

Faith on the chopping block

JOHN DICKSON

This year's Smith lecture was given by evangelist and Bible scholar John Dickson. As one of the sponsors of the Smith lectures, kategoria publishes the text of the address.

A cultural eavesdrop

Late one evening I was enjoying the night sky on a friend's balcony when a fascinating conversation broke out among the guests of a dinner party on next door's balcony. They were your classic twenty-something Chardonnay-yuppies, and hardly what you'd call the 'religious type'. Nevertheless, at one point the conversation turned decisively to things religious. Sparked by a passing comment about a church wedding one of them had been to, one by one the guests began to share their views on spiritual themes—the design of the universe,

prayer, God, yoga, the soul, and so on.

One comment in particular stood out for me as profound and self-revealing. In response to a sarcastic remark about 'conventional' forms of worship, one of them said: "Yes, but there's something in it, don't you think? I like the idea of being grateful to Someone for the things in my life". The comment seemed to drop in on the dinner-party like a revelation: the response from the others was complete silence for at least three or four seconds which, at this party, seemed like forever.

(It was perhaps unethical of me to eavesdrop for as long as I did but I figured I could justify it as 'research'—something I might even be able to include in a future lecture.)

What struck me about this conversation was that, although it was obviously the first time these friends had shared their views with each other, it was equally apparent they'd all thought about

the issues in some detail. I came away reminded of something I've known for a long time but easily forget. No matter how educated, materialistic or secular our society becomes, questions of 'spirituality' just don't go away. We appear to be incurably inquisitive about realities deeper than our investments, our holidays and our retirement packages. It's as if something in our

world continues to seduce us with questions of faith—Why are we here? What happens at death? To Whom should I be grateful?, and so on.

The social sciences confirm this impression. While we often hear of the decline in religion, the research reveals an enduring belief in God and the soul, with over 80% of Australians believing in both, and less than 6% describing themselves as 'atheist'.¹ As we gaze down the immense corridor of centuries of historical research, it is no exaggeration to say that every single society about which anthropologists and historians know anything significant has made 'spirituality' a key component of its cultural life. Australian Aborigines, native Americans, pre-Anglo Celts, marauding Goths, nomadic Mongols and modern Chardonnay-yuppies—all of them have been conspicuously 'religious'.

Talk of God is, in the truest meaning of the phrase, 'common sense.' Like the human fascination with art and music, or our desire for social organization and

personal intimacy, the question of God is one of the few universally shared premises of humanity throughout time. It is *common sense*.

That much is easy to concede. Trickier by far is the obvious philosophical question which emerges from this global observation. Which, if any, of the numerous spiritual perspectives corresponds to reality? Amid the cacophony of competing religious claims, where is truth to be found?

Perhaps the most common *secular* response to this question is the philosophical position known as 'pluralism', the belief that spiritual truth is 'plural' in form, not 'singular'. Pluralism does not reject all religions—as atheism does—it rather seeks to affirm them all. It suggests that the spiritual traditions of the world, in the end, point to one unified reality: different paths up the same mountain. I want to spend some time outlining what seem to me some major—though much neglected—flaws in a 'pluralistic' outlook, whether in the *popular pluralism* of contemporary culture or the more *sophisticated pluralism* of the academy.

Pluralism's fatal flaw

One problem can be stated quite simply. In seeking to affirm all religious perspectives, pluralistic cultures like ours tend to honour none of them. By insisting on the ultimate unity of the faiths we often ignore or suppress what is dis-

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tinctive about them. For, as unpopular as the idea seems to have become, the great religious traditions of the world make claims which are, as a matter of logic, entirely at odds each other. Superficially, they agree—most of them, for instance, say prayers—but at the more substantial level they tend to refute each other.

Take the great Eastern examples of Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism. Hinduism is premised on the existence of many gods (or polytheism). Guru Nanak, however, the founder of the Sikh faith, came to reject his native Hinduism and insisted there was just one deity who alone is worthy of worship. Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) also rejected Hinduism but not by proposing the existence of one god; he disposed of theism altogether, a position still reflected in Theravada, or Classical, Buddhism. You don't need a degree in mathematics to see fundamental contradictions here.

