If I Were God I'd Make Myself Clearer

Searching for clarity in a world full of claims

John Dickson

If there really is something spiritual out there, wouldn't there be some pretty clear signposts to it? Surely God wouldn't leave people with nothing but a bewildering variety of religious voices?

If God exists—wouldn't he have made himself clearer?

In this book, John Dickson considers the vast array of spiritual claims made by different religions and individuals and asks whether any clarity about God can be found.

Written from a Christian perspective, this books struggles honestly with a dilemma facing 'believers' and 'unbelievers' alike: With so many religions on offer, can one of them be considered true? Or are they different paths up the same spiritual mountain? And how can any one person sort their way through the maze of claims?

Starting out as a professional singer-songwriter, John Dickson now works as an author, speaker, historian, minister and media presenter. He strives to be a public advocate for the Christian faith in doubting times.

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Also by John Dickson:

Hanging in There

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A Hell of a Life

Simply Christianity: A modern guide to the ancient faith

If I Were God, I'd End All the Pain

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For the Timmins family
in loving memory of Judy,
who came to enjoy clarity.

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Introduction

I know of a teacher in an Australian private school who begins most mornings with 10 minutes of Transcendental Meditation, a few lines from the Koran and a rendition of The Lord's Prayer ('Our Father'). I suspect his motivation goes beyond that of religious insurance—covering all his bets, so to speak—but it is certainly an interesting approach to the variety of religions on offer.

By contrast, I've got a number of mates who do virtually nothing of a spiritual nature—no church, no prayers and, except for a few rugby matches back in 2001, no experiences of an ecstatic nature.

As strange as it sounds, though, both approaches are often just different responses to the one spiritual dilemma. When it comes to faith there appears to be no clarity, just a cacophony of competing claims.

The vast array of spiritual options leaves many of us bewildered, wondering which, if any, of these is rational, helpful or true. Some take the so-called 'pluralist' approach and accept all perspectives as valid. Others avoid religion altogether lest they be led up the proverbial garden path (others, I guess, avoid religion

for fear that some of it might actually be true!).

This book tries to tackle the problem of clarity in a world of spiritual plurality. It is not intended to be a definitive answer—this issue is far more significant than a book of a hundred pages implies. Nor is it my aim to prove the 'truth' of a particular viewpoint, though I should acknowledge up-front that I myself accept the claims made by Christ.

My hopes are quite simple. It seems to me that most of us, whether 'religious' or not, have a hunch that there is more to life than meets the eye, as they say. And so I want to ask: what (if anything) has the Almighty done to match our hunches with something tangible? Because, to be honest, if I were God, I'd make myself clearer!

1
Incurably religious

A cultural eavesdrop

Late one evening recently I was enjoying the night sky out on the balcony when a fascinating conversation broke out among the guests of the dinner party next door—they too were out on their balcony.

The guests were your classic twenty-something Chardonnay-yuppies, and hardly what you would call 'religious types'. Nevertheless, at one point, the conversation turned decisively to religion. It started with one of the girls telling the others about a wedding she'd just been to for some 'happy-clappy-Christians', as she described them. A few lighthearted comments passed about the various Christians they'd come across, and then the conversation suddenly became 'deep'.

One by one each began to share his or her own insights into things spiritual. One bloke announced he preferred the New Age approach because it offered a spirituality that was meaningful but didn't make any of those onerous demands that Christianity apparently insists upon. The rest of them 'hmmned' in agreement. They really had my attention now.

The conversation floated from one aspect of

spirituality to another—the design of the universe, prayer, meditation, God, yoga, the church and so on. But there was one comment in particular that stood out for me as profound and quite self-revealing. One of the girls had made a sarcastic remark about 'organized' forms of worship—I think she was referring to the sort of thing I get up to most Sundays—and then one of her friends responded: "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." It could have been my imagination, but the comment seemed to drop in on the dinner-party like a revelation: the response from the others was complete silence for at least two or three seconds which, at this dinner party, seemed like an eternity.

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 may even be able to include in a future book. From the point of view of someone who writes and speaks on these issues, what struck me about this conversation was just how interesting and interested they all were in things spiritual. You could tell it was the first time they'd articulated their spiritual opinions to each other but it was equally apparent they'd all thought about the issues.

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 do not go away. We appear to be incurably inquisitive about realities deeper than our

investments, our waistlines, our holidays, our retirement packages and so on. It is as if something in our world continues to seduce us with questions of faith—Why are we here? What happens at death? To Whom can I be grateful?—and a thousand other questions which have tantalized the human mind over the centuries.

This may sound like the wishful thinking of someone whose 'bread-and-butter' is the promotion of a particular brand of spirituality, but Australia's leading newspaper, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, ran a feature article with a similar observation. It was titled 'Highly Spirited' and it ran the teaser: "Despite its materialist veneer, religion is thriving in many different guises in Australia". The writer listed an array of spiritualities he believed to be alive and well in Australia. There were the obvious ones, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and so on, but the informal expressions of religion were especially interesting: he pointed to the New Age movement, for example, and the modern fascination with Aboriginal spirituality.

But it is not just these obvious claims of faith that point to an interest in spirituality. I find it fascinating that some of the prominent atheists of our day have devoted much of their time and energy to spiritual questions. I would have thought that once you rejected the existence of God, and the spiritual realm generally, you would devote your attention to things material. This is apparently not the case. Philip Adams, for instance, the radio broadcaster and perhaps Australia's most vocal atheist, is constantly discussing religion—

usually with some scorn but frequently nonetheless. I once heard him debate a Christian leader on-air and his depth of knowledge about, and fascination with, things spiritual was intriguing. He confessed to having a particular curiosity with ancient Egyptian and pagan spirituality—not that he believed any of it, of course.

To offer another example, perhaps the 20th century's greatest atheist, the Englishman Bertrand Russell, was similarly 'plagued' by religious inclinations, even if in the end he was able to diffuse these with his rationalisations. In a biography written by his own daughter, Russell is described in strikingly spiritual terms:

> I believe myself that his whole life was a search for God, or, for those who prefer less personal terms, for absolute certainty. Indeed, he had first taken up philosophy in the hope of finding proof of the existence of God… Somewhere at the back of my father's mind, at the bottom of his heart, in the depths of his soul, there was an empty space that had once been filled by God, and he never found anything else to put in it. (Katherine Tait, *My Father Bertrand Russell,* Victor Gollancz, London, 1976, pp. 182-189)

Even late in life, after all his argumentation and vitriol against theism, Russell still confessed an unshakeable 'feeling' toward religion. After visiting an ancient Byzantine church in Greece, he wrote to his daughter:

> I realized then that the Christian outlook had a firmer hold upon me than I had imagined… I realized with some astonishment that I myself am powerfully affected by this sense in my feelings though not in my beliefs.

Whether it's Chardonnay-pluralists like the guests next-door or hard-core atheists like Adams and Russell, men and women seem strangely drawn toward spiritual questions. It is as if we are incurably religious.

An ancient eavesdrop

Something similar to this was said almost two millennia ago in a famous speech by the Apostle Paul, the one-time-persecutor turned promoter of the Christian faith:

> "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it… gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek

> God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him." (Acts 17:22-27a)

This statement was made not in a church, or in a theological textbook with eager converts devouring every word, but in one of the cultural and intellectual nerve-centres of the ancient pagan world—the great city of Athens. To be more precise, the statement was part of a larger speech delivered (in A.D. 50) to the *Areopagus*, an elite intellectual council of elder statesmen-and-women which convened on Mars Hill overlooking the old city. The purpose of this particular meeting of the council was to assess the value, or otherwise, of the bizarre recent news about a Jewish teacher in Palestine who had reportedly been raised to life after Roman execution and who, as a consequence, had sparked a whole new religious movement. Paul was one of the movement's chief spokespersons and so, in the interests of tolerance, the Areopagus granted him the opportunity to explain the significance of this new teaching. Paul relished the opportunity and in taking it up left us with one of the ancient world's truly great speeches.

Throughout the book I will refer to this speech on a number of occasions, giving us the opportunity to eavesdrop on a debate which occurred millennia ago, but which seems to me as relevant today in our multicultural 21st-century context as it was back then in the wonderful potpourri of cultures that made up first-century Athens. If you're interested in reading the entire speech in its setting it can be found on pages 77-79.

At this point, however, I am interested simply in Paul's cultural claim in the statement above. Not only were the Athenians 'very religious' but God has in fact arranged the times and places of human societies with the express intention that they should search for their Source of Life and perhaps "feel their way toward him and find him". The human family, in other words, is designed for connection with the divine.

Paul said this as someone who'd never travelled outside the Mediterranean basin. His personal experience of cultures was probably limited to Libyan, Egyptian, Palestinian, Turkish, Greek, Italian and, perhaps, Spanish societies. But all these years later, as we gaze down the immense corridor of centuries of historical research, Paul's words appear truer than ever before. Every single society about which anthropologists and historians know anything significant has made 'spirituality' a key component of their cultural life. Australian Aboriginals, New Zealand Maoris, native Americans, pre-Anglo Celts, marauding Goths, nomadic Mongols and modern Chardonnay-yuppies—every one of them has been, or is, conspicuously 'religious'.

It is worth reflecting on this for a moment. 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 organisation and personal intimacy, the question of God is one of the few universally shared premises of humanity throughout time. It is *common* sense. To ignore the question, then, or to relegate it to the level of the obscure, is to stand outside the

mainstream of human thought.

Now whether this common hunch about things spiritual finds an answer in something concrete—such as an actual God, a real heaven and so on—is a separate issue. Paul obviously thought it did, and we will spend some time later in this book thinking about whether there is enough evidence really to support such a claim.

But for the moment, what is especially interesting to me is why we in the modern Western world talk about these things so rarely. Why is it that, despite the incurable religiosity of humanity, many of us talk about these questions only *very* occasionally, after a few Chardonnays, on balconies?