

NATC Newsletter

Consider First Principles

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Since the infamous O.J. Simpson trial back in the mid-90s, there have been a plethora of courtroom cases shown on television for the viewing pleasure of American audiences. Forensic investigation series, police homicide reality shows, "who dunnit" re-enactments have all graced our 1080dpi television flat screens. It has even spawned several television stations totally devoted to the crime scene/forensic genre. The more salacious, the more scandalous, the more intriguing a case is, the more newsworthy it is judged to be.

In televised courtroom dramas, you've seen witnesses squirm in their chairs as prosecutors and defense attorneys alike question them, grill them, and interrogate them with all the rhetorical skill mothers use when questioning their chocolate smeared four-year-olds while observing chunks of missing dinner desserts.

Having testified in a number of federal and state criminal trials, I can appreciate what witnesses go through as all ears listen intently to the testimonies they nervously offer in the courtroom. One of the goals of the attorneys on either side is to discredit the witness. They want to poke holes in their testimony; they want to portray the witness as a deceiver, a liar, one who should be heard with a fair dose of skepticism. No judge, jury, or court reporter would accept the testimony of a witness who contradicts himself on the stand. Neither would a jury believe that opposite conclusions drawn by expert witnesses for the prosecution and defense hold equal truth values. The jurors have the responsibility to choose what theory they think best fits the facts, but they would not come to the conclusion that contradictory theories are both true.

Why is that? Because built into the very fabric of reality are fundamental laws of thought which philosophers and logicians call *first principles*. One of those principles is the law of "non-contradiction." The law of non-contradiction states that two opposite truth claims cannot both be true at the same time and in the same sense. Either God exists or He does not exist. Either $2+2 = 4$ or it does not equal 4. Either Jesus is God or He is not God. It is logically impossible for God to both exist and not exist. The sum total of $2+2$ cannot be both 4 and 16. Let me not belabor the point.

So, why is this seemingly obvious truth important? Because in the religiously diverse culture that we live, the "coexist" mantra reigns supreme. That is, the religious commitments of Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, atheists, Christians, and Zoroastrians should be tolerated, not only for plurality's sake (an idea which the founding fathers thought important), but because everyone's religion is equally *true* and as such, deserves our respect and acceptance. To embrace that notion is to violate the fundamental law of non-contradiction. As stated above, either God exists or He does not exist. Either God is one or He is many. You are either reincarnated after death or you are not, but it can never be both.

The next time someone tells you that all religions are fundamentally the same, but only superficially different, think about the law of non-contradiction and simply ask that person to defend the idea that two opposing truth claims can both be true at the same time and in the same sense.