

DP2.07 Subjective Evidence for the Truth of Christianity?

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In this scientific age we expect evidence to be as objective as possible. How else will we prevent flights of fancy or whims or deceitful invention? This commitment to empirical method suits Christianity, since of all the religions, it is historical at its core. Whereas Islam could arguably survive without Mohammed, and Buddhism could survive without Buddha, if Jesus Christ did not actually rise at an historical place and time “...(our) faith is futile...we are to be pitied more than all men” (1 Cor 15:17, 19).

Recently I was asked to talk to a group about the evidence for the reliability of the New Testament. As I did my preparation, I was once again struck by the overwhelming number of manuscripts and supporting documents available to check that what we read today is the same as what was written originally. I was struck by the painstaking way the New Testament writers marshal the evidence for “what they had seen and heard”, and the way they are so convinced of the factuality of these events that they can appeal to their audience to check it out for themselves. I was struck by the fact that their enemies seem impotent to do this, resorting to a futile attempt to silence them (Acts 4:17, 5:28). And I was once again struck by the fact that many of their enemies ran out of ways to deny what they knew to be true, and so they became Christians (Acts 6:7, cf Mt 28:11-15). In short, I was once again struck by the strong (to say the least!) objective evidence for the truth of the New Testament’s claims.

But my preparation also resurrected a problem that I had struggled with many times before. Although the objective evidence for Christianity is so strong, I had often noticed that it is rare indeed for someone to become a Christian because of that evidence. For sure, such animals do exist. There are people who sat down, read the New Testament analytically, weighed up the evidence, and eventually, like C.S. Lewis, were converted kicking and struggling, compelled by the objective truth of the darned thing.

But for most, it seems to me, there is another scenario. When you listen to Christians giving their testimony, it often seems much more subjective. They were hearing someone talking about the gospel, and it “just made sense” to them. They read the Bible and “it was talking about my life”. They had so many questions about life and “the Bible seemed to give answers.” Sometimes people become Christians on the bare minimum of the gospel message. And it seems that many, many Christians wouldn’t know the first thing about the objective evidence for the New Testament provided by manuscripts, early versions and the like. They read the Bible and, like sheep responding to the voice of a Palestinian shepherd, they recognise in it the voice of their Master.

Now, one option would be to say that this group has got a precarious footing on Christianity. Come the first egghead agnostic and their faith will go down the gurgler. Okay, so it may be helpful for them to gain greater assurance of their faith through the study of the various evidences.

But another option is to say that this group actually constitutes another piece of objective

evidence. That is, it is an objective fact that a large group of Christian people claim to “hear God’s voice” when they hear the gospel of Jesus Christ and/or read the Bible.

The New Testament itself testifies to this, doesn’t it?

1. “What then is this, a new teaching with authority” (Capernaum Synagogue, Mark 1:27);
2. “To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” (Peter, John 6:68);
3. “No-one ever spoke the way this man does” (the temple guards sent to arrest Jesus, John 7:46);
4. “My sheep hear my voice” (Jesus, John 10:27);
5. “When I came to you my message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power... If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command” (Paul to the Corinthians, 1 Cor 2:1-4, 14:37);
6. “God made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor 4:6);
7. “Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction...when you received the Word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe” (Paul to the Thessalonians, 1 Thes 1:4-5, 2:13);
8. “You have been born again...through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1:23);
9. “You have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth” (1 John 2:20).

When I eventually spoke to the group I decided to add this extra piece of evidence. When the question time came, I remembered why I had always been reluctant to put it in before. “But that’s too subjective. Every religion has their Holy Books. They all have the same experience so it doesn’t prove anything about Christianity.”

What an idiot I was! This is multicultural, pluralistic Australia – of course I would get this objection! I could see my whole talk – even the objective bits – being rejected as the ravings of a naive, uncritical fundamentalist, who was prepared to accept any subjective report as evidence. I remembered that from my previous encounters with this objection I had developed a very effective standard response, which I promptly put into action. I covered my embarrassment with “Isn’t it hot in here?”, then glanced obviously at my watch and exclaimed “Oh, is that the time?” and slunk out of the room.

But this time I was determined to do something about this. I had been embarrassed once too often. Why didn’t this approach ever seem to cut the mustard? After all, this subjective evidence was part of the New Testament, and it was an objective fact of today’s Christianity, so where was the problem? The problem was that I didn’t know enough about other religions.

On different occasions, I spoke to four friends who were residents of other countries, but temporarily in Australia. One was a Korean who told me about Confucianism and Taoism. I learned about Buddhism from a man from Singapore. Another was Indian, who spoke of his

country's native Hinduism. The fourth was from Pakistan, well versed in Islam. What they each told me came as a complete surprise.

Yes, each religion had their Holy Books. However, these Holy Books played nowhere near the role that the Bible does for Christians. They were written in ancient languages, largely inaccessible to modern people, and copies were certainly not widely possessed by the adherents of the religion. The teaching of these books tended to be collections of wisdom that was passed from father to son, rather than from believers reading it for themselves.

I read them 1 Thessalonians 1:5, and 2:13 "...our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction;" "...when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe." I asked them whether there was any relationship in their country's religion parallel to this one. Did the adherents of Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism report that when they heard their Holy Book they heard their God speaking through it?

Their answer was short, simple and unanimous, in each case accompanied by a vigorous shaking of the head: "No" (although my friend versed in Islam stressed that the Koran is nevertheless, treated as God's Word). Then I realised. The problem was not with my claim, but with the objector's claim. He assumed that other religions were just like Christianity. But this assumption was wrong. He was a victim of our Western pluralism that keeps on telling us that all religions are the same. How I kick myself that I too have believed that lie for so long! I think of all the embarrassment I could have saved! But more importantly, I now think of the conviction that I can have from now on. For now I can firmly proclaim the objective fact that God still speaks to people today, only through the gospel of his Son. As this gospel is proclaimed people still accept the word that comes through other men, "...as it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe."