

John Dickson has been lecturing on World Religions at the Macquarie Christian Studies Institute and this book reflects extensive research and reflection on John's part. There are many admirable features of this book. Already an accomplished author¹, John writes engagingly, using many excellent illustrations. John has an enviable ability to make complex ideas simple. For example, his explanation of the Five Aggregates of Attachment in Buddhism is particularly helpful.

John's own integrity shines through as his pen allows each religion to present itself in the art gallery of religions. John is determined to be fair-minded and even-handed in his treatment of these five world religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

John sets out to view all of the 'works' (religions) in their best light, believing this opens the way for 'the spectator' to appreciate the surpassing beauty of Christianity. John rightly points out that "approaching the world religions *on their own terms* is the only way really to understand them" and "that this is also the only way to engage in meaningful conversation about Christ with those from other religions". Consequently, he opposes approaches which seek to understand religions against a set of pre-determined categories. This doesn't work any better than trying to explain the codes of five world sports using a set of predetermined categories like 'scoring, speed, force, training, playing field', etc. This is because the great world religions are not asking the same questions.

John builds on this and, in his treatment of these five religions, succeeds in demonstrating that they are radically different from each other. His illustrations are excellent, as is his closing argumentation against the pluralistic belief that all religions are essentially the same. As John observes, "The statement, 'All religions are basically the same', is born of the same lack of acquaintance as 'All Asians look the same'." It is akin to "someone's grandma attending a rock festival, listening to all the bands from the back of the crowd with her fingers in her ears, and then announcing authoritatively: 'They all sound the same to me'".

The substantial difference between religions is not merely due to the fact that they are concerned with different questions but also is a product of the different cultural settings in which they developed and the fact that they often arose 'as deliberate critiques of what came before'. To 'squash distinctions between them and quash debate about them' means 'we are not really listening to them'.

The penultimate chapter – *What's wrong with Jesus* – is part of John's agenda to debunk the pretensions of pluralism and demonstrate the substantial differences between religions. By seeing "what is 'wrong' with Christianity from the perspective of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism

¹ John's other books include *A Sneaking Suspicion*, *A Hell of a Life*, *Simply Christianity - Beyond Religion*, *If I were God I'd make it clearer*, *If I were God I'd end all pain*, and *Hanging in There*. John's doctoral work has been published by Mohr Siebeck (Germany) under the title *Mission-Commitment in Ancient Judaism and in the Pauline Communities: the shape, extent and background of early Christian mission* (WUNT II 159, 2003).

and Islam” John aims ‘to demonstrate clearly, and in a fair way, the sheer diversity of opinion that exists among the religions of the world”.

Take the differences between Hinduism and Christianity, for example. Here John shows the incompatibility between Hindu conceptions of reincarnation and *moksha* (liberation) with Jesus’ teaching that every individual will face God’s judgment after death, plus his teaching concerning resurrection from the dead. Likewise he contrasts Jesus’ claims to deity and Christian belief in Jesus as ‘the singular human manifestation of the one true God’ with Hindu belief in multiple incarnations of Hindu deities. He also points out the hiatus between Christian belief in the forgiveness of sins by God’s pure mercy and the doctrine of karma, which insists ‘sinful actions must reap their appropriate consequences’. In much the same manner John considers fundamental differences between Buddhism and Christianity, Judaism and Christianity and Islam and Christianity. This analysis provides a very helpful way of contrasting the other main religions with Christianity.

John notes that sophisticated pluralists do recognize substantial contradictions between religions while still arguing that there is ‘a deeper, grander TRUTH made clear by them all’. John closes his book by asking, “Is it all ducks and rabbits?” Here John has in mind a famous argument for pluralism made by John Hick. Hick presents an optical illusion, a sketch which, depending on how you look at it, may appear to be either a duck or a rabbit. The argument goes that Person A, who has only seen ducks and no rabbits, will look at this sketch and see a duck. Similarly, Person B, who has seen only rabbits but no ducks, will be predisposed to see a rabbit. Yet the nature of the sketch is such that both persons are justified in seeing what they see: “The ‘contradiction’ between the opinions is a matter of perception rather than substance.”

Against this John points out that Hick conveniently ignores the third party who conducts the experiment, a person who knows the truth, that the sketch is a trick designed to create an illusion. In this way John exposes the presumption of pluralists that they, though a very tiny minority, ‘have discovered a greater truth that none of the religions has observed before’. John adds other persuasive arguments against a pluralist position and then concludes the chapter with an argument for religious tolerance, meaning not ‘mere acceptance of other people’s *beliefs*’ but ‘acceptance of *people* who hold contrary beliefs’. Following on from this John argues that the right approach to other religions is not to adopt an ‘economy of effort’ approach that, in the interests of not offending anyone, will avoid the effort to find out which competing religious claims are true and which are not. Rather, he urges his spectators ‘to keep exploring the big ideas that have shaped the world’s civilizations’.