Again, take the three great Middle Eastern faiths, modern Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Central to the Christian faith is the conviction that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God, the promised Jewish Messiah, who died on a cross and rose again. This is non-negotiable for Christians—without it you don't have Christianity. But modern Judaism insists that Jesus was not the Messiah, just one of many pretenders to that title.² The true Messiah, says Judaism, is yet to come. The matter gets more complicated when one introduces Islam. Muhammad, the founder of

Islam, venerated Jesus as a prophet but insisted that he neither died on a cross nor was the Son of God. Indeed, these central Christian beliefs are described by the Koran as 'blasphemous'.³

Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists, Christians, Jews and Muslims must, of course, respect and care for each other as fellow members of the human family, but they cannot for a moment regard each other's beliefs as 'true' in any meaningful sense of the word. At this point, I find myself in unlikely agreement with probably the twentieth century's greatest atheist, Lord Bertrand Russell: "It is evident as a matter of logic that, since [the great world religions] disagree, not more than one of them can be true".⁴

Sophisticated Pluralism

However, there is a more sophisticated path open to those who want to speak of the universal oneness of religions. Aware of the intractable contradictions between the faiths, some argue that while there are few explicit truths common to the world religions, there is an implicit 'macro-truth' made apparent by them all. This grand truth, says the sophisticated pluralist, has little to do with Muhammad requiring five daily prayers, or Siddhartha Gautama advocat-

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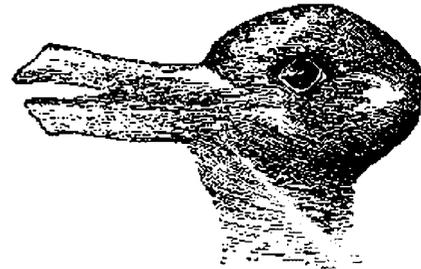
ing the removal of desire, or Jesus dying for the sins of the world. These are merely culturally contingent expressions of the deeper, shared truth that there is an ultimate, ineffable spiritual reality toward which the human family appears to be irresistibly drawn. To quote Chris McGillion, lecturer at Charles Sturt University, and the *Sydney Morning Herald's* religious affairs columnist:

The very diversity of religions ... speaks to a truth—that all people in every time and place have felt the need to respond to the infinite ... The various religious traditions are the 'how' of that response ... All religions are truthful in far more important ways than some of their propositions are false.⁵

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Within academia, perhaps the most influential proponent of sophisticated pluralism during the last three decades is Professor John Hick of the University of Birmingham. For Hick, religions constitute not *revelations* of spiritual 'Reality' but merely culturally conditioned responses to it.⁶ Individual religions are thus to be thought of as signposts or emblems of a reality they do not themselves grasp. How Hick and others know this is, as far as I can find, never discussed in the literature. The point is merely affirmed and illustrated with something resembling religious zeal.

Hick, for instance, brilliantly employs a sketch first used by psychologist Joseph Jastrow in his studies of illusion.⁷



The sketch, as you can see, shows an ambiguous figure drawn to look like both a duck (facing left) and a rabbit (facing right). If shown to a culture which knew ducks but not rabbits, says Hick following Jastrow, the picture will be interpreted quite validly as sketch of a duck; conversely so if shown to a culture that knew only rabbits. The point of course is that each group, in a sense, is justified in describing what it sees as variously a duck or a rabbit. The contradiction is a matter of perception rather than of substance.

In the same way, argues Hick, the great religions of the world do not see 'Reality' as it is; they merely contain valid perceptions of that 'Reality' within a cultural context. In a Muslim society one sees Allah, in a Christian society, the Trinity, and so on. It's all just ducks and rabbits.

The analogy is potent until one realizes that there is actually a third point of view at work in the illustration. In reality, the picture is neither a sketch of a

duck nor of a rabbit, but only of an image drawn to look like both a duck and a rabbit. The unknowing subjects in the experiment may be justified in perceiving the picture to be a duck or a rabbit but the one showing the picture is under no such illusion. He or she knows the image to be an example of what Jastrow called ‘rival-schemata ambiguity’—an illusion.

