

Consider...

If there is only one true God then why are there so many religions?

If religion makes people better then why isn't the world getting better?

Why do religions that advocate peace, condone violence?

How can a loving God allow some people to go to Hell?

Whose side is God on?

Why does the Bible and the Koran have so many inconsistencies and contradictions?

Is there one universal religion?

These are a few of the questions that plague religion. From the rich to the poor, the intellectual to the simple, the philosopher to the common man, all must eventually ask these questions and seek the answers.

Derrick Holt has struggled with these questions for over 20 years. There's nothing he wants more than to know that what he has believed all of his life is the truth; but he has doubts. Is there truth in religion or are we being deceived?

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Are We Being Deceived?

by

Chris Meyer

...the “sacred” is an element in the structure of consciousness and not a stage in the history of consciousness. On the most archaic levels of culture, living, considered as being human, is in itself a religious act, for food-getting, sexual life, and work have a sacramental value. In other words, to be -- or, rather, to become -- a man signifies being “religious.

Mircea Eliade

Preface to A History of Religious Ideas – Volume 1

All men have need of the gods...

Homer

Prologue

We are born into a world we don't understand; a world of complexity and endless mysteries. To make things worse, life is just as mysterious. In our need to understand how to survive successfully within our environment and live peacefully with those around us we listen, we read and we observe, hoping that what we have heard or read or observed will help us make sense of the world in which we live and guide us in our efforts to survive. Our search for understanding would be much simpler if the information available to us was always accurate or true. Unfortunately, it is not.

It has been said, "We do not see the world as it is, we see the world as we want to see it." Bombarded by a deluge of information, we go through our days impulsively choosing what we want to believe with little or no regard for truth. Maybe there is no absolute truth. Maybe truth is subjective or relative. Maybe truth is no more than what we believe it to be, therefore there is no real universal absolute. And yet, truth, absoluteness, must exist somewhere, at least in degrees, as a universal reality. If there is no objective truth then anything goes; there is no definitive direction for men's lives. If we are left to create truth for ourselves then there is only chaos. Unity can never exist where there is no truth; no absolute. If there is no truth then we are left to wander in the darkness with no illumination other than that which we create for ourselves in our own imagination and limited understanding. We are lost.

In an attempt to achieve some measure of order in life and find direction many of us adopt a system of beliefs or creed. These standards help guide us through the uncharted waters of life. Sometimes these tenets become a part of life subtly. And, because they have crept in so imperceptibly we fail to adequately investigate their credibility. Many of us simply do not question whether or not the creed that we have accepted is actually true.

Some people really don't care whether or not what they believe is true. They are content coasting through life believing what their parents believed; accepting those things without

question. After all, parents are older and wiser; and if that creed is the most popular with the majority of the population, then there is no reason to doubt whether or not those principles are valid. If it seems to work for us, why question it?

Of all of the influences that affect our life, religion has, perhaps, the greatest impact. Mainstream religions talk as if they have God and religion figured out. There is a rigid formula for everything: sin, prayer, salvation, and the afterlife. The problem is that not everyone believes the same thing. There are a myriad of religions and religious ideas in the world. So we are faced with a dilemma: either one religion is right and the others are wrong, they are all right, or they are all wrong. But which is it? What makes one religion right and the others wrong? What makes one true and the others false? After all, people in all religions are convinced that theirs is the right one; the truth. Is it a feeling that we are right that makes us right; that what we believe is true? Or does everyone in all religions share that same feeling? And, from our own experiences, is it smart to trust feelings? Haven't we all been deceived by emotion? Remember that first love? Feelings were strong. We felt as if that person would be our mate forever. Unfortunately, for most of us, it turned out to be no more than a momentary obsession. There is a fine line between love and lust. Impulse, infatuation, desire; feelings that can drive us to make catastrophic mistakes. Can feelings be trusted? Is religion no more than a feeling? And if it is more than a feeling what else is it? Is it necessary that a creed or set of beliefs constitute truth or is it sufficient just to believe in something? Is religion important enough to be tested or is it enough that it gives us something to believe in and provides us with some direction in life, notwithstanding that that direction might not be the best? Who really cares? Some do.

For some, truth *is* important. But the search for truth can be exhaustive, frustrating and confusing. No road worth traveling is an easy one. However, the destination can be well worth the journey. The search for religious truth is a journey that everyone must make for themselves at sometime in their life; a quest not just for superficial answers or traditional rhetoric, but a search

for objective truth; a quest for the one true God and a universal religion. Once and for all it is important to know: is there truth in religion? Do mainstream religions have it right or are we being deceived?

Chapter 1

We do not err because truth is difficult to see. It is visible at a glance. We err because this is more comfortable.

-- Alexander Solzhenitsyn

It was early evening when I finally arrived home from work. I lived in Sugar Land, a small but vibrant community just outside Houston, Texas, where the traffic is horrendous. My wife was visiting her ailing grandmother in Chicago and my two sons were out doing who-knows-what to who-knows-who so the house was quiet for a change. It began to rain just as I arrived home and, being that it was November, there was a chill in the air that made it feel much colder than it was. The humidity in Houston is always high, normally eighty-five to ninety-five percent so the cold feels even colder than the thermometer indicates. I lit a fire in our gas fireplace and watched as the fake embers began to glow. I really preferred to burn wood but the smoke and ash always made the house smell unpleasant so I converted the fireplace to gas a few years earlier. So, here I was, sitting in a quiet room, fireplace blazing, cold and rainy outside and a warm cup of coffee by my side. This was the perfect atmosphere for reading. I pulled out the Bible, as was my practice at such contemplative times, and began to read. It happens that I opened the book to the eighth chapter of John. When I got to verse thirty-two I read, "And you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." For some reason, I stopped reading and began reflecting on all of those questions that had haunted me for so many years. Questions that I had either ignored or simply pushed to the back of my mind. Questions like: if there is only one true God then why are there so many religions? If religion makes people better then why isn't the world getting better? Why do religions that advocate peace, condone violence? How can a loving God allow some people to go to hell? If there is one true religion, which one is it? Certainly, I had always believed it was Christianity, but if that were true then why didn't everyone else realize it too? Why did

they continue to hold onto their false religions? Whose side is God on? Why are there so many inconsistencies and contradictions in the Bible? Is there meant to be one universal religion? The list went on and on. I realized that after all of those years of attending church and teaching Bible studies, these questions still remained. I continued to have doubts about certain aspects of my faith. In fact, as embarrassed as I was to admit it, I even doubted the existence of God. That night I made a commitment to find answers to these questions no matter what I had to do or how long it took or where my journey might lead.

The first thing I needed to decide was where to begin. This was certainly not something that I could do on my own. I'd tried that many times and had gotten nowhere. The preacher at the church I attended seemed to be knowledgeable so I decided to start there. I called the church office and scheduled a meeting for the following day. I spent the rest of the evening making a list of things that I wanted to discuss.

Pastor Greg Watson was in his late thirties. He had graduated from Southwestern Theological Seminary in Ft. Worth, Texas. With several years of experience under his belt having ministered in small Texas towns, he moved to Sugar Land and became the pastor of our congregation. Ours was a mid-sized church with about two thousand members. Certainly nothing like the mega-churches that boasted congregations of ten thousand members or more. Pastor Watson was young for a church of this size, but because we had a young congregation, the average member being in their mid-thirties, he could easily identify with their concerns. So, he was a good choice. Of course, one thing lacking in any younger person in any business or situation is experience. Sometimes I think age is not as respected as it should be. Maybe I feel that way because I'm older now. Now in my late forties, I'm realizing how important experience is to seeing life as it really is rather than how we always imagined it should be.

The next morning I arrived at the church a little before ten o'clock. I announced myself and took a seat. The office was decorated with paintings depicting the life of Christ. It was

interesting how each artist saw Christ differently. Some painted him masculine with strong arms and manly features while others depicted him as being frail, almost effeminate. And then there were the crucifixes displayed around the room. I always wondered if gunpowder had been invented in the first century and Jesus had been executed by a firing squad rather than on a cross would our churches and homes be decorated with guns hanging from the wall? Would a rifle have become a pivotal Christian icon? It wasn't long before the secretary invited me to join Pastor Watson in his study.

After we exchanged greetings, I took a seat across the desk from where he was seated. I had been anticipating this meeting all night. It was my hope that after our talk I could lay to rest all of my questions and doubts and get on with my life.

“Derrick, what can I do for you? What’s on your mind?” He got right to the point. I like that. Sometimes people want to make small talk and you lose valuable time for discussing the important issues.

“It might sound funny coming from a person of my age, but I have a few questions about our faith that I would like to discuss.”

“Alright, I’ll help if I can.” He picked up a pen as if he were going to take notes. Instead he just started clicking it the way some people do when they’re nervous.

“For several years now I have been bothered with what seems to be inconsistencies in the scriptures.”

“What do you mean, inconsistencies?” He wrinkled his brow slightly.

“Well,” I continued, “we believe that the Bible teaches that God is love.”

“That’s right.”

“And that God is perfect.”

“Yes. Omnipotent, Omniscient and Omnipresent.” He spoke with confidence.

“But the Bible also indicates that God can be filled with wrath and that he can be jealous and envious and sometimes, just.”

“I think that’s true.”

“Well, if God is a God of love and if God is perfect than am I wrong in concluding that God’s love is perfect love?”

“Again, I would have to agree.” I could tell by his expression that he wasn’t sure where this conversation was headed.

“Well, then,” I was coming to the big question, “isn’t there a contradiction here? I mean, if God’s love is perfect then God always loves. Being filled with wrath would not be the result of perfect love. Being jealous would not be the result of perfect love. Even being just would not be a part of love because justice demands that the person being judged is responsible for paying the consequences for their wrongdoing, whereas perfect love would always provide forgiveness and, therefore, the guilty would not be held accountable for their wrongdoing as the law requires.”

“God is perfect in all that he does,” the pastor responded. “So, he is perfect in love but he is also perfect in wrath. That means that his wrath is justified by our actions.”

“But if God’s love is perfect then there is no justification for wrath in any situation. Being angry is a result of something happening that we didn’t know was going to happen and we get angry as a response to someone’s behavior that surprises us. Our reaction to this surprising behavior is anger. If we had known that they were going to act a certain way or do a certain thing we would not be upset or angry because we would have already known what they were going to do and we would have been prepared for it. Christianity claims that God is omniscient so he already knows what is going to happen and therefore should not be caught off-guard. And, being perfectly loving, he would have

already forgiven the person for acting in an unacceptable way. It is the same with jealousy. Perfect knowledge means perfect understanding because he knows all things; all the motives, all the circumstances, all our weaknesses, and therefore, that perfect knowledge that leads to perfect understanding would lead to perfect forgiveness because of God's perfect love. And certainly, as I mentioned, justice is not consistent with perfect love, even if it is perfect justice."

He thought for a moment. "But God has given us the freedom to make our own decisions. We call that free will. We are responsible for our decisions. God loves us, but we can choose whether or not to accept that love. That acceptance comes through acknowledging Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of the world."

"But Christianity claims that the Bible indicates that God's love is unconditional. Unconditional means without condition."

"If you accept God's offer of salvation through Jesus, his son," he replied.

