chinese Folk Religion, not because 'superstition' in Chinese Folk Religion does not represent what Yang describes, but because it can be a different yet equally rational (or irrational) position as 'religion' (ibid). Terming it 'superstition', on the other hand, would give an unfair and unrealistic impression that its beliefs are more irrational, unreliable or 'pseudo' (ibid).

Whether or not we should term Chinese Folk Religion as 'superstition', there is at least an agreement that a significant attitude of such a non-theological, non-institutionalised tradition is the tendency to accept religious beliefs uncritically. As the next section will try to demonstrate, however, although its followers do seem to accept religious beliefs uncritically, it does not mean that they would have total faith in such beliefs either. If that is true, then the existence of Chinese Folk Religion would not only pose a challenge to the approach Hick applies to define and categorise religions, but also his assumption that to belong to a religion is to be completely committed to or have total faith in its key doctrines.

### 9.5 The seemingly 'agnostic' attitude of a 'superstitious' tradition

To further respond to the accusation that it is irrational for the Chinese to believe in the ideology of ancestor worship and rebirth simultaneously, there is a possibility that they do not actually have total faith in either of the two concepts. If their belief can be interpreted as a somewhat 'agnostic' idea that either one of the two concepts is true (but not both), then such a belief would certainly appear to be more reasonable and comprehensible. That being argued, it is only so if they really do have such 'agnostic' tendency.

To begin with, apart from the informants who are not aware of the origins or other information about the household deities they worship, Feuchtwang (2001) has also mentioned a female worshipper who is more knowledgeable about the deities she frequently worships, only this time, she is actually aware of two seemingly conflicting accounts concerning the statuses and duties of Tudi Gong (Earth)<sup>120</sup>. Before analysing the rationale behind this, however, we must not overlook another passage that narrates how a male informant sees the problem. As the man puts it, "Each place has a Tudi Gong. There are several kinds of Tudi Gong. There are so many kinds of Tudi Gong. He protects the area. He is the area's god" (ibid, p.101). As this implies, then, the

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<sup>120</sup> As the informant describes, "I have heard that Tudi Gong is both the greatest and the smallest... At a grave he guards just that grave. But he is also close to the God of Heaven reporting to him every three days" (Feuchtwang, 2001, p.101).



co-existence of conflicting accounts regarding Tudi Gong would be less problematic, for there are in fact “many kinds of Tudi Gong.” Nonetheless, it should also be noticed that the male informant has addressed the deity using singular form, which suggests that he did not actually mean that there are more than one Tudi Gong<sup>121</sup>. In fact, although there are many different accounts concerning the origins of Tudi Gong (ibid, pp.100-101; 251), none of the existing studies has suggested the idea that Tudi Gong is more than one. Therefore, when the man said “there are several kinds of Tudi Gong,” he was probably referring to the multiple accounts regarding the same deity; and when the lady demonstrated her knowledge of the conflicting accounts concerning Tudi Gong, it is likely that she was speaking of the very same divine figure.

This leads us back to the original problem: how could one possibly believe in two conflicting truth-claims simultaneously? The existences of conflicting accounts concerning the origins and statuses of Chinese deities are more puzzling than the scenario Baker (1979) proposes, and it does seem nonsense for anyone to simultaneously believe that Tudi Gong is of the lowest as well as the highest rank in the heavenly government. However, such a belief is nonsense only if we understand the concept ‘religious belief’ as ‘the total faith in a religious truth-claim’. As

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<sup>121</sup> In Chinese language, there is a clear distinction between third person singular (*t*) and third person plural (*t men*). One would never use the singular form to address a plurality of persons.

mentioned earlier, if there can be a form of 'agnostic belief' which does not imply a total faith in two conflicting religious truth-claims, the phenomenon would at least be more comprehensible.

According to Huxley (2007), agnosticism does not necessarily imply the belief that Ultimate Reality can never be known:

I do not very much care to speak of anything as "unknowable." What I am sure about is that there are many topics about which I know nothing; and which, so far as I can see, are out of reach of my faculties. But whether these things are knowable by any one else is exactly one of those matters which is beyond my knowledge, though I may have a tolerably strong opinion as to the probabilities of the case (p.26).

Fairly speaking, even though Baker's (1979) comments can be questionable, his notion that the worshippers are merely 'willing to practice' rather than actually having faith in the religious claims involved may prove to be quite insightful (p.97). The same goes for Feuchtwang's (2001) remark that it is not common for these worshippers to believe in what is true (p.9). Certainly, they are not actually saying that the worshippers would consider their own religious beliefs false, otherwise it would

be something more than superstitious. Rather, it can be seen as a viewpoint quite similar to that of Huxley in the sense that the worshippers too do not think they can be certain of some matters, but as they still need religion for spiritual or practical functions, they have chosen to be religiously involved nonetheless – they do not know for certain if ancestor worship, for instance, would be effective, though they are still willing to participate just in case it would ‘work’. As an old Chinese saying goes, “It is better to believe in it than not to.”

Despite such assumption, it would not be very appropriate to term their attitude as ‘agnostic’, mainly because agnosticism is commonly understood as a system of philosophy concerning how we should (or should not) treat religious truth-claims, while the attitude of Chinese Folk Religion believers is more of a ‘willingness’ to practice. Therefore, it should be less confusing to avoid being too categorical and stick with the notion that Chinese Folk Religion does not require a strict form of membership or total spiritual commitment from its followers, nor does it consider ‘what is true’ too important.

Although Hou and Fan (1994) have repeatedly regarded the system of beliefs of Chinese Folk Religion as ‘chaotic’, ‘unrealistic’ and ‘vulgar’, they also believe that its believers do not actually have faith in any religious claim wholeheartedly (which should have implied that their beliefs in conflicting truth-claims are not really that

illogical), they write:

With regard to religious claims, they tend to have the idea that “it is true if you believe it, and it is false if you don’t.” Therefore, deities in China have never completely convinced their believers... The Chinese folks are quite cold to religious matters in the sense that they do not think being religiously involved is essential – it would be just as fine for one to live a secular life (p.85)

To support such a speculation, they try to point out that even the feng-shui/fortune-telling masters would not believe in their own practices/power completely, and hence the rather well-known inside jokes such as “poor people wouldn’t exist if the practices are effective,” “we can help the others but not ourselves,” “don’t expect a return if you pay me,” or that “we must say something good in order to get paid” (ibid, p.83). According to Hou and Fan, these sayings are equally popular among the people who would consult a feng-shui/fortune-telling master, meaning the ‘help-seekers’ too do not have faith in these practices wholeheartedly (ibid). Nonetheless, as Hou and Fan argue:

Although the Chinese folks have not accepted the existence of supernatural power completely, they haven't denied it neither. Especially when they have encountered certain unsolvable problems in life, they would undoubtedly seek help through religious means. However, as they do not have total faith in these supernatural powers, they would not rely on religion that much... In everyday life, they treat their gods quite secularly; but at the same time, they deeply believe that *Tien* will treat them well if they behave rightfully (ibid).

Based on a qualitative study of 'Chinese religiosity', Harrell (1974) has also reached to a similar conclusion regarding how 'faithful' these Chinese worshippers are. As he argues, religious believers in China can be divided into four types: (1) 'intellectual believers' who have total faith in the authoritative doctrines of institutional religions; (2) 'true believers' who have total faith in any religious idea available to them; (3) 'nonbelievers' who completely disbelieve all religious ideas; and (4) 'practical believers' who do not believe in any religious idea completely but are willing to get religiously involved just in case some religious ideas are true (ibid, p.86). According to Harrell's findings, almost all of his interviewees are 'practical believers' whose attitude is described by him as "half trust and half doubt" (ibid).

Although Chau (2006) does not totally agree with Harrell's categorising approach, he

nonetheless agrees that most of his interviewees from Shaanbei are also 'practical believers', meaning such 'half-trust-half-doubt' attitude is more than a regional, particular phenomenon, or as Chau puts it, the common philosophy of his informants is that "one should not not believe, nor should one believe everything" (pp.67-68).

As mentioned, the preconception concerning strict religious belonging and total commitment to the key doctrines of a religion is the main reason why some critics would consider Hick's neutral approach impracticable and undesirable. Conversely, if such conceptions prove to be something conditional rather than universal, one may then suggest that Hick's theory is not necessarily undesirable for the audiences who tend to concern religious belonging and commitment from a different perspective. In other words, taking the incompatibility between his criteriology and the ideology of Chinese Folk Religion aside, perhaps his model is more 'applicable' to the Chinese in the sense that it is able to help them to embrace the pluralistic vision we prefer even if it fails to effect such transformation on Christians, Buddhists or the religious believers from other religions who find his non-confessional assumption unacceptable.

### **9.6 Multiple belongings, pluralism, or syncreticism?**

As a religion that does not require much loyalty to a deity or a denomination, its

followers are believed to be allowed to enter any temple they come across, worship any deity they feel attached to, or participate in any religious practice they find attractive or beneficial. This seems to suggest a position similar to what some may regard as multiple religious belonging or pluralist. As Li (2008) expresses, "...it is easier for the [Chinese] polytheistic communities to accept foreign culture or thought, as they have already admitted the existence of multiple values – they can absorb anything foreign without changing their basis" (pp.425-426). Apparently, this is quite different from Cornille's (2008) understanding that it is inevitable to understand other religions from within one's own conception of ultimate reality (pp.132-133).

As mentioned, there are viewpoints within the contemporary Chinese academia that Chinese Folk Religion or its followers are already 'pluralistic' (see section 1.1.3). If this is true, then the notion that belonging to a religious tradition which does not stress on a strict sense of membership or total commitment may help to embrace a neutral pluralistic vision would be more than a mere hypothesis. Nonetheless, the 'pluralistic attitude' the Chinese scholars speak of is in fact more of a tendency to tolerate differences than a 'sophisticated' affirmation of the validity of a plurality of religions. According to the 'Western' scholars, the said attitude of the Chinese Folk Religion followers is more commonly understood as a form of multiple religious

belonging or a devotion to a mixture of various faiths. Ching<sup>122</sup> (1993), for example, has described how religious identity is understood differently in China, and argued that multiple religious belonging is not usually considered inappropriate in the Chinese religious situation:

In the West religion is presumed to include a belief in theism... it is also understood in an exclusive sense, and the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic God is characterized as a jealous God. One is either a Christian or a Jew or a Muslim, but one cannot be more than one of these at the same time. In East Asia this is not so. It is often assumed that many Chinese are Confucians in actions, and Taoists in contemplation (pp.85-86).

In a sense, multiple religious belonging does imply a somewhat pluralist assumption, for it is supposed to involve the belief that at least the religions one simultaneously belongs to are all true. However, although Goossaert (2005) also tends to agree that 'Chinese religion' is less exclusivist in nature compared to other Western religious traditions, it is more of a mixture of various faiths, or, to put it differently, a form of syncreticism:

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<sup>122</sup> Strictly speaking, Ching was also a scholar from China, though she did spend most of her academic life in Canada. For references, please see Chan (2002).



It includes ancient sacrificial religion, Confucianism which continued it, Taoism and Buddhism, as well as the sectarian movements that were formed later. The most common form was the worshipping community with a temple, dedicated to a local saint: this kind of community was not Confucian, Buddhist or Taoist but linked to all three. Chinese religion existed but did not have a name because it did not have an overarching church structure or dogmatic authority. It brought together all forms of China's religious life, with the exception of certain religions of foreign origin which, because they required exclusive membership and claimed a monopoly of the truth, could not be included: these were the three monotheisms, Islam, Judaism and Christianity (pp.13-14).

Similar to Ching's viewpoint, Goossaert also considers 'Chinese religion' non-exclusivist because it contains beliefs related to Confucianism, Taoism as well as Buddhism. However, the notion that it cannot include Christianity, Islam, or other traditions that strictly require exclusive membership may very well suggest that it is not really pluralist, but syncretistic. That being said, even though the nature of a religion is not pluralist, the attitude of its followers can still be pluralist in the sense that they may personally see Christianity, for example, as an equally truthful religion.

After a series of social statistical studies, J. Xu (2008) expresses something quite similar to some of our earlier assumptions that Chinese Folk Religion (or 'Chinese popular religion' as he puts it) is neither completely religious nor secular, that what its followers believe are rather ambiguous, and that "the relationship between man and God may be less 'justified by faith', but more 'mutually beneficial'" (p.16). More importantly, he also learns that their 'spiritual realm' is 'highly tolerant' – apart from the "many Chinese Buddhists [who] are also Taoists," there are also worshippers of ancestors and 'folk gods' who have faith in Christianity simultaneously, or as he puts it, "For many believers, one may choose to believe in very different faiths [simultaneously]" (ibid).

In fact, as his surveys demonstrate, 42.3% of informants were found believing in ancestor worship and folk gods, within which 16.7% are also followers of foreign institutional religions such as Christianity and Catholicism; and if Buddhism and Taoism are taken into account, there are as many as 40.1% of Chinese religious believers who reported to have spiritually belonged to more than one religious tradition, which, again, includes Christianity and Catholicism (ibid, p.14). This suggests that a significant number of Chinese religious believers – even when dedicating to monotheistic traditions such as Christianity or Catholicism – are not only tolerant towards, but also find little spiritual obstacle in belonging to another

religious traditions, and, according to Xu's analysis, the reason for them to be able to have such attitude is that their devotions are not bounded by the requirement to be completely committed to a single religious tradition.

Perhaps a case study would help to depict the phenomenon further. Pang (2002) has conducted a qualitative research studying how people from different faiths perceived the Taoist funeral rituals they had participated. Within which, there was a Christian informant who appears to be able to see some spiritual values of such a non-Christian practice:

Yuk-leung's strong faith helped him cope with his bereavement, and he never doubted that he would reunite with his wife in the afterlife. The special arrangement for the final night was an open part of a standardized Christian ritual that Yuk-leung brought his own ideas to and made meaningful for him. Accompanied with the performance of [Taoist] post-funeral death rituals, his beliefs were reinforced and a continuing bond with his deceased wife was established (ibid, pp.297-298).

The above example may seem to be a mere description of how a Chinese Christian is able to accept traditional Chinese practices, yet we should not forget that

the Chinese Folk Religion followers would seldom regard themselves as a member of Chinese Folk Religion, and therefore when Yuk-leung is reported to have embraced Chinese traditional beliefs as well as Christian faiths, he would most certainly be categorised as a Christian who also accepts some Chinese traditional beliefs rather than the other way around. Nonetheless, according to the definition this thesis suggests, he should also be categorised as a Chinese Folk Religion follower, that is, he has actually belonged to two religions simultaneously, even though he may not agree with such categorisation. At the very least, J. Xu (2008) and Pang's (2002) findings do demonstrate that Goossaert's assumption about how 'Chinese religion' cannot include Western monotheistic beliefs is questionable, or, in other words, Chinese Folk Religion is perhaps more tolerant (if not pluralist) than he expects.

To further support such viewpoint, Song and Li (1988) have surveyed the general populaces in Hsinchu city, and learned that as many as half of the informants who claimed to be 'non-religious' have in fact believed in the supernatural effects of feng-shui practices, within which 66% of them have also believed in other fortune-telling techniques (pp.121-127). What really surprises the researchers is the finding that there are 30% of Chinese Christians who report to believe in feng-shui practices and have actually paid a feng-shui master for that reason<sup>123</sup> (ibid). As Li

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<sup>123</sup> However, the figures proposed by Xu (2008) or Song and Li (1998) also imply that such tolerating attitude is by no means universal, for there are also an equally significant amount of their interviewees

(1998) later comments, it is because their religious worldview has remained unchanged even though they have committed to a doctrinal, monotheistic tradition like Christianity (p.207).

For another theory of the phenomenon, Ching (1990) has also witnessed a group of Chinese Christians who used to call themselves 'Buddhist' or 'Taoists' (p.134). As she realises, they started to consider themselves "believers in Jesus" simply because the term "Christians" sounds more 'modern' to them (ibid). Ching further argues that this is possible because the Chinese tend to think that "all religions seek the good, and that what is good is more important than what is true," which is, again, similar to our earlier assumptions that they would seldom have total faith in any religious truth-claim, and that such attitude is responsible for their tendency of tolerating foreign or conflicting beliefs (ibid, p.143).

As this thesis would suggest, however, one should avoid forcing any debatable category onto Chinese Folk Religion because most categories concerning religious matters – such as 'superstition', 'agnosticism', 'pluralism', etc. – are often linked to various preconceptions or meanings alien to what we intend to describe. For example, if we are to claim that the Chinese Folk Religion followers have embraced the

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who did not accept elements from a plurality of religions simultaneously. For this reason, the 'Chinese Folk Religion followers' we identified are possibly only a part of what the term is commonly referred to, and much of our arguments may only be applicable to that particular religious group. That being said, although there may not be as many as 394 million of 'Chinese traditional religion followers' who would fit into our definition entirely, the magnitude of the religious group this thesis described should be significant enough to be considered a member of the world religious situation.

pluralist vision Hick speaks of, our audiences may have the unrealistic impression that they too consider 'universal compassion' as the sole criterion for verifying religious truth-claims, even though what we wish to express is merely that they do not find the problem of conflicting truth-claims soteriologically relevant or the faiths of the others soteriologically incapable. Perhaps this is based on the viewpoint that most religious matters are highly diverse and cannot be generalised, and it is particularly preferable for this study to be consistent with such viewpoint.

As another example, regarding the question as to whether the said nature of Chinese Folk Religion is multireligious, pluralistic or syncretistic, there can be a perspective that all religions are syncretistic<sup>124</sup>, and thus merely applying the term onto Chinese Folk Religion would not help the ones who hold such perspective to truly understand what we aim to impart, for we are most certainly referring to a different meaning of the term. Supposedly, such 'problem' should be solvable by clarifying what we mean by, say, 'syncreticism', but then, it may attract unnecessary criticism that we have distorted the meaning of the term because it is understood differently by such critic, much like the Buddhist response that Heim has forced his mistaken interpretations of Buddhist teachings onto its followers, even though he has clarified his understandings quite clearly. Therefore, instead of terming such nature of

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<sup>124</sup> As Veer (1994) argues, "Every religion is syncretistic, since it constantly draws upon heterogeneous elements to the extent that it is often impossible for historians to unravel what comes from where" (p.208).

Chinese Folk Religion as 'multireligious', 'pluralistic' or 'syncretistic', it should be better to describe it as a tendency or willingness to accept conflicting or foreign religious beliefs uncritically and simultaneously.

### **9.7 Schmidt-Leukel's defences for multireligious identity and syncretism**

Although it is not preferable to apply such terms on Chinese Folk Religion, the related discussions are still worth-mentioning, especially Schmidt-Leukel's (2009) arguments which support both the possibility of meaningful multiple religious belonging and the rationality of syncretism. According to his understanding, there is no such thing as being half-Taoist and half-Buddhist, but only a unique, 'multireligious identity' that is "formed and developed under the influence of several religious traditions" (ibid, p.47). As he argues, "only someone who assumes that the decisive salvific truth is to be found exclusively in one particular religious tradition" would find such identity negative or dangerous (ibid, p.48). Since his concept of 'multireligious identity' seems to fit quite well the form of belonging of Chinese Folk Religion, perhaps we may consider his theory one of the explanations why Chinese Folk Religion does not condemn such 'disloyal' attitude, for it is believed to be a tradition that does not consider its own truth-claims absolutely valid or the attainment

of afterlife salvation essential, let alone the idea that salvific truth can only be found exclusively in its beliefs.

As he further describes, it is common for religionists to see a 'significant tension' between the total commitment all religions expect and the 'complete openness' multireligious identity requires (ibid, pp.50-51). For example, similar to her later argument that one is always expected to be totally faithful to the teachings and practices of one 'concrete religious tradition', Cornille (2005) has also said:

Total commitment to a particular tradition seems by definition to involve a high degree of exclusivity and thus lack of openness to the other. Complete openness, on the other hand, implies the possibility of abstracting completely from any particular commitment to truth... Whereas an attitude of total commitment risks losing any sense of the otherness of the other, complete openness contradicts one's own religious identity and takes away the possibility of having anything worthwhile to say for oneself. A fruitful interreligious dialogue must therefore move between complete openness and total commitment (p.8).

In response to Cornille's argument as well as a similar viewpoint expressed by



Hick (1989a, p.373) which we have also discussed earlier, Schmidt-Leukel (2009) 'confesses' that he is 'not entirely convinced', for he cannot see why total commitment would constitute an obstacle to 'complete openness' under all possible circumstances – if, for example, a religious tradition does not exclusively consider an openness to another religious tradition a kind of 'adultery', or if total commitment is understood as a complete faith in what one personally and individually believes, then the 'tension' Cornille speaks of would no longer exist, and therefore genuine interreligious dialogue (one that fully allows both complete openness and total commitment) is indeed possible (pp.51-54). Although he suggests that such non-exclusiveness is already common in some Eastern traditions/thoughts, the particular Chinese religious phenomenon we proposed should have further supported his argument by demonstrating such religiosity more explicitly (ibid, p.47; 53-54). His understanding is also consistent with our major argument that the common 'pluralistic theology of religions', or Hick's model in particular, is often a rather arbitrary or biased interpretation of the actual world religious situation, for it tends to assume that all religions would find the openness to the other faiths unacceptable and contradictory to their ideals (ibid, pp.51-52).

In terms of multireligious and syncreticism, Schmidt-Leukel considers the two concepts to be closely related, for he is inclined to understand the latter as a 'reaction'

to 'the awareness of all the other religious traditions' which integrates and combines beliefs and practices from different religions (ibid, p.67). Although, based on our understandings that not all elements of Chinese Folk Religion are derived from other religions, it shouldn't fit into his definition of syncretism entirely, the arguments against syncretism he describes are nonetheless similar to the criticisms of the religiosities of Chinese Folk Religion we saw earlier, meaning his defence for syncretism may also help to review the said arguments against the latter. As he summarises, such criticisms include: (1) syncretism always encourages a 'corruption' or distortion of the unique Absolute Truth taught by each religious tradition; (2) syncretism always encourages the superficial cultivation of 'self-interest' and 'a distinct lack of interest in compassion'<sup>125</sup>; (3) syncretism is irrational for ignoring the inconsistencies between the religious elements it embraces simultaneously; and (4) by being syncretistic, one would also lose his identity and 'integrity' (Schmidt-Leukel, 2009, pp.69-77). Similarly, the Chinese Folk Religion followers have also been accused for distorting certain religious ideas (especially the Buddhist teachings); being too self-centred, superficial, and having no compassion in seeking the Absolute Truth and ultimate salvation/liberation; ignoring the inconsistencies between the elements of different religious traditions; and lacking a

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<sup>125</sup> Please see Carrette and King (2006, p.114; 128) for references.

sense of religious identity.

In response to the above criticisms respectively, Schmidt-Leukel tries to argue that: (1) the accusation that syncretism would always encourage a 'corruption' of Absolute Truth is 'derived entirely' from the exclusivist viewpoint that each distinctive Absolute Truth (if there are many) can only be found in its respective religion, but "it cannot be excluded that there is truth, goodness and holiness" outside one's tradition; (2) accusing syncretism for being superficial is unfair, for "popular religion will always have its superficial elements, regardless of whether it is particularly syncretistic or not," and "seriousness and superficiality mark the two ends of a spectrum that can be found equally well within a syncretistic or a non-syncretistic spirituality;" (3) "not every difference of belief or practice need necessarily imply incompatibility," because whether two concepts are conflicting would depend on how one understands such concepts, and therefore "the alleged conflict might only be an apparent rather than real one;" and (4) a syncretistic belonging can be understood as an equally valid multireligious identity (*ibid*, pp.77-89).

As for Chinese Folk Religion, it is also commonly agreed that its nature is rather non-exclusivist, even though this thesis rejected the idea that we should term such nature 'pluralist'. In regards to the understanding that its ideology would encourage a

kind of self-centredness, a viewpoint suggested by Schmidt-Leukel may prove to be quite interesting:

The Christian understanding of love, for instance, can be enriched by the understanding that loving commitment is not at odds with non-selfish detachment, but that both qualities – the one at the centre of Jesus' spirit, the other at the centre of the Buddha's spirit – can mutually qualify and enhance each other (ibid, pp.88-89).

It is not to imply that loving commitment for Christianity is similar to the conditional filial piety for Chinese Folk Religion, but that the affirmation of the value of the latter would not necessarily distort, degrade or impair the belief in 'universal compassion' or any other criteriology or ideal considered ultimately truthful by each religious tradition, thus the suggestion of multiple criteria. In other words, this thesis would disagree with the view that the tendency of cultivating self-interest or putting 'what is true' in a secondary place must be more superficial, for such view is not necessarily consistent with what the Chinese Folk Religion followers see as serious or utmost important, and it is only pluralist to determine what is superficial/serious based on the perspective of those who are spiritually attached to the related beliefs or

practices (i.e., it would be acceptable to force an 'external' criteriology onto the faiths of the others if such approach is not meant to be 'pluralist').

Similar to Schmidt-Leukel's defence, it is also argued earlier that the ideas of ancestor worship and rebirth, for example, are not necessarily incompatible. Based on the suggestion of multiple criteria, however, we should also respect equally the viewpoint which sees such incompatibility, for such viewpoint is true in the sense that such incompatibility does exist according to the critics' understandings of the two ideas. There is actually no real tension between the seemingly conflicting viewpoints, for we have come to such different conclusions not because we believe in something different, but because our definitions of the beliefs are different. By affirming the truthfulness or value of each other's viewpoints or criteria, we may realise that the conflict is in fact 'an apparent rather than real one'.

### **9.8 Doctrinal toleration vs. inter-denominational toleration**

To summarise, this Chapter has demonstrated that not all religions (or religious groups) would require the kind of total commitment or sense of belonging Hick and his critics tend to expect; that such 'alternative' religiosities are responsible for the tolerating or 'multireligious' tendency some religious groups demonstrate; that Hick's

theory is not necessarily considered undesirable or impracticable by all those who are religious; and that establishing an interreligious dialogue without impairing either 'total commitment' or 'complete openness' is indeed possible for those who are not required by their faiths to interpret other religions exclusivistically and can accept the idea of multiple criteria.

Nonetheless, in defence of Cornille's position, she does express that only "most religious traditions," not all religious traditions, would "expect a total and unique commitment," even though her other arguments do tend to speak for all possible situations, thus the conclusion that the said interreligious dialogue is impossible or that "all empathic understanding of the other religion is always colored" (2002, p.3; 2008, p.170). In addition, our argument also does not imply a disagreement with her basic viewpoint – it does agree that Hick's model, for instance, is undesirable and impracticable from the particular viewpoint she describes; it is only the approach or tendency to assume one's own viewpoint to be universal that we find questionable.

Furthermore, this thesis would also urge those who claim that Chinese Folk Religion or its followers are 'highly tolerant' or even 'pluralist' not to over-fantasise such religiosity. As another typical example, after comparing the theories of Hick, Knitter and Kammer, Liang (2008) comes to the following conclusion:

Up until now, China has always been a nation in which various religions can co-exist peacefully. This pluralistic nature is the major characteristic of Chinese religion as well as the attitude its followers have always embraced... In regard to interreligious dialogue, Chinese religion tends to embrace the differences, and base the mutual understanding on accepting such differences<sup>126</sup> (p.24).

As a response, what the Chinese demonstrate, however, is at most a willingness to accept or 'absorb' the beliefs and practices from other religions or a tendency of not considering them absolutely false. There should be a distinction between what we may call a 'doctrinal toleration' and an 'inter-denominational toleration', of which the former is referred to the willingness to tolerate foreign religious beliefs or concepts, while the latter is the toleration of foreign religious groups or traditions. The materials we covered so far only suggest that the Chinese Folk Religion followers have demonstrated a certain degree of 'doctrinal toleration'. Nonetheless, it does not imply that they would not also tolerate other religious groups or traditions.

As Hou and Fan (1994) see it, if there is one thing positive about the tendency of

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<sup>126</sup> In fact, Liang has also quoted a passage from the Chinese edition of Hick's *God has Many Names* (2005), in which Hick is claimed to have said, "World religions should not be seen as conflicting organisations, but the spiritual fields that overlap... I think the Chinese traditional philosophies have done just that" (as cited in Liang, 2008, p.24).

putting the pursuit of Absolute Truth in a secondary place, it has to be the that there can hardly be any interreligious conflict:

Their lack of interest in seeking religious truth or having a religious belonging has hindered the development of an organised institution as well as a complete system of theology. Because of this, while the other nations or countries were having a dark period because of religions, there hasn't been any interreligious conflict in China for a thousand years, let alone a never-ending war between denominations (p.85).

Whether a phenomenon (e.g., interreligious conflict) did exist within a social context, however, is one of those assumptions that can only be falsified but not fully proven, in the sense that a single counterexample would be sufficient enough to disprove what Hou and Fan describe. However tempting it is to use the above passage to strengthen our argument that the religiosities of Chinese Folk Religion would help to embrace a truly pluralistic attitude, the said counterexamples do, unfortunately, exist in quite a significant scale. In fact, as already mentioned in section 8.3, Feuchtwang (2003) has actually witnessed some feng-shui practitioners who would act against neighbouring groups for the sake of resources (pp.269-275). That is why



some Western religionists (e.g., Weber, De Groot) would regard feng-shui as an evil cause of conflicts (ibid, p.271). As Henry comments, "These evils are due to geomancy. Everyone wants the best, but people are numerous, and lucky site few... Quarrels and bloody fights ensue, boundary stones are removed, the bones of the dead are dishonoured, and years are spent in litigation" (as cited in ibid, pp.270-271). Similar conflicts are reported by Watson's (2002) study concerning certain Tien Hou cults. As he understands, since all villages would celebrate Tien Hou's birthday on the exact same date, competitions are inevitable because all of them would want to have the greatest number of attendees – this leads Watson to the conclusion that the Tien Hou cult is exclusivist in nature (ibid, p.186).

That being said, Feuchtwang (2003) has also tried to argue against the viewpoint that blames feng-shui for the conflicts:

It would, however, be rash to say how much and even whether fengshui ideology aggravated conflict. It is false to attribute to fengshui the power to cause conflict... I hope I have illustrated this by citing firstly cases both of division and of co-operation for fengshui, and secondly, by demonstrating that interest in the ideology is a process of subdivision in the direction of the individual standing in the present and looking for his own independent

fortune. This does not necessarily mean conflict, although of course where everyone is out for himself conflict is likely (p.271).

Although the above argument is meant to be a defence for the ideology of feng-shui, it does not ease our concern – what we would like to verify is not whether the particular ideology of feng-shui would cause conflict, but whether there are inter-denominational conflicts between a group of Chinese Folk Religion believers and the others. As Feuchtwang (*ibid*) and Watson's (2002) studies demonstrate, such conflicts do appear to be common. Especially when Feuchtwang (2003) also appears to agree that the ideology of cultivating self-interest – which, as we have discussed, is central to Chinese Folk Religion – is likely to be the cause of the conflicts, it does suggest that the religiosities described in this Chapter can at most encourage a degree of 'doctrinal toleration', but not 'inter-denominational toleration', and it is too optimistic or even misleading to simply term Chinese Folk Religion 'highly tolerant' or 'pluralist'.

However, to stand by the proposal of multiple criteria and the assumption that the religiosities of Chinese Folk Religion would help to develop a truly pluralist vision, we should notice that:

1. It is not the openness or other attitudes mentioned in this Chapter, but the ideology of self-centredness that may have encouraged the conflicts, meaning the former may still have the supposed effect of enabling a fully tolerating and pluralist vision;
2. We suggest including filial piety or the cultivation of self-interest as an equally authentic criterion to verify religious beliefs not because we consider such viewpoints equally beneficial to humanity, but because it is a fairer and more pluralistic approach to understand the world religious situation and the differences within;
3. Our hypothesis is not that Chinese Folk Religion is truly pluralist, but that its religiosities are necessary to enable the kind of pluralist attitude we prefer – for example, although our previous argument did imply that the tendency of not considering any religious belief false is crucial to the establishment of the said pluralist attitude, it does not mean that all persons who hold that tendency would be pluralist.

In addition to suggesting how we may embrace a truly pluralist vision, this Chapter also compensate Hick's allegedly 'incomplete' interpretation of religion – even if none of the religiosities we discussed is regarded as preferable or rational, they

should at least be considered a part of the world religious situation unless they are not even categorised as something religious, which would not be a very pluralistic viewpoint.

