Christianity as a Cultural Minority

Part 1 of 2: Christianity in the Public Square
with
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The Table Podcast Christianity as a Cultural Minority

Darrell Bock Welcome to the table where we discuss issues of God and culture and today our topic is functioning as Christian in the context of being a cultural minority. And I have gone far and wide to bring John Dickson here from down under, from Australia. And as soon as he opens his mouth you'll recognize he's not from Texas. John is executive director of the Centre, now that's C-E-N-T-R-E for Public Christianity out of Sydney Australia. And John and I go back. We have done many projects together. I have filmed for them when I got to Australia and so this is payback time. So welcome John glad you could be with us.

John Dickson Fantastic. We've also done some sporting stuff together.

Darrell Bock That's exactly right. Aussie rules futball, which there will be an exam after the podcast on how that works.

John Dickson I think you know more about Aussie Rules than I do actually.

Darrell Bock That's actually a frightening thought isn't it? [Laughs] So we're here to discuss the kind of ministry that you have. So tell us a little bit about the Centre for Public Christianity? What got it launched and why it exists and what you all do?

John Dickson Well we were friends decades ago with an idea maybe 15 to 20 years ago we wanted to one day when we grew up have a center that somehow engaged the public square that we felt had either neglected or poorly treated by church and Christian organizations. We thought wouldn't it be great if we could start something where we could be thoughtful, generous and articulate. We didn't really think we'd pull it off but eight years ago we were offered quite out of the blue a pretty sizable grant to do whatever we wanted. And we pitched the center for Public Christianity because we had already had it in our heads. And we got the grant and that kicked us off for the first four years, just completely bankrolled us, which meant that we didn't have to worry for four years. We worry everyday now. [Laughs]

Darrell Bock Exactly right. I understand that transition.
John Dickson

So the best way to describe is we're a group do of scholar communicators who have a mission to take thoughtful, generous, Christianity into the public square. And Public Square for us really boils down to the media and public debates. We don't see ourselves in any way a political lobby group. There are lobby groups that are Christian lobby groups. We're trying to commend Christ and the worldview that comes out of knowing Christ to a pretty skeptical, secularizing nation. We see ourselves as international because almost half of the web traffic to our website is from outside of Australia. But we are located in Australia and we do a lot of work in Australia. We write for them mainstream press and appear in the mainstream media pretty regularly. We have a very large, website library of audio, video and print, and we put on events and write books and produce documentaries.

Darrell Bock

That sounds pretty exciting and the website is?

John Dickson

PublicChristianity.Org.

Darrell Bock

Okay. And so let me commend that to you if you have a chance to take a look at it. It's full of resources of all kinds really some of what the Centre does is very much the model for some of what we're trying to do here at the Hendricks's Center as well. So we have collaborated and conspired together to some degree talking about how to do what you do. Let's talk about, you said a "generous" is the word you used. Let's talk about that a little bit. Why that term and what do you see that as involving?

John Dickson

Well I guess by generous I mean an approach to the conversation that is willing to listen to give space to others to share their views. So it's listening, I think that's part of generosity that concedes what needs to be conceded in the arguments against Christianity, the complaints that society has about the Church, to the degree that it's appropriate and we feel it, we want to concede it. Rather than rush to defending Christianity-

Darrell Bock

At all costs.
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John Dickson  - at all costs. And then when we actually engage in the defense or the commanding of the faith we want to do so in a spirit of civility and not a defensive position that sometimes you get amongst Christians, even Christians are really confident in their faith, they come across as defensive. Maybe because they're worried that they win this argument in this media spot, they're letting the team down or they're letting God down. I think we've tried, maybe it's just personality, maybe it's theology. I don't know but at CPX - and I should say we call our CPX as you well know. And the X is the Greek chi for Christianity.

Darrell Bock  There you go. I'm feeling justified now. Thank you.

John Dickson  At CPX we really feel that we can lose well and still win. So we're not very defensive when we go into the media space because we feel God's big enough to cope with our mistakes and there will be answers there even if we can't find them. So all of that we include in this notion of generous public engagement.

Darrell Bock  Now you walk into this media space and there's some interesting differences between Australia and the United States let's talk about how significant the Christian population is in Australia because that will stand out to Americans. So evangelical Christianity, what we might call evangelical Christianity, how well represented is that in Australia?

