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At a time when the vast diversity of human belief systems is accessible to all, the outsider test for faith offers a rational means for fostering mutual understanding. It's important that people understand findings from psychology, anthropology, sociology, and neuroscience to escape the notion that any one religion represents the only truth.

The Outsider Test for Faith: How to Know Which Religion Is True Details

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Charlie says

I dropped this to 4-stars primarily because of the repetitive nature of the text. Now, it's not as repetitive as a John Piper work, but I suppose much of the repeating is contextually necessary in this case.

Frankly, the premise is quite simple and only in objection does anyone make this more complex or difficult than it needs to be -- it's a critical examination of why anyone believes a particular way. Answering for the massive, culturally dependent, religious diversity that *actually exists* in the world today is important.

Loftus does a really good job of dealing with both the process and potential objections, as well as countering supposed "refutations" from Christian apologists (or, "anti-anti-theist defenders").

I recommend this book to everyone. It's an incredibly good read & premise that demands application. GENUINE application, consideration, and exercise.

Max Moore says

Valid, very useful, arguments, but presented in a tedious manner.

Clinton Wilcox says

John Loftus essentially gives a poor argument for critiquing your own religious views. It's ironic that Loftus actually says his arguments are nuanced (which is far from the truth), and argues that language evolves and that one should basically not read a definition of a word that was not originally intended, but he does just that with faith. His entire book is based on a faulty definition of faith (that is, belief in something despite evidence to the contrary). However, Christian faith is not a "blind faith." It is a faith based on evidence and reason (the word for faith in the Bible is "pistis," which is the same word Aristotle used for forensic proof).

Loftus should be commended for responding to the best Christian apologists (e.g. William Lane Craig, J.P. Moreland, Norm Geisler, Alvin Plantinga, etc.) but all that accomplishes is showing how out of his league intellectually with them he is. He responds to their critiques of his Outsider Test for Faith by hurling elephants, in an attempt to bolster his case, but in many cases he doesn't even end up responding to the objection at all. He argues that no faith can pass the test, so naturally he just explains away any Theistic attempt to answer the OTF on its own terms, and to explain away when Atheists are convinced by rational arguments for Christianity and convert.

One last thing to say is that Loftus does not approach this as an outsider. Approaching claims as an outsider involves keeping your mind open to the possibility that something could be true, even if you are skeptical about it. However, Loftus argues that since certain things are "impossible" (like miracles), we should start with that assumption before looking at religious claims. So he is not looking at religion as an outsider, he is looking at religion as an Atheist Presuppositionalist, probably without even realizing it (and he would likely deny it if you mentioned it to him).

So needless to say, this is not a very strong challenge to Christianity, or any faith for that matter, at all. If you want strong objections to Christianity, there are much better Atheistic philosophers you should be reading.

Scott says

I agree with my friend Justin Powell that this book became repetitive, though it didn't bother me quite as much. Loftus acknowledges that it will be repetitive early on. But still, especially in the last chapter, I, too, found myself thinking, "We get it: Probabilities are all that matter, not possibilities."

Sometimes Loftus could have given much shorter responses to the people he was writing responses to in his book, and you sometimes get the sense that he's just writing on and on to fill up space. To be fair, I can see how he may just be doing this because the people he is trying to argue with really try hard to miss his point, so perhaps he felt he really needed to beat the point home.

All that said, the book is solid, well-argued, and frankly not all that hard to understand for anyone who is actually open to understanding it. The first three chapters explain the Outsider Test for Faith and make the case for it. The rest of the book is Loftus defending it against prominent Christians who have responded in often bafflingly ridiculous (but still popular and influential) ways. Loftus tries hard to cover all his bases and I applaud him for that, even if it felt repetitive sometimes. Worth a read (but more importantly, everyone interested in this subject must read Loftus' 2012 edition of "Why I Became an Atheist").

Scott Andrews says

Loftus hammers his point home...

What is obvious even to a thinking child is obfuscated through the lens of faith. Loftus' hammering his point home may seem repetitive at times to those who are free from cognitive bias on these matters, but obviously quite necessary to counter the illogical/irrational meanderings of religious apologetics on every conceivable front. An honest reader will find Loftus' logic to be impeccable.