Along the way, John’s book raises some important questions:

1. Is it right to treat religions as works of art?

“As the title makes clear”, John says, “this book is not written for religious devotees but for spectators, those with a simple curiosity about Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam”.

Evidently, John’s ‘spectators’ are not passionate fans sitting in the stands, ready to cheer on their respective side. Rather, he likens them to people walking through an art gallery and admiring works of art. Indeed, John doesn’t hesitate to describe all world religions as works of art to be not only understood and treated with tolerance, but also with appreciation.

John makes no secret of the fact that he writes as a dedicated Christian. How then does John square his depiction of world religions as beautiful works of art with biblical denunciations and even lampooning of false religions as but the sordid 'works of human hands'?

In Romans 1 Paul teaches that the inability of creatures to know their Creator is due to their sinful and inexcusable suppression of truth, which God has revealed to all people. From this perspective all non-Christian religions involve exchanging the truth of God for a lie and justifies all people being the objects of God's wrath. Paul sought to understand other religions (see Acts 17:23), but it is difficult to think of Paul *appreciating* other religions. Is there any example of anyone in the Bible being approved because of the way he or she expressed appreciation of another religion? Is there any evidence, for example, that Christians in the early church sought to appreciate the finer aspects of the emperor worship cult?

At any rate, why should a proper understanding of another religion necessarily involve *appreciating* that religion? Yes, as John argues, it is important 'to see what others see in their religion'. Or as he puts it elsewhere: "until I am able to answer a question like, 'Why are millions of people attracted to Buddhism? I am in no position to evaluate the Buddha's teachings.'" But does it necessarily follow that those things which attract people to their particular religion make that religion 'worthy of display in the best light'? After all, such vices as prostitution and gambling have their attractions for many. Do we conclude from this that they are admirable?

Since John writes this book as a respected Christian leader and evangelist it necessarily follows that for many his approach constitutes a model for approaching other religions. John is at pains to emphasise that though critiquing other religions is not invalid *per se*, this forms no part of the purpose of this book. But is John providing a good model when, as a Bible-believing Christian, he engages with other religions without offering a critique and even commending them as worthy human products? Does God see them as beautiful works of art? Has John sold out to postmodernism at this point? Isn't there a real danger here that readers will come away thinking that Christianity is but one option among many others to pick from in the supermarket of religion? Is it perhaps the case that John is not merely tickling the curiosity of his spectator audience but actually pandering to a non-involved spectator mentality?

There is an apparent inconsistency between the way John speaks of encouraging tolerance of the five great world religions at the beginning of the book and his concluding remarks that tolerance does not mean acceptance of other people's beliefs but of the people who hold contrary beliefs. Yes, we must accept that people are created in God's image and treat them with graciousness and great respect. But if this does not require accepting their beliefs why should it require appreciating the religion in and through which they express those beliefs?

2. Is Christianity presented in its best light?

John has avoided any discussion of absolute versus relative truth and, therefore, he makes no attempt to argue that Christianity is the only true religion. But there is a strange inconsistency in the book. For at the outset he has indicated that it is valid to expect that when all religions are displayed in their best light, Christianity will outshine other religions. If so, why is it that John makes no concerted attempt to present Christianity in its best light?

In order to show Christianity in this way John would need to narrow his focus down to a consideration of biblical Christianity. However, John hamstringing his ability to do this by the very

way in which he approaches each religion. In each case he begins with an uncritical overview of the history of the religion as understood by its devotees. This is followed by an essentialist understanding of the religion which simplistically assumes that Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Judaism can be understood by summarizing the essence of mainstream teaching and, in the main, ignoring religious practice. Next, John attempts, not always successfully, to summarise the major schools or divisions within each religious tradition.

There is no questioning John's integrity. So, when he presents Christianity he does so in an even-handed manner following much the same pattern. But this means that true biblical Christianity is not hung on the wall of the gallery for all to see but is still buried beneath a pile of canvases! As a consequence Christianity is never seen in its best light, which seems to defeat the underlying apologetic intent of the book.

3. Isn't it reductionist to understand world religions by comparing their teachings?

John's approach to understanding world religions and comparing and contrasting them is ideologically based. With few exceptions, the spectator is asked not to look at the practice of the world religions but at the ideas which are said to underlie them. This is a big problem, because it is typically the case that religious practice flies in the face of religious dogma.

The vast majority of the world's Buddhists are syncretistic. That is, the Buddhism they practise is a mix of imported Buddhism with traditional religious beliefs and practices. Similarly, the vast majority of the world's Muslims are adherents of folk Islam. That is, the Islam they know is one which incorporates mystical and magical beliefs and practices. What *is* Buddhism? What *is* Islam? When John presents his understanding of the fundamental ideas underlying these major religions what is he presenting in the best light, the religion itself or an unrealized abstraction?

I don't envy the task John has set himself. As one who lectures in Buddhism I struggle myself with the problem of how to present, in an undistorted manner, what Buddhism is really like. In a lecture room setting it is very difficult to avoid construing Buddhism other than as a suite of alternate ideas. Our very *discussion* of Buddhist practice tends to reprocess practice as ideas. Appreciating the practice of the major religions involves an experiential element, one I seek to address, in a very partial and inadequate manner, by introducing video input and occasionally taking students or trainees to see Buddhist temples. I recognize, therefore, that it is probably unfair to expect John to be able to capture the practice of religionists in the pages of a book. Nevertheless, this highlights the problem that confronts John or any other author who proposes to explain the essentials of the major religions.

4. Is it accurate to describe Hinduism as preceding Judaism and Buddhism?

John is quite right to present Hinduism in this way if Judaism is defined as beginning with Moses, as John accepts with qualifications, and *if* we follow John's assumption that 'Hinduism' may be used to refer to the cocktail of Indian 'rituals, beliefs, practices and exercises' that has characterized India from around 1500 BC. The difficulty here is in deciding how to treat the developed caste system. Is this integral to the definition of Hinduism or not? If the answer is 'No' then John's claim stands. If the answer is 'Yes' then the relative dating of Hinduism and Buddhism is more questionable.

The caste system remains an essential feature of almost all expressions of modern Hinduism. Yes, it has now been outlawed by the Indian government. This may signal an eventual change in Hinduism, though it is probably unrealistic to expect such an entrenched way of life to be cast off with any rapidity. Since Hinduism and caste seem to go hand in glove it is important in dating Hinduism to ask when the caste system began.

It is true that Hindus often trace the caste system back to the original four *varnas* or classes of society (Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vashyas and Sudras) variously understood as either the result of an Aryan invasion around 1500 BCE (the historicity of which is now seriously in question) or, in the Upanishads, as emanations from the body of Brahma – Brahman (priests and teachers) from his mouth, Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors) from his arms, Vashyas (merchants and traders) from his thigh and Sudras (peasants and labourers) from his feet. But this is not the caste system. After all broad class structures were as characteristic of ancient societies as they are of most societies today and the Vedas make no mention of a caste system. The careers of the Buddha and Mahavira began before the end of the period covered by the Upanishads (c. 800-450 BCE) and the so-called caste system that they rejected was in fact the four level class system just described. So there is good reason to believe that the rigid caste system characteristic of modern India is a much later development than is commonly assumed. The jury is still out on this one.

Here again the problem of how to understand a religion is raised. If we emphasise an ideological approach then the caste system, being a practice, tends to be regarded as a later development within Hinduism or as peripheral to the definition of Hinduism. But if we take practice seriously it is hard to see how we can speak about 'Hinduism' without speaking about caste. It follows from this that a more practice-oriented approach to understanding world religions does not favour the view that Hinduism precedes Buddhism. Rather ancient Indian philosophies and religious practices, not to be confused with modern 'Hinduism', have influenced the development of the two religions which we know today as Hinduism and Buddhism.

4. Is it right to depict Islam as a religion of peace?

Many years back a work colleague, responding to recent news, vented, "Why do they let Muslims into this country? They're all terrorists." I asked her if she knew any Muslims. She reflected for a moment and said, "Actually, yes, my husband plays squash each week with a Muslim." "Is he a terrorist?" I asked. "No", she replied, "He's a very nice man."

With John I want to take a stand against Islamophobia and when I hear people making Islamophobic remarks I too wonder 'how many people in this camp have actually met a Muslim or bothered to find out about the Islamic faith'. Yet, having lived with my family in a Muslim neighbourhood in Pakistan for seven years, I am troubled by John's simplistic approach to the question of Islam and violence.

John clearly espouses the view that violence is not a necessary feature of Islamic faith. In this regard I find it striking that in his list of recommended reading at the end of the chapter there is no reference to Tony Payne's book *Islam in our Backyard*. This book won the Australian Christian Book of the Year award just two years ago and, like John's own book is published by Matthias Press.

Tony asks whether Osama bin Laden constitutes the lunatic fringe or a representative Muslim. He points out that Islam repudiates any distinction between religion and the state. John recognizes that the Islamic state is a very important concept in Islam but does not seem to grasp the political realities this involves. Tony makes the point that Islam is essentially undemocratic. The citizens of an Islamic state can never be free to choose their own religion. Tony insists: "...to place the adjective 'militant' in front of Islam, as if there is an essential Islam that is not militant, is to misunderstand Islam. Theologically, philosophically, politically and historically, Islam is militant." Tony also observes that Islam's refusal to privatize religion defies secularists who seek to exclude religion from the public domain and treat it as ethically irrelevant.