John Dickson  Not very. So anyone who ticks the Christian box is about 62 percent in Australia. And that includes Roman Catholics, that includes everyone, but church attendance, the public statistics on regular church attendance is 15 percent but regular means once a month or more. So 15 percent are there once a month or more.

Darrell Bock  Okay. The numbers dropping.

John Dickson  That includes Roman Catholics and Orthodox and Liberal Anglicans. So somewhere in there, and it's very difficult to get the right figures because we don't have the kind of evangelical research base that you have here. Somewhere down 4 percent, 5 percent of Australia would be Evangelical Christian believers.
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*Darrell Bock*  
Now how does that compare and I'm assuming you know this, it may be a bad question, how much does that compare say to the UK which of course is the mother country of all of us in one sense or another?

*John Dickson*  
Yeah. Very, very similar and even the belief rates are very similar. So we have done studies on belief rates in God, almost identical in Britain and Australia. The atheist population almost identical. I think Britain is 10 percent, Australia is 9.8 percent atheist. Here in America it's down to like 2 percent or something. So yeah we're very British. We started as a British colony. Although it's true to say we started as a prison colony off Brittan.

*Darrell Bock*  
Yeah I heard you give a message in which you mentioned that William Wilberforce actually had to make a case to sending missionaries to Australia.

*John Dickson*  
They were going to found a nation without any Christian representative. So they were going to send 700 and something convicts, 250 marines and few other sort of settlers in the very first fleet and it was an afterthought to get a Chaplain. And it was through William Wilberforce's work that we got a guy called Richard Johnson who was an Evangelical Anglican and actually a fantastic guy. And in some ways I look back to him as a gift to Australia because he in a weird way represents the kind of Christian that there needs to be. The kind of public Christian because he was incredibly generous in his approach to things. He worked really hard with convicts.

The government was very suspicious of him because he didn't act as a moral policeman, which is what they wanted. They wanted someone to just tell all the convicts to obey the Ten Commandments. Well he wasn't, he was an Evangelical. So it was Grace and obedience flows from grace and he would go and hold the hand of those who were about to be executed and all this sort of stuff so he got in trouble a lot with the government. And so I don't mean that so Christians should take that advice and get in trouble with the government. What I mean is he wasn't part of the power establishment. He was in one sense, his job was paid by them but he actually sided with those in great need rather than-

*Darrell Bock*  
He was working to build bridges for the mission that he had come to perform.
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John Dickson    And during some plagues that we had in some of the early years of the colony, he was famous for, against every one's advice, going and visiting the sick. He didn't get sick himself, which is astonishing and he'd be the only one who would go and visit them. We have convict letters from this period back home to Britain and one of them very striking one, describes Richard Johnson as the physician of soul and body. I think that's a great public Christian right there.

Darrell Bock    The picture has come in mind of when the UK decides to create a convict colony they don't mess around. They sound it thousands of miles away. You're not getting back.

John Dickson    Yes indeed but our feeling about that is they did us all a favor because we live in Australia and there are far more British people wanting to move to Australia then the other way around now.

Darrell Bock    I'll let you settle the commonwealth politics in another venue. So we've got this minority context in which you function. The closest analogy I think we have to that here are parts of the northeast and parts of the northwest who's numbers probably aren't quite as low as what you've sited but are close, certainly closer than say in the south here, I mean in Dallas I think the statistics are that 50 percent are in a religious establishment on a given weekend. That number I imagine would be astonishing to an Australian and then you go from there.

So a very different kind of context which is part of the reason why I wanted to chat with you because there is a lot of experience involved in thinking through what it means to represent Christ in a context in which you are really functioning as a cultural minority. So let's talk about that some and there are other peculiarities that are worth pointing out as we kind of move into the conversation. You pointed out to me as we were preparing for this, the term apologetics doesn't quite work the same way in Australia as it does here. Why don't you explain that and kind of what that means; how you come out of that?

John Dickson    Apologetics tends to be used for bad arguments. So if someone says, "Oh you're just doing apologetics. That's just apologetics." They mean you're using any kind of argument, even a bad one to promote Christianity. And so now Christians adopt the term in that prerogative way by saying, "Oh that's just atheist apologetics."
Darrell Bock: They even turned it around.