Eric says

repetitive but straightforward. The best way to view or test the validity of your own faith is to see it through the eyes of an outsider. Use the same arguments and critical scrutiny you'd use to dismiss another faith against your own beliefs and see what happens.

Nathan Schwartz says

Simple and to the point. It's not an original argument, but it's put very directly here. If there is one true God, and this God created the universe expressly so that we might come to know him, then why is it that only a small fraction of people in the world and throughout history have been placed in a situation that makes that possible? How is it that nearly everyone ends up sticking with the religion that they grew up with? Why do the religions with which we are unfamiliar seem silly but our own seems deeply meaningful?

Eric says

Good book overall, interesting ideas and arguments. Well written and well thought through. However the use of Acronyms started to drive me crazy and did not add to clarity. There were many sections that were repetitious. The author warned of this but it got distracting.

Todd Martin says

"The easy confidence with which I know another man's religion is folly teaches me to suspect that my own is also."

- Mark Twain

"I contend we are both atheists, I just believe in one fewer god that you do. When you understand why you dismiss all the other possible gods, you will understand why I dismiss yours."

- Stephen Roberts

Here's something that should come as absolutely no surprise to anyone ... if you are religious, it is overwhelmingly likely that your religious denomination is identical to that of your parents. In other words, the beliefs that you hold fervently to be true and those of other religions that you know with certainty to be false, are little more than an accident of your birth. Thus those born in India are likely to be Hindu, those born in Saudi Arabia are likely to be Sunni Muslim, those born in Pakistan are likely to be Shia Muslim, those born in Mexico are likely to be Catholic and those born in the U.S. are likely to be Protestant. Similarly, if you had been brought up in ancient Greece you would have worshipped Zeus and Apollo, or if you were a Viking you'd worship Wotan and Thor. But each of these religions is making different, mutually incompatible truth claims and at most, only one of them can be true.

This should be of concern to anyone who would like to know whether they are believing in the right things. Given that there are approximately 4,300 different religions in the world (comprised of 45,000 sects), your chance of being born into the 'right' one is ... let's see ... raise the 5 to the 3rd power, divide by pi, carry the two ... one in 4,300 (of course this assumes that one of them is 'correct', which has a likelihood approaching zero).

Rather than taking your chances that you were born into the 'right' faith, John Loftus (a former evangelical Christian turned atheist) wants you to test the truth claims of your religion by applying the 'outsider test for faith' (OTF for short). In other words, he wants you to apply the same standards of evidence and critical thinking to your own religion as you would to a faith to which you do not adhere. If the claims don't hold up then the logical thing to do would be to change your religion or give up faith entirely.

I suppose the way this would work in Loftus' mind is for a Christian to reason something along the lines of the following:

"The Koran says that Mohammad flew to heaven on a winged horse with a human head.

Flying horses don't exist, neither do human/horse hybrids. Therefore the Koran can't be true, that's why I am not a Muslim.

The Bible says that Jesus was born of a virgin.

Human procreation doesn't work that way, ipso facto the Bible is wrong and Christianity is a fraud."

I'm an atheist myself, but I have to say, I think it's incredibly naive for Loftus to think that this approach would work. Beliefs aren't founded on reason, and as a consequence it's not possible to reason somebody out of a position they didn't reason themselves into in the first place. Religious indoctrination is the quintessential example of a process that takes place in the absence of critical thinking (which is why it's most effective in young children). As Christopher Hitchens has said, "If religious instruction were not allowed until the child had attained the age of reason, we would be living in a quite different world".

The other reason Loftus' OTF probably isn't going to work is that, while his arguments have merit, *The Outsider Test for Faith* is a boring snoozefest of a book. It has the tedious, repetitive, round-and-round again feel one associates with internet arguments that take place in the comments section of a political post on Facebook. If you want people to join your team, you make your team interesting, fun and exciting. Everyone wants to be one of the cool kids. No one wants to join a club filled with pedantic boors.