"You just used the word 'if'. You said it's unconditional 'if'. Unconditional love has no 'ifs'. The minute you say it's unconditional 'if' or 'but' or 'when' you are putting a condition on love and it is no longer unconditional! You say the Bible also says that God's love for us is a covenant and not a contract. That means that God's love for us is not contingent on anything that we do, it is one-sided and we cannot affect it in any way. If God's love for us is unconditional and it is a covenant, then it is for everyone everywhere and there are no conditions, period. I love my sons. They have absolutely no control over my love for them. They can reject my love, they can make a conscious decision to hate me, but they can never make me stop loving them. So, can we have control over God's love for us or is it unconditional and a covenant? Do I love my sons more than God loves his creation?"

Pastor Watson leaned back in his chair and gazed at me. I guess he was trying to absorb all of my aimless rambling. Finally he leaned forward and put his elbows on the desk. "How

long have you been a part of the Christian faith?” His voice was stern, almost defensive.

“About thirty years,” I answered.

“Then you should know that these are deep theological questions that were settled hundreds of years ago. These are questions of faith. There are things we can’t understand. They are beyond our comprehension. Certainly, God is one of those incomprehensible things.”

“But it seems that Christianity and all other religions talk as if they *do* have it figured out,” I argued. “They describe God as if they know exactly who he is. The Bible explains it, doesn’t it? It gives us certain characteristics of God and yet these characteristics are inconsistent even though God is supposed to be consistent. Look, if we make a list of the characteristics of God as indicated in the Bible we have things like wrathful, loving, angry, retaliatory, just, discriminatory, forgiving, caring, compassionate and jealous to name a few. If you consider all of these character traits, God sounds a lot like my Uncle Frank! Some of these character traits are actually what we consider character flaws, things that we try to teach our children not to do; things like getting angry, being judgmental, desiring retaliation or becoming jealous. Are we saying that we want our kids to be better than God? Help me out here!” I’ll admit that I was getting a little loud, maybe even angry. I really wanted answers and I didn’t perceive that I was going to get them.

“Faith, Derrick, faith,” he said emphatically. “That’s the answer. Since we cannot know the true nature of God, we must depend on his Word and that word is the Bible. It is without flaw, infallible. If it says that God is this way, we must trust that he is and live in the knowledge of that truth.”

“But truth is absolute. These are inconsistencies concerning the very nature of God! Is God perfect or not?”

“The answer is faith. That’s all I can tell you. You really need to spend more time in prayer asking God to help you understand.”

“I have and that’s why I’m here!” I realized that he was giving me the same run-around that everyone else had. He had resorted to the old “faith” speech. Anytime I had a legitimate question concerning religion and no one seemed to have a real answer they always turned to faith as the answer. If you doubted, you didn’t have enough faith. If you didn’t understand something, you didn’t have enough faith. Faith was the answer to all religious questions. Unfortunately, this time for me it wasn’t good enough. I had hoped for more.

“Look,” he said getting up indicating that our discussion had come to an end. “You think about it some more and pray about it and we’ll talk again in the next few weeks. Okay? I’m sure God will give you the answers you need. But remember...faith.”

He ended by praying for me. He prayed that God would lead me to find the answers I was seeking and to accept the things I could not understand. I said, “Amen”. We shook hands and I left. As I got into my car and headed for home I was even more determined to find the truth.

Chapter 2

If you would attain to what you are not yet, you must always be displeased by what you are. For where you are pleased with yourself there you have remained. Keep adding, keep walking, keep advancing.

-- Saint Augustine

The problem was, I was back where I started! I didn't know where to go from here! Should I read? If so, what? I had already read a lot of books written by Christians about Christianity. They all said pretty much the same thing. Should I read about other religions? I know that many religious leaders, regardless of their religion, warn that there are certain people you should avoid talking with and certain books you shouldn't read for fear that they will cause you to doubt your faith. But I already had doubts. And I figured that if truth existed, it would somehow rise to the top over all of the lies or deceit that lay in store for me on my journey. I was determined to look under every rock for answers to my questions. If truth existed, I was determined to find out what it was. I did not want to be guilty of putting my faith and trust in something that wasn't true.

So, I began by reading. I read a few books on various other religions. I read parts of the Koran. I read some of the Hindu writings. I studied some of the works of the great philosophers. Things got worse. I realized that there were inconsistencies in all of the religious doctrines. Could truth be found in religion at all? It was time to look for someone else who could help.

Once again I thought about the preachers that I knew, and I knew a lot of them. But I was hesitant to contact them because I had learned from past experience that I would get the same unsatisfying answers that I had gotten over the years; superficial rationalizations that I had heard proclaimed from pulpits year after year. Where could I go to get a fresh perspective? Who did I know who would not try to sell me a bill of goods? I took mental inventory of all my acquaintances. Unfortunately, all of

them were of the Christian faith and I knew they would be biased. Plus, most of them probably had the same questions that I did. However, there was one person who might be of some help. I'd met him many years ago at a lecture on stress. Being in business for myself, stress was a problem from which I had always suffered. Only a person who has been in business for himself can know the kind of anxieties that torture the self-employed. Since that lecture, Dr. David Beckstein and I had become good friends. He was known in his profession as one of the most respected psychologists in the nation. Even though he was a member of the Jewish faith, I felt confident that he would be someone capable of discussing the topic of religion without bias. Anyway, I'd never know how much help he could be until I had spoken with him. I didn't know if he would be interested in discussing the topic at all. But, that's where I would begin.

Chapter 3

A seeker after truth must “shun no science, scorn no book, nor cling fanatically to a single creed.”

-- First Epistle of the Brethren of Purity

The next morning I was up before sunrise. I couldn't wait to call David. Unfortunately, in my enthusiasm I had forgotten that most people don't get to work until at least eight o'clock and some don't arrive until even later. I spent the next few hours going over the list of my questions and concerns. As I thought about this quest, I started feeling a little guilty. I mean, should I even be doubting my faith? Was it wrong to question? Was it the devil putting these ideas in my mind in an attempt to drive me away from my faith? I thought about abandoning the search altogether and going back to believing what I had always believed; continuing to ignore the questions that troubled me. *The truth will make you free.* The phrase kept echoing in my mind. Deep down, I knew that if I abandoned the task now I would just start searching again sometime in the future. I was not the kind of person who could live with unresolved issues. Devil or not, I had to have answers.

At eight-thirty, I picked up the phone and dialed David's office. I could tell by the sounds in the background that the person who answered was actually in his office and not someone from an answering service.

“I'd like to speak to David Beckstein if he's in.”

“Who is calling, please?”

“This is Derrick Holt. I'm a friend of David's.”

“One minute, please.”

The line went quiet. Thankfully, they didn't have any music playing while I was on hold. I hate it when they play music while you wait. It's supposed to make it seem like time goes by faster; make you forget that you've been on hold for about an

hour, but it doesn't work. You just get really sick of hearing the same old music over and over. About thirty seconds passed when I heard the line open.

"Derrick?" I knew it was Dave's voice.

"Yeah, Dave. Have you got a minute? I don't want to take your time but I have a question for you?"

"Sure, what's up?"

"I'm kind of struggling with some personal issues and I was wondering if you might have some time to discuss them? I don't mean today, of course. I know you're really busy but I was thinking if you have some time later maybe we could talk." I really hated to ask him to give me his time when discussing these kinds of issues was probably something he got paid to do.

"Personal questions, huh? Can you tell me a little more?"

"It's kind of difficult to explain over the phone."

"Is it serious?"

"Well, it is to me. I mean, it's not life threatening or anything. I can tell you that it involves religion."

"Religion, huh?" The line went quiet for a few seconds. "Look, I'd love to talk with you but I'm not sure I'd have any valuable input. Religion's a topic that I'm not really qualified to discuss in any depth."

My hopes were dashed. My heart sank. I was afraid I had hit a dead-end on my first call.

"But listen," he continued, "I have a good friend, Dr. Samuel Lester. He's a retired college professor. He taught religious studies and he is really in touch with mainstream religion. He has spent a great deal of time studying religious history. Why don't I give him a call and set up an appointment for you?"

My hopes were rekindled. "That would be great if it's not too much trouble."

“No problem at all. I’ll give him a call today.”

“Thanks a million,” I said. After I hung up, my enthusiasm was revived. At least this call had led me to someone who might be helpful. I couldn’t wait to hear from him.

Hardly an hour had passed when my phone rang. It was Dr. Lester. Obviously, he and Beckman were very good friends. I told him about my situation. He listened as if he were actually interested. I told him that I would love the opportunity to visit with him. I explained how I had questions about certain aspects of religion for which I had not been able to find answers.

“I’ll tell you what let’s do,” he said when I finally finished rambling on. “Are you doing anything this weekend?”

“No, not that I can think of. My wife, Sue, is in Chicago so I’m pretty free.”

“Now that I’m retired, my wife Brenda and I live in Wimberley, in the hill country. Why don’t you come up and stay for the weekend. It’ll give us a chance to talk.”

“I couldn’t do that. I don’t want to impose.”

“You won’t be. David tells me that this is important to you and I want to help if I can. I’ve got plenty of time. So you are more than welcome. My wife paints for several hours everyday so it can get pretty boring around here. A good discussion will give me something to do.”

This was more than I had expected. “Well, okay, I guess, if you’re sure it’s not an inconvenience.”

“No, not at all. I’ll look forward to it. I’ll email you directions. We’ll plan on you getting here Thursday evening and you can stay for the weekend or leave any time you’re ready. However, it’s important for you to know that you still might not have your answers. Religion is a complicated issue.”

“I understand. Thanks, Dr. Lester. This means a lot to me.”

“Please call me Samuel. And don’t thank me too soon. It might be a waste of your time.”

“Oh, yeah, right,” I said sarcastically. “I’ll look forward to it, too. See you then. Thanks.”

“No problem. Goodbye.”

I hung up. It was all I could do to keep from exploding with anticipation. Luckily it was already Tuesday so I only had to wait one more day before making the trip to Wimberley. I must say it was one of the longest days of my life. It seemed to drag on and on. And then I thought, what if he was right? What if he wasn’t any help? What if he ended up giving me the old “faith” speech? What if he turned out to be some kind of fanatic for another religion and tried to convert me? Boy, would that be embarrassing! What would we talk about all weekend? I began to stress out. You know, it’s true what they say, most of the time we stress about things we can’t do anything about or things that never happen. But I was an expert at stress. I’m one of those who stresses over not having anything to get stressed about. But what could I do? I had made the commitment. And really, this could be the greatest weekend of my life. Little did I know how true that would turn out to be.

Chapter 4

... I could not do better than to try once and for all to get all the beliefs I had accepted from my birth out of my mind, so that once I have reconciled them with reason I might again set up either other, better ones or even the same ones. And I firmly believed that by this means I would succeed in conducting my life much better than were I to build only on old foundations or to lean only on the principles of which I permitted myself to be persuaded in my youth without ever having examined whether or not they were true.

-- Rene Descartes

Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy

The drive from Houston to Wimberley wasn't a long one. On a normal day it took about two-and-a-half hours. I can't say that Thursday was an altogether normal day. It was another one of those nasty, rainy, yucky days that makes driving more of a chore than a pleasure. The real challenge was when I arrived in Wimberley. The directions that Samuel had given me were good if you were familiar with the area. Their little house was secluded. After making about a dozen wrong turns, I finally gave him a call and he directed me, meticulously, through each turn and down each unmarked gravel road. When I finally arrived, my nerves were shot.

