

The Sound of a Lecture Undelivered: Jesus and the World's Religions

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Not in the human "atmosphere", but in the divine "stratosphere".

Frithjof Schuon

I'm going to do something tonight I've never attempted before, or not at least publicly. Your patience, compassion, and good humor would therefore be much appreciated.

I'm going to pose a series of questions, questions I think you might have wished to ask in response to the lecture I'm *not* going to give. This is more than a little weird, I realize, but there's an important pedagogical point at stake: namely, that we listen more attentively, and end up learning more fully, when we're a little puzzled. Furman prides itself on promoting what it calls an "engaged" education. Well, one of my aims here tonight is to stimulate such an education precisely, though in this case the engagement, if and when it comes, won't be off-campus but within your minds. If we work at this together, by the time I've finished you should have been able to piece together at least the basic outlines of what I *could* have told you but didn't—and thus, as a Zen Buddhist might say, to hear the sound of a lecture undelivered. Whether I'll be greeted at that point by the sound of at least one hand clapping, or by hisses and boos, we'll have to wait and see.

The six questions I'm going to pose, and then endeavor to answer, like the questions people actually ask after lectures, have been designed to reflect a variety of perspectives and assumptions. Three will come as if from students, two from professors, and one from a member of the clergy, as suits (I've assumed) the make-up of this audience. Let me add at once that I'm envisioning my questioners as representative types. If they remind you of people you actually know, whether here at Furman or elsewhere, I

won't necessarily be displeased, but I can assure you that with a single exception—and that person will know when the time comes—any correspondence with real individuals, whether living or dead, was unintended. Some of the questions will take as their starting point the answer I provided to another question, while some may appear completely off the wall. One or two may seem, and perhaps even be, stupid, but that's the way it often is during Q and A sessions. I'll try not to embarrass my imagined inquirers, however, for genuine stupidity—not to say insolence—can be an open door to Truth.

So, without further delay, let's turn to the questions. I'm going to call first on the scowling young man I see here on the front row toward my right wearing the Campus Crusade for Christ T-shirt.

Question 1. Dr Cutsinger, you *say* you're a Christian, but unless I've completed misunderstood your lecture, you apparently believe anybody can be saved regardless of what religion they follow. Haven't you ever read what Jesus said: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me" (John 14:6)? Or are you one of those liberal religion professors, who think the Bible isn't really the Word of God but just a bunch of interpretations foisted on the purely human facts of Christ's life by his followers?

Answer 1. You've asked a good question, or rather—if I counted correctly—you've asked me *three* good questions: Do I think people can be saved no matter what they believe? Do I agree that the Bible passage you quoted means that only Christians go to Heaven? And what do I think of liberal religion professors? Let me proceed back to front and stick with your third question for now. Trying to answer it will help me clarify my position, and unless I'm mistaken others in the audience will wish to return to the other two issues anyway.

So, am I a liberal when it comes to my view of Jesus and my interpretation of the Bible? What you ask, and the tone in which you ask it, suggests you're fed up with all those scholars of Scripture whose approach to Christ's life, and the lives of those who wrote about Him, is strictly bottoms-up and solely in terms of cultural and historical

context. Frankly, I'm fed up with them too, and I use every occasion I can, whether in or out of my classrooms, to critique all such critics.

Here's the problem in a nutshell. We've got way too many people on college campuses wielding their Ph.D.'s in order to persuade the impressionable that science alone can provide us with genuine knowledge. And it's precisely because they've bought into this nonsense, or are afraid to say if they haven't, that so many religion professors end up reducing the sacred to the secular and absolutes to relativities, treating their subject as a historical curiosity, or as a language game, or (in the worst of cases) as primitive superstition. I suspect that's what you're reacting to when you use the word "liberal". If so, I can assure you I'm definitely *not* a liberal, though doubtless there are other senses in which I shall seem to you left of center.

Let's get one thing crystal clear: even though, as you learned from my lecture, I'm not a Christian *exclusivist* but am convinced on the contrary that other religions can be true and saving paths to God, I'm nonetheless a thoroughly *traditional* Christian, who accepts, as they say, the whole nine yards: prophecies, miracles, angels, saints, relics, sacraments—you name it. Probably a lot more than you wish I believed! I realize you had every right to expect just the opposite, especially if you're familiar with the standard forms of interfaith dialogue today. In my experience, those who participate in such dialogues are often more eager to seem accepting of others than they are in accepting what their own traditions have taught through the centuries, and one ends up with what you've called liberal Christians talking to liberal Hindus and liberal Jews and liberal Buddhists about how great it is to be a liberal!