This brings me to Loftus' writing style, which strikes me as an extended exercise in text padding. Here's one example among thousands:

"We don't find scientists in one part of the world agreeing about the existence of a geocentric (or earth-centered solar system) while scientists in another part agree about the existence of a heliocentric (or sun-centered) one). We don't find scientists in one country agreeing that astrology can predict the future while scientists in the country right next to it reject astrology altogether. We don't find scientists arguing for bloodletting in one nation and scientists arguing against it in a different one. That's because science is not culturally specific to one region of the earth, as is religion."

Ugh ... we don't find scientists in one part of the world who find repetitive examples to be an unnecessary waste of time while scientists in another part of the world believe that a fourth, fifth or sixth superfluous example would really crystalize the concept for the reader in a way that would otherwise totally fly over their heads if the paragraph was, instead, written in a manner that was concise and to the point.

I don't like it when people waste my time and would suggest to Loftus that he needs to respect his readers enough to eliminate the unnecessary and repetitive verbiage from any future texts. Also – maybe try to make the book fun, interesting and something people want to read.

Barry says

Laboriously repetitive at times. Though I am inclined to agree with the test, I found some of the secondary arguments somewhat weak. That said, I listened to the audible version and it's quite possible some of my criticism is as a result of the terrible narrator.

Rusty says

When I was a kid, I dunno how old exactly, but probably 8 or 9, my grandfather, a deeply religious man, was idly talking about God, the bible, or something along those lines.... Actually, I'm pretty sure he was talking about hell – and how every man is destined to spend eternity there barring some intervention.

As any child would, I assumed of course, that didn't include me. So he turns to me and said, specifically, Rusty, this means when you die, you will go straight to hell.

In an unrelated note, I was baptized the following Sunday (per my Grandfather, salvation comes via water

baptism – feel free to disagree with his theology). I spent the time between his pronouncement of my impending doom and my dunking into the water a few days later in abject fear. I mean, what if my school bus ran off the road and died before I could be baptized? Or what if I was playing outside and a tree fell on me and I died? Or what if the house caught on fire and I was trapped inside and died?

It was the first time I really remember thinking about death, or at least about me personally experiencing it. When they gave me the certificate after my baptism that confirmed the fact that I had actually been baptized. I also recall wondering if I had to use it like a ticket when I got to heaven, you know, the sort of thing I could whip out like a police badge and get to cut to the front of the line.

I also wondered how I'd have it in the afterlife in the first place, but I couldn't really wrap my head around the thought that the ghost version of me would be naked either, and I didn't really wonder where my "ghost clothes" would come from, so I figured I'd have my "ghost baptismal certificate" on me should I need it.

I would probably interject here that thinking about things like that, to me, shows how incoherent my views were about how the afterlife worked, but at the same time, I think my views as a child were as valid as anyone else's are.

In fact, this book, *The Outsider Test for Faith*, is more or less a whole book long argument about how one would expect any "true" faith to be less geographically dependent than man-made versions of a religion would be.

In case that made no sense, I'll put it the way a girlfriend of mine did way back when I was a young man in college – You take a globe, and point to some landmass at random, and I can tell - with a reasonable amount of uncertainty - what the religion is of the people who live there. Oh, you live here? Probably a catholic. You live over there? I bet you're Muslim. There? Hindi. That place? Buddhist. I mean, you meet a person whose family live in Salt Lake City for three generations, are you going to be stunned to learn that they're Mormon?

And on and on. That's a problem. Compare that to something like mathematics, you live there? You must think $2 + 2 = 7$. Or in that place, $2 + 2 = 5$. No, doesn't work that way. Math works the same, more or less, no matter where you come from, as long as you know basic arithmetic (and don't count in binary, or something).

If there were one "true" faith then it would stand to reason that its adherents would be dispersed more evenly across the globe. Why aren't Jains converting by droves to becoming Sikhs? Or Pentecostals converting in droves to Wiccans? The simple answer is that our faiths are cultural, not rational.

Whatever, I agree with his premise. I'm not sure the book itself is a very good rhetorical tool in convincing anyone who didn't already think this way, but it does lay out the hypothesis in a pretty rigorous way.

So, that's cool.