Samuel and Brenda welcomed me as I drove up to the house. I felt uncomfortable coming to visit a couple who I didn't know, but from the moment I arrived they did everything they could to make me feel welcome. Before long, we were having a cup of coffee and I was getting a tour of the house. Their home was rustic and quaint. The exterior was constructed of wood and maintained its rough finish. Inside, the walls were knotty pine. A light-colored rock tile covered the floors. They explained that having a light color on the floor helped them spot scorpions more easily. That settled my nerves! We enjoyed a brunch of bagels and cream cheese and table conversation. Brunch passed quickly and helped me to feel that I was less of an intrusion. Finally, it was time for Brenda to begin her painting and us, our

discussion. Brenda excused herself and disappeared into a bedroom that she had converted into an art studio. Samuel poured us a fresh cup of coffee and we went into the family room. I was glad the room provided such a casual atmosphere. I felt at ease, which was important since we were about to take on a subject that could easily become uncomfortable. I waited for Samuel to find his chair before I took mine. Many people don't understand the significance of a chair. I can't speak for women, but men take possession of a chair like other male animals claim territory. That's the place where they think, watch football, read and take naps. As a guest it is important not to encroach on another's territory. Once Samuel had taken his place in a large recliner next to the fireplace, I found an over-stuffed easy chair that fit me just fine. He sat his coffee on a table next to his chair.

"I really appreciate you giving me this time," I began.

"It's not a problem. Like I told you on the phone, I would normally be stuck reading some boring novel. This will be much more enjoyable."

"I'm not too sure about that," I warned as I shifted in my chair. I wasn't accustomed to discussing such a personal topic with a stranger.

"You mentioned that you have questions about religion."

"Yes. I am trying to get answers to some issues that I have had for many years concerning my faith."

"Alright. I'll help if I can. Religion is a subject I've spent a lot of time studying and teaching."

"That's what David said. I guess the problem is that even though I have been bothered by these questions for years I've ignored them and just sort of written them off thinking they would go away."

"But they haven't?" he asked.

"No. They've bothered me more and more. Every time I hear a sermon or attend a Bible study these issues resurface. In fact, because of these unresolved matters I now have serious

doubts about the validity of what I believe. I have to get these things settled if I'm ever going to experience the peace that I once had in my life."

"What aspects of religion are you having problems with specifically?"

"Originally, I guess, it started with those basic universal questions that are asked at one time or another by almost everyone who seriously ponders religion: why are there so many religions? If there is only one Supreme Being then why should so many religions or religious ideas exist? Doesn't that imply that there is one religion that is true while all of the others are false? After all, can there be more than one truth concerning the same thing? And if there is a God, a Supreme Being, and if that God is a God of love and compassion as most all of the religions claim, then why is there so much hatred and conflict between the religions? Shouldn't these religions be emanating the love of God that they so fervently worship? Some of the greatest atrocities in history have been committed in the name of God: witch hunts, the Inquisition, the Crusades, the deadly conflict between the Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, and the war in the Middle East, were all fought in the name of a loving God who is supposed to be merciful and forgiving. Muslim extremists are terrorizing the world using God as an excuse to kill and maim. Christian extremists calling themselves Christian Militia are threatening violence against those who they imagine to be their enemies, all the while claiming to follow the teachings of a man who taught that we should turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, forgive seventy-times-seven, and said that the meek will inherit the earth and blessed are the peacemakers. He even stopped the violence when he, himself, was arrested in a place called Gethsemane. He didn't lift a finger in his own defense when he was tortured and painfully killed. There is a saying used by Christians, 'What would Jesus do?' After studying his teachings, I can hardly imagine that he would grab a gun or design a homemade bomb and set out to kill his enemies! What we are seeing are those who call themselves God's people, Muslims, Jews and Christians, destroying each other and using

God as an excuse to do so. Why? These are the things that have puzzled me and, I think they are the things that are driving many people like me away from religion.”

I got up and started walking around the room, talking as I walked.

“And then there are the inconsistencies and contradictions in the scriptures. If the Bible is God’s Word and it’s infallible as Christianity claims, then it should not contain these inconsistencies. I’ve tried to justify them by telling myself that there are reasons for these discrepancies that I am just not aware of. Unfortunately, as I’ve tried to find reasons for these irregularities, I have not only failed to get satisfactory explanations, I’ve discovered even more discrepancies that have inevitably led to even more concerns. Now I have serious doubts about Christianity, the Bible and even the existence of God!”

I couldn’t believe these words were coming out of my mouth. Even though I had fostered these thoughts I had never actually said them out loud to anyone. A few years ago I would never have thought that I would be engaged in such a journey as this. As a young minister conducting youth revivals, I was solidly set in my religious beliefs. I could debate the scriptures with anyone. In fact, when I was a young man in my mid-twenties, after teaching a class on the end times as outlined in the New Testament book of Revelation, an elderly man whom I respected pulled me aside and told me that I was wise beyond my age. I remember being so impressed with myself. I actually believed him. Then I spent the rest of my life proving him wrong. Now here I was talking to a stranger about having doubts regarding the most basic issues of faith. It was difficult for me to realize that I had come to this place in my religious life. But here I was.

“Tell me something about yourself. What is your background?” Samuel inquired.

“I was raised in a Christian environment. My father was a church leader, a deacon in the Baptist church. For over 40 years he devoted his life to serving others. My mother was also an

active member. She sang in the choir and taught Bible studies. From infancy, my parents took me to church at every opportunity, not just once or twice a week, but many times, sometimes three and four times a week. For as long as I can remember I have attended Bible studies, prayer meetings, preaching services, and what we called revivals. In fact, many of my fondest memories are of traveling to Christian camps and participating in intensive Bible studies with my closest friends. By the time I was a youth, I was teaching Bible studies and leading prayer groups. For a while, I had even made religion my career. So you can see why these questions and doubts trouble me. I feel guilty just having these thoughts.”

“Yes, I’m sure you do. Sometimes, though, it’s healthy to doubt because it makes us study harder so we’ll understand our faith better. The result can be a deeper or more thorough comprehension of our faith.”

“That’s what I was hoping but that’s not the way it has turned out.”

“So you began searching?”

“Yes.”

“And what has that search involved?”

“I have read commentaries on the Bible, I have discussed these issues with preachers and friends, I have even stepped outside of my faith and read about other religions like Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.”

“And what have you discovered?”

“Well, unfortunately, I have discovered that there are inconsistencies in all religions. There are more in some than others, but none of them offer consistency.”

“You keep talking about consistency. Why is this so important to you?”

“Because when I researched the definition of ‘truth’ I found that it means ‘absolute’ which in turn means ‘consistent’. The

religion that I accept, the standards that I trust to guide my life and my destiny, must be true. I cannot and will not allow myself to believe in something that is not true. Unfortunately, at this point, I'm not sure that truth in religion exists at all."

"Can you share with me a few of these inconsistencies that have caused you to doubt?"

"Certainly. Most of them concern the character of God."

"Which is important," he noted, "since the theology of religion is formulated based on the assumed attributes of God. Please continue."

I took the list of questions out of my pocket. I had carefully written down some of the scriptures that were problematic from the Bible and the Koran.

"Well, according to the Bible, God is perfect, and He is loving. In 1 John 4:16 it says,

'And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.'

In 2 Samuel 22:31 it says,

'As for God, his way is perfect: The Lord's word is flawless; he shields all who take refuge in him.'

In Malachi 3:6 it is written that God does not change. In Matthew 5:48 it is written,

'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.'

"As I mentioned, the word 'perfect' means 'consistent', 'without blemish', 'absolute' and 'precise'. However, also in the Old Testament in Numbers 11:10, God is said to be kind one minute and angry the next.

'Moses heard the people of every family wailing at the entrance to their tents. The Lord became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled.'

In Deuteronomy 1:34-35 it says,

‘When the Lord heard what you said, he was angry and solemnly swore: ‘No one from this evil generation shall see the good land I swore to give your ancestors.’

According to these scriptures, God can be merciful on one occasion and judgmental the next. In Joshua 22:18 we read,

‘And are you turning away from the Lord? If you rebel against the Lord today, tomorrow he will be angry with the whole community of Israel.’

And it appears that God can be loving to some while sending others to a tortuous hell for eternity. In Genesis 12:3 it says,

‘I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.’

The New Testament continues that same theme. In Revelation 14-15 it is written,

‘Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.’

The Koran basically echoes the same themes that God is perfect and forgiving. In 015:025 it says,

‘Assuredly it is thy Lord who will gather them together: for He is perfect in wisdom and knowledge.’

In 060:007 it is recorded,

‘It may be that Allah will ordain love between you and those of them with whom ye are at enmity. Allah is mighty, and Allah is forgiving, merciful.’

“But, again, the Koran proclaims that God can be one of vengeance. In 47:4-9 it is written,

‘When ye encounter the infidels, strike off their heads till ye have made a great slaughter among them, and of the rest make fast the fetters. And afterwards let there either be free dismissals or ransomings, till the war hath laid down its burdens. Thus do. Were such the pleasure of God, he could himself take vengeance upon them: but would rather prove the one of you by the other. And whoso fight for the cause of God, their works he will not suffer to miscarry; He will vouchsafe them guidance, and dispose their hearts aright; And he will bring them into Paradise, of which he hath told them. Believers! If ye help God, God will help you, and will set your feet firm; But as for the infidels, let them perish: and their works shall God bring to naught.’

“That just doesn’t sound like a perfect, consistent God to me. To me it sounds more like the behavior of a human. How can a perfectly loving God condone and even encourage killing?”

Samuel seemed impressed. “You’ve done your homework well. And I can see what you mean, but in their defense, the Bible and the Koran both teach that there is a condition for salvation and those who refuse or don’t meet those conditions will suffer the consequences of their refusal.”

I could see the professor coming out in Samuel. He was playing the part of the antagonist.

“That’s just the point. If God is perfect and God is a God of love then God’s love is perfect which means it is unconditional. If there is a condition no matter what it is, it becomes conditional. Either God loves unconditionally, perfectly, or God’s love is not unconditional, and therefore, not perfect. If truth is consistent and absolute, and if perfection is absolute, being without fault, then truth is perfection. If God is perfect as is claimed by these ancient sacred documents, then God is truth and therefore, God is consistent. The picture of inconsistency

drawn by these documents throw shadows of doubt on their accuracy and pose a great dilemma for those of us who are trying to find the real God.”

“What else have you found?” he asked.

“The Koran teaches that Allah is compassionate and merciful in too many places to note. In fact, almost every Sura, or Chapter, begins with the phrase,

‘In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful.’

And yet, we read, once again, that the Almighty can be filled with wrath and anger. Here are some examples from the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Koran.

In the Old Testament, in Chronicles 36:13 and Isaiah 10:5 it says,

‘But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the Lord was aroused against his people and there was no remedy.’

‘Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath!’

And here are a couple from the New Testament from John 3:36 and Romans 1:18,

‘Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.’¹

‘The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness,’²

And from the Koran, 4:39 and 16:106,

‘And whoever kills a believer intentionally, his punishment is hell; he shall abide in it, and Allah

¹ *John 3:36*, Bible, New International Version, Zondervan

² *Romans 1:18*, Bible, New International Version, Zondervan

will send His wrath on him and curse him and prepare for him a painful chastisement.’³

‘He who disbelieves in Allah after his having believed, not he who is compelled while his heart is at rest on account of faith, but he who opens (his) breast to disbelief-- on these is the wrath of Allah, and they shall have a grievous chastisement.’⁴

There’s another flagrant contradiction that has bothered me,” I continued.”