## 10. CONCLUSION

### 10.1 Concluding remarks

The rationale behind Hick's particular criteriology is mainly based on his belief that all 'post-axial' religions do treat the 'Golden Rule' as the only soteriologically relevant teaching, thus the enormous amount of references to their scriptures. Such an approach is consistent with what he sees as the best pluralist model, which is the most comprehensive theory that explains the reality of the world religious situation without favouring any of its members 'confessionally'. A more confessional or 'religious' assumption is not preferred because, as a philosopher, Hick sees the inevitable conflict between the affirmation of the literal ultimacy of the doctrine of one religion and that of the other. A confessional theory may not imply a bias towards one's own religion, but it is the tendency Heim and other confessional pluralists demonstrate. By assuming the only hope of salvation is to, eventually, accept Christ as lord and saviour<sup>127</sup>, Heim's theory does reject the possibility that one does not need to accept Christ to achieve salvation/liberation, even though his particular idea of multiple

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<sup>127</sup> As quoted in footnote 111, it is Hick (2009) who decides to not capitalise the term 'lord' or 'saviour', for he is intended to reject Heim's assumption that it is soteriologically essential to affirm Christ or anyone as our Lord or Saviour – according to Hick's hypothesis, the 'Golden Rule' should be the only soteriologically relevant teaching.

religious-ends does not require such a confessional assumption to function (Hick, 2009). Such an assumption is, from the general theological perspective, acceptable, but it is not pluralist (ibid).

Hick's neutral approach, then, is to remain unbiased by seeking what is commonly considered the ultimate truth by all religions and assuming such ultimate truth to be the only literally authentic and soteriologically valuable teaching. His logic is indeed reasonable – if the teachings of the world religions are mostly contradictory to each other, yet there is one concept central to all of them, then it is quite likely that some of the conflicting truth-claims are literally false, and that the commonly taught ultimate truth is the most reliable belief. The strengths of his particular neutral position are therefore the logically reasonable explanation of the existence of conflicting truth-claims and the unbiased assumption. Since his assumption is unbiased and consistent to the core teaching of all religions, his audiences are supposed to be convinced that the faiths of the others are also soteriologically effective. In this sense, Hick's theory does imply that interreligious dialogue is not impossible, but unnecessary, for we have already learned the only teaching that really matters.

Our study of Chinese Folk Religion, however, does not only suggest that the 'Golden Rule' is not the sole soteriologically valuable teaching as some critics

complain, but that it is contradictory to the central theme of a religion, meaning such religion would be graded as unauthentic and non-valuable according to Hick's criterion, which is exactly what he intends to avoid by taking the neutral position. In other words, since his assumption is inconsistent with what this religion regards as essential, the nature of this particular assumption is in fact confessional, not because it favours any existing religion, but because it favours his personal religious belief – it wouldn't be a religious belief if all religions consider the 'Golden Rule' the central theme of their teachings. And since it is no longer unbiased and neutral, it would be unable to fulfil the preferred purpose of convincing at least the Chinese Folk Religion followers to appreciate a pluralist vision. If he tries to argue that what this religion teaches is indeed mistaken because it is inconsistent with the core teaching of other religions, such approach would be identical to that of the exclusivists whom he strongly opposes; and if he suggests that this religion is syncretistic, superstitious, non-salvific and thus unreliable, we have seen that such classical viewpoints are unfair (i.e., non-pluralist) because the said religiosities only imply differences, not inferiority – the pursuit of earthly fortunes at the present, for example, can be seen as a different yet equally legitimate conception of salvation.

In order to retain the strengths of his neutral position, this thesis suggested the idea of multiple criteria which affirms the validity of the conceptions and criteriology

each religion originally proposes, meaning we should respect equally how the worlds religion understand certain concepts differently and what they see as true and essential, which also implies a rejection of Hick's dualistic distinction of 'Real *an sich*' and 'Real as experienced', for it is argued that such distinction is not entirely consistent with how Chinese Folk Religion understands a dualistic relationship. Such an idea is similar to Heim's theory of multiple religious-ends, except that it does not involve any confessional assumption. Our position is neutral not because we assume an ultimate reality higher than the ones addressed within the world religions, but because we did not favour any of them. Such understanding is different from what Cornille (2008) regards as 'neutral', but 'neutral' or not, it should be a more pluralist assumption for it can provide a fair ground for meaningful interreligious dialogue (p.128). This is also different from Abe's (1985) assumption that there is no common denominator, because our proposal did not assume ultimate reality to be many, but by enabling a dialogue that the currently 'degraded' traditions would be more willing to participate in, we may eventually find the answer to that question. In this sense, then, our assumption did imply the rather 'agnostic' idea that we can yet come up with a sufficiently reliable criterion to verify each religious truth-claim, but it is also argued that certain 'agnostic' tendency is inevitable if a pluralist model wishes to truly treat all religions equally.



Since it is considered a more reasonable explanation for the existence of conflicting truth-claims, this thesis would maintain Hick's ideas that some religious beliefs must be literally false, but possibly true in the mythological sense, even though we cannot be certain as to which beliefs are mythologically true. Together with the admitted 'agnostic' nature of our core assumption, one should expect the criticisms that these ideas are spiritually unexciting and undesirable, but we have also learned that such criticisms are not universally applicable.

## **10.2 The significances of the accomplishments of this research**

The first goal of this thesis is to verify if Hick's pluralist theory is justified, necessary, fair and thus pluralistic. The premise of such verification is that his criteriology would treat at least one religion unequally, and that some of his assumptions would distort what this religion believes and how it functions. By using Chinese Folk Religion as an example, this thesis has proven this major hypothesis true. The second goal, then, is to reconstruct the assumptions that are responsible for his model to have treated such a religion unequally or mistakenly, so that it can fulfil its intended purposes of promoting the pluralist position and enabling us to understand and respect other faiths. The thesis has also accomplished this task, and during the

project, it has contributed a significant amount of other original arguments and theories that are useful and valuable to future studies.

First, the thesis has identified the main reason why Hick's theory has put Chinese Folk Religion in an inferior position. It is learned that his original intention of developing a soteriological and ethical criteriology is to avoid being too relativistic, but by making a more absolutistic assumption about what is true, it jeopardises the strengths of the neutral approach and fails to serve its intended or preferable functions. This issue is often overlooked because his criteriology does not degrade the religions of his critics. Although the existing arguments against his criteriology are reasonable and valid, they have neither concerned the traditions graded as 'evil' nor questioned the reliability of the 'Golden Rule', for the critics do not find the 'Golden Rule' contradictory to the moral ideals of their religions, or in other words, no critic has attempted to defend a religion that encourages self-centredness.

Second, apart from his criteriology, this thesis also identified the common problems of Hick's theory and its criticisms. These problems are mainly referred to the viewpoints or approaches that are inapplicable to the interpretation of Chinese Folk Religion. Unlike Hick's criteriology, these viewpoints or approaches do not degrade the ideology of Chinese Folk Religion, but they offend or disrespect this religion equally, for they would make it difficult for Chinese Folk Religion to engage

in an interreligious dialogue, and it is not a mere assumption, but a solid fact that Chinese Folk Religion is absent from the current debates.

The identification of the above problems is important because it suggests that the current discussions of religious pluralism are, in fact, exclusivistic in nature. On the one hand, the exclusivistic assumptions or preconceptions involved have hindered the pluralist thinkers to have a genuine and objective understanding of the world religious situation, and on the other, they have also made the existing models and dialogues look uninteresting, offensive and irrelevant to the excluded religious traditions. Only by having a foundation that can truly recognise, respect and attract these traditions can we develop a reliable and complete interpretation of religion, unless such an interpretation is not meant to be pluralistic.

Then, to solve these problems, this thesis first proposed an original approach that can effectively define and identify Chinese Folk Religion. The proposal of this approach is vital to the project because we must first be able to recognise Chinese Folk Religion as an independent religion before we can claim that its ideology is as valuable and preferable as that of other religions. In addition, this approach can also be used to define, identify and recognise other folk religions with similar structures (e.g., syncretistic, ambiguous religious identity, etc.). For example, if we can define Folk Shintoism as an independent

religion that embraces the Shinto elements 'folk religiously', we would no longer need to treat it as a mere "form of animism" (e.g., Asai, 1997, p.52; Hori, 1981, p.122).

The proposal of this approach does not only allow us to identify Chinese Folk Religion effectively, but also questions and reinterprets the traditional definition of religion. According to this reinterpretation, a model, approach or dialogue that is claimed to be pluralistic should not exclude a tradition only because it does not have an authoritative scripture, doctrine or institutionalised structure. To argue that folk religion is as much as a religion as Christianity or Buddhism is to affirm that it too deserves equal and mutual respect and attention. Considering that Chinese Folk Religion is claimed to be the fifth most popular religious tradition in the world (see Adherents.com, 2005), there is clearly a problem if it is absent from the debates that concern the world religious situation. In a sense, this thesis is to bring it into the debates, and the first step of the project was to offer an approach that can recognise it as a religion.

Nonetheless, the said approach only tells us how we can define Chinese Folk Religion, but not what it is. Therefore, to provide the actual definition of this religion, the thesis has described systematically what religious beliefs it contains and what religiosities it demonstrates. Since this definition has

summarised, systemised and integrated the findings of the key literatures that concern the commonalities of Chinese Folk Religion, it should be considered the most thorough and usable definition available. In other words, for any future research that accepts my approach to define Chinese Folk Religion, it can simply adopt the definition this thesis provided without having to go through the very demanding process of defining it again.

After having such a definition, the thesis then pinpointed the key problems of Hick's model that are responsible for putting Chinese Folk Religion in an inferior position. Since his theory is heavily based on the assumptions that concern universal soteriological and ethical ideal, the thesis suggested that the key problems and the assumptions that need to be reconstructed are his preconceptions of salvation and exclusivistic criteriology, thus the proposals of 'multiple salvific-states' and 'multiple criteria'. These reconstructions did not change his systematic explanatory theory or solution to the problem of conflicting truth-claims, and can therefore make his model truly pluralistic without jeopardising the strengths of his neutral position. As argued in the previous section, although the reconstructed model would be more agnostic and relativistic – which is what Hick tries to avoid – it is the only way to remain truly neutral (i.e., unbiased) and accept all differences. In other words, this thesis

maintains that to be truly pluralistic is to be able to remain completely neutral and accept all differences, because, for a pluralist model to be useful and meaningful, we should expect it to be able to serve the function of encouraging and enabling us to understand other faiths without forcing any preconception onto them or distorting any of their beliefs. By diminishing its exclusiveness, Hick's model should prove to be the best model that can serve this function.

Hick has spent a huge portion of his project to reference the scriptures and sayings that are consistent with his assumptions, but he has never allowed the traditions he disapproves to speak for themselves, because he has presumed them to be 'evil' and mistaken. This thesis, however, did not only integrate one of these traditions (i.e., Chinese Folk Religion) into the discussion, but also offered a theory that can encourage and allow other similar traditions to engage with each other as well as the religions Hick approves explicitly. The newly open door does not only welcome the folk religions with structures or natures alien to what Hick (1989*a*) describes, but also the practices or individuals who embrace an ideology contradictory to that of Hick, which include the outcaste status within Hindu society, the burning of brides because of an insufficient dowry, the cutting off of a thief's hand under the *shariah* law, and the "savage persecution" of the *Bah'ais*, etc. (p.327). The reconstructed model does not claim that their ideologies are equally valuable and preferable, but that

a genuine pluralist model must accept the possibility that they are not mistaken until we possess enough evidences to reach a conclusion, and to reach such a conclusion, we should at least listen to what they have to say, just to be fair. Hick's current approach that presumes the 'Golden Rule' to be the only possible Absolute Truth and references only the arguments that favour his presumption is neither fair nor pluralistic, nor is it truly neutral.

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