Religion on Trial

Cross-Examining Religious Truth Claims

Revised Edition

Craig A. Parton

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to
Dr. John Warwick Montgomery: lawyer, theologian, philosopher, and most important, friend.

In celebration of the Annual Study Session of the International Academy of Apologetics and Human Rights in Strasbourg, and the 10th anniversary of the publication of your Tractatus Logico-Theologicus, which teaches well that sapiens nihil affirmat quod non probat.
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The secular culture of the Western world is hostile toward Christian orthodoxy. As a consequence, Christians are rediscovering their rich history of defending the faith (or “apologetics,” from the Greek *apologia*). The contemporary interest in apologetics has to a large extent brought about a revival of the philosophical defense of Christianity. This has resulted in a good-news and not-so-good-news situation. The good news is that important philosophical arguments from the patristic and medieval eras, such as those of Athanasius and Aquinas on God’s existence, have been given new life for the contemporary scene. The less-than-good news is that these same philosophical arguments have a somewhat limited value. Convincing someone to become a theist is a necessary but not sufficient step in the apologetic process. The New Testament tells us that “even the demons believe” that God is one (James 2:19). Philosophical arguments do not have the ability to fully focus on the crux of the Christian position, namely the factual case for the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I once heard someone say, “Philosophy is very good at defining and describing the problem but not great at solutions!” If philosophical apologetics is not the most effective apologetic method, what can be used?

Fortunately, a small group of philosophers themselves have seen the weakness of their field and have recommended a way forward. One analytic philosopher said, “Logic is generalized jurisprudence . . . arguments can be compared with lawsuits.”¹ What he meant was that for centuries, lawyers, judges, and juries have been dealing with the major issues that society faces. They resolve civil disputes and enforce criminal law on subjects by hearing relevant and admissible evidence in support of claims. Legal rhetoric and argumentation

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based on the rules of evidence is absolutely essential in order for courts to reach sound conclusions. For centuries, the courts have been exercising and using practical reasoning based on evidence to discover the truth.

A small group of lawyers have taken their cue from analytic philosophers and developed a legal methodology in the area of apologetics. Legal apologetics is a branch of apologetics that says the historical evidence available in support of Christianity when viewed through the lens of common-law rules of evidence vindicates the truth of Christianity. Craig Parton is at the center of this apologetic school. The volume you hold in your hand is a legal brief for the contemporary seeker of religious truth. Parton describes the chaotic contemporary religious scene and acknowledges the challenges one faces in making a religious choice. He then gives the seeker tools on how to determine truth—how do we get at the facts? What is “evidence” in the religious world? In language the layman can understand, he explains how lawyers get at the facts and the truth.

Mr. Parton then moves to the documents that support and communicate the Christian claim, the first 4 books of the New Testament—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In lawyerly-like fashion, he builds an argument for their historic validity and reliability. Throughout this work, he carefully builds his case and effectively cross-examines the opposing views until he reaches his conclusion. His approach is identical to that of the 19th-century Harvard law professor, Simon Greenleaf, who put it this way:

All that Christianity asks of men on this subject is that they would be consistent with themselves; that they would treat its evidences as they treat the evidence of other things; and that they would try and judge its actors and witnesses as they deal with their fellow men, when testifying to human affairs and actions, in human tribunals. Let the witnesses be compared with themselves, with each other, and with surrounding facts and circumstances; and let their testimony
be sifted, as if it were given in a court of justice, on the side of the adverse party, the witness being subjected to a rigorous cross-examination.²

While contemporary authors like Craig Parton are leading the legal apologetics school, it is in many ways a revival of what Simon Greenleaf did in the 19th century and what Hugo Grotius, the Dutch lawyer and diplomat, did in the 17th century with his *The Truth of the Christian Religion*. This school is one that seeks to defend Christian truth claims by applying the rules of evidence, standards of proof, and legal argumentation that take one right to the central claim of Christianity—namely that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

This approach is not unlike what the apostles did. As we examine the New Testament writings, we see Dr. Luke documenting and compiling “a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us . . . who from the beginning were eyewitnesses” (Luke 1:1–2). Peter in his Acts 2 sermon provides a legal brief for the timing of the Messiah, a summary of the facts of His ministry, death, and resurrection along with the Old-Testament-fulfilled prophecies. Similarly, Paul, who was legally trained, lays out the case for Christ in a forensic fashion to an inquiring audience in Acts 17.

I am delighted to endorse this work by Craig Parton. For several decades, Craig has taught apologetics and defended the facticity of Christian truth claims on university and college campuses and also as a lawyer in lectures and debates from Berkeley to Cornell. He speaks across North America and each summer at the prestigious International Academy of Apologetics and Human Rights in Strasbourg, France. As a skilled trial lawyer arguing for a verdict, Mr. Parton succinctly places before the reader the evidence that directs one to the cross of Christ as the only viable religious option in this pluralistic and secular age. May the seeker in reading this book come to see the

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² *The Testimony of the Evangelists* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Classics, 1995), 41.
Christ as described by John the apostle: “From His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:16–17).

The Honourable Dallas K. Miller
Justice of the Court of Queen’s Bench
Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

On the Feast of the Epiphany
January 6, 2018
“When one person suffers from a delusion, it is called insanity. When many people suffer from a delusion, it is called Religion.”

—RICHARD DAWKINS¹

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

—DANIEL DENNETT, DARWINIAN PHILOSOPHER²

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 everyone has a worldview, even if that worldview is that we came from a totally purposeless beginning and are returning to dust, and that this life is largely what novelist William Faulkner (echoing Shakespeare) 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 Teresa to Madonna, from Stephen Hawking to Sigmund Freud, from Carl Jung to Karl Marx, from Buddha to the Beatles.

However, for good reason, the following perceptions exist: (1) religion is the true source of the problems in the world (one need only witness terrorists of all races and creeds who have strident and extremist religious views and the negative connotation that comes

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3 Timothy Gill, well-known for promoting the right to same sex marriage across America, displays fervor and a level of tolerance often associated with religious zealots when he says, “We’re going into the hardest states in the country. . . . We’re going to punish the wicked!” (“Wicked Ways,” quoted in The Weekly Standard, August 7, 2017, www.weeklystandard.com/wicked-ways/article/2009041).
with the word *fundamentalist*); (2) religion, unlike science, is hostile to intelligent factual inquiry and involves, 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 that I fulfill quite ably through assiduous commitment to my local pub”); or, at best, (3) 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 a comment I recently heard on my local university’s 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, so 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 2 being added to that number every day, it is clear that religious options are truly a dime a dozen. Choosing a religion must be akin to choosing an ice cream you like. It’s all a matter of preference and personal opinion. And while religion leads to enslavement by adherence to ritual and genuflecting to hierarchical authority, “spirituality” can be enjoyed on immediate and accessible terms that involve a wholly personal journey of freedom and self-discovery. Thus, being “spiritual” is fine. Being religious, however, is suspect.

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

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is found in both Christianity and in Eastern religions, as is the use of rosaries and pilgrimages; 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 superiority based on unique practices.

Common activities, however, do not equal a common cause of those activities (this is subject to the logical fallacy of post hoc, ergo propter hoc, literally, “after this, therefore because 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 they 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 we cannot merit heaven by our 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 incompatible in regard to their teachings? Perhaps all could be false in their basic claims, 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 this “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?

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6 An example of the post hoc, ergo propter hoc fallacy is concluding that because all divorced couples were previously married, marriage is, therefore, the cause of divorce.