“Go ahead.”

“In the Koran, as I mentioned, God is said to be perfectly merciful, and yet, there are those people indicated in the scriptures who God does not love, or even like! According to the Koran, God not only dislikes but ‘loveth not’ the unbeliever⁵, and the doers of evil.⁶ God even hates those who refuse to believe.⁷ So, does God discriminate? And if so, on what grounds? If we happen, through no fault of our own, to fall into one of those categories that he dislikes are we simply out of luck? As a human parent, if I have a child who doesn’t love me or obey me, at what point do I stop loving him? Never. Because in spite of his actions he is my child. I have given birth to him. I have watched him grow. I know his soul. I will never disown my children. If I, a human, in my limited capacity to love will not abandon what is mine, how much more will a loving God not abandon what is his? That would certainly indicate that God is not a God of perfect love and mercy. Discrimination and prejudice are not consistent with a loving, caring person, much less a loving God. And, is it reasonable that God would demand that men kill other men for no other reason than because of where they were born or what their heritage might be, or what

³ *Koran 4:93*, Translated by J.M. Rodwell, Phoenix, London

⁴ *Koran 16:106*, Translated by J.M. Rodwell, Phoenix, London

⁵ *Ibid*, 3:29,

⁶ *Ibid* 3:50

⁷ *Ibid* 40:10

they believe? Aren't we all descended from the same ancestors? According to these same sacred scriptures, weren't we all originally created by God? When in the course of time did a certain lineage become hated by God? And once again, does God hate? Rather than kill or hate those who don't believe in what is considered to be the truth, wouldn't a loving God rather us help those who don't believe to understand the truth? Is there any such thing as a holy war? Can God be on either side of a battle where killing is involved? Is that who God is? And, it's not just the Muslims, the Jews believe that they, and they alone, are God's chosen people. The Christians believe that they are the only ones who have the 'way to God' and are therefore God's chosen people. Is God inconsistent? Does God discriminate? Is the perfect God loving to one group of people one minute and a hater of others the next?"

Thirty years of questions and frustration were pouring out of me without restraint but I couldn't help it; I couldn't stop.

"You see? These are just a few examples of the many scriptures that are written in these sacred documents that emphasize God's wrath. So what are we to do with these? Don't they reflect an inconsistency in the Almighty One? How can a God who is perfect and loving be driven to anger or wrath? How can God be both compassionate and judgmental? If God is perfect and his compassion and mercy are perfect then there is no place for anger or wrath. As I have said, anger is not a result of love, compassion or mercy. One must decide if God is perfect. If God is perfect, then it must be said that everything God does is done with perfection. If this Deity is a God of love then it is perfect love. If God is compassionate and merciful then it is a perfect compassion and mercy. However, if God is one of wrath, then it is a perfect wrath. To be loving and wrathful would be a contradiction; therefore God would not be perfect or consistent. It can't be both ways. To be both is to be imperfect. To be imperfect is to be inconsistent. To be inconsistent is to be undependable. To be undependable is to be human."

Suddenly, it was over. I felt exhausted. I returned to my chair wondering what Samuel must be thinking. After a moment he spoke.

“You’re right,” he said. “You make a good argument. These are important concerns that need to be resolved. But let’s discuss contradiction for a moment. What if all of these scriptures that you quoted are not contradictions? What if God is perfect in all of these emotions? What if his love is perfect but his wrath is also perfect. So God would be perfect in that each one of his actions or reactions or emotions would be a perfect action?”

“I guess that could be the case.” I had to think about that one.

He smiled. “Let me answer my own question by introducing you to Socrates’ argument concerning opposites.”

Uh oh. Now we’re discussing Socrates! I was sure I was going to get lost in this discussion. “Okay, but keep it simple, please!”

“It really is very simple and quite obvious. Here’s the way Socrates explained opposites or contradictions:

“Socrates argued that opposite values, at their essence, will not play any part in the value of their opposite. For example, he argues,

‘Absolute greatness will never be great and also small, but that greatness in us or in the concrete will never admit the small or admit of being exceeded: instead of this, one of two things will happen, either the greater will fly or retire before the opposite, which is the less, or at the approach of the less has already ceased to exist; ...And as the idea of greatness cannot condescend ever to be or become small, in like manner the smallness in us cannot be or become great; nor can any other

opposite which remains the same ever be or become its own opposite, but either passes away or perishes in the change.⁸

“I’m not sure I got all of that! I said.

“Another way of saying it is that all values in their essence are absolute and any modification in the direction of its opposite diminishes its value so that it is no longer retains its original value. The original has ceased to exist due to the impact of its opposite. There is no greater great than absolute “great”, small does not play a part in its value. If and when great is impacted by small and there becomes a degree of greatness, relative to its opposite, theoretically, it is no longer great but something totally different. Great has ceased to exist. Perhaps we can agree on that concept.”

“I think so. It makes sense to me.”

“Good. As we have discussed, the Bible and the Koran state that God is perfect. Now, using Socrates’ argument concerning opposites, we may say that the essence of perfection is that perfection is absolute. Imperfection plays no part in perfection, otherwise, perfection is no longer perfection, it ceases to exist. The Bible and the Koran also state that God is good.”

“I jumped in. “But what is meant by good? Doesn’t it mean different things to different cultures?”

“We might agree that “good” in any language or culture is behavior that impacts others and everything it touches in a positive way; a way that enhances existence or contributes to wellbeing. Bad, then, is the opposite of good and its definition would be the opposite of “good”. Bad plays no part in good as a value. Bad cannot reach good and has no impact on it. If bad plays a part in good, good fails to exist. Likewise, love is a byproduct of “good” as are mercy and forgiveness. Each results in a positive effect on those things that it touches. Therefore, love, forgiveness and mercy being “good” by definition, in

⁸ (Plato. Phaedo (Kindle Locations 1391-1393)

essence, have no part in their opposites, hate, justice, and vindictiveness. When these play a part, the former ceases to exist. If God is perfect and if God is good then any impact by their opposite would cause them to be less than what their true value is and would totally invalidate their true value, rendering God imperfect.”

Wow! I think I did understand that! “So, you are saying that we are correct in calling these inconsistencies contradictions?”

“Yes, given Socrates’ argument of opposites.”

“But what if the anger talked about in the Bible is not really anger but *righteous* anger? That is, anger that is evoked because someone is doing something horrible to someone else and, out of love and compassion, God gets angry. Maybe that’s what God has in some of these instances; righteous anger.”

“Give me an example of what you would call righteous anger.”

“Okay.” I had to think for a second. “Let’s say that I see a man injuring a child. I might be driven to anger out of the fact that the man, who is bigger and stronger, is intentionally hurting a small child. Wouldn’t it be justified for me to strike out at the man and stop the unjust abuse out of love for the child? I suppose you could call that righteous anger or a type of righteous wrath, couldn’t you?”

“But what you have just illustrated is a human reaction.”

”What do you mean?”

“What you have described is seeing a man who is committing an action that is outside of the standard of behavior that you consider to be acceptable and that behavior has made you angry. He has chosen to allow hatred or temper to bring him to hostility against the child. If we all follow the rule to love others then we will experience a perfectly functioning, healthy society. However, for this perfect society to exist, everyone must participate in loving his fellow man; we must all follow the

standard. When one person acts outside of this directive, the entire system fails to work. Suddenly, we as a society must deal with this person who has acted selfishly. The result is social law. Society has enacted laws to deal with those who choose to do harm to others. It is society's obligation to deal with those who harm society. However, if we assume at this time that God is perfect and one of God's qualities is love, which results in compassion and mercy, then God is the steadfast one. God is the one who is always forgiving because that's what love does."

"But when I step in to stop the beating aren't I acting out of love and compassion for the child?" I asked.

"Perhaps. But in getting involved you are acting out of a social obligation. It is social law that demands justice, not God. While God has instituted social law as a consequence for certain unacceptable behavior to keep humanity from destroying itself, according to the scriptures that you have quoted from both the Bible and the Koran, God is loving. Again, sticking with your argument, if love is a perceived quality of God then justice is not a part of perfect love. Justice provides recompense for wrongful actions or behavior. Perfect love continues to love even when it is undeserved. Love provides forgiveness. Not having knowledge of why the man is beating the child, you have no justification for being angry with the man for his behavior. Certainly, there is no good or just reason for being cruel to a child, but hatred, retaliation, anger and wrath are the result of being out of control. As humans, our love and compassion are not strong enough to cope with a given situation so we turn to violence. Anger might be what led this man to treat the child unkindly. He might have been driven to the breaking point by some action by the child. And, even though it was not justified, he lost control. On the other hand, if God suddenly became angry or lost control, that would imply that something happened of which the Almighty wasn't aware; that something snuck up on God and caught this Indescribable One by surprise. If God is who you say he is then is that possible? Maybe God arranged for you to be present to view the action so you could get involved in the situation. A man beating a child is not

acceptable behavior so you attempt to stop the beating, not only because you are angry at the behavior of the man and compassionate for the child, but also you are acting socially responsible. However, in the end, God's consistent perfect love would offer forgiveness and compassion both for the man doing the beating and the child being beaten. As you stated, if God is who you say he is, attributing wrath and anger to God is a contradiction in God's perceived nature and it might cause people to doubt the dependability of God since one can never be sure when God will be loving or when God will run out of love and become the wrathful, angry God described in these scriptures that you have pointed out."

"That seems true enough. If we accept that God's love is perfect then acting in anger would be inconsistent no matter what kind of anger that might be."

"Once again, if God is perfectly loving then God is not vengeful. Love forgives and perfect love always forgives. There would be no end to the mercy and forgiveness of a perfectly loving God. If there were limits to God's love or mercy or forgiveness then it would not be perfect. I believe this was your observation."

"Yes, I did make that argument, but what about tough love? Even as parents, don't we have to administer what we call tough love, letting our children suffer the consequences for their actions once in a while in order to help them see the error of their ways so they are better off in the long term?"

"Certainly. We all suffer the consequences of our actions, but that kind of love is not driven by anger or revenge. Discipline might also be considered tough love. But these things are driven by love. The result of discipline, whether we believe it is directly from God or a result of the consequences of certain actions, is designed to help a person see the results of unacceptable behavior. It is intended to make things better for the individual and the community in which he lives. We will talk about this later in our discussion. Discipline, in the form of consequences, is an act of love. Punishment and wrath, like

what is described in these scriptures that you have pointed out is one of hostility and vengeance. As you have noted, it is totally out of character for a loving God. That is, if God is a loving God. But remember, at this point in our discussion we are talking about the nature of God as described in these scriptures and the inconsistencies that exist within these books. We will save the discussion concerning the true nature of God for later.”

“Yes. I certainly agree.” It helped to have my observations and conclusions confirmed by another. Although I wasn’t sure what he meant when he said, ‘the true nature of God.’”

“Let’s continue,” he recommended. “Is there anything else?”

“Unfortunately, there is. There is another concern that I have in regard to religion that seems to be greatly affecting the world in a negative way.”

“What is that?”

“I touched on it earlier. Each one of these religions teach that it is the only valid religion. It’s like these religions are trying to own God! What they seem to be saying is that if you are not a part of their club you can’t have God! I truly believe there is only one true religion, but can it be one that forces or attempts to force its doctrine on others? In Matthew 5:45 the Bible says,

‘He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.’