Throughout history all political states have meted out their highest punishment against traitors, often the death penalty. Because Islam has always been a political entity it takes this same stance towards apostates. It is undeniable that both in the authoritative texts (Koran and Hadith) and in practice, especially in most Muslim countries, apostates are legitimate targets for violence or, at the very least, severe persecution and ostracism.

John's handling of *jihad* in the Koran leaves a lot to be desired. John cites Sura 2:190-193, which speaks against Muslims making a pre-emptive strike. He rightly notes how many Muslims cite this as evidence that 'Islamic terrorism' violates the clear teaching of the Koran. However, the fact is that the terrorists responsible for September 11 did not see themselves as making a pre-emptive strike but as retaliating to American attacks on Islam. Here again readers are recommended to read Mike Raiter's treatment of *jihad* in the publication of his 2003 Leonard Buck Lecture in Missiology, *Contending for God in Islam and Christianity*. He shows that it simply will not do to portray all Islamic terrorists as the equivalent of a Timothy McVeigh or of the redneck, racist Ku Klux Klan. All conservative Muslims are constrained to work towards establishing Islam throughout the world. Many contend for this using only peaceful means but as Mike comments: "some find in the Qur'an and hadiths legitimacy for the use of physical force. We have seen that such an interpretation is a justifiable reading of these ancient documents."

But be careful not to jump to the opposite conclusion that Islam is a religion of violence not of peace. My problem with John's portrayal is that it is simplistic and, therefore, unhelpful. The truth is far more complex. To understand what Islam *is* we must look not only at the texts (which **do** emphasise *jihad* as physical, militant struggle) but at how Muslims have interpreted and practised their religion. Historically, Muslims have often had opportunity to treat those they have conquered in an unmerciful fashion but have in fact shown considerable mercy. In the contemporary world Muslims live under divergent forms of government and have differing attitudes towards the matter of how to promote Islam.

5. Does the presentation of religions in their best light result in a seriously distorted portrayal?
Given the encroachment of modern culture how many of the world's mainstream Jews directly interact with the Talmud (Mishnah plus Gemara), the oral tradition in Judaism? An even more germane question is: How many of the world's mainstream Jews (Reform, Conservative, Orthodox or Reconstructionist) directly interact with Scripture? To the extent that mainstream Jews have anything to do with Scripture what proportion regularly read and study non-Pentateuchal Old Testament books? Do modern-day Jews listen to their prophets?

If practice and not merely ideology is essential to determining what a religion *is*, then a failure to accord sufficient attention to religious practice must lead to distortion in a presentation of world religions. In practice a very high percentage of Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims are concerned about the need to protect themselves from malignant supernatural powers and spirits and such things as the evil eye. Such features are very much in the background in John's treatment of world religions.

6. Is there an adequate indication of the different schools that exist within each religious tradition?

It is not fair to expect John to cover the full gamut of religious expression involved in Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. To do justice to this would necessitate a much longer and less readable book. However, there are points at which more needs to be said about variant schools. For example, in Buddhism it needs to be recognized that Vajrayana Buddhism (roughly Tibetan Buddhism or Lamaism, also found in Bhutan and Mongolia) has various distinctive features, e.g. making the lama a fourth refuge and employing tantric practices such as employing (magical) mantras and mandalas, while depending on mystic masters for progress towards enlightenment. This fully warrants discriminating it from Mahayana Buddhism.

Buddhism is like football. That is, just as 'football' might refer to soccer (outdoor or indoor), rugby union, rugby league, Aussie rules and American gridiron, so 'Buddhism' covers widely divergent 'codes' such as Pure Land, Zen (most of the world's Buddhists represent a blending of Pure Land and Zen), Nichiren, etc. Buddhism is nowhere near as monolithic as John's presentation seems to indicate and it must also be noted that for most of the world's Buddhists Siddhartha is not likely to be the main focus of veneration. For example, Avalokiteshvara is far more important for Tibetan Buddhists, Amitabha/Amida Buddha for Pure Land Buddhists, Guan/Kuan Yin for many Buddhists from Chinese people groups and the Buddha Mind for Zen Buddhists. While John recognizes a distinction between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism his overall presentation is largely from a Theravada perspective, which pertains to a minority of Buddhist practitioners.

In treatments of modern Judaism it is normal to include Reconstructionist Judaism, a branch not considered by John. Jews of this school do not believe in a personal deity, nor in miracles such as the parting of the Red/Reed Sea, nor even in the idea of Israel as a chosen people. While the relatively small size of this branch might warrant its omission from John's treatment it probably needs to be included because of its significant influence upon Reform Judaism.

In this book John is seeking to understand each religion and present it as it *is*. It is curious therefore that in his treatment of Christianity he has almost nothing to say about liberal Christianity even though a high percentage of those who call themselves Christians hold views at variance with the presented traditional beliefs of Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox.