

## Enough rope, dope and hope

Comments on Andrew Denton's feature-length documentary, *God on my Side*.



*by Greg Clarke*

Is God on your side, my side, no-one's side, or everyone's side?

And how can you tell? Visit America and find out, with the help of your favourite TV host, Andrew Denton!

The host of popular ABC TV talk show, *Enough Rope*, has produced a remarkable and entertaining documentary in which he explores this question through the eyes and mouths of participants at the National Christian Broadcaster's Convention in (where else?) Gaylord, Texas, U.S. of A. Denton visited the convention in February this year, and the resulting documentary has now hit cinema screens. It's entertaining, timely, and an important examination of today's culture—not so much for what it says about American evangelicalism, but for what it says about how intelligent agnostic Australians (such as Denton) approach the subject of religion.

Denton's empathic but incisive style is perfect for this subject: he asks people whether they think God is speaking to them and through them, and gives them enough rope to either hang themselves or commend themselves in their answers. He is always genuinely interested in them as people, and in what they say, even when he disagrees strongly with them. It is a model of journalism in which the views of both the interviewee and interviewer are a legitimate part of the discussion. I like it!

Denton wanders around at this enormous Christian media convention (6000 in attendance), interviewing producers, artists, salespeople and puppets (yes!), trying to fathom why they are in the religious media game. The approach he adopted was to ask

people a series of questions about how to “sell God” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, how they came to ‘find God’ themselves, and some questions about religious life in America.

There are some real doozies among the interviewees. There’s Doug Batchelor, the billionaire’s son who lived in a cave before discovering Christ; there’s a range of trinket sellers who could be at any market selling anything, and then there’s the Macduff singing evangelists who are a world of hairpieces unto themselves.

Such interview subjects do a lot to discredit religion in the eyes of the intelligent viewer. However, Denton is a model of generous secularism in his engagement with them; he neither pretends to agree with them, nor ridicules their beliefs. Instead, he expresses his astonishment at what they hold to be true.

There are a number of religious claims in the film where evangelicals need simply to say, “That’s dopey and harmful and wrong”. One example is the woman who promises that God will send a new pancreas to a viewer via the Holy Spirit through the television. Nothing to defend there! Another, in my view, is the premillennialist attitude to Israel and some of the end-times beliefs espoused by a few people in the film—but I know some will disagree with me on that.

There are some very admirable interviewees, too, such as the fellow representing Arab Vision, a Christian television service into the Middle East, who comes across as extremely well-thought-through. In fact, *many* of the people interviewed come across as earnest Christians seeking to make a difference to the world. Sure, they may be fashion-challenged (there are some hairdos I have never encountered in real life), they may speak in strange religious phrasing, and they may come from a subculture unfamiliar to Australians (especially that over-made up, neat and shiny American religious type). Nevertheless, beneath the surface distractions there are plenty of sincere believers. To his credit, Denton acknowledges this and was at many places moved by a person’s faith.

There are two critical issues behind the film. The first is the influence that evangelicals have on American politics, and whether a version of that influence is developing in Australia. Denton tells us that the evangelical vote is decisive for the Bush presidency, and therefore evangelicals have some clout when it comes to policy in the US, especially in relation to Israel. Whether or not this is a fair line of argument, it certainly reflects the opinion of many—the Christians are getting too close to government. In Australia, with

the federal government handing out money for school chaplains and hosting Christian heritage conferences in Parliament House, it seems like a fair concern. Secularists, who feel that the question of religious truth can never be settled, are deeply concerned that religion might become too powerful in politics.

The second issue of importance relates to beliefs about the end-times, otherwise known as eschatology. Denton hears some startling beliefs about Israel and the importance of war in the Middle East, about the antichrist heading up the United Nations, and about the insignificance of environmental care because “it’s all gonna burn” soon in the apocalypse, so who cares. When this is what a secularist like Andrew Denton hears, it is no wonder he worries. It is one of the pressing needs of our time that we evangelicals clearly communicate what we do and don’t believe the Bible teaches about the future.

Denton has described faith as a personal view of the universe that can be neither proved nor disproved. It’s not a bad definition, but it’s not enough. A faith *can* be shown to be baseless, against reason, improbable or unrealistic. If a faith is contrary to reason, experience and reality, then it can’t be one worth holding. There’s faith in something tenable, and there’s faith that is untenable. Christians (and everyone else of any faith) have a job to do in convincing others that their faith is tenable.

The film finishes with the words of Jesus, that we are to love one another. This is a great message—better than the message to ‘tolerate’ one another, which always sounds like you are merely enduring a bad smell in the room for the sake of being polite! But it is not the message of all religions—it is a specific message, with a distinctive Christian flavour to it. It is unclear to me whether Andrew Denton is aware of the extent to which he has inherited specifically Christian desires and a Christian anthropology, or whether this love he commends to us is something new and different to Christian love (if so, what is it?).

As we Christians take on board some of the implicit and blatant criticisms of this film, as we must, we can hope and pray that Denton and others may also look closely at the specific love that Jesus has shown the world, and in it find some satisfying answers to life’s deepest dilemmas. Is the Christian claim to knowledge of God a case of “my invisible friend is better than your invisible friend”, as Andrew Denton suggested in one

interview session? Or is there more reason, more evidence, more experience, more match with reality that would indicate it is worth believing?

But the major problem Denton seems to have with religious people is when they say, “I have the one true faith”. Exclusivism bugs him most. This is a great challenge to Christians, because we clearly do believe that only in Jesus is God revealed fully to us. And only through Jesus can sins be forgiven. So how to communicate this without being arrogant? It seems to me that it is eminently possible, because Christianity is a message, a gospel, not a set of laws or an intervention of force. If Christians stay “on message”, we will be honouring the one in whom we believe and making him attractive to all we come in contact with. That should be enough, I hope. Leave the rest to God.