So the indication is that God is no respecter of persons and yet these religions claim that they are the only way to God!”

“That’s true,” Samuel agreed. “Exclusivity is what has caused most of the abuses in religion. For thousands of years men have sought to make their religion the only true one. From the earliest times, it seems that mankind has tried to transform spiritual things into mysterious things. Many early cults met in secret, in hidden places, conducting rituals and ceremonies that were attended exclusively by an elite membership who had

passed through an elaborate initiation. Qualifying for such membership made a person feel special or chosen. It elevated that individual above other, common men. Today, many religions still hold initiation rituals for membership. Baptism is one. In the *Didache*, also called the Lord's Teaching Through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations that dates back to the end of the first century, new converts were required to fast for one or two days. Christians were to pray three times a day.⁹ Some religions require converts to quote certain scriptures, or say certain prayers or perform special tasks, all in an effort to make the initiate earn their membership. Then, through this membership, they become part of the elite. These are all examples of man's attempt to make God the exclusive property of a special group," he explained.

"And each religion goes to great lengths to maintain that exclusivity," I added. "Most religions warn that any other teaching, other than their own, is false and that members should refrain from listening to any other philosophy. I have been warned many times to be careful of what I read or what I listen to."

"Yes, a person should always be wary of any religion that issues that warning," he said. "It sounds as if they have something to hide or they are afraid that investigation will prove their religion to be false. Truth will never be threatened by sincere investigation. It will only be substantiated."

"I have observed another problem that comes with this zealous evangelism," I continued. "The Protestants use a scripture in the New Testament called the Great Commission found in Matthew, Chapter 28 verse 19-20 and Acts, Chapter 1 verse 8 as a command of Jesus to evangelize the world. For many Christians this evangelizing has become the primary objective while the other teachings of Jesus are neglected or fall to second place in the list of priorities. Jesus also taught that those who are 'blessed' will feed the hungry,¹⁰ the New

⁹ *Didache* 7:6-7, Translated by J.B. Lightfoot

¹⁰ Matthew 25:31-40,

Testament says to help the widow and the orphan,¹¹ to love our neighbors¹² and develop meaningful relationships.”¹³

“That’s true,” Samuel agreed.

“But, I’ve also heard,” I continued, “that these things are physical things and spiritual things like salvation are more important.”

“I’ve heard that argument many times,” he replied, “but we must remember that we are a physical creature as well as a spiritual one. In almost every story told about Jesus in the New Testament and his interactions with others, he dealt with their physical needs before their spiritual needs. He healed the blind man, the crippled man, the leper¹⁴ and raised the dead.¹⁵ These were physical needs. He fed the five thousand that had no lunch.¹⁶ As a physical being we must be concerned with our physical existence. Besides, it’s easier to tell a person how to be ‘saved’ and then move on to the next ‘lost’ soul than it is to take the time to become involved in a person’s physical wellbeing. Caring means getting involved in the lives of others and that’s where most religions are missing out today. It is compassion and love that draws people to other people. As the old adage goes, ‘actions speak louder than words’. As you help me, I am motivated to help others. If the teaching you follow led you to help me, then I will be drawn to the teaching that you follow.

“So this doctrine that claims that Christianity is the only way to God clearly implies that God sets standards for his love and care. This is also true of the Islamic faith. Anyone who does not believe as indicated by the Koran is an infidel and, consequently, not one of the chosen. If we are all created by God and if God is perfectly loving, then this Great Spirit is perfectly loving to all those he created. As you pointed out,

¹¹ James 1:26-27

¹² Matthew 19:19

¹³ Matthew 5:23

¹⁴ Matthew 12:22, 15:30, Bible, New International Version, Zondervan

¹⁵ Ibid, Luke 8:49-53

¹⁶ Ibid, Matthew 15:29-35

exclusivity by any religion makes God inconsistent and is therefore according to each religion's own theology, a contradiction. This exclusivity then becomes a great diversion. By focusing inwardly on 'it has to be my way or no way,' religion is failing to look outwardly to the desperate needs of the world. The struggle or war between religions becomes the focus rather than helping one's fellowman to survive."

"I have to agree," I said. So far we were in agreement on most things. But I was looking for more than agreement.

"You've covered a lot of issues, are there others? It is important to get them all out so we can discuss them thoroughly."

"I could go on but I think the ones I've listed sufficiently prove my point regarding the irregularities in the scriptures of the various religious documents. The other concern I have comes from observing the condition of the world."

"Can you be more specific?" he asked.

I paused to collect my thoughts. "I guess I just don't see that religion is making a difference in the world. True religion should make the world a better place in which to live."

Samuel folded his hands. "Why? Is that the purpose of religion?" he questioned.

"I'm not sure. I'm not sure I know the purpose of religion. What do you think?"

"I agree that it should. If it is not the purpose then it is certainly a byproduct. Whatever the primary purpose of religion is we must agree that there are certain byproducts that will be a result of the primary purpose being fulfilled."

"Of course," I replied.

"So let's say the purpose of religion is to find salvation, or to establish a relationship with God. Through religion, if a person does find what they believe to be salvation, won't that bring them happiness? And by happiness I mean joy or satisfaction?"

“I suppose.”

“And if, through some religion or ideology, a person believes that they have established a relationship with God, won’t that bring them happiness? And won’t that happiness, in turn, make life better for them, since they have found joy or satisfaction?” he questioned.

“I think it should,” I agreed. “There is ample proof through my own experience and what I have heard from others and read, that having God in one’s life can make life more fulfilling.”

“Then we should be able to conclude that if enough individuals have a better life and they, in some small way, impact the community in which they live and the community, in turn, impacts society then it would go without saying that a byproduct of effective religion would be to make the world a better place. And, by ‘better’, I mean for all mankind and not just a few select groups.”

“That makes sense,” I agreed. “So religion should lead people to be more civilized.”

“Yes, I think that is an accurate assumption,” he concurred.

“But that’s just the point,” I said. “As I look around and observe the world, I don’t see any signs that would indicate that religion is making any major positive contribution to the attitudes and activities of men at all. People have not changed. The world is no different now than it was hundreds of years ago.”

“You don’t think people have changed over the years?” he asked.

“I don’t observe that people have changed much at all,” I replied. “We behave basically the same as people did thousands of years ago.”

“What about our lifestyles, our way of living?” he argued. “Wouldn’t you say that we are different than those of earlier generations? Consider advances in technology, scientific discoveries, the fact that we can travel around the world in a matter of hours, talk to people half the way around the world in

an instant, and spend months living in space. Don't you think that these things have made a difference?" he asked, still playing the devil's advocate.

"Certainly, we live in a much different technological environment," I admitted, "but the nature of man has not changed. Has it? It seems to me that we are no more civilized now than centuries ago when all of these things didn't exist or were even dreamed of. As I understand it, civility is defined as a polite act or expression. In other words, it's measured by how people treat each other. It has nothing at all to do with technology. And when it comes to how we treat each other, it looks to me like we are still primitive creatures."

"But what about the numerous orphanages and other acts of humanitarianism? Don't these indicate that we are more civilized?" he argued.

"Maybe. I mean, sure we can cite small acts of kindness, but the real test is not those isolated acts, is it? Shouldn't mankind be evaluated on a grander scale where acts of kindness and other positive actions are weighed against behavior that negatively impacts civilization? When I look around, greed still leads men like a seeing-eye dog leads a blind man. The recent failure of the savings and loan industry and the collapse of the financial sector in countries around the world in the decade of the 2000's are proof of this. The decisions that led to those failures were the result of not only bad business decisions, they were the result of greed. We see this kind of behavior all over the world."

Once again I was talking like I was almost out of control, but these were thoughts that had been bothering me for a long time and I needed to express them to someone.

"Governments still suppress citizens and trample on civil rights. Men still believe that there is no such thing as enough. They always want more no matter how many people it hurts or who they have to cheat to get it. Mankind is still plagued with the overwhelming desire for power over others. Wars around the world still rage where humans kill humans, not just with hand-to-hand combat, but now with sophisticated weapons that appear

to make war less barbaric. We are a world obsessed with violence, don't you think?"

I didn't give him time to answer.

"Today, the most popular movies and television programs are those filled with violence. The current sport of ultimate fighting is no more than Roman coliseum barbarism where men fight until one is unconscious or dead. Bloodthirsty crowds still flock to such activities in droves and even more watch on television or the Internet. People still kill and maim others using religion and God as an excuse to do it, hoping it will soothe their guilty conscience, even though they know, in truth, that what they are doing is wrong. In fact, if you think about it, we are still witnessing a form of religious ritualistic sacrificing."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"According to my research, originally a sacrifice was intended to appease the gods or it was an offering to the gods in gratitude for something. It seems those who sacrificed wanted to give the gods what they thought the gods required. Isn't that true?"

"I believe it is," he responded.

"Well, then, it seems to me that anytime people are needlessly killed in the name of a god, the killers are doing what they think their god wants them to do, aren't they? They are appeasing their god. The slaughter of innocent people on September 11, 2001 at the World Trade Center in New York was nothing more than a sacrifice of lives in an attempt to appease God. It was like piling up over 2,000 bodies and screaming, 'Here they are, God. Are you pleased with the stench of death?' To think that God is pleased when we kill others is ludicrous and a flagrant display of ignorance. Can God really be pleased by such ungodly actions?"

I stopped. I was afraid that I might have crossed the line with that comment.

"That's an interesting angle on things," he admitted. "I'm not sure I ever thought of those kinds of actions as being sacrificial. But I guess you could take that perspective."

“And, with all of the wealth we have accumulated and all of the scientific knowledge we have attained,” I added, “there are still people starving in the world. We possess the assets and the knowledge to eliminate hunger completely, but for one reason or another we choose not to. We would rather spend billions of dollars putting men in space or fighting wars than dedicating those funds to helping mankind in his efforts to survive. I think it’s obvious that we are still an uncivilized world.”

“Maybe you’re right,” he reluctantly agreed. “I suppose when you examine it in terms of civility, we are still very primitive.”

“You see, these are the reasons why I am on this search for truth. I sincerely believe there is truth in religion. Or, at least I want to believe. But with the inconsistencies that I have observed in the Bible and the ineffectiveness of religion to improve society I’m not sure it does.”

“If it makes you feel any better, you’re not alone in this dilemma. Many others are going through what you are experiencing,” he said.

I knew he was right. According to a Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 28% of American adults have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion - or no religion at all. The survey found that the number of people who say they are unaffiliated with any particular faith today, 16.1%, is more than double the number who say they were not affiliated with any particular religion as children. Among Americans ages 18-29, one-in-four say they are not currently affiliated with any particular religion.

A Gallup Poll conducted in mid-2011 reported that more Americans are claiming no religious affiliation than ever before. Nearly 3 in 10 say religion is out of date. Additionally, in a telephone survey of over 1,000 American adults, Gallup discovered that 16% of Americans — the highest number to date — do not have a religious affiliation. Gallup has tracked religious preferences since 1948. The percentage of Americans having no formal religious identity has never exceeded 12% until

2005. In addition, it seems the number of Americans for whom religion is “not a very important part of daily life” has also increased, ranging from 11-14% over the last three decades of the 20th century, rising to 19% over just the last two years. Finally, Gallup also tracked whether Americans think religion has all or most of the answers to today’s problems, or if it is old-fashioned and out of date. In 1958, when Gallup began tracking this measure, 82% of Americans believed religion had the answers, while only 7% felt it was out of date. Today, fewer than 6 in 10 believe they can turn to religion for answers, and nearly 3 in 10 feel religion is old-fashioned.¹⁷

“Yes, I know,” I answered. “But quite honestly, the fact that others are also disillusioned with religion doesn’t bring me much comfort. If more and more people are going through what I am then that’s additional proof that something’s wrong.”