John Dickson: They totally adopted the same thing but I think Dawkins uses apologetics. Richard Dawkins uses this term in a very denigrating way and it's really caught on. And so we never use it. I might especially in America where I know it's not a damaged term. The word does slip out of my mouth but in Australia we will only ever talk about doing public Christianity. It's not a known thing, it's not a verb to do public Christianity but we think that's what it is. It's making Christianity more public.

Darrell Bock: Which means you have to think about how you express and even communicate and even in some cases translate the theology that's part of scripture in a way that the listener can connect to particularly because often times the listener in Australia comes with absolutely no church background what so ever to have any context in order to understand what's going on. Fair enough?

John Dickson: Yeah. We have quite high belief rates in God. We have a high view of Jesus. So we do have that going for us. And a general assumption that Christianity had some influence on the Western world. So I don't want to give the impression there might as well be pre-Christian society pagans because I don't even think Australia is yet post-Christian. It doesn’t really work but it's kind of pre-post Christian. We're definitely on the way. We're not a Christian nation by any stretch of the imagination but I don't think we're quite post-Christian because the major news channels or the talk shows will still think to ask a Christians view in public. They don't think to ask the Imam or the Hindu leader or whatever.
So there's still that memory that Christianity is in some ways part of the culture in a way other religions aren't but that doesn't mean we're given any respect in that context. So CPX will be invited onto mainstream television or radio and that's fantastic but then we'll be given an incredibly hard time. So it doesn't come with any privileges other than the invitation to be part of the conversation. So I sometimes describe us as in a perfect storm between Christianity's credibility still because of the memory of the West and contestability and it's precisely because those two things are operating that we're getting so many opportunities at CPX to engage. Any more credible, anymore Christian, if our nation were any more Christian I think we would be passé and we probably wouldn't get any more controversial or contestable and people would probably think of you don't need to worry about Christianity. But we're at this perfect blend of you invite a Christian on but then you give him a hard time. So we're in this space where we take a lot of hits and hopefully we lose well and sometimes we win.

**Darrell Bock**

Yeah the last time I was in Australia I did a gig for you guys and the topic was the simple topic of hell and we engaged, I was there with a catholic, with a liberal Christian, with a denominational fairly conservative Christian, so there were two conservative voices in the group maybe 2.5 and I have to say the host was very fair, engaged the topic positively and negatively. And it was a very much an evening of conversation about hell. In some ways refreshing because it didn't have quite the polemical edge you might get in certain contexts. The host was very, very professional about what he did and the way he went about it and so I've had a taste of this conversation and of course I've spent time in Europe as well. So between the combinations I have a sense of the difference really between the United States and Australia.

Talk a little bit about how you approach the use of language. Apologetics isn't the only example. Your book that's just come out called A Doubters Guide to the Bible. Perhaps could have been titled, An Unbeliever's Guide to the Bible just as easily. That's in some sense is who it's aimed out but that's obviously a conscious choice. We were talking about the message that you gave while you've been here in which you contrasted, beauty, the ugly, the resolution and then why God. In many ways you're really talk about truth and the orderliness of the creation. So talk a little bit about the philosophy of communication that you guys really do work pretty hard at.
I think it just arises from listening. From using language and finding it grates with people and changing the language. We don't think about it much in terms of what would be the better terms to get a better hearing I think it's more intuitive growing up in a society where some words like unbeliever or non-Christian even grates. To be classed non-Christian to be classed unbeliever a lot of people really find offensive and it's really just connotation. It really just means you don't believe but the connotation of unbeliever is very negative same with non-Christian. So in my church I try and encourage the staff not to use the term non-Christian even in their sermons because we have visitors who come. And the idea of being classed as a non-something when the something on the other side of the equation is a positive that we're all holding up is just inherently offensive. The connotation of it is inherently offensive. I mean it's a long way around but I will often just talk of those who don't believe and that's just softer and more acceptable.

The doubter thing is interesting because although it is noun that is describing someone it's not a non-something or an un-something. And doubt in our culture is actually a positive thing; the connotation of it is a positive thing. And so I’m happy to pick up on the vibe that surrounds a word like that. I often use the word "spectator" as well which ties into our sporting culture anyway. So a lot of people, maybe they're not a skeptic or even a doubter they're a spectator. They just don't want to get too close, they don't want to get on the field but they want to watch. So that kind of language does really help. The most important thing I think about language is that whatever words we use the fundamental thing is to make sure that we're not speaking with any air of entitlement.

And it's easy if you live in a Christian community and all of your friends are Christians to feel like the world is obliged to follow Christ, in a theological sense they are, but that at a societal level, they ought to be listening to me because I represent the church of Jesus Christ and the kingdom that’s coming so you better listen to me. And that ambassador motif I think is then wrongly used for like that means, "I have authority over this unbelieving nation." Whenever Australians hear a Christian person speak with any air of entitlement, you've lost them but they could hear the same ideas expressed without any sense that you have to listen to me, you have to obey what I'm saying without any of that and I'll listen and I'll give you a fair go. So that aspect of language, entitlement is I think key.
Darrell Bock

And the difficulty here is that I like to think about the ambassador picture as well and to me the value of the ambassador picture is I'm a stranger in a strange land and I represent someone and something to other people who may or may not appreciate what it is that I represent. So I have to think about how to do that well and with the intention and the hope, and this is the mission part of it, of inviting them into the experience that believers share with God.

John Dickson

That's almost certainly what the biblical picture of ambassador means but I think Christians can take it as a kind of “my authority over the world” because ambassadors are people we bow and scrape to. So yeah you're dead right it's a fantastic image viewed from that perspective.

Darrell Bock

So the hard thing is to deal with this - our message does say, you're a creature accountable to a creator, you have responsibilities before God whether you recognize it or not but then the flip side of it is how do you get the person to take that frame of view or that world view seriously? And I like to say when I talk about this theme with people, what would you prefer if someone were to put something in front of you? The response that says, "Well you're blind and in the darkness and just can't get it" or the response that says, "You know that's a good question now let's talk about the answer." And there is this tension that we do have out of scripture that talks about where people are theologically on the one hand and yet there's the relational part of how to get there on the other. And sometimes I think our theology washes out the relational dimensions of how we think about mission.

John Dickson

Or we interpret that authority that we do have in Christ in institutional structural terms. The main point I'd make on this question is that Australian's anyway, I can't speak for American's, hear any tone of authority as institutional and structural authority. They hear it as you think your institution ought to be running the show. That's how they hear it. You and I might simply mean, we've heard the message of God and that is an inherently authoritative message, so that when we speak the words of God, everyone is under it. Sure but that's not how it's heard. It's heard as, "My organization is better than your organization."

Darrell Bock

They see it as almost a power grab in some sense?
John Dickson

The associate it with political and legislative and social power instead of persuasional power and relational power. So it's complicated because you can pluck out of the scriptures all sorts of references to authority but it would be wrong to interpret that as an authority in any structural way and it would be wrong for us to use language that helps those that don't believe think that we have structural authority.

Darrell Bock

It's interesting because when you think about the example of Jesus and how he went about doing his ministry, there's no doubt that he challenged people to think about how their related to God. And did so in ways that could be considered, I love this British word, off putting. And yet at the same time the nature of his ministry and relational engagement with people with such that it seems to have negated an aspect of the edge of that challenge and it was having the two things together, side by side, functioning together that allowed people to say, "Yeah he may be challenging me but there's no doubt he cares about me while he's issuing the challenge.

John Dickson

And this is key isn't it. And the genius of Jesus to be able to flex two muscles at the same time. The muscle of conviction and the muscle of compassion. So he can thunder in public about the coming judgement and then sit down at a dinner table with those under judgment. It's an extraordinary thing and once more they flock to him, they surround him, they want to hear him, they want to be near him. Through the history of the Church of course there have been moments where the Church has been able to flex the muscle of conviction, moral conviction, theological conviction, political conviction, really well but the muscle of compassion has atrophied and we all know that type. Equally there have been periods of Church history, particularly nowadays when the church is good at flexing the muscle of compassion and has given up conviction. Well neither represents Jesus who was able to do both at the same time.
Darrell Bock

So there is a really important kind of backdrop to this kind of process. So let me shift gears a little bit. You're in the public square on a regular basis, you're engaging all kinds of people in all kinds of situations. What are some of the more challenging questions you consistently get in Australia that represent the key challenges to the faith? I think you address some of these in A Doubters Guide. And I just saw a clip of you on Fox News in which I think some of these key questions came up. So let's talk about those a little bit. What are some of the key objections that you come up against and I'll preface by saying there are kind of two classes of questions. What I might call the macro questions about God being out there in one way or another and then the more detailed kind of biblical questions that come up. They seem to be in two classes if you want to think of them that way. So what do you encounter when you walk into the public square?

John Dickson

Well you're right that there are those two kinds of questions. We find a lot of the questions nowadays could be classified as questions about the misuse of power. And so forms of it are, "Hasn't the Bible just been used as a tool of oppression? Hasn't Christianity just raped and pillaged through the Middle Ages and there's the crusades after all? Doesn't religion cause all the wars or what about the old testament violence?" This has become one of the most regularly asked questions in our public work. "Doesn't the Old Testament have such a violent picture of God that is inappropriate in our day where we value human rights and so on?" So all of these questions come from the perception that Christianity and the Bible is about the misuse of power and so that makes it all the more necessary for Christians never to speak as if they think they've got structural power because that's the main gripe, one of the main gripes. Other than the normal, "Why does God allow suffering? Is there any historical evidence?" The technical apologetic questions. I used the word apologetics for you - that you would get in a course of apologetics. They still ask but there is this huge cloud about the misuse of power.

Darrell Bock

And how do you address that question in your interactions; what do you try and do to neutralize that claim?
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**John Dickson**  Well we would almost always concede that it's partly true. So you take the misuse of the Bible to abuse people, to condone slavery, to inspire wars and so on. There are plenty of examples of that in Christian history. And I would spend, and it depends on how long one has, but I would spend some time talking in some way that the person, the interlocker, knows that I really feel this question and this is not just strategy on my part; I really feel the question. And studying Christian history as I do I probably know more of the bad stuff than the interlocker does. So I feel the question. Then of course one needs to move to start to defend, after you concede you must defend otherwise you're just saying, "Yeah you're right Christianity is bad isn't it." And I would like to make a distinction I often do, in fact I did in that Fox thing you just mentioned, between how the bible is used for the evil ends that are common to all culture, slavery, war, oppression, you'll find them in Greece and Rome and Babylon and Egypt.

**Darrell Bock**  They're Roman. I mean they're human.

**John Dickson**  Yeah. Exactly. They're Roman and they're human. You don't need the Bible to pull them off. So it's not surprising that the Bible would be used as justification. The more interesting question by far is, "What are the things the Bible seems to have itself inspired or drawn out of humans in a unique way in a way that you don't find in Babylon, Egypt, Greece, and Rome?" And if you put that back to the interlocker, they have to admit the Bible didn't give us wars because there were wars without the Bible.

**Darrell Bock**  Long before the Bible.
And nothing to do with the Bible. It's a great way to sort of steer them around to this tradition of charity toward the poor because it's very widely recognized that Greece and Rome didn't have anything like the charitable notions in fact pity toward to the poor for Aristotle was actually a deficiency in a human being, that you would be moved by the plight of the poor was actually to show that you were not a measured human being. So there are all sort of philosophical reasons to be against pity toward the poor but of course Judaism first, Christianity inheriting it was incredibly sympathetic and felt pity towards the poor because God did and I want to steer people around to see that these things can't have come from Greece and Rome. You love them, you love that tradition in our society. That came from the Bible. And when one thinks of it like that, "Yes the Bible is used badly but has actually inspired beautiful things." I think it opens up a space to talk about the human heart is the common factor in the bad but what the Bible actually inspires is not power or the misuse of power, but sympathy, humility, generosity and so on. I think there's a great benefit in walking down this path.

So service and sacrifice, compassion, mercy, those are the values that you see that standout and I should point out that your training is as a classicist, you serve as an adjunct of faculty at Macquarie University and teach at the University of Sydney in Classics. So we're you're mentioning Aristotle et cetera you're speaking out of the background of your training and understanding the Greco-Roman world.