Tolerance and open-mindedness too often go hand in hand in such settings with a kind of embarrassment at one's own spiritual riches and a willingness to compromise and negotiate at the level of dogma. One of the best known and most influential Christian writers in this field is an Englishman named John Hick, whose influential, pluralistic model of the world's religions is combined with the conviction that the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is merely a myth. Please believe me when I say I'm worlds apart from such heretics. I believe as you do that Jesus Christ is the divine Son of God, that He was born of a virgin, that He caused things to happen during His years on this planet that natural science can't explain, and that having truly died and been truly raised from the

dead, He ascended to Heaven, “whence He shall come (as the Apostles’ Creed says) to judge the living and the dead”. I do not suppose He was merely a man, not even a divine man. I take Him to be precisely what the Christian tradition proclaims: namely, the eternal God—or, more exactly, the second of three eternal Persons of God, also known as the *Logos* or Word.

Speaking of Heaven, I’ve always been especially intrigued by the words this Person speaks in John 3 to an utterly stupefied Jew named Nicodemus—and do remember, please, what I said a few moments ago about stupidity. Jesus told him, “No one ascends into Heaven except the one who descended from Heaven, even the Son of Man, who is in Heaven” (John 3:13). In other words: “Nobody goes up except the One who came down, and the Person who’s speaking to you right now *is* that One even though He’s actually still there!” Wrapping our minds around that mystifying maxim—or rather allowing our minds to be exploded by it—is, in my opinion, somewhere very near the heart of the Christian life. And a purely horizontal approach to the Bible, as to religion in general, is of no use at all in bringing about that explosion.

Let me take another question. How about the spectacled woman with the stack of blue books at her feet and a briefcase in her lap, sitting over there to my left?

Question 2. Yes, thank you. I would like to speak up in defense of “liberal” religion professors, Dr Cutsinger. Surely you don’t mean to suggest—or *do* you?—that what you’ve condescendingly called a merely “horizontal approach” has taught us *nothing* about the history of religious traditions. Are the grammars of the relevant languages, or the archeological examination of artifacts, or the study of the sociological dynamics of faith communities really of *no* significance *at all* to you when it comes to understanding the evolution and variety of humankind’s beliefs and ritual practices? And what about the insights supplied by ethnography, psychology, comparative literature, women’s studies, and the cognitive sciences?

Answer 2. Coming as it has from a colleague, a fellow professor of religion, this is a most important question, and I’m grateful you asked it. For in trying to respond, I may be able to highlight a bit more clearly than I did in the lecture the full significance of

one of its key ideas, what I called the “transcendent unity of religions”. I’m beginning to see that I must have failed to put enough stress on the word *transcendent* in that phrase, with all the altitude and verticality it implies.

Let me say first I don’t disagree with you. That is to say, I don’t disagree that the various disciplines you mention can lead to a better understanding of what you called “the evolution and variety of humankind’s beliefs and ritual practices”. Scholars have indeed managed to amass a great deal of fascinating information concerning all kinds of curious beliefs and behaviors, those of the early Christians among them. But to what end? If I understood the subtext of his question correctly—and the complaints I hear from students at my own university lead me to think I have—the young man whom I called on first is very rightly worried about an approach to religion, especially *his* religion, which treats it as a purely empirical or even phenomenological entity. I’ve no idea what you do in your classroom, but you and I both know that our discipline is rife with professors whose bedrock philosophical assumption is that nobody can know what Kant and Carnap can’t, and who inevitably end up reducing and trivializing the objects of their study, whether purposefully or not.

Just the other day I was visiting the website of a religion department at a well-known university not far north of here. I won’t mention the name, but I *will* tell you it’s in Chapel Hill. Anyway, here’s what I found—under the topic of how to write a research paper in religious studies: “The goal of any paper in religious studies should not be to demonstrate or refute provocative religious concepts, such as the existence of God, the idea of reincarnation, or the possibility of burning in hell. By nature, such issues are supernatural and/or metaphysical *and thus not open to rational inquiry.*”¹ What colossal arrogance, I thought! In one stroke this writer dismisses Moses Maimonides, the Dalai Lama, and Saint Gregory of Nyssa—none of them stupid people—who certainly *did* and (in the case of the Dalai Lama) *do* think, respectively, that God, reincarnation, and the state of the damned can be inquired about rationally. I confess I’d much rather listen to any one of these spiritual giants than to the Ph.D.’d drone who emitted this drivel.

I like to quote the great Hindu scholar of religions Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. A prodigiously brilliant man by any measure, who was fluent (his son told me) in thirty-

¹ http://www.unc.edu/depts/weweb/handouts/religious_studies.html on 20 April 2007. My italics.

three languages, Coomaraswamy was once asked to explain what had led to his becoming such a perspicacious interpreter of religion, sacred art, and metaphysics. What was his motivation, the underlying aim of his work? His response was to say, very simply, “I do what I do in the first place for my soul’s salvation, and secondarily for those who might likewise benefit from my results.” This has become in a sense the motto of my own teaching and writing. Like Coomaraswamy, and like most of the students who enroll in my classes, I’ve no interest in faith communities or ritualistic behaviors of type such and such, or in the impressions they may have left in the *horizontal* record of history, except to the extent they might serve as launching pads for a *vertical* ascent into God. Those in our profession who stop short with meticulous descriptions of the position or shape or composition or size of those launching pads, or with the biographies and genealogies of those employed in building them, have completely missed the boat in my view—or I guess I should say, missed the rocket!