“There is an anti-religious movement in our country,” Samuel agreed.

“I’m not sure it’s occurring just in this country. A few months ago I was in a large city in Denmark. One Sunday I decided to attend a local church. For two hours I looked for a place where services were being held. I asked people on the street. No one could tell me where there was a church holding services. All they could do was point me to old churches where tours were being conducted. I found three of those churches within several blocks but I could not find an active church anywhere in my part of town. Do you think all of these people who were once involved in religion are seeking the truth like I am?”

“Probably not. Most people just don’t want to take the time to embark on such a quest. They have other things to do. The quest for truth is a very difficult task. It becomes even more challenging when it concerns something as abstract as religion. As I’m sure you know, many very intelligent people, including some of the greatest philosophers and scholars have discussed the topic of truth in religion only to end in disagreement.”

¹⁷ Quoted by the Secular News Daily. October 11, 2011

“I know,” I confessed. “And maybe I will end this journey the same way. Do you think there is truth in religion? Can it be found or do you think my search is futile?”

“Only time will tell. The important thing is that you are searching. I don’t think it will be a waste of time. Even Jesus said, ‘seek and you will find.’ So you have taken the first step of seeking. That’s the easy part. Finding is the hard part.”

“I’m discovering that,” I confessed.

“While we’re on the subject of concerns, allow me to continue that discussion for just a minute more.”

“Certainly,” I said.

“I agree that there are inconsistencies in these sacred documents as we have them today. And these irregularities do present problems for the serious student of religion. One other concern that I have discovered is that if it is taught that we, as humans, can make God angry, or sad, or disappointed, or have any other effect on God’s mood and subsequent actions based on those moods, then we are, in fact, claiming that we have some control over God,” he exclaimed.

“I guess I never thought of that.” It sounded strange, but it’s true. If I can make God angry or sad by my actions, whenever I want, I am actually controlling God. What an astounding observation!

“And I will add one more aspect of religion that can be problematic for those who diligently seek to do the right thing,” he continued.

“Go on.” I was eager to hear his observation.

“Let me use an illustration to explain the conflict. Let’s suppose that you are God, even though you do not have God’s perfect knowledge and all-encompassing wisdom, you are constructing the world.”

“I’ll do my best,” I volunteered.

“Let’s assume for a moment that God created the world. You, acting as God, have built the world exactly as the real God

has presumably constructed it; just as it is, or was before humans began messing with it. You have come to the stage of designing the ultimate creature: humans. Everything else has been created and is functioning and evolving just as it should. Now it's time for your masterpiece to evolve. This particular character will be special. It will, in some way, be fashioned after your own character. How will you design it?"

"You mean physically, emotionally or mentally?" I wanted to be sure I understood the question.

"Let's begin with the physical construction. Will you build it out of rock?"

"Certainly not."

"Why?"

"Because it is not intended to be rigid as the mountains."

"Will you create it out of the substance of grass or plants?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because it is not to be as fixed in place as the plants, or as vulnerable to the seasons."

"So what material will you use?" he asked.

"Well, I assume, if it is to live in the world that I have already created, I will keep it consistent with the rest of creation, especially the creatures that will be similar to it. It should be able to move and function as the animals because they have the most dexterity. So, I will give it skin and bones and the internal workings that are in keeping with others like it. That way it will fit comfortably within its environment."

"That seems reasonable," he said. "So, your human has skin and bones and organs. You have designed it physically to fit and function efficiently in the environment in which it is expected to live."

"Yes. That seems appropriate."

“And what about emotionally?” he asked.

“Well, I suppose, to give it the very best existence, if this is to be my most perfect creation, I will give it the ability to experience the full scope of emotions.”

“You mean compassion and love and joy and happiness?”

“Certainly.”

“But what about sadness and pain and suffering and all of those negative feelings that will cause this creation unhappiness?”

“Those are important, as well. Emotions will be tied to the psychological and physical aspects of existence. One will affect the others. That is the only way it can be. These creatures, being fashioned as a higher intelligence with a more advanced consciousness will need to experience a full range of emotions in order to effectively develop so they will ultimately become the decision-makers that I desire these creatures to be.”

“How do you mean?” he questioned. I was really getting into this role-playing thing.

“Well, as I see it,” I said, “effective decision-making depends on understanding the consequences of the decision to be made. If I understand that the decisions I make will impact my joy or happiness, or on the other hand, bring me sorrow or pain, I can more effectively make a decision that will be beneficial to me.”

“So it seems that all we should be concerned about is the emotional impact of a decision. Is that true? What about those decisions that bring joy to the community but sorrow to the individual who makes the decision?”

I had to think about this one for a few seconds. “Therein lies one of the very special features of this human creation. It will have the ability to decide, through compassion and reason, to make a decision that will result in bringing more joy to others than to itself. This is a very special capability that has not been given to any other creature.”

He seemed pleased with my response. “Interesting.”

“But there’s more.”

“Please, go on,” he said.

“Another emotion or condition that I will give the human is peace or satisfaction, a state of mind. This is a very special quality that will affect all of the other emotions. I will define it as contentment. By making a decision that appears to help others more than the decision-maker himself, the result of that decision will bring this special peace or contentment to the decision-maker. So, in this way, both the community and the decision-maker will benefit. Therefore, in the end, even a sacrificial decision results in good for both the decision-maker and the community.”

“Great. Now, that brings us to the mental construction of this human creation.”

“Okay,” I continued. “I will allow this creature to think and reason. I will give it the inherent knowledge of justice and compassion. I will make him a thinker. I will give him the mind to gather information and the skill to analyze that information so he can make reasonable decisions about life. I will give him an extensive memory so he can accumulate experiences and store information that will enable him to be an even better decision-maker as he grows older. I will provide him with many of the basic instincts and intuitions that I have given other similar creatures so he will have a basic knowledge of how to survive. And, I will use that intelligence, intuition, accumulated knowledge and those experiences to create an even greater gift, the gift of wisdom – insight that will lift him even higher above the rest of creation.”

“Well done!” he exclaimed. “And now that brings me to the reason for this exercise...”

“But wait, we have left out one of the most important gifts that I wish to give this creation.” I suddenly had a revelation.

“And what is that?”

“Well, if I am fashioning him after myself and I am spirit, as religions teach, then I will give him a spirit or a soul.”

“And what is that, exactly?”

“A unique knowledge that within him there exists an immortality; an intuition that his existence is not limited to the temporary world of the physical; a knowledge that will allow him to experience the deeper meaning of existence; to feel a part of the universe, as I have created the universe. To sense the eternal part of himself that enables him to know me. It will be his spirit that will have communication with my spirit. This spirit will allow him to sense, in some small way, that there are things that are eternal – a higher plane of existence. It will be this spirit that will urge the human to search for me and establish a relationship with me. It will be this spirit that ties us together and makes him one with the rest of the universe. It will be this spirit that will drive him to me and desire to establish what he will call religion.” I was extremely pleased with myself.

“Excellent!” Samuel exclaimed. “You have outdone yourself! And although the last quality that you have given your human evokes many questions, I would like to set them aside for a few moments and get back to the reason for this exercise.”

“And that is?”

“If you have endowed your human with all of these abilities and emotions; and if you have constructed him out of the material that is common to his environment; and if you have designed him basically to live on this earth that you have created for him, doesn’t it make sense that you would want him to find peace and contentment and joy while living here?”

“Of course. What other reason would there be?”

“And if he is made out of matter as this world is, and if he is limited to those limitations that you have built into this world such as time and space, then shouldn’t he strive to make the best of the time and space in which he lives?”

“Of course he should. That’s why I have given him the ability to make wise choices that will lead to positive consequences for him and the community in which he lives.” I reiterated.

“Then we must ask ourselves why it is that some religions, most specifically Christianity and Islam, stress that we should dislike the very world in which we were created to live? According to Christianity, we are to hate the things of this world.¹⁸ Would a God that is good place us in a world that we should despise? Would this Deity put us in a world that we should not feel a part of? Would a loving God subject us to a life where we should not enjoy the very things that he has given us? Is it necessary that there should be this drastic conflict between the physical and the spiritual when God created us with both? I might have spiritual attributes as a spiritual creature does, but I was also created with a physical body and placed in a physical world and I’m sure that’s the way God meant for it to be and therefore, there should be a balance, or understanding, that will allow us to enjoy both. After all, in Genesis after God created the world he said, ‘It is good.’”

“Once again, it does seem like that’s the way it should be. He did endow us with all of the faculties to enjoy what we have here on earth. And, I have often felt guilty for having a good time, or for having things that made me feel good.”

“So this inconsistency, this teaching,” he explained, “can cause confusion to those people who want to do what they perceive to be the right thing. Like you, they might even feel guilty if they actually enjoy life! Some extremists might go to great lengths to force themselves into depression or unhappiness in order to ‘hate this world.’ Some will even go so far as to inflict pain on themselves in order to experience the pain and suffering that they believe they deserve. Certainly, children who are taught by their parents and teachers that they should not be happy may suffer from all kinds of psychological and emotional problems.”

¹⁸ Bible, John 12:25, New International Version, Zondervan

“Don’t worry, be happy.”

“Well, at least don’t feel guilty about being happy!”

“So does that mean that we should be more materialistic?”
I questioned.

“Not at all. Buddha believed that man should take the middle road; that he should strive for moderation. There is a balance to all things in life. Too much of anything can result in negative consequences. We need material things for survival and they help us enjoy life, but the desire for too many material things can lead to greed and envy and even hatred. We are responsible for finding that middle road,” he explained.

“But what about love? Can we love too much?”

“Absolutely. Love can become obsession. Moderation, the middle road, is what we should strive to maintain. Remember, desire can lead to many problems, but it can also result in much good will. We must learn to control our desires.”

Chapter 5

All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we leave behind us is a part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter another.

-- Anatole France

We took a short break. I needed to stretch my legs and get some water. Samuel threw a couple of logs on the fire. The sun had risen and taken the chill out of the air. We really didn't need the warmth of the fire but it did create a cozy atmosphere. From our discussion, it was obvious that Samuel had already been on the journey that I was now taking. He seemed to know in advance what my questions were as if he, himself, had struggled with them in his own life. Sometimes we go through life thinking that we are the only ones who are experiencing a certain feeling or problem when, in fact, there are many others who are in the same boat as we are; others who have already been there can help us in our time of need if we'll only ask. When I returned from the kitchen Samuel was still leaning over the fire.

"Derrick, what do you hope to accomplish with this discussion?" he asked as he poked at the burning logs.

"Somehow, I'm hoping I will find answers." I found my seat and sat the glass of water on the table. "I desperately want to find out that what I have believed all of my life is true. I want confirmation of my faith. I want to know that what I believe is the truth!"

"It sounds like you've already made up your mind and what you're looking for is validation of what you already believe. If that is what you're seeking then you've come to the wrong place. You can find justification and rationalization from any number of places. If however, you are looking for truth no matter what that turns out to be, that's a different matter."