Unwittingly, then, Hick’s analogy succeeds in uncovering an uncomfortable, and rarely admitted, assumption of sophisticated pluralism. The sophisticated pluralist daringly claims that while all religions are justified in *perceiving* ‘Reality’ to be variously the Trinity, Allah, Vishnu and so on, the truth of the situation, apparently known only to the pluralist, is that these perceptions are merely culturally conditioned responses to an ultimately *unknowable* ‘Reality’. ‘Sophisticated pluralism’, then, not only claims to have discovered a greater truth that *none of the religions has been able to see* for itself; it has the boldness at the same time to suggest that the ‘lesser truths’ individual religions *thought* they could see are in fact historically contingent illusions.

By claiming that religions are true in a manner none of them has affirmed before and false in all the ways they have always affirmed, sophisticated pluralism assumes a high ground that is positively breath-taking. It’s true that Islam, for example, makes the grandiose claim that four-fifths of the world’s peoples are mistaken in their religious beliefs.

Christianity likewise regards as mistaken two-thirds of the world’s population. But this can’t be any less acceptable than the tiny minority of Western pluralists arguing, without any attempt to substantiate the position, that the vast religious majority of the world is enamored with illusions.

So, why the persistence in modern Australia in accepting a pluralistic outlook, either in its popular or sophisticated form? Why the desire to place all religions on the same level of truth or illusion?

The fear of intolerance

One motivation is surely the fear that religious conviction will lead to religious intolerance and, as a consequence, to discrimination and violence. The fear is understandable. History is littered with examples of violent intolerance on the part of Christians, Hindus, Jews, and so on. And those of us who belong to a religious tradition, I believe, need to respond to our society’s critique at this point by working hard at being more tolerant of one another—not by *accepting* each other’s beliefs but, far more admirably, by treating with respect those with whom we disagree.

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Economy of effort

There is probably a second reason our society is attracted to pluralism and

avoids discussion of the differences between the great religions. It has to do with the long-held Australian tradition of choosing the easier of two options. Some call it ‘apathy’; I prefer to describe it as ‘economy of effort’.

When a Christian affirms Jesus’ death on the cross, and a Muslim refutes the same, it produces a dilemma that you can resolve in one of two ways.

Suppose you were to ask two Chinese friends how to say ‘I love you’ in Mandarin. One of them replies ‘Wo ai ni’, the other says, ‘Wo hen ni’. You now have a problem, which can be resolved in one of two ways. You could research

the issue—speak to another Chinese friend, look up the entry in an English-Mandarin Dictionary, and so on. This will take a little effort but at least, in the end, you could make an informed decision. The other option is far easier. Rather than dwell on the discrepancy between the answers, you could just assume that both are correct: perhaps they are different ways of saying the same thing, dialect variations of one original expression.

Affirming both answers as true will not only avoid upsetting anyone, it will require no effort on your part whatsoever. It’s the perfect economy of effort—except that, in reality, ‘Wo hen ni’ means ‘I hate you’!

I’m sure you can see the point.

When a Christian affirms Jesus’ death on the cross, and a Muslim refutes the same, it produces a dilemma that you can resolve in one of two ways. On the

one hand, you could look into it yourself, assessing what historians believe happened to Jesus. Easier by far would be to accept both claims as true in their own way. While this would require a degree of ‘mental elasticity’, it is clearly the option requiring the least effort.

What I’m suggesting here—hopefully not too impolitely—is that our society’s keenness to affirm all religious views stems, in part, from an aversion to having to think too deeply about any one of them.

Seeking clarity

Suppose one accepts that the God-question is a universally shared premise of humanity throughout time—common sense. Suppose further that one is willing to concede that all religions are not the same, that there are irreconcilable differences between them which can’t be sidelined without assuming an unfounded moral high ground. This still leaves an obvious and critical question: how can one discern which, if any, of the religious options is true?

For Chris McGillion, quoted earlier, one can never know. Religion, almost by definition, is beyond human enquiry:

To say that my religion is the one true religion can only ever be a claim based on faith. It can’t be proved or disproved because there are no criteria by which to test the claim apart from propositions

that are internal to the thing being claimed in the first place.⁸

McGillion is almost entirely correct, and helpfully draws attention to a critical issue which distinguishes the claims of Christianity from those of the world's Faiths. That is, the core claims of Christianity are, to a very high degree, testable. They are dangerously open to critical enquiry.

I want now to explore the issue of the testability of religion, not in order to prove Christianity to you, but merely to invite us all to take a second look at the faith of one-third of the world's peoples. For, it seems to me, if one were interested in exploring the great religions, or even in ruling them out, one is best advised to begin with the religion most vulnerable to testing.

Unverifiable truth claims

Imagine I came to you today with the unusual claim that last night my great grandmother appeared to me in a dream with revelations about the path to true spirituality. Imagine further that I wrote down in a notebook all that I could remember of the matriarch's words, and now ask you to read the notes and consider embracing this perspective for yourself. You now have a problem. Leaving aside the bizarre nature of the claim, the situation proposed here highlights a critical question which presents itself to all religious statements: *how can*

the truth or falsehood of the claim be tested? How could you begin to assess whether it were true or false?

Quite simply, you couldn't. The character of the revelation—being private and visionary—means that it is beyond the scope of human enquiry. Dreams and visions are, by their very nature, imperceptible to all but those who experience them. Philosophically speaking, a claim like this may be termed 'unverifiable'. 'Unverifiable', in this context, does not mean untrue, it simply means that a claim cannot be tested one way or the other. It is beyond scientific, historical or forensic scrutiny.

And here is the critical point: virtually all of the world's religions are, at their core, unverifiable. Again, this is not to say they are untrue. It just means that they cannot be verified one way or the other. Buddhism, for example, is premised upon the lone insights of Siddhartha Gautama, the sixth century (BC) Indian prince who, one night in May while meditating under a *Bow Tree*, gained enlightenment concerning the goal of life, which he understood to be the *negation of desire* through various ethical and mental disciplines. Neither the fact of his experience nor the content of his teachings can be tested. They can be learnt and embraced but they cannot in any objective sense be verified.

Islam is likewise grounded in a revelation of a private and mystical nature,

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the content of which is beyond analysis. One day in AD 610, Muhammad, a nobleman from Arabia, was visited in a vision, we're told, by an angel who announced to him: "You are the Messenger of God." From this time, until his death in 632, Muhammad received frequent and very detailed personal revelations. These were proclaimed by Muhammad, committed to memory by his disciples and compiled in the great Islamic holy book, the Koran.

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Let me emphasize, the point of this précis is not at all to critique Buddhism or Islam but merely to underline the essentially *unverifiable* premise of both faiths. This is not the same as saying these faiths are untrue. I am simply

drawing attention to the philosophical nature of their claims.

Without turning this into a study in comparative religion, it can be stated quite simply that almost all of the world's religions are similarly *unverifiable*. Confucianism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Baha'i, Shintoism, and so on, all share this basic premise. For the faithful of such religions the unverifiable nature of their beliefs actually provides a shelter from the arguments of critics. For no matter what humanity discovers about the physical universe or the events of history, beliefs such as these can never be challenged.

The Muslim, the Buddhist, the Hindu

and so on, all live in the security that their faith is unassailable. It is un-provable, yes!, a matter of pure faith, yes!, but with this unverifiability comes a measure of invincibility—an invincibility not enjoyed by those traditions which dare to make *verifiable* claims. It is to these traditions I want now to turn.

Verifiable truth claims

Imagine I came to you today with another unusual claim that one evening during the week my great-grandmother appeared to me with new revelations about the path to true spirituality. This time, however, so the claim ran, the revelations came not in the form of a private dream or vision but in that of a giant apparition in the middle of George St, Sydney. In fact, the matriarch's appearing was so public it stopped peak hour traffic for two hours. Being closest to the old lady, I took copious notes and later interviewed other eye-witnesses to gain their perspectives. I then compiled the details in a notebook and offer them to you now for your consideration.

Leaving aside the bizarre nature of this 'revelation', the claim itself is a 'verifiable' one. The truth or falsehood of my claim can, to a degree, be tested. You could listen to news reports and see if the alleged event rated a mention; you could analyse the scene itself to see if incidental details in the witness reports matched up; you could assess the traffic reports of the police; you could perhaps

do background checks on the witnesses to see if their testimonies were reliable. You may not be able to prove the event with mathematical certainty but you could arrive at a reasonable conclusion regarding the credibility or otherwise of the claim.

The claim is verifiable. To repeat myself, 'verifiable', in this context, does not necessarily mean true—just as unverifiable does not mean untrue—it simply means that a thing can be tested. It means that through scientific, historical or forensic scrutiny you can gain a degree of confidence about the validity of the claim.

So, of course, the question is: which religions are premised on verifiable claims, claims which can be investigated and found to be either warranted or unwarranted? There are, I think, just two candidates: biblical Judaism and Christianity.

If I'd had time this evening, I would have enjoyed outlining something of the verifiable nature of ancient Judaism. For the present argument, though, that would be more of a luxury than a necessity, since Christianity is itself premised upon the Judaism of antiquity. For the Christian, therefore, establishing the verifiability of Christianity automatically endorses that of biblical Judaism.

Jesus Christ and history

So, in what sense is the Christian claim testable? How is it different from, say, the claim of Muhammad that the words

he heard in his heart were the very words of God?

At the centre of Christianity lies not a vision, enlightenment, or a lone dictation of divine words, but a series of reported public events. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is not a mythical narrative revealed to a lone prophet and transcribed on a holy book. It is an account of phenomena within time and space. This revelation, in contrast to that of the other great faiths, was an event of history.

Philosophically, the Christian claim belongs to a different category altogether from that of Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam, and Baha'i. Christianity proclaims not simply timeless spiritual truths but actual events which occurred in Palestine in the first century—events about a man who forgave prostitutes, rebuked religious bigots, healed the sick, died on a cross and, most importantly,

rose from the dead to be seen by hundreds of eye-witnesses. This constitutes a verifiable claim, a daringly verifiable one.

I stated earlier that unverifiable truth-claims enjoy a measure of invincibility from the arguments of critics. Regardless of what scientists and historians discover about the world, the claims of such faiths remain unchallenged. By contrast, the historical and event-centred nature of Christianity leaves it potentially vulnerable to the

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examination of critics. It is as if Christianity deliberately places its neck on the proverbial chopping block of public scrutiny, and invites anyone who wishes to take a swing.

And 'swing' they do. Scientists analyze the ancient papyri documents of Jesus' biographies (the Gospels) to assess their age and reliability; archaeologists dig up sections of Galilee to see if Jesus' stomping ground has been accurately described

by the New Testament writers; historians pore over the literary and inscriptional evidence from non-Christian sources to see if place names, personal titles and architectural details can be confirmed, and if Jesus' healings, death

and resurrection rate a mention outside the Bible; and source-critics scrutinize the New Testament documents themselves to see if there are enough signs of independent testimony surrounding these events to warrant trust in what they claim.

This openness to scrutiny makes some Christians nervous. They live with the thought that just around the corner there may be some new discovery that will undermine their faith. But the reality is, for every scholarly criticism throughout the years there have been dozens of equally scholarly retorts and, as the dust settles and nervous Christians begin to breathe again, the bold Christian claim simply lifts its gaze to the crowd, places its head on the chop-

ping block once more, and invites the next person to take a swing.

I can appreciate how Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus would find security in the knowledge that their beliefs can never be disproved. But, for me, this would never satisfy. I don't think I could shake off the feeling that if God were interested in our attention he'd offer more than a dream, vision, or a private dictation; he would surely present some tangible, verifiable signpost to himself. The fact that Christianity claims to do just this, combined with the fact that the more this claim is scrutinized the more substantial it appears, makes me anything but nervous; it thrills me.

Tonight, I am not seeking to demonstrate, or even to outline, the substance of the Christian claim. I am merely trying to illustrate something about the nature of that claim. Christianity is open to critical enquiry precisely because its central claims are, by their very nature, verifiable. You can test them. You can come, with sceptical muscles fully flexed, and take a swing.

So, if you are someone interested in pursuing the universal spiritual hunch, or even if you're someone interested in ruling out a few of the options, my simple suggestion is—why not begin by exploring the tradition most open to critical enquiry? **K**

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John Dickson is an evangelist and Bible scholar. His PhD is in ancient history.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Australian data: 1995 World Values Survey, Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, Ronald Inglehart et al., 2000.
- 2 Talmud: b. Sanhedrin 43a.
- 3 Suras 4.157; 5.75-78.
- 4 Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1957, p. 11.
- 5 'Groping at shadows in a darkened room', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Tuesday, March 18, 2003.
- 6 'The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity,' in John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (eds), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, SCM Press, London, 1988, pp. 16-36.
- 7 John Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths: Critical Dialogues on Religious Pluralism*, SCM Press, London, 1995, pp. 24-25.
- 8 McGillion, *op. cit.*