Now I realize, of course, many scholars feel they’ve no choice—or not at least if they want to get tenure!—no choice but to keep their feet planted on the solid ground of what academia is pleased to call “facts”. Having been told by their modern and postmodern mentors (as well as by the websites of major universities) that there’s no way of *rationaly knowing* whether there’s Anything “up” in the first place—let alone any way of projecting ourselves in Its direction—they’ve settled for scrabbling about on the single plane of this world, like the two-dimensional characters in Edwin Abbot’s book *Flatland*. Cataloguing, comparing, and contrasting perspectives, they may well have a few beliefs of their own, but when it comes to their books and classrooms they humbly refrain from all third-dimensional judgments as to the existence of solid truths. Well, it’s long seemed to me such scholars need to try refraining from something else for awhile, namely, from the ubiquitous but unexamined assumption that we’re essentially limited and conditioned beings, somehow stuck within space and time, and that the only things we can know (if even those) are empirical.

But I think it’s time for another question. The fellow with the green Mohawk and the iPod dangling from his ear—who’s been frantically waving his hand at me ever since I finished my lecture—seems especially eager.

Question 3. Yeah, man, well I don't know anything about that Nicodemus dude you were talking about before, but exploding your mind sounds pretty cool! Anyway, I think you need to back up to what that first guy asked you—the part you just sort of skipped before. You went on and on in your lecture about this “transcendent unity of religions” thing. Sounds like all the religions are the same, and you can believe whatever you want to. If that's what you mean, then like you know I'm completely cool with it. “Live and let live” is what I say.

Answer 3. I'm very sorry to tell you that if that's how things came across in my lecture, one of us has made a *huge* mistake, because I'm most definitely *not* an anything's-okay-as-long-as-you're-sincere-about-it sort of guy.

As I trust you'll remember, I used the image of a mountain in my talk, and I asked the audience to consider the possibility that there are multiple paths up this mountain, the paths corresponding to different religions and the summit to God. This is a common metaphor for describing the position I've tried to articulate here tonight. Another comparison is to say that the world's major spiritual traditions are like the several spokes of a wheel, the hub in this case corresponding to God, or again that they resemble the dialects of a single language.

But notice in each case that *more-than-one* is not the same thing as *all*. Not every path is a mountain path, nor does every mountain path take you all the way to the top. Some of the trails people find themselves on may circle aimlessly around the mountain's base or meander off along some low-lying spur, while others can actually lead them away from the mountain altogether. In the same way, not every spoke is attached to a hub, and not every piece of wood is a spoke. Nor are all forms of speech the dialectical variations of a common tongue, for there are completely different languages after all, and there's also just plain gibberish.

In talking about Jesus and His saving relationship with the adherents of the world's religions, I have in mind certain specific traditions, with specific doctrines and practices. There's no way I can go into all the details or describe every nuance of the position I hold. But broadly speaking I would say that Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism,

Christianity, and Islam should all be regarded as saving means of return to our Origin, and thus as paths leading all the way to the summit.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not proposing that this necessarily exhausts the list of true religions, nor am I saying that every form of these five religions is authentic. But I *am* saying what you apparently didn't hear, or didn't wish to hear: that while it's possible to get back to God by a number of different routes, there are also spiritual dead ends and—even worse—paths that can lead the unwary under cover of night to the very edge of a precipice. This being so, distinctions need to be drawn not only between true and false religions, but, within a given true religion, between its orthodox and heretical forms. If asked to name names, I would point to Scientology, for example, as a false religion—its creator, L. Ron Hubbard, was a science fiction writer, after all, who's on record as saying that the best way to get rich is to invent a religion. And I would cite the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, otherwise known as the Unification Church, founded by the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, as a false form of Christianity.

In any case, no, I don't believe you can believe whatever you want to. As I emphasized in my lecture, in order to be genuine, and therefore spiritually liberating or deifying, a religion must meet at least three criteria: it must be revealed by God and not concocted by humans; it must provide its adherents with an accurate map of the various levels of Reality and above all with an adequate picture of the Ultimate Source of All Things, whatever name we might use for that Source, whether Yahweh, Brahman, Allah, Tao, or Father; and it must offer a sacramental method or means sufficiently infused with the power of the Source to allow those who sincerely make use of these sacraments to overcome or extinguish their egos and thus become what we're all meant to be, that is, participants in the very nature of God. "It is no longer I," said Saint Paul, "but Christ who is in me" (Gal. 2:20).

If you'd like a contemporary example of a person in whom, as with Paul, such an extinction was evident, I might mention my friend Martin Lings, a man who'd been described to me years before I first met him as someone who, when he walked into the room, made you believe in God. He was a student and life-long friend of the great Christian apologist C. S. Lewis, but shortly after graduating from Oxford in the mid-

1930s, Dr Lings entered Islam and lived for the next sixty-eight years, until his death in 2005 at the age of ninety-six, within the context of Sufism or mystical Islam, serving during the final decade of his life as a widely renowned Sufi *shaykh* or spiritual master. Though I've been blessed with a number of other friendships with exemplary Muslims, he could have convinced me on his own that Islam is a genuine path up the mountain.

I had the privilege of meeting with Dr Lings periodically over the course of about eighteen years, both privately and in settings with others, and he was someone whose every action and word, whose very body language—if I might use that expression—gave proof of inward detachment and a profound effacement of ego. It was easy to understand in his presence what Saint Paul must have meant by the phrase “no longer I”. And I couldn't help but reflect on Christ's statement that prophets are to be judged “by their fruits” (Matt. 7:16): If the good fruit of a religion is sanctity, I thought, and if there are people like my friend Dr Lings who've come to embody such sanctity by believing the doctrines and practicing the methods of their non-Christian religions, what else could I do but conclude that their religions are genuine?

I shall call next on the bearded man in the cassock, standing near the back of the chapel. Yes, Father, would you like to ask a question?

Question 4: Forgive me, Professor Cutsinger, but it seems you've been talking entirely around your main topic, “Jesus and the World's Religions”. It's clear enough now that you don't think all the religions are true, but you obviously *do* think at least *some* of them are and that non-Christians can be saved by their means. Perhaps the word “salvation” has a less profound meaning for you than it does for me. Maybe when you offer us the example of someone like this man Martin Lings, it's just his apparent moral rectitude or something equally elementary you've got in mind. But if it's anything more than that, I think in all fairness to your audience you really must go back to the text the first of your interlocutors cited, John 14:6. And you need to explain to us, if you can, how you as a Christian can say that a Muslim, who obviously *doesn't* believe in Jesus Christ, can nonetheless be truly saved if, as Christ Himself told us, “No one comes to the Father except by me.”

Answer 4. Thank you for reminding me of this important passage of Scripture. It's one often cited by Christians who believe theirs is the only true and saving faith. Before commenting on the verse itself, however, just a word or two as to what I mean by "salvation". I'll be very surprised if it isn't what you yourself mean since we're both Orthodox Christians. At the same time I'll be equally surprised if it's not something rather different from what many of our Protestant and Catholic brethren here tonight have in mind when they hear the word. You suspect me of not going far *enough* in my usage. They may well accuse me of having gone *too* far.

The meaning I attach to the term was already hinted at in my last response. I pointed out that one of the criteria of a true and saving religion is that it must give its adherents the means of overcoming or extinguishing their egos so as to become "participants in the very nature of God". In using that phrase I was of course quoting a New Testament text often used in defending our Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* or deification, namely, 2 Peter 1:4.

As to what this participation involves, I often refer my students, and would refer my audience now, to the provocative words of Gregory Palamas, a fourteenth-century Orthodox theologian and saint. According to Palamas, the effects of salvation, which may begin to manifest themselves even now in this life, consist in our entering into a mode of existence that is "without origin, indescribable, and supra-temporal", with the result—he adds a fine paradox—that we creatures "become uncreated".² In other words, while remaining essentially human, we come to share in the defining powers and privileges of God Himself, the uncreated Creator, even as Jesus, while retaining His essence as God, came to share in all the characteristics and properties that define us as human beings. Even as God shed human tears, bled human blood, and died a human death on the Cross, so are we humans enabled to see with divine eyes, work with divine hands, and take-up-no-space with a truly divine omnipresence—as does the One who was speaking to that stupefied dude Nicodemus.

That's what I mean by salvation. And though I realize it must seem to you incredible, it's what I saw evidence of in my Muslim friend Dr Lings. I don't mean to suggest he was necessarily perfect or had yet become deified. But your phrase "moral

² *The Triads*, ed. John Meyendorff (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1983), p. 86.

rectitude” is simply not sufficient to account for what one sensed in his presence. On the contrary, it was clear to me as to many others, not merely that this man didn’t sin in his actions, but that his innermost thoughts and intentions had been correspondingly purified, to the point in fact that at the very end of his long life he experienced what those who were close to him could only describe as a kind of clairvoyant or precognitive illumination regarding the precise moment he was going die—a moment that found him in his *zawiyah* or oratory with his *tasbih* or prayer beads in his hand, having just put the final touches to his last book, appropriately entitled *A Return to the Spirit*. Call it what you will, something very big, and very good, was clearly underway in this remarkable soul.

Well, obviously a great deal more could be said about that, but I see other hands, and I haven’t even gotten to the main issue you raised. Like my first inquirer, you want to know how I can possibly think other religions can save—perhaps especially in the exalted sense just described—if indeed Jesus Christ is *the* way, not *a* way; *the* truth, not *a* truth; and *the* life, not *a* life? Let me cut straight to the heart of this matter by asking a question of my own: namely, who’s doing the talking in John 14:6 anyway? Who precisely is the “I” who “am” the way, the truth, and the life, and who’s the “me” through whom one approaches the Father?

According to the ancient teaching of the Ecumenical Councils, as you yourself know very well, the central “I-ness” of Christ, that is, the subject who thinks His thoughts, speaks His words, and is the agent of all His actions, is the eternal Word or Son of God, second Person of the Holy Trinity. Jesus isn’t a man who was adopted by God, nor a man in whom God was the indwelling presence, nor an intermediate being created by God as the highest of creatures, nor again a composite being, partly divine and partly human. As I said in response to the first of the questions this evening, who Jesus is, *is* the divine Son of God, “by whom all things were made”, as the Nicene Creed puts it.

The Gospel of John is most emphatic in this regard, for the same Person who says He’s the only way to the Father also says, “Before Abraham *was*, I *am*” (John 8:58). I’d encourage everyone to spend some time pondering the tenses of that passage. The bewildering juxtaposition of the past and the present—of the “was” and the “am”—clearly undercuts every effort, however well intentioned, to identify Jesus with a strictly

temporal set of saving facts. It's therefore a major mistake to confuse the uniqueness of the only-begotten and eternal Son of God with the supposed singularity of His historical manifestation in first-century Palestine.

I've certainly no wish to deny that there's only one Son of God, or that He alone is the author of salvation, or that Jesus Christ is that Son. But I would insist very strongly that there are no Biblical or dogmatic grounds for supposing that this one Son has limited His saving work to His incarnate presence as Jesus. On the contrary, as Saint Athanasius and other early theologians maintained, though the Word "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14), He was by no means confined to that flesh, even during His earthly ministry.

Once this subtle point has been grasped, a number of other scriptural teachings begin to take on a richer and more encompassing meaning. We're able to read in a new and fresh way that Jesus is "the true light who enlightens every man that comes into the world" (John 1:9) and that He has "other sheep who are not of this fold" (John 10:16), and we realize that the events of His passion on Golgotha were the working out, at a particular time and place, of a strictly timeless salvation. For the Lamb of God, whose "act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for *all men*" (Rom. 5:18), is "slain from before the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8).

If we're willing to follow the thread of such clues, we begin to sense that the Son or Word of God, far from being limited to a single religion, is the divine Principle behind all revelation and the eternal source of salvation in every authentic or orthodox religion. Though truly incarnate as Jesus Christ in Christianity, there's no reason to think He's not savingly operative in and through other traditions as well. In some He may be present in an equally personal way, as in Krishna and the other Hindu avatars, while in others He may appear in an impersonal way, as in the Koran of Islam, where He made Himself book.

Well, that was a long-winded and somewhat technical answer, I realize, but these issues are so important, and so close to the heart of my presentation tonight, I felt some elaboration was in order. Anyway, it seems to me time for another question, and I'd like to call again on a student. Let's come back up front, where I see another scowling young

person sitting at the opposite end of the row from my first interlocutor. You seem to be clutching rather tightly to that book in your lap, young lady. Could you show me what it is? Oh yes, I see. She has a brand new copy of Richard Dawkins' recent salvo, *The God Delusion*. Did you have something you wanted to ask?

Question 5. I really have to hand it to you, Cutsinger. So far at least you've stage-managed this evening quite cleverly. First, it's this fundamentalist guy, then another hired hand like you who gets paid for professing this whole religion thing, then that weirdo New Age junkie with the bizarre hairdo, and now last but not least we hear from this Christian priest in the cute black dress. You get all these seemingly different people to throw you a bunch of softball questions, and then you put on this act like you're disagreeing with them. But truth is, they've all just played right into your hands. None of them has the guts to ask the really tough questions, because each of their own pathetic little lives depends on helping you maintain the illusion.

You did have to admit, I noticed, that there *are* at least a *few* intelligent people out there who think it's all just absurd, who look at religion—let's see, I wrote this down; yeah, here it is—"as a historical curiosity, or as a language game, or as primitive superstition". But you never said *why* that approach is so bad. You just assumed everybody here would come along on your little parade, and I'm sure most of them have. I doubt they've read a word of Dawkins, or Daniel Dennett, or Sam Harris, and I doubt you have either.

Anyway, you haven't even come close to discussing what anybody in their right mind can see is the bottom-line issue. You've given the intelligent atheist no reason at all to think there's a God in the first place, and certainly no reason for thinking that this Great Cosmic Entity is somehow responsible for the confusing, and obviously contradictory, belief systems you want us all to honor. I don't need all your rhetoric about religions as launching pads and believers as astronauts. If you expect serious, scientific people to take you seriously, you need to give them some evidence. Show us this God of yours! Prove it's not all just a bunch of wishful thinking! Religion's history, Cutsinger, and you and the rest of the deluded masses need to face up to that fact!

Answer 5. In responding to the opening question tonight, I began by pointing out that it actually included a trinity of related issues all rolled into one, and unless I'm mistaken that's true as well of the challenge you've posed. Your three questions might be expressed in a more or less rhetorical form—though unlike you I'm far from thinking them rhetorical questions. First, isn't it obvious that faith is just wishful thinking, something weak or childish people use to cope with a world that's otherwise too harsh to bear? Second, isn't it true there's no evidence for the claims of religion? Third, doesn't it follow that atheism is a more intelligent position than theism?

Let me assure you I can understand where you're coming from, and frankly I admire your chutzpah in speaking out as you have, though your question is a bit of a tangent to my main theme tonight. In an academic climate that is in many quarters growing less and less hospitable to religious conviction, it's inevitable that thoughtful people, including believers themselves, would be asking such questions. Obviously a book might be written in answer to each. About all I can do here tonight is provide just a hint—just the briefest of intimations, really—as to where I might start were I authoring these books. My answers, as you probably expected in any case, are no, no, and no.

First of all, no, it's *not* obvious that faith is just wishful thinking, or at least it's not obvious that it's necessarily so. I add this qualification because I agree that certain forms or levels of belief can be rather childish, as is the faith of the grownup who still thinks God has a beard, or sits on a throne, or exists for the sole purpose of dispensing chocolate. But there's also such a thing as childish *disbelief*. In my experience, many atheists haven't been given all the chocolate they want and are therefore mad at God for not existing. William James's distinction between the tough- and tender-minded applies to both theists and atheists. In both groups we find people whose perspective on life is based on what they regard as objective facts and good reasons (those are the tough-minded in James's terms) as well as other people whose perspective is based on purely subjective desires (those are the tender-minded). In any case, it's important to realize that the sophisticated dismissiveness skeptics often employ in debate, which takes the form of saying, "Oh, you just think that because you're immature, or uneducated, or depressed, or had a dysfunctional family, or are subject to some sort of chemical imbalance", is a game two can play. Perhaps the atheist is just afraid of commitment or responsibility or being

thought a fool by his friends. According to Freud, religion is really just repressed sexuality, but there's nothing to stop us from countering that sexuality is really just repressed religion.

No again, it *isn't* true that there's no evidence for the claims of religion. The crucial word here, of course, is "evidence". I'm pretty sure when you use the term you're thinking exclusively of *empirical* evidence, and thus buying into the assumptions I was critiquing earlier in responding to my first two interlocutors. Like many people on today's college campuses, you're assuming the only things we can truly know are things we have some sort of physical evidence for—and for which we might apply for some grant money!—things we can see, hear, taste, touch, or smell, either directly through one or more of these five natural senses or indirectly through the mediation of an instrument, like a microscope, that's been designed to magnify or amplify the reach of those senses. What I'm not sure you've noticed, however, is that the statement "The only things we can truly know are things we have some sort of physical evidence for" is not something there is, or could be, any physical evidence for. The claim of the empiricist or positivist is therefore just as *metaphysical* as the claims of the world's religions, which he means to deprecate. For he asserts a truth, or in this case a falsehood, about the way things ultimately are, and he does so in a way presupposing some non-empirical, or supersensible, intuition or insight.

Finally, no, atheism is *not* the more intelligent position. On the contrary, atheism is self-contradictory. Think about it. The atheist says, "There is no God." Now anyone who says, "There is no _____," is giving voice to what a logician would call a universal negative proposition, whatever might be placed in that blank. It's negative because it says "no" and denies something, and it's universal because the field it encompasses is unlimited. If I said, "There is no platypus in this chapel," I would also be uttering a negative statement, but it wouldn't be universal because the context would be restricted to this building, and we could verify, or disconfirm, the truth of my statement by arming everyone in the room with a flashlight, fanning out throughout the building, and engaging in a systematic platypus-hunting exercise. Notice, however, that when atheists say, "There is no God," they're not saying, "There's no God in this chapel," or "There's no God in Greenville," or "There's no God in our galaxy." They're saying, "There is no God

anywhere in the entire universe, no God at all wherever one might look throughout the full extent of reality.” But in doing so they’re implying that they’ve done the looking. They’ve carefully inspected all the nooks and crannies of existence, even as we’d need to inspect all the nooks and crannies of this building to know there’s no platypus in it. If however they’ve truly looked everywhere there is to look—if they can honestly say they’re personally acquainted with the full extent of reality—it follows that they must be omniscient. But omniscience is an attribute of God. Therefore, in saying “There is no God,” atheists are implicitly claiming to *be* God, and thus inevitably contradicting themselves.

If you don’t mind, I’d like to ask you a couple quick questions before moving on. Just nod or shake your head. In my lecture I referred to a number of key authorities on what might be called the “technology” of the spiritual life, and I’m wondering whether you’d ever heard of them. How about Patanjali? No, I didn’t think so. Nicephorus the Solitary? No, again. Maybe Jalal al-Din Rumi? You’re cautiously nodding on this one, so I guess the name rings a bell, probably because of the popularity of his poetry. But have you actually studied his teachings? No. Well, let me ask you this: have you ever tried to concentrate on only one thought, and have you noticed that it’s almost impossible to do so for more than three or four seconds? Yes, good, so that’s a familiar experience. You’re familiar with the fact that your ordinary, day-to-day consciousness is highly undisciplined—in fact, almost completely out of control.

Here’s my point: each of the three sages I mentioned—the first, Patanjali, was the most renowned of all Hindu teachers of yoga; the second, Nicephorus the Solitary, was a Hesychast master of the Christian East; and the third, Jalal al-Din Rumi, was a great Sufi *shaykh*—each of them taught his students a method for gaining control of their consciousness, for bringing it into a state of stillness or stability that could in turn serve as a portal (I’m tempted to say “as a launching pad”!) to levels, modalities, or dimensions of consciousness ordinarily hidden or dormant, dimensions through which and in which they might come to experience directly the Ultimate Source of All Things.

You wish to have evidence. You want somebody to “show” you God, you said. Very well, these and other great masters, both past and present, are fully prepared to assist. But they’re going to require what any “serious, scientific person” like yourself

already knows is essential when testing some theory: namely, that she enter into the laboratory, which is in this case her mind, carefully following the procedures and making use of the equipment these spiritual scientists have given her. Until you've done that, I'm sorry to say it's just a sign of ignorance to think the claims of the world's religions are not verifiable—an ignorance, let me add at once, which is far more understandable and forgivable in someone your age than in the compilers of writing protocols for university websites!

Well, I think we'd better start wrapping things up. There should be time for one final question, and I'm going to give that opportunity once more to a fellow professor. Yes, please, the gentleman with the graying hair and trimly cut moustache.

Question 6. Thank you very much for your comments this evening. I believe I have a somewhat clearer picture of your position than I did before. I confess I'm still not quite certain, however, what—or whether—the perspective you've described contributes to discussions of religious pluralism. I'm fairly sure you don't think the concept of a “transcendent unity of religions” simply dissolves the issue of pluralism by reducing concrete traditions to a common core, but I wonder whether you might say a bit more about that.

Also, I'd appreciate some further reflections on the subject of epistemology. I share your concerns about scientism and would like, as you would, to find a post-critical way of affirming those aspects of human experience that are of a more personal and tacit character. I believe we often know more than we can clearly articulate in the terms and categories favored by the scientific enterprise, and I sense this may be what you have in mind when you speak about the importance of the “vertical”. Occasionally, though, your language suggests something more, especially when you allude to the mystics. Sometimes you seem to be saying we can escape the force of gravity altogether, if I might borrow your rocket metaphor—that we can *transcend* (that's the word you've been stressing) the shaping forces of our cultures and histories, and perhaps even the limits of embodied existence. And I confess I'm finding it a bit more difficult to agree with you there.

Answer 6. I'm delighted you asked this, for linking the two parts of your query may be of some help in pulling together this evening's discussion.

You've posed two distinct questions, but the very fact that you've paired them suggests they're rather closely connected, as indeed they are. In fact, the metaphysical issue of whether there really is such a thing as a "transcendent unity of religions", and if so what this might entail, and the epistemological issue of how far human knowledge extends, or could extend, are really two sides of a single coin. Which is why, though the subject of my lecture was "Jesus and the World's Religions", I've spent so much time in this follow-up session—it may seem to some a disproportionate amount of time!—lamprooning the *Flatlander* approach to religion and lambasting our professional colleagues for the arbitrary restrictions so many of them wish to place on our powers of knowing.

To turn to the first part of your question, I suppose it all depends on what is meant by a couple of key terms. I confess I'm always a little uncomfortable when I hear the word "pluralism". If it simply means that one acknowledges a plurality of saving traditions, then of course there's no problem. My sense, however, is that in many academic contexts today the word has a relativistic connotation, which I would certainly want to avoid. For as I hope my lecture made clear, I *don't* believe the orthodox religions of the world are simply the results of man's efforts to make sense of his universe on his own or from the bottom up. My position instead is that each is a top-down, and thus divine, revelation.

As for "reducing" these revelations to a "common core", the phrase suggests one is searching for some sort of ethical or doctrinal least common denominator, and that's certainly not my aim. It *is* of course possible to distill a number of moral constants from the world's great religions. My friend Peter Kreeft, a Boston College philosophy professor who spoke here at Furman some years ago, I believe, has a fine article entitled "Ecumenical Jihad", in which he envisions an alliance of religious believers from different traditions against what he takes to be their common enemy: namely, a globally increasing materialism and secularism. I agree with Kreeft that a collaboration of this kind, based on an underlying ethical unanimity or commonality, is certainly possible—and indeed desirable—but that's not what I'm speaking of here.

Nor am I speaking, or not at least in the main, about a convergence of dogmas or worldviews. That there *is* such a convergence, I very firmly believe. That doesn't mean we should ignore the doctrinal disparities, and even contradictions, which certainly do exist between specific religions or, as you've called them, "concrete traditions". But I can think of no case where such disparities can't be resolved through prayerful study of the intention behind the doctrines. Resolution, however, is not "reduction", but rather an extrapolation, if you will—or better, perhaps, a sort of spiritual "intussusception", to use a word one doesn't get to use very often! (It's what happens when you stick your hand down to the very bottom of your sock, take a hold of the toe, and pull it back inside out.) Hindu polytheism, Buddhist atheism (so-called), and Jewish monotheism can then be seen as so many pointers, or points of entry, leading us in the direction of a single Reality that ultimately exceeds all our words, whether revealed or otherwise.

So no, the "transcendent unity of religions"—and now I'm segueing to the other half of your question—is a unity I understand to be manifest, not so much at the moral or even doctrinal level, but in the deifying experiences of the world's greatest sages and saints. I've mentioned a few such figures already in this Q and A session. I could add to this list the names of the Hindu Shankara, the Buddhist Nagarjuna, the Christian Eckhart, and the Muslim Ibn al-Arabi, each of whom ascended to the very pinnacle of their respective paths and thus to the highest of all states of knowledge, where Knower and Known are but a single, indivisible Self.

So you see, you're very right to have picked up on my allusions to the mystics, and you're right as well to have sensed that I have in mind something quite extraordinary when I speak of the "vertical". I hope you and the rest of my audience can also begin to appreciate why I therefore gave this *un*lecture a deliberately Zen-sounding title, why I prefaced my remarks with a distinction between the human atmosphere and the divine stratosphere, why I paused to congratulate Nicodemus for the stupefaction he felt in talking to Someone whose *is*-ness overcomes every *was*-ness, why I've more than once hinted that the time-and-space-defying operations of this flummoxing Someone can be taken as models, as well as causes, of our own liberation, and why I've been at such pains to accentuate the full meaning of salvation as a deifying participation in the very nature of God.

Though I myself am no saint and am very far from fully understanding the spiritual “mechanics” of these emptying, transforming, and deifying operations—even among those woolly fellows who share my own “fold”, let alone on behalf of other “sheep” whose enclosures are elsewhere—I’m nonetheless certain that the flummoxing Someone in question, whom like my fellows I call Jesus Christ, must be at work there as well. As I’ve already mentioned, one important source of this certitude is that I’ve personally had the great blessing of meeting a few rare individuals from other religious traditions in whom one could discern the distinctive marks of transcendence. Such exemplary men and women have convinced me that the biographies of great saints from the past are to be regarded, not as pious exaggerations, but as provocations, or invitations, pointing us all in the direction of what we might truly become.

I’ve also been convinced of course by my scholarly research, as should be obvious from the references I’ve scattered throughout these remarks, research focused for many years on the teachings of spiritual masters from a wide range of traditions—*gurus*, *murshids*, *roshis*, *gerons*, to use just a few of their traditional titles. And from your point of view as my audience, this is clearly the more important basis for the convictions I’ve been sharing tonight, since judging its value doesn’t depend on your trusting what is, after all, the purely anecdotal testimony of your speaker about the people he’s met. On the contrary, you too can share in the intellectual explorations that have led to my certitude concerning the existence of multiple paths up the mountain.

For those who might be intrigued by this prospect, I shall close by assigning some homework. I recommend very strongly that you spend some time slowly reading, and ruminating over, a truly remarkable anthology of spiritual writings called *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, compiled by a man named Whitall Perry. This is a book that brings together selections from each of the world’s sacred scriptures as well as from the writings of numerous saints and sages, East and West. And it does so in such a way as to demonstrate—beyond every shadow of doubt, as I see it—the inward and “transcendent unity” of their outward and horizontal differences. Don’t be misled, however: the value of this anthology is more than theoretical. It’s a book that can also be of tremendous practical use to the person who wishes to begin testing the methods prescribed by the likes of Patanjali, Nicephorus, and Rumi.

Here's your library's copy. It's catalogued as a reference volume but was passed to me secretly by a spy of mine who works there. First published in 1971, it wasn't purchased by Furman, or so my spy informs me, until two years ago—and then only at my spy's request! Since then, I'm disappointed to tell you, it's not been taken off the shelf until today. But it will be back in the library tomorrow morning, ready for all you truly serious, scientific people to make use of as you set to work in your laboratories. If you really want to have evidence—if you want someone to “show” you God, first of all in His several disguises and then face to Face—this, in my opinion, is an excellent place to get started.