"You're right. While I do hope that what I'll find will validate what I already believe, I am searching for truth."

“And what if you don’t find validation? What if you find something different? Are you willing to open your mind to the possibility that you have been mistaken?”

“Samuel, as you’ve already stated, the truth is powerful and will surpass untruth. I, also, believe the truth will never be threatened by untruth. There can only be peace in my life when I finally discover the truth, whatever that might be. But I must add, that at this time, even though I have serious doubts deep down in my heart, I can’t believe that my religion is not true. I think it’s just a matter of my lack of understanding.”

“There is much deception in the world.”

“And you think I have been deceived? How is it possible that the millions of people who have been involved in religion could have been deceived for thousands of years?” I asked.

“People are basically very trusting. Many live their lives eager to believe whatever they are told. If the person doing the telling sounds convincing and the majority of the population seems to agree then people tend to jump on board buying whatever snake oil is being sold. Our lives are inundated with untruths that we readily accept as truth. Theories from the scientific community we accept and teach our children as if they are factual even though there may be little or no evidence of substantiation. Religious theology is accepted sincerely without question or skepticism even though that theology might prove to be harmful to those who put their trust in it. It can even be destructive for the world. You have already mentioned the atrocities that have occurred in the name of God and religion. History provides proof that we are ready to accept lies out of respect for tradition or fear of the things that we don’t immediately understand. If someone calls himself a scientist, or an expert, or a scholar our skepticism crumbles like old stale bread and we accept, without question, their opinion or teaching as if it is truth.

“You’ve already mentioned some events that illustrate how the masses can be misled. The Crusades, the Inquisition and the witch-hunts of earlier history are evidence of how good people

can be led to do bad things. More recently, during World War II, millions of well-intentioned Germans followed the leadership of Hitler. Trusting in his words and his leadership, they were convinced to march across Europe killing millions of innocent people, slaughtering a staggering number of Jews. Dedicated men sacrificed their lives for the ‘cause’ that Hitler so eloquently advocated,” he continued. “Think about Jim Jones, the founder and leader of the People’s Temple which is best known for the November 18, 1978 mass suicide of more than nine-hundred Temple members in Jonestown Guyana. They followed their leader to the death. Remember David Koresh? He claimed to be the final prophet. He called his organization Branch Dividian. He gained a small group of dedicated followers. In 1993, fifty-four adults and twenty-one children gave up their lives for their leader. Today, in Africa, men are attacking villages, murdering men, women and children in the name of their god.”

As he spoke, I thought about recent news stories concerning Warren Jeffs, the president of a sect of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints who was convicted of molesting two young girls, telling them that it was God’s will for them to have sex with him. This religious organization continues to have a very large membership in spite of this travesty.

Samuel continued. “Even now, in the 21st century, the most technologically advanced civilization in history, we are experiencing horrific violence directed toward innocent people at the hands of religious zealots who are following the guidance of charismatic leaders. Religious groups, convinced they are acting in the name of God, now called terrorists, are threatening the world, killing thousands of innocent humans. In each of these situations the followers are not evil people. They are simply trusting the teaching of those whom they respect; doing what they believe God wants them to do.” He paused. For a few seconds there wasn’t a sound.

“It’s just hard to believe that so many could be deceived. We are talking about millions and millions of people,” I said quietly.

“Derrick, you have to remember that to some extent each one of us is a product of our environment. When a person has been raised in a particular faith, especially when that faith is the most widely accepted religion in the community, it’s easy to see how it can become ingrained in that person’s mind. It becomes his tradition. Elements of the faith are accepted without question, especially if his indoctrination began in childhood or early adolescence. You, yourself are an example of that.”

He was right. The things that I was taught as a child did have a great impact on my life and still does to this day. I remember well the stories I was taught in Sunday School. Those stories were the basic building blocks for the things I would eventually accept as part of my creed.

“A person who is born in the Far East is likely to be a Buddhist or a Hindu,” he observed. “Those born in the Middle East are more likely to be Jewish or Islamic...”

“And, traditionally, those born in the United States or Europe will probably be Christians,” I noted.

“Exactly. The individual born into that religion, so to speak, assumes, as you mentioned earlier, that if the ideology of their religion was not true then it would not have survived. So he learns from an early age to overlook or justify or rationalize inconsistencies and contradictions, if he notices them at all, and continues down the path that his father and forefathers have traveled. However, when and if an individual does take the initiative to carefully examine those principles objectively, I truly believe he will come to the same conclusions that you have: that there are problems with mainstream religion that have not been addressed; problems that require us to examine what we believe and why we believe it.”

“You’re right, I guess,” I had to agree. “I just find it hard to believe that if what we believe wasn’t true, someone else long ago would have brought it to the world’s attention.”

“Maybe they did. But remember, such accusations would not have been popular. In fact, for hundreds of years any kind of

skepticism was considered heresy and was suppressed by those who had the power to squelch such opposition. During the Inquisition, people were burned at the stake for simply making a statement that could be interpreted as opposing the doctrine of the Church. Even today, in the Islamic world, anyone who speaks out against the Islamic faith will find themselves in deep trouble.”

“So is it your opinion that religious leaders are deceiving people intentionally?” I asked.

“Not in most cases. As I mentioned, most people are trusting by nature. We want to believe that those who seem to know actually do. Today, we tend to believe whatever we hear or see on television or on the Internet or read in books or newspapers. We want to think that the people who speak and write are actually telling us the truth. But that’s not always the case. In fact, today it’s quite the contrary. There can be no debate that even the various news reporting services are biased in their reporting. Objectivity is rare. Finding the truth takes time and enormous effort. We’d simply rather have someone else do it for us or accept, without question, what has already been accepted over the years. If the truth were known, very few of those who claim to be ‘in the know’ have sought the truth for themselves. They are simply stating their own opinions and theological philosophies, or spouting off traditional rhetoric that they have been taught for years but never questioned. Some people who hear these self-proclaimed experts turn away, realizing that what is being taught is inconsistent and harmful, while others grasp onto it and attempt to make it work in their lives in spite of the misery that it causes, not only to them but also to the world. The atrocities that have occurred and continue to occur in the name of God and religion can only happen because people, well-intentioned people, are not seeking the truth, but are blindly following the loudest, most accepted or most charismatic voice; or following the path of least resistance; that of tradition.

“To answer your question more succinctly, I don’t believe most ministers and priests and rabbis or monks or Imams are out

to intentionally deceive anyone. Many of them have been raised in the faith that they teach. Others have been trained in seminaries and universities who teach a one-sided view of religion. Still others have had a life-changing experience that they want to share with the world. Whatever the case may be, many are simply following the tradition of their religion without adequately examining the doctrine of that faith.”

“But if a person is satisfied with what they believe, if it is comfortable, maybe that’s enough. Maybe it doesn’t have to be true.”

“Maybe it doesn’t. If what you believe provides you with happiness and gives you security and peace, then why rock the boat?”

“Yeah, why? If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”

“That’s right,” he said. “Is truth really that important? Since we cannot know the definitive truth about God, why not believe what you want to believe and not worry about whether it is the truth or not?”

“I guess a lot of people feel that way, I replied. But don’t you think there comes a time in most people’s life when there is doubt?”

“Maybe, but is that doubt strong enough to cause a person to begin the laborious task of searching for answers? Doubt can be rationalized away simply enough. A good justification for doubt is that sometimes we have situations that cause us to be skeptical or unsure, but those times will pass and when they do the old dependable theology will come shining through and everything will be okay again. You see, doubt can be shoved into the background until it is forgotten.”

“I guess.” He was probably right. Why rock the boat.

“So why didn’t you just shove the doubt to the back of your mind until it passed?” he asked.

“Because this is a very important issue. What I believe might bring me peace and comfort but if that peace and comfort

is a result of believing lies, then it really isn't true peace is it? If the information that brings me peace is false information then the peace I'm experiencing isn't real, is it? I mean, if I knew that the information that brought me peace was false, it would not bring me peace. Do you see what I mean?"

"I do."

"I guess I'm not one who can stick his head in the sand and convince myself that everything is okay. I need to *know* that it is!" Samuel seemed to understand what I was saying.

"It is important, Derrick, to everyone, or at least it should be. When it comes to religion, no one should stick their head in the sand. What a person believes is of ultimate importance because it determines a person's destiny and impacts the world. What I'm saying is that what a person believes dictates, or should dictate, their moral and ethical behavior, influences their relationships, and determines how they will react to situations they encounter in life. In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, a spiritual writing in the Hindu religion, it is written:

'As a person acts, so he becomes in life. Those who do good become good; those who do harm become bad. Good deeds make one pure; bad deeds make one impure. You are what your deep, driving desire is. As your desire is, so is your will. As your will is, so is your deed. As your deed is, so is your destiny.'¹⁹

Our desires are driven by what we believe. Most people follow a religion that includes belief in a supernatural being. Except for Confucianism, all popular religions profess the existence of one or more gods. It is what we believe about God, Its existence, Its nature and Its character that influences how we see the world, how we interact with others and how we construct our moral and ethical standards. It dictates what we believe about life after death, which, in turn, impacts the way we live life now. What we accept as our tenet for living can, in fact, affect

¹⁹ The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Verse 5b. Translated by Eknath Easwaran, Nilgiri Press, Canada, 2007

our emotional, mental and physical wellbeing. I know this sounds a little bizarre, but it seems that researchers have found a link between people who are highly religious and an alleged advanced atrophy in a particular part of the brain called the hippocampal.”

“You’re kidding! That sounds like a story formulated by radical atheist!” I exclaimed.

“I know it does, but a team of researchers from Duke University conducted a study that showed such evidence.²⁰ While certain aspects of religion are healthy, there are also aspects such as guilt that can lead to stress and depression that are very harmful. So, the way we view God, what God is like, affects more than just our ethical and moral behavior. It can have an effect on our health.

“Another reason why a person should test their religion is that what a person believes might work for them but it might not work for society. It might bring them freedom but it might result in the oppression of others. It might be profitable for them but it might lead to harm for others. What a person decides to believe about God and life is the single most important decision they will ever make. It’s the most important decision *you* will ever make.”

“There are those who say they don’t really believe in anything.”

“Everyone believes in something,” he stated. “They either believe that it’s acceptable to lie in business or unacceptable; that it’s acceptable to steal what belongs to others or it’s unacceptable; that there is a Supreme Being who controls the universe and has designed a purpose for mankind or that there is no god and perhaps no real purpose in life at all. These principles, what is accepted as being right and wrong, true or false, acceptable and unacceptable behavior constitutes a belief

²⁰ Religious Factors and Hippocampal Atrophy in Late Life, *Plus One Magazine*, March 30, 2011.. Reviewed by *Scientific America*, May 31, 2011, p. 59.

system and defines a person's character. And, if a person really believes what he professes, that belief will impact every aspect of his life."

"Doesn't this process occur rather slowly and subconsciously for most people? As we discussed, many people are raised in a home where a specific religion is accepted and taught. Therefore, believing comes gradually as a child grows and learns the ways of their parent's religion or ideology."

"Of course, in many instances that's true. But in most cases, there comes a time when those beliefs are tested and a person is forced to reevaluate those principles in a very conscious way in order to make a more definitive decision concerning whether or not they will continue to make that doctrine or philosophy a part of their life."

"Where do you think the basic ideas come from that creep into our lives and formulate our belief system or our understanding of God?"

