

## Preface

*“We don’t believe in ghosts or elves  
or the Easter Bunny or God.”*

—Daniel Dennett, Darwinian philosopher,  
New York Times, July 12, 2003, sec. A, p. 11, column 1

### Religion: Ruin, Remedy, or Mere Relic?

RELIGIONS ARE worldviews. They claim to address the primary questions of our existence—where we came from, where we are going, and why we are going where we are going. Everyone is religious because everybody has a worldview, even if that worldview is that we come from a totally purposeless beginning and are returning to dust and that this life is largely what novelist William Faulkner called “sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Thus, in one very important sense, everyone who has ever walked on this earth is thoroughly religious, from Mother Theresa to Madonna, from Carl Sagan to Karl Marx, from Buddha to Bono.

However, for good reason, the following perceptions exist: (1) that religion is the true source of the problems in the world (one need only witness terrorists of all races and creeds with strident and extremist religious views, and the negative connotation that comes with the word “fundamentalist”); or (2) that religion is a purely private<sup>1</sup> and confidential matter that involves,

1. As former Superman Christopher Reeve put it: “When matters of

in the final analysis, issues of personal taste and mere matters of subjective preference (“you have faith, but I put my trust in the assured results of science” or “you meet a psycho-social need by means of religion, a need which I fulfill quite ably through assiduous commitment to my local pub”); or, at best (3) that all religions are saying approximately the same thing so there is no ultimate difference, or significance, in the direction one chooses to travel on the “spiritual road.” This viewpoint reminds me of the comment I recently heard on my local university campus: “I was raised Jewish, but I go to an ecumenical worship service on campus, and my mother is trying out Buddhism.” We hear this kind of talk regularly and it is no wonder that many of us dismiss religion as a kind of psycho-social, babbling blend of emotions, hang-ups, superstitions, prejudices and paranoia. In addition, with 10,000 distinct religions in the world, and two being added *a day*, it is clear that religious options are truly a dime a dozen.<sup>2</sup> Choosing a religion must be akin to choosing an ice cream you like. It’s all a matter of preference and personal opinion.

After all, haven’t the psychoanalyst Carl Jung and mythologist Joseph Campbell definitively shown us that many of the world’s religions do in fact have common *ceremonies* (i.e., animal sacrifices are often employed cross-culturally in religious rituals, monasticism and meditation are found in both Christianity and in eastern religions, as is the use of rosaries and pilgrimages, while Mormons also engage in baptisms, etc.)? Thus it is argued that no *final* significance can attach to the choice one makes regarding religious options since no religion can claim a superiority based on unique practices.

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public policy are debated, no religions should have a seat at the table.” Cited in “Reeve: Keep Religious Groups Out of Public Policy,” Associated Press, April 3, 2003.

2. James B. Twitchell, *Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College Inc., and Museumworld* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 48.

Common *activities*, however, do not equal a common *cause* of those activities (this is subject to the logical fallacy of *post hoc, proctor hoc*, literally, after *this, therefore on account of this*). In fact, the teachings of the world's religions themselves are radically different, and it is the teachings that give the religious practices their meaning and focus. Thus Mormons and Muslims may both claim to follow the Ten Commandments, but both may do so to merit salvation, heaven, and eternal life. Christianity, on the other hand, claims that we are unable to follow the Ten Commandments, that no one can merit heaven by their works, and that a main purpose of the Ten Commandments is to remind fallen humanity of its *inability* to merit heaven.

So what if all religions were, in the final analysis, fundamentally and logically incompatible in regard to their teachings? Perhaps all could be false in their basic approach, but are *any* of them true? And why should one even bother to test religious claims for "truth" in any event? Isn't truth a culturally conditioned perspective and therefore a wholly relative concept? And isn't "logic" a uniquely Western—and therefore modern—imposition on human thought? What criteria should one employ to determine the truth of contradictory religious claims? If one really could determine the truth or falsity of particular religious claims (or at least realize that some positions may make no such testable claims whatsoever), then one would at least be involved in weighing the evidence for and against those claims. Under these circumstances, could standards of proof from science, history and law provide value in weighing the validity—or testability—of these obviously gigantic "cosmic" claims of the world's religions?