Nathan Duffy says

It all gets a bit tedious after a while – the hectoring tone, the argument-by-assertion, the repetition, the special pleading and question-begging, the myopia. And quickly. Despite the book's massive flaws, the central contention – that it's a profitable endeavor to subject our culturally inherited beliefs and biases to

critical scrutiny, availing ourselves of the tools of science and reason – is certainly true, and not particularly controversial. The OTF itself can be salvaged from the wreckage of the book if you broaden it to include all manner of beliefs, rather than only explicitly religious ones, and extricate the author's unsubstantiated foregone conclusions which permeate the text. But really, what's the point? In a culture as modern, pluralistic, and secular as our own, this amounts to preaching to the choir. Even if the sermon did happen echo beyond the pulpit, reaching the apostate faithful out on the street corners and miraculously leading to some of their conversions, they still won't have become outsiders. They'll have done the only thing that's possible: traded one insider vantage for another.

^^ This is the concluding paragraph of my review of this book. The full thing is available here: <http://nateduffy.blogspot.com/2013/05...>

Justin Powell says

Let me start off with saying that in theory I agree with the concept of this "test". However, I think it's argument within this book is very much lacking in the amount of strength it actually has. First, the RDVT and the RDPT have the right idea in mind, but even the works used within the work, such as Gary Marcus is far too vague to make the case that's needed. I think the skimming of referencing the material that lays the actual foundation to the argument hinders the argument in the end.

In regards to the manner in which it is delivered, I think it's ultimately ineffective. When you've specifically written a book, and developed a test for those currently as "insiders" to take on their religious faiths, I'd assume everyone would agree it's not a good idea to call names such as "delusional" if they disagree in the end. Regardless if it's true! In which case I think so, but this book's intent isn't, or shouldn't be to pump up the non-believer base. It's goal and purpose is to affect the religious "insider". Why on earth would you even think to go about saying such stuff, knowing full well they are already touchy about being questioned?

"Probability is all that matters". I was ready to throw the book across the room from having to read this statement so many times by the end. I get it. Probabilities matter. The redundancy I'm sure is helpful, to an extent, with those not in agreement with you, but boy was it over the top for me! I felt like I was reading the same stuff over and over again.

This book gets a 3/5 rating because of it's intent, first off. Second, the high points were there, but the low points were too many. Maybe I was expecting too much before reading this, but this is how I feel after having just finished reading it. Will revise, and, or add thoughts at a later date if needed.

Robin says

Easy read, at times painfully redundant and repetitive.

Presents a very well thought out argument for the use of the OTF(outsiders test for faith) that will be quickly ignored, set aside or stuffed into the nearest scarecrow.

What Loftus has done is codify an informal or personal argument that's been around some time with coherence and clarity, giving it force and respectability.

I would encourage everyone not only read this book, but apply the OTF to their beliefs and have the courage

and intellectual honesty to go where such an endeavour leads them with quiet determination and dispassion.

Ross Blocher says

I was eager to read *The Outsider Test for Faith*, as I'd been recommending it to others in one breath while sheepishly admitting I hadn't read it myself in the next. I was familiar with John Loftus's thesis, which is easy enough to describe: in order to evaluate whether a religion is true, one must look at it from the vantage point of an outsider. This potent point was one of the key observations that fueled my own journey away from faith. What were the odds that I just happened to be raised in the right place and time with the correct religion? Why are there so many other faiths, and why was I so confident in dismissing their beliefs while embracing my own? Mormons, Muslims, and even Scientologists seemed equally convinced of their conclusions. How could I know that my own beliefs were superior?

These are the central themes of *The Outsider Test for Faith* (OTF), and Loftus unpacks them at length. He had already introduced the OTF in his other works and blog writings, and used this book to address his critics as well. Loftus makes it clear that he believes all religions fail the OTF. There's no beating around the bush in expressing that position, though I must say the core concepts are conveyed in every possible permutation, and it becomes painfully repetitive. There are many incisive arguments spread throughout, however, and it's well worth the read for someone looking to critically examine his or her faith. Just be forewarned that it's not written diplomatically for the believer; many will be turned off by its declarative tone and unnecessary length.