"They come from a lot of different sources. Certainly, as you mentioned, many come from our parents or other influences that touched our lives when we were young. For many of us our first lessons as infants concerned what is right and wrong: don't take that toy it belongs to another child, always tell the truth, don't hit the other kids. This basic education becomes the foundation for what we ultimately believe about good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Other influences are school, friends, church, and the media: television, radio, books and the Internet."

"Do you agree there are adults who never challenge those initial ideas and continue to adhere to those first precepts throughout adulthood?" I asked.

"Certainly. In fact, that's true for most people. Those first concepts are burned deep into our minds and they are very difficult to overcome. Even if we reach a place where we realize that they are not the best ideals on which to build our lives, it is

difficult to replace them with new ones, especially if the new ideas are radically different from the original ones.”

“I, myself, am an example of that,” I admitted. “As I said, I came from a deeply dedicated family of Protestants. So when I decided to question Christian theology I suffered from extreme feelings of guilt. Several times I quit the search for truth altogether, afraid that what I would find was not what I wanted to find.”

“At least you are seeking the truth,” he said. “Questioning ones faith is one of the most difficult things a person can do. So many people find it easier not to challenge those initial concepts of traditional theology even when they have doubts about its credibility. They will adhere to it as much as possible simply because it is the most popular and prevalent set of religious ideas in their community. Why rock the boat? Tradition is comfortable.”

I had to agree. Doing things the old fashioned way was comfortable. Singing the familiar hymns, participating in responsive readings, even sitting on those uncomfortable wooden pews gave me a sense of belonging; of being a part of something that had been experienced by millions of others like me for generations.

“What about those people who say they believe one thing but behave in a way that is in contradiction to those principles?” I asked.

Samuel gave it a moment of thought. “Once again, sometimes that happens as an evolutionary process. Rather than to actually alter one’s beliefs, the currently held precepts simply do not influence the actions of the individual. In reality, if what a person says they believe does not coincide with their behavior and lifestyle, then chances are they really don’t believe what they profess. If there is a sincere commitment to the ideology or those principles they feel are important, it will influence their actions. If it doesn’t, living a hypocritical life makes for a very unhappy existence, as you have experienced. How can a person profess one thing and live their life in contradiction to those

principles and be content? And, whether or not a person chooses to make a Supreme Being part of their tenet is a very important consideration.”

“Why is that?”

“If we believe that a supernatural Being exists who is ultimately superior; one who created the universe and everything in it including humans then we must ask ‘Why’? Why create a creature such as man with a higher consciousness and such a powerful intellect? There must be some reason for such a creation. Therefore, it should be our priority to seek the purpose for which we were created and attempt to fulfill that purpose if we plan to find satisfaction. If a Supreme Being exists then we should desire to know about that Being as much as we possibly can. Discovering our purpose and learning who this Deity is and what It is like will help us select the principles and ideals in our life that will mold our religion and build our spiritual character, resulting in our ultimate happiness. If, on the other hand, we believe that life is accidental, no more than a chance happening, then we really have no purpose. We just exist and our goal becomes mere survival and the pursuit of material possessions and transitory success.”

“So you think religion helps us find our purpose?” I asked.

“Definitely. The sacred texts that are used as the foundation for religious ideology should help us find our way. That’s why it is so important to test these sacred writings to be sure that the information they provide constitutes truth.”

“But, of course, all religions profess to be the truth.”

“Yes, but as you pointed out earlier, can they all be true? If they make different claims regarding such things as the character of God then either both are wrong or one is true and the other is a deception. If they provide us with inconsistent information can they be true? After all, things are not always as they seem.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Samuel got up to freshen our coffee. There was a small table near the fireplace where a variety of bottles of wine and liquor were kept. Samuel had put a fresh pot of coffee on the table during our break.

“The older you get, the more you realize things aren’t quite the way you imagined them when you were young.”

“I’m not sure I’m following you.”

He handed me the coffee and then returned to the fireplace. “How old are you, Derrick?”

“Forty-three.”

He knelt down over the fire. He watched the fire as it burned for a few seconds.

“I remember being forty-something,” he said softly. “It was over twenty years ago, but I still do have a vague recollection of that time. I think by that age I had figured a few things out, but when I was much younger I imagined all adults as being wise and knowledgeable in all matters. As I grew older and became an adult myself, I realized that my friends who were also adults certainly were not filled with wisdom or knowledge. In fact, they and most of the other adults that I knew were no more than older kids attempting to make it through life just like I was; doing the best they could by learning from their mistakes. It was obvious that my concept of adulthood was drastically incorrect. These adults were not the wise knowledgeable people that I had envisioned. It was then that I realized further that there is no magic age when a person suddenly attains wisdom or knowledge; that knowledge is something that comes only through great effort, and wisdom never comes at all to some. As I grew older, my dreams, yearnings, habits, and thoughts for the most part were the same as they were when I was young. There were some things that I grew out of and others that were modified, like the dreams that I once had that faded with the realities of life, but nothing really changed with age except the burden of responsibility and the knowledge that came with experience.”

“And how did this realization affect your thoughts on religious truth?” I questioned.

He walked back into the sitting area. “That we cannot believe something simply because it has been accepted by previous generations; that tradition is not synonymous with truth. Just because something has been labeled as truth in the past does not make it true. Truth does not come easily. I realized that things aren’t always as they seem. People will be deceptive if they can profit from it. I learned that truth must be sought, diligently and sincerely, with an open mind if it is to be found. I also realized that we can come closer to the truth by improving our understanding of issues in the light of new discoveries and available information. Through the various sciences, archeological investigation and a better understanding of ancient languages we can be more accurately informed. This new knowledge can shed fresh light on ancient documents and primitive beliefs and behavior and help us grow in our understanding. They can move us closer to the truth concerning what these old documents are trying to tell us and what value the ancient religions might hold for us today.

“In addition, we are no longer bound by governments or other threatening authorities to accept religious ideology without question. We are free to examine and test those ideas that seem inconsistent. In fact, we are responsible for doing so. This includes science and religion. We must always be vigilant in our search for truth. Tradition does not always hold the answers. Humans are always coming up with new variations on old ideas. Religion is not immune to these variations. I understand that the documents and doctrines of the major religions are ancient. And I know that they have been trusted for thousands of years by many wise and intelligent people but tradition must be tested.”

“But aren’t all religions constantly being examined. Isn’t that why there are so many versions of the Bible? Aren’t scholars constantly trying to get closer to the original writing and meaning of the text?” I questioned.

“Yes, those things are being done. Maybe the quest is not to try to re-interpret the text of these great documents. Maybe we need to get more basic. Maybe we need to examine the authenticity of those documents. If we are going to discuss truth in religion, we need to examine the credibility of every aspect of religion: where it all started, why it started and the documents that have been used to formulate the ideology of those religions.”

“Can we actually do that? That seems like an impossible quest! How can we test the Bible?”

“And the Koran and all religious documents. We have to. It is our responsibility. By doing so, we might succeed in answering some of your questions and resolving some of your concerns. And, if we find that there is truth in current religions then we will have reinforced your faith by giving you greater confidence that what you believe about God and religion is valid. Who knows, our research might even reveal something extraordinary.”

Once again the room grew silent. I was exhausted. I had never before explained all of the reasons for my doubt. Now, making the argument audibly to someone else, I realized how many concerns I had and how legitimate those concerns were. For the first time I was talking openly about how I felt without worrying that someone was going to judge me. More than ever, I knew I could not return to what I had believed before. Now, more than ever, I had to find answers.

I think there are a lot of people like me in the world; people who go about living but give little thought to the deeper, more important aspects of life. We concentrate our efforts on obtaining material things, which is natural since we need to have certain material things to survive, but when it comes to contemplating the spiritual facets of life we just don't take the time. Perhaps we feel we don't have the time. After all, dealing with the day-to-day challenges can easily consume every available minute of the day. Then again, maybe we feel those spiritual areas don't need examination. I never did. We are comfortable doing what everyone else does and believing what

everyone else believes. For me, it took over thirty years to see the need to analyze why I believed the things that I professed. I think there are those who never make the journey. Maybe the need to take this spiritual journey only comes with age and experience. Maybe it's not until we have obtained some of the possessions that we have striven for or reached our career objectives that we come to realize that those things don't bring lasting satisfaction. I remember always wanting a nice car and a big house. I was finally able to afford them. At first, I experienced great satisfaction just knowing that I had achieved my goals. I also remember how a year later I had my eye on a newer car. The one that was once new was no longer new. Now it was the old one. And the big house was no longer a novelty. Now I had to pay the cost of upkeep and maintenance. The house, too, had lost its luster. Perhaps it's when we reach that point that materialism becomes less attractive and we begin to look for something that will bring longer lasting satisfaction. We search for a greater meaning to life. Maybe that's what drives some of us to religion in the first place. However, for me, because of the legitimate concerns that I had just shared, religion, too, had lost its luster. Like the material possessions, the peace that religion once provided was gone. What I believed in, where I put my trust, had to be true. It just had to be.

Brenda broke the silence and announced that she had prepared lunch. It was time to feed the body and give the mind a rest.

Chapter 6

Man has always sacrificed truth to his vanity, comfort and advantage. He lives... by make-believe.

W. Somerset Maugham, The Summing Up, 1938

During lunch we had an opportunity to talk about Samuel's past. His knowledge of religious history was very impressive. Much of his time had been spent in the study of ancient mythologies. I guess I never thought about all of the religious ideas that had developed within the various civilizations around the world. I had only been exposed to the religions of the Middle East, the history of the Hebrews specifically, as described in the Bible. I never thought about what was happening in the rest of the world during that same time. Samuel explained that he, too, had spent many years on the quest for truth, a journey very much like mine. His quest was also prompted by his disillusionment with traditional religion. After a quick lunch, we took our tea and headed back to the family room.

"How will we begin this search for religious truth?" I questioned.

"First we will establish a criteria for truth. In other words, what are the requirements that must be met for something to be true."

"That sounds reasonable."

"There are universally accepted standards for truth that we will use. While we might not be able to arrive at any definitive conclusions, depending on the amount of information available to us, our goal will be to get as close to the truth as possible."

"Is this going to be hard to understand? It sounds like we're about to get really philosophical and I'll have to admit that I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer!" I said jokingly.

“You should be able to keep up,” he said. “The criteria for truth is quite simple. First, you must understand that there are three ‘primary truths’ inherently accepted in the investigation of knowledge and truth. They are: the first fact. That states that the objective of our discussion does indeed exist. In other words, if we are discussing the truth concerning a ball, we must first agree that the ball exists.”

“Okay, I get that. That’s pretty simple. I’m with you so far.”

“Secondly,” he continued, “is the first principle. That is that there are no contradictions in the facts or information concerning the object of our discussion. If we say that the ball is a sphere, it would be a contradiction to say that the ball is also a cube at the same time. The ball can only be one shape at any given time. So, it is either a sphere or a cube.”

“That makes sense. So, we are saying that truth is without contradiction. It is consistent.”

“Yes. And thirdly, the first condition: the ability of the mind to know truth. That is, that we are capable of understanding the truth concerning the objective of our discussion.”

“Okay, I can accept that.”

“It’s important for us to have a foundation from which to begin our search. This criteria for truth is the most widely accepted so this is where we will start.”

I agreed. “Sure. I understand.”

“In our discussion, we will make certