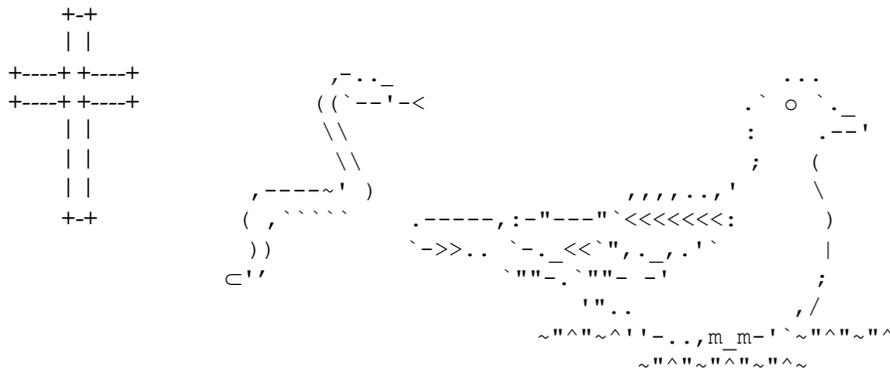


# Wise as serpents and harmless as doves

(Matthew 10:16)



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## Cliché thinking is for the birds

Mike L Anderson

An Englishman, an Irishman, and a Scotsman walk into a bar. The bartender turns to them, takes one look, and says, "What is this - some kind of a joke?"

A cliché is an oft-used phrase. Should we avoid them like the plague or find pearls of wisdom in them? It's tricky.

One thing that should make us wary about slogans is that it is not hard to find their equally charming opposites. For example, "many hands make light work" but "too many cooks spoil the broth." And "great minds think alike" but "fools never differ." A cliché may have validity in a certain situation, but its literary appeal can make it loiter in the mind, displacing other thoughts (or opposite clichés) and persuade far beyond its real value. Lord Chesterfield said, "Most maxim-mongers have preferred the prettiness to the justness of a thought, and the turn to the truth."<sup>1</sup> That beauty is only skin deep can apply to clichés too!

They are often just too superficial to be reliable guides. It would be better if clichés came with qualifications. However, it is their very terseness that makes them so quotable. Consider the ditty "Red on yellow, kill a fellow; red on black, venom lack." This folk rhyme is intended to help people distinguish venomous coral snakes from the

similar-looking non-venomous Milk Snake and other mimics. It is true enough - for North America. A fellow who picks up a red on black banded snake in Africa may well end up dead. The rhyme is a practical shortcut. It fosters the quick and appropriate reaction of a cowboy to a snake so that he can get on with his other duties. Fair enough. A person who tries to apply the rhyme in all contexts has fallen into cliché thinking.

So, lets take a few clichés and examine in what situations they apply, if any.

Take "God helps those who help themselves." One poll found that three quarters of Americans believe that it appears in the Bible!<sup>2</sup> Actually it began as, "the gods help those who help themselves" in Aesop's fables. Aesop (620-560 B.C.) was talking about getting a wheel out of the mire. The monotheistic version was popularised by English politician Algernon Sidney and scientist Benjamin Franklin.<sup>3</sup> There are situations in which the Bible supports applying the cliché. For instance, when the pursuing Egyptians were closing in on the praying Israelites, the word of God came to Moses saying, "Quit praying and get the people moving."<sup>4</sup> The Israelites were looking to God alone while he was expecting them to play a part. Their physical wellbeing depended on them helping themselves! However, it is spiritual madness to apply it to eternal wellbeing. The Bible stresses that we are quite helpless to secure our own redemption. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast."<sup>5</sup> God redeems those who refuse to try and redeem themselves.

Or take "Cleanliness is next to godliness." One wonders whether some sneaky medieval mother tried to coerce cleanliness out of her son by giving it eternal significance. John Wesley (1703 - 1791) and George Whitefield (1714 - 1770) approvingly quoted it.<sup>6</sup> They should have known better. True, there are many ceremonial laws in the Old Testament regarding cleanliness. However, Jesus criticised the Pharisees and teachers of the law for giving externals too much importance, quoting Isaiah, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."<sup>7</sup> The trouble with cleanliness or dirtiness is that *both* have been used as marks of spirituality. Some during the Middle Ages so neglected themselves in reaction to worldly comfort that they became infested with lice. This was seen as a sign of saintliness!<sup>8</sup> Jesus declared that a person is not made spiritually unclean by being physically clean<sup>9</sup> nor made spiritually clean by being

physically dirty.<sup>10</sup> It is all too easy to use externals to manufacture an artificial spirituality, but God sees inside the heart.

Paradoxical humour in a cliché can give it an undeserved measure of import. Mark Twain has often been quoted: "Faith is believing what you know ain't so."<sup>11</sup> His definition may well describe the kind of faith that he had. The apostle Paul had a different view. "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."<sup>12</sup>

Jesus explained one context: "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."<sup>13</sup> Sure, the Holy Spirit cannot be seen, but God incarnate was quite visible. And the effects that God has on people are evident in their lives. One question is "does faith breed charity?" Atheist Roy Hattersley admits it does. Writing in the Guardian, he acknowledges that after the hurricane Katrina disaster it was the Salvation Army and mostly other faith groups that got stuck in with relief work. He added, "Notable by their absence are teams from rationalist societies, free thinkers' clubs and atheists' associations - the sort of people who not only scoff at religion's intellectual absurdity but also regard it as a positive force for evil."<sup>14</sup>

Nobel prize-winning physicist Steven Weinberg made a statement that has become a cliché overnight. It got 141 000 hits on Google!<sup>15</sup> The statement: "for good people to do evil things - that takes religion."<sup>16</sup>

The concept of religiously inspired evil is not new with Weinberg. Jesus warned his disciples, "In fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God."<sup>17</sup> Christians should not be surprised when religion co-operates with evil. Indeed, Jesus never calls us to faith in religion (he does not even mention the term); he calls us to faith in God. Does this mean that all religion is invariably bad? No, because Jesus goes on to identify the true source of the evil saying, "They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me."<sup>18</sup> There is a religion that springs from knowing God and it leads to doing good things. The apostle James says, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."<sup>19</sup> James implies that there is a kind of religion that God does not accept and which is impure and faulty.

It has been noted that Weinberg's statement "would play badly in almost any context and demanded clarification."<sup>20</sup> To be fair he did try.

He said, for instance, "I think that on balance the moral influence of religion has been awful,"<sup>21</sup> implying that religion has done some good. How often does the qualifier accompany the provocative statement on the Internet? Very much less than one percent of the time.<sup>22</sup> Still, the qualifier itself needs to be qualified. There are and have been throughout history a great deal of religious people of various persuasions on the planet. Investigating the effect of religion on recent disaster relief alone is a big task. What kind of religion does Weinberg think inspired those who helped the victims of Katrina? One would have to be God to accurately sum up the global effect of religion throughout history." Even the Son of God, who knew his disciple's future, spoke specifically instead of generalising about the effects of religion.

In contrast, when it comes to spiritual matters, Weinberg is less into qualifying statements and more into the sweeping kind. It is a little like noticing the wretched lives of drug abusers and saying, "drugs are bad – use snake oil." Ample clinical trials demonstrate that *prescribed* drugs used wisely are far better for particular patients than no drugs at all. Weinberg is welcome to attack religiously motivated evil (Jesus did), but he must do so accurately. He makes no distinction between converting to religion and converting to Christ. He pulls a fast one in promoting Christlessness. God does not prescribe religion, but Jesus.

How does one avoid been taken in by the slogan? Avoid being overawed by its literary appeal or air of profundity. Remember that just like any other claim, slogans have to be evaluated. A cliché may be as cute as a bunny but as safe as a rabid one. Cliché thinking is for the birds; only a bird-brain would think otherwise.

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If you found this article helpful please give it to someone else.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Quoted in Hoover, A.J. (1982) *Don't you believe it*. Moody Press, Chicago, p. 99.
- <sup>2</sup> McKibben, B. (2005) The Christian paradox: How a faithful nation gets Jesus wrong. *Harper's Magazine*, August.
- <sup>3</sup> Philpott, K. (1974) *If the Devil wrote a Bible*. Logos International, New Jersey, p. 11
- <sup>4</sup> Exodus 14:15 Living Bible.
- <sup>5</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9
- <sup>6</sup> Philpott, K (1974) *Ibid.*, p 20.
- <sup>7</sup> Matthew 15:8.
- <sup>8</sup> Harpur, J. (2002) *Sacred Tracks: 2000 years of Christian Pilgrimage* Frances Lincoln Limited, London, p. 108.
- <sup>9</sup> Matthew 15:16-20.
- <sup>10</sup> Matthew 5: 16-18.
- <sup>11</sup> Quoted in Konner, J. (2007) *The Atheists Bible: An illustrious collection of irreverent thoughts*. HarperCollins Publishers, HarperCollins, p. 125.
- <sup>12</sup> Hebrews 11:3.
- <sup>13</sup> John 3:8.
- <sup>14</sup> Hattersley, R (2005) Faith does breed charity. *The Guardian*, Monday 12 September.
- <sup>15</sup> Accessed on 17<sup>th</sup> September using the search items Weinberg, "for good people to do evil things," and "that takes religion." It was done this way because punctuation varied.
- <sup>16</sup> Weinberg, S. (2001) *Facing Up: Science and its Cultural Adversaries*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts p. 242.
- <sup>17</sup> John 16:2.
- <sup>18</sup> John 16:3.
- <sup>19</sup> James 1:27.
- <sup>20</sup> Giberson, K. and M. Artigas (2007) *Oracles of Science: Celebrity Scientists versus God and Religion*. Oxford University Press. p. 182.
- <sup>21</sup> Weinberg, (2001) *Ibid.*, p. 241.
- <sup>22</sup> The qualifier received only 230 hits on Google compared to the 141 000 for the provocative slogan.