

Sherlock Holmes Meets the Buddha: How to Investigate a Religious Claim

*“When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains,
however improbable, must be the truth.”*

—Sherlock Holmes, *The Sign of Four*

Logic Anyone?

LOGIC AND the empirical method are the only means by which a factually based religious position can be verified.

We have seen that religious positions of the “try it, you will like it” variety make no factual claims that could be falsified in principle. But by what method can the competing claims of authority be weighed and either dismissed or verified? It is our position that logic and the empirical method are the *only* appropriate methods to determine the facticity or falsity of competing religious claims.

But is not “logic” itself a western concept? Actually, no. The word “logic” has no plural form. There are no “Zen” or “Southern Baptist” or “Norwegian” logics. Simply put, you cannot function in the world without employing logic. This is true regardless of whether you are in Shanghai or Santa Barbara, Delhi or Detroit. Without logic you would not know if you were talking to a human being or to an avocado. In the same way, without logic there

would be no way of discerning if you were hearing the voice of God or the voice of Frank Sinatra. To reject logic is to reject the possibility of gaining knowledge or of systematic education.

The most basic principle of logic is called the “law of non-contradiction”—meaning that something cannot both exist and not exist at the same time. This is why religions and cultures that supposedly reject and ignore “logic” as a concept of Western imperialism will still send their future rulers to be educated in universities where the law of non-contradiction is honored. In fact, the concept of the university comes directly out of the foundation of Western European Christianity and its acceptance of the fundamental idea that the world stands separate from God, can be investigated through the use of the rational faculties, and that the investigation of that world and the relieving of suffering in that world are vigorously encouraged. Intelligibility ends up being the foundational presupposition of modern science—the idea that the world is knowable and organized.¹

The law of non-contradiction teaches very clearly that Christianity’s presentation of who Jesus Christ is (God Almighty in the flesh come to save sinful humanity by His death on the cross) and Islam’s presentation of Jesus Christ (a mere enlightened man and a prophet of God, but definitely not God in the flesh and definitely not the savior of the world) cannot both be right. They may both be in error, but they cannot both be equally true.

Of course, no one need be logical or live according to logic. You cannot be arrested for being illogical. People who insist on rejecting logic are given a padded room and medication all the

1. For a fuller treatment of this idea, see Sir John Polkinghorne, *Traffic In Truth: Exchanges Between Science and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 30ff. Polkinghorne is Past President of Queens’ College, Cambridge, Fellow of the Royal Academy, and former professor of mathematical physics at Cambridge.

while they attempt to eat the furniture and to argue that John F. Kennedy was the Pope in disguise. One can reject logic, but if one does so they eliminate the ability to communicate with others and eliminate the ability to discover truth. In my state of California, those who deny logic seem to make particularly large incomes as “personal guidance trainers” for people of means.

In addition, the denier of logic will be employing logic and the empirical method almost every moment of every day. Why? Because the real world still exists, and one will still be run over whether in the streets of Pittsburgh, Paris, or Phnom Peng if the empirical method is not employed of looking both ways, weighing the evidence, and making a decision. This occurs regardless of whether one is a New Age adherent or a Buddhist or an Islamic fundamentalist or a Christian believer.

Thus *everybody* uses logic out of sheer necessity. But logic itself does not tell us the “stuff,” or facts, of the world. It only shows us how to interrelate facts. The use of logic does not commit a person to *any* particular religious position. It is simply required to get anywhere in investigating the world. Therefore logic, in and of itself, does not compel one to accept that Allah is God and Mohammad is His prophet, nor does it compel the belief that Jesus Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate, died, and rose again from the dead.

While logic tells us how to interrelate facts, the empirical method tells us how to determine the facts of the world. The empirical (or scientific or legal-historical) method is used every day in the courts of law. It is the basis for all legitimate scientific endeavors and historical investigation. All that law courts do in a jury trial is to provide a forum for the “re-creation of history.” Trial lawyers present to juries a version of history—what happened in the past. Many legal trials can involve cases where the central facts of the case may have occurred a half century earlier. The empirical method is used by lawyers every day to investigate

those facts. Juries use a version of that method to determine what the facts of the case happen to be, so that the relevant law can be applied to those facts.

How Holmes Would Check Out the Claims of Buddha—Applying the “Empirical Method” to Religious Claims

The empirical method operates as follows: First, you determine what the problem to be solved is or what the question is to be answered (let's take, for example, whether or not Jesus Christ rose from the dead). Next, one formulates an answer or hypothesis that seems to explain the problem or provide an answer (for example, in the case of Christianity, the claim that God raised Jesus from the dead vs. alternative explanations such as the disciples stole the body, or that later editors created a resurrection myth, or that Jesus “swooned” on the cross and later resuscitated in the tomb and escaped). One next determines how to investigate the problem to be solved and what reliable data will be employed in that investigation (e.g., review of all eyewitness or primary source accounts vs. relying on the speculative comments of later writers about what might have happened, competent archeological data, etc.). One then collects and records the data and rechecks and analyzes whether the hypothesis remains tenable or whether an entirely new or amended hypothesis is necessary in light of the factual data developed.

There are some who oppose using the empirical method to prove—or disprove—ultimate religious claims because they assert that this makes a method (i.e., the empirical or scientific-legal method) superior to God and thus it is idolatrous. These people argue that one should *assume* the truth of a religious position and then argue that the position is internally consistent. However, the problem with such a position is immediately

evident. Every religion says they are true and many are at least internally consistent! The question is how to determine which religious position is in fact true. Internal logical consistency of a religious position is no basis for the acceptance of that position. Both Islam and Mormonism are logically consistent if one first accepts their fundamental starting points (for Islam that starting point is complete submission to Allah as God and Mohammad as his prophet, while for Mormonism it is a strict polytheism). Euclid's geometry is internally consistent but no one would argue that it is, therefore, the Word of the Lord.

Thus we by no means make an idol of a method by using the empirical or scientific-legal analysis to determine the accuracy of a religious position. The empirical method is simply a roadmap that we follow to see if we can arrive at the King's Castle and not at the local garbage dump.² Just because we use a map to get to the castle does not mean we honor the map over the King or the Castle.

With Holmes as a guide, we will analyze religious claims by first asking whether the particular religious claim at issue is even making a factual claim in the first place. Such a claim, to be truly factual in nature, must be capable of being investigated by means of the empirical method and must be capable of verification or falsification. Unfortunately, 99.9% of all religious claims are not factual in nature and cannot be verified or falsified, even in principle.

2. John Warwick Montgomery, *Tractatus Logico-Theologicus*, supra at chapter 1, ft. 1, proposition 2.385312.

Are Not All Interpretations Equally Valid Anyway?

In the end, what if all interpretations are equally valid? Haven't we then just wasted a tremendous amount of effort trying to get at questions of "truth" and "fact" only to discover that the interpretive grid we used to analyze those facts was wholly subjective? That brings us to our next very important point.

It is commonly suggested that facts are subject to a variety of mutually valid interpretations. However, this is contrary to the realities of science and law, both of which are disciplines where critical decisions effecting life, liberty and property are made daily.

Facts are, in actuality, self-interpreting! *Facts are themselves the final arbiters or judges of all competing interpretations.* A proper interpretation of the facts should fit the facts just as a good shoe fits one's foot—not too narrow as to pinch (and exclude facts or data that are "inconvenient"), but not too loose as to let the foot slosh around (and thus be "consistent" with *any* view of the world).

Let's give two examples of what we mean. What of an interpretation of the Holocaust that argued that as a matter of fact Hitler loved the Jewish people and instituted the Holocaust in order to send them to heaven more quickly? Is that not a valid interpretation of the fact that Hitler exterminated six million Jews? Or consider the interpretation that Jesus was a Martian who deceived people into thinking that He was resurrected (Van Daniken's *Chariot of the Gods*) or that Jesus swooned on the cross and that He plotted with Joseph of Arimathea and Lazarus to revive in the tomb (as presented in Schoenfeld's book, *The Passover Plot*)? Are not these valid interpretations of the facts?

We quickly see that no such interpretation can be maintained unless countless facts are discounted or totally ignored. *All interpretations are not equal.* The best interpretation is the

one which fits the facts most completely. Indeed, the position of Post-Modern literary criticism is that “no objective meaning” of any text is possible and all a person can do is tell “their story.” Unfortunately this position is an illustration of the logical fallacy known as “infinite regress,” that is, if no objectivity is possible, this applies to the person asserting this position also and the entire argument falls into solipsism or complete subjectivity.³ The result is that no statement of any type carries *any* objective meaning: A statement is itself either objectively true (and thus refutes the position that no objectivity is possible); or it is a statement of subjective opinion and therefore it is not verifiable.

The idea that “everyone has their own interpretation” is utterly rejected in fields where life and death are at stake. Radiation Oncologists (cancer physicians), for example, do not live in the world of making up their own inner truths about how and where to attack cancer with highly defined and intense bursts of radiation. Similarly, courts regularly ask juries to arrive at one interpretation of the facts of the case and often send convicted defendants to their deaths based on that single correct interpretation. Serious scientists have now clearly recognized that if science is simply “politics and power plays masquerading around in a lab coat” rather than the pursuit of what in fact is true about the world, the future of that discipline is doomed.⁴

3. For a hilarious discussion of how the postmodern theorist Jacques Derrida complained bitterly and hypocritically that one of his opponents had treated him “unfairly” and had “misunderstood” Derrida’s obviously clear (and objective?) position, see Millard J. Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 156.

4. See the devastating critique of postmodernism’s impact on science in *A House Built on Sand: Exposing Postmodern Myths About Science*, Noretta Koertge, ed. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998).

Religious Claims Are a Dime a Dozen

Religious claims do not equal religious *truth*. There are a multiplicity of religious “claims” floating around. Perhaps you have heard one of the following:

- “Brahma is All.”
- “Jesus rose from the dead, but you can’t verify it until you first have faith.”
- “I channel the timeless wisdom of the ancient Roman sage Maximus.”
- “Mohammed caused the moon to come down and pass through his tunic. This occurred so quickly that no one noticed that the moon was missing.”
- “God is Wholly Other and is Being Itself.”
- “I believe God is in all of us.”
- “The burning in my bosom confirms to me that Mormonism is true.”
- “Jesus is in my heart.”
- “Yoga brings inner peace and helps you experience oneness with nature and the universe.”

All of these religious claims suffer from the same terminal malady—none of them can be *verified*. One might as well say that “God is a Lasagne Deity who gives me peace and purpose and forgives my sins.” Verifiability is a critical component when dealing with religious claims.

Religious Claims are Almost Never Verifiable

Once you realize that this is the case you must stop asking “truth questions” about the religion, because you are making a category

mistake and are involved in pure futility. The advocates of the religious assertions stated above will all appeal to the final arbiter of all religious claims—inner experience or the pragmatist’s motto, “it works.”

Modern philosophy in the twentieth-century (especially the so-called “Vienna Circle” or the “ordinary language Philosophers” or the “Analytic Philosophers”) spent considerable time analyzing the types of statements made in the area of religious, or other ultimate claims. Statements were seen to fall into one of three categories: first, there were statements of logic or mathematics (called “analytic statements,” from which this school of philosophy derived its name), then statements of fact (referred to as “synthetic statements”), and finally statements of neither logic nor fact which were called “meaningless” statements (or “non-sensical”).

A statement of logic or mathematics is a statement true by definition. They really tell you nothing, said modern analytical philosophers, about the content or facts of the world. A statement of logic is something like $2 \text{ husbands} + 2 \text{ husbands} = 4 \text{ husbands}$. This statement is true by definition if you know what the components mean. It tells you *nothing* about the factual nature of the world. One does not need to do any investigation of the world to determine the truth of this statement. A person could make the mathematical statement that “ $2 \text{ Cyclops} + 2 \text{ Cyclops} = 4 \text{ Cyclops}$ ” and that is true regardless of whether or not Cyclops exist. It is irrelevant whether Cyclops exist or not. Logic, said the great twentieth-century philosopher Wittgenstein, is the scaffolding of the world.⁵ Logic provides structure and assists you in organizing the facts of the world, but logic does not help one whit in telling you the actual “stuff” or facts of the world.

5. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logicus-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), propositions 1.1–1.21.

Conversely, a statement of fact or a synthetic statement is something that can be *verified* (via historical, legal, or scientific methods, for example). “Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in Ford’s Theater,” “water is composed of two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen,” and “little green people live on Mars” are *all* statements of fact. While the last statement does not appear at first to be an assertion of fact, it is, at least in principle, verifiable—or at least falsifiable. With advancements in telescopes, radar, and technology, we could, with a reasonable degree of accuracy, determine if “little green people” actually live on Mars.

The last category of statements are those that are neither assertions of logic nor mathematics, nor are they factual in nature. Modern philosophers saw this last category as consisting of “meaningless statements.” They are statements that may not be strictly or literally “meaningless,” but they are statements neither true by definition nor true because they can be verified or falsified. While these “meaningless statements” may be meaningful to the person making them, and may reflect some mystical and non-verifiable religious experience, they are not subject to truth testing.

Now note how the statements that we began this section with are certainly *not* statements true by definition. That is, they are not assertions of logic or mathematics. Most importantly, though they may seem to make factual claims that can be verified or falsified, in reality they do not. There is no way to verify or falsify any of those claims with which we began this section—no evidence can count for or against them.

Take the statement of some Christian theologians that “Jesus rose from the dead, but it cannot be verified.” Such a claim is actually *totally* meaningless. Why? If there is no way to verify the assertion that Jesus rose from the dead, exactly how does one come to believe its truth? If the response is “by faith,” then why accept this particular claim by faith and not, for example, Mohammed’s claim that he alone is the true prophet of

God who brought God's final and complete revelation to mankind? To request someone to have faith in something which has no way of being checked out is to request pure credulity.

God the Father or God the Formula?

Similarly, a God of pure formality, logic or mathematics that simply exists as a product of deductive reasoning would not be particularly helpful when you are on your back in a hospital room, having been informed you have three weeks to live. Such a formal God presumably would not be interested in a personal relationship with His/its creation. This kind of God could be carried around as a formula in one's back pocket, but there would simply be no assurance that such a god had the slightest interest in listening to and answering the prayers of its creation. Man presumably would benefit greatly from a God who cares, who listens, who has an interest in this world, and who is deeply personal and relational. If a god of pure logical or mathematical formality exists, we are not missing much by not connecting with "it."

But what if there was a God who was indeed personal? If He was interested in His creation it may not be irrational to conclude that He has given evidence of His existence and of His interest in His creation. And what if God had entered factual, gritty history in a deeply personal way? Again, it would not be irrational to conclude that He provided a means of verifying His entrance into human history. We would expect that there would be a way of verifying or falsifying the historical claim that God had entered human history. Are there rules historians use to determine the likelihood of certain things having occurred in the past? Can those be employed to determine the "historicity" of a religion and its claims?

It is true that all religions are in some sense "historical" in that they arise in history. However, very few religions are depen-

dent on the facticity and verifiability of their claims. Clearly the great so-called monotheistic religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) make “historical” claims, as does Mormonism, in some sense. However, it appears that only one religious position—Christianity—pins its *entire* credibility on a particular historical event and even encourages rigorous examination and analysis of the facticity of that one event. Christianity actually makes historically and legally verifiable claims that can be checked out in ordinary history by applying standard methods of historical investigation used all the time to determine the credibility of ancient and classical texts. The method we shall employ to investigate that central factual claim is the same method used all the time by courts and juries to determine questions of fact.

What Level of Certainty Can We Expect When Investigating a Religious Claim?

But what of the concern that historical questions can never be determined with *certainty*? Isn't it wise to be skeptical about history—especially *ancient* history?

First, complete historical skepticism as a position is illogical and self-refuting, since the present is always being transformed into the past. You create history all the time. What you were doing before you began reading this section of this book is now, technically speaking, “history.” Second, a trial in a court of law is really a recreation of history. We live each day on the basis that the past can be accurately reconstructed and relied upon. Our society is built on the idea that history can be understood and “recreated” through the means of documents, photographs, testimony, etc. Third, matters of fact can *never* be 100% certain but that does not prevent us from making decisions which are life and death in nature based on less than certain reasoning. Surgeons do this daily, weighing probabilities and making a de-

cision based on historical records and their current evaluation. The fact that they are not 100% certain they are right in their diagnosis is not a reason not to go under their knife if the probabilities weigh heavily in favor of the diagnosis provided.

Thus, the central issue quickly becomes whether God has entered human history and whether sufficient evidence exists to verify that entrance into history. The skeptic surely stops us in our tracks here, does he not, since God entering human history would be a “miracle” and the assured results of science have disproved the existence of the supernatural and of the miraculous?

As for the objection that miracles are not in principle possible (the argument of the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume), the Einsteinian universe of relativity which we inhabit has told us repeatedly that it is more important to go with evidence over any Procrustean prior commitment to the impossibility of the miraculous entrance of God into human history.

The reality of the situation is that miracles⁶ cannot be ruled out without first checking the evidence. We simply do not know enough about the universe to dismiss factual claims *a priori* without investigating those claims first to see if they hold water. Note that if a religious position makes claims that can be verified, those claims will be factual in nature. Thus they are claims that are capable of being verified *or* disproved. For example, a religion built on the claim that its leader is actually Abraham Lincoln risen from the dead is a verifiable religious claim. One could, for example, disprove it by exhuming the body of Mr. Lincoln which would disprove the claim immediately. But here we remember our fundamental principle: 99.9% of *all* religious claims are actually not capable of verification or falsification even in principle. Our response to such unverifiable claims should be:

6. For our purposes, a “miracle” can be defined simply as an event that is not adequately explained merely by reference to natural laws but points instead to transcendent power.

“Fine. But what distinguishes your claim from my claim that my beloved Australian Shepherd dog is actually Napoleon risen from the dead and can forgive sins?”

We now see that *any* truly historical religious claim, even if evidence exists for it, will never reach 100% certainty. Issues of fact cannot in principle rise to 100% certainty. Only matters of deductive logic or mathematics can give one complete certainty. But we have already seen that such strictly formal systems would not yield a personal God in any event, but likely only a God of a formula that can fit in my wallet by means of a 3x5 card, or can be downloaded onto my I-Pod.

So we are left with the reality of how the world works in matters of fact. History, law and science are never completely 100% certain of their conclusions. They must always have some sense of humility and openness to being shown they are wrong and in need of correction if the facts turn out to be otherwise. Regardless of this, though, we continue to make life and death decisions based on probability reasoning and less than 100% evidence. Thus we condemn people to death by lethal injection and do life-threatening surgery based on weighing probabilities and coming to a decision based on less than 100% certainty of what the facts might be in a given court case or medical diagnosis. Every day in the courts of the United States people award millions of dollars to victims or litigants based on the weighing of evidence. Therefore, when we come to historically based religious claims we should expect nothing different. Those claims, if they are truly factual, will always have some common denominators: (1) they will be verifiable or falsifiable, and will not consist of “hidden” knowledge that only spiritual people with “faith” can understand; (2) they will never attain 100% certainty; and (3) they stand as true whether or not people “accept” them as true or not.

We now turn our attention to finding whether *any* religious claims are truly factual claims.