

Professor John Hick speech at degree congregation

Posted on Wednesday 10th August 2011

Adobe Flash Player or QuickTime is required for video playback. [Get the latest Flash Player](#) [Get the latest version of QuickTime](#)

Transcript

Graduates, Graduands, Colleagues, Guests.

One of the most important roles for a university in the modern world is to keep alive the flame of knowledge that powers the forces of reason and with that open-mindedness.

We try to do it in our research. We hope we light it in our students and we share with communities all over the world that we serve.

Today it is my honour to present to you a man who has carried that flame forward throughout his long career as a Minister, a scholar and a teacher - Professor John Hick.

Born in 1922 and educated at Bootham School in York and the Universities of Edinburgh, Oxford and Westminster Theological College, John Hick was ordained as a Presbyterian Minister in Northumberland. He taught the Philosophy of Religion at Cornell and at Princeton Theological Seminary, before returning to Cambridge and from there to the HG Wood Chair of Theology at the University of Birmingham.

After 15 years in Birmingham, he returned to the USA as Danford Professor of Philosophy of Religion and he returned happily to Birmingham on his retirement. His academic career has been loaded with honours. He gave the prestigious Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in 1986-7. He received an Edinburgh DLitt for his published works and he was awarded honorary degrees from the University of Glasgow and Uppsala University in Sweden.

He was honoured too in the United States with the Grawemeyer Award in Religion from Louisville University in 1991.

The work for which these honours were awarded involved him in addressing some of the most puzzling and important questions in history.

For John Hick those questions addressed the fundamental issues of evil and the God of Love and the recurring relationship between faith and doubt. In giving the Gifford Lectures, he carried on a great Scottish tradition. The lectures had been established in the will of Adam Lord Gifford with the desire to promote and diffuse the study of natural theology in the widest sense of the term.

In other words the knowledge of God and all his works in the world. That question stretched the imagination of Gifford's 19th century contemporaries and his distinguished successors beyond the daily conflict between Science and Ethics to the overarching vision of both as the work of God.

They were lectures that brought John Hick into the company of Neil Spore, Reinhold Niebuhr, Iris Murdoch and more recently, Terry Eagleton, Richard Dawkins and Norah O'Neill. John Hick's account of these questions was also of pressing concern to a wider public. His book on the Philosophy of Religion sold over half a million copies. But this preoccupation with the ultimate understanding of the divine involved more than abstract speculation. It was rooted in the conflicts of contemporary society. In the 1960s and 70s, John Hick became Chair of the Birmingham Community Relations Committee and worked to support communities in Handsworth in their resistance to the National Front.

He became the first Chair of the Birmingham Inter-Faith Council, understanding perhaps before any of us, how important religion is to the critical cultural relations of our global society.

He does not stop. In March of this year at a symposium on Religious pluralism and the modern world, the John Hick Centre for the Philosophy of Religion was established at the University of Birmingham.

Ladies and Gentlemen, colleagues, to honour this lifelong commitment to understanding, knowledge and community relations, I present to you and to the whole University, Professor John Hick, Doctor of Divinity (honoris causa).

- By virtue of my authority as Chancellor, I admit you to the degree of Doctor of Divinity (honoris causa)

- Chancellor, Provost and Vice-Principal, Graduates, Graduands and guests, first congratulations to all of you. I think you're seated at the back now, who are taking your degrees today after three years of hard work which have also been years of growing and maturing. As you now go into what some people call the real world, though there are many other real worlds, I would like to offer you a piece of advice.

The advice is to think globally. We are not just parts of this small island, we are parts of the entire world with its nearly 7 billion inhabitants. When we use what little influence we have as individuals, for most of us just by voting, we should think of the effects not only in our country but upon families in desperately poor parts of the world and also families suffering under great natural disasters like droughts and famines.

In short, we are part of the whole human race and not just citizens of this country.

Now, my own special interest as a Philosopher of Religion is in thinking globally about religion. Birmingham is a very special city because it is a meeting place of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists.

It was once part of my job on behalf of the Birmingham Community Relations Committee to visit the various places of worship. If you go into a Hindu Temple in Birmingham, the sights, the sounds, the lights, the smells, everything, reminds you of India and if you've been in India you could imagine yourself back there.

If you go into a Muslim Mosque, the sight of hundreds of people or on the Friday prayers, thousands of people, all bowing together in worship of God is an inspiring sight.

If you go into a Sikh Gurdwara, you're invited to join in the worship of God as their holy book is read and then to join in a common meal.

A Jewish Synagogue is rather more like a Christian Church, except of course that there are continual reminders about the centuries-long interactions between God and the Hebrew people. So, very different.

But what struck me very forcibly was that at a deeper level what is going in all these different places of worship is actually the same. Human beings coming together under the auspices of some ancient, highly developed tradition which helps them to open their minds and spirits upwards, so to speak, to a higher reality which makes the same demands on their lives which is to treat others as you would wish yourselves to be treated. This golden rule is in the teaching of all the great world religions.

So, in religion also, think globally and now, good luck to you.

[Privacy](#) | [Legal](#) | [Cookies and cookie policy](#) | [Accessibility](#) | [Site map](#) | [Website feedback](#) | [Charitable information](#)

© University of Birmingham 2015