Originally, universities in the western world were committed to what they called the *universitas*—or the universal nature—of truth. All knowledge was believed to interlock, and the division of the university into "schools" was simply a pragmatic effort to categorize knowledge. The accepted understanding

was, at least through the time of the Renaissance, Reformation, and even through the nineteenth-century, that if something is established as a fact, it is a fact for those living in California or Calcutta, Singapore or Siam.  $E=MC^2$  in Hollywood, Harlem or Hanoi. There is no Mormon math or Shintoist science. All of Western knowledge, and certainly the rise of modern science (starting around the end of the Middle Ages), is built on this presupposition about the nature of truth.<sup>3</sup>

This book is an effort to start at the beginning, with a serious look at whether the world's religions are really compatible or not, that is, whether all roads lead up the same mountain, and if not, whether *any* of them can withstand a closer examination using as our guide the evidentiary methods developed in law, history, and science. *If* any religions are left standing, they (or it) must have claims made not in a corner somehow immune from rigorous examination, but testable by all serious inquirers using methods that have been employed in other fields dealing with truth claims.

More fundamentally, if God is there and is not silent, answers may possibly, though not necessarily, be expected to questions of the meaning of life (since after all, we may determine that the evidence indicates that God exists, but that He/She/It has apparently chosen to remain silent about any plans for humanity and the world). An adequate foundation may perhaps be provided for real and defensible (i.e., transcendent and thus cross-cultural) ethics and for knowing if history is actually going somewhere discernible, but only if God has spoken in a way we can *understand*. Our highest artistic aspirations (that is, the sense we are partaking of a gift when in the presence of great

3. For a discussion of the importance of this worldview to the work of the sixteenth-century scientists Nicolaus Copernicus, Tycho Brahe, and Johannes Kepler see John Warwick Montgomery, *Cross and Crucible* (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), Vol. 1, 1–22.

art, music and literature) may also, as J. R. R. Tolkien says, be verified or confirmed if God is there and is not silent.<sup>4</sup> If God has spoken, we would expect to hear clear words about man and his condition (not naive or ambiguous “do your best” moralistic platitudes, of which our culture is tragically full), and whether there really are answers to the fundamental problems of our existence, including the reality of evil and suffering and the apparent finality of death. We would hope to hear a direct explanation of how the existence of evil in the universe is compatible with an all-powerful and all-good Being. We would, in the very best of all worlds, want a God who cared about our condition. A straight flush would be if that God had entered our situation, spoken clearly, and somehow presented a remedy for our seemingly deep infection and bent to do evil, or at a minimum, not fulfilling even our own internal moral code.

The eighteenth-century encyclopedist Dr. Samuel Johnson once mused that “when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates the mind wonderfully.”<sup>5</sup> The French existentialists (Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Samuel Beckett) echo the findings of the depth psychologists (Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Mortimer Adler) that our mortality is the fundamental and tragic predicament of our time. As the poet John Donne wrote in the sixteenth-century, “You ask for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee . . .” Funerals remind us that the implications of our world view could not be more serious and important.

4. J. R. R. Tolkien, *On Fairy Stories: Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), 83–84. Tolkien points out that high art is “received” while pop art and culture is “used” or “consumed” and that high art (think Rembrandt, Shakespeare, and Bach) points to a deeper reality.

5. James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1946), 413.

Religious claims should be put to rigorous cross-examination of the type used regularly in my profession as a trial lawyer. Such claims should not be handled with kid gloves since they claim to provide answers to the most significant questions relating to the meaning of life and death. Nothing less than eternity may be at stake and it is simply not acceptable to allow religions to get away with vague assertions like “try us, you’ll like us and your life will get better, your cholesterol will be lowered, you will have more flexibility and strength, and you will be at peace with the universe.”

So whether you are utterly convinced that you are an insignificant piece of matter in a gigantic but ultimately purposeless cosmic game, or are positive that God may be there but is deathly silent, or are sure that your “religion” is true because it makes you feel good and works, you should not fear a relentless search for the truth. Such a quest is what this book intends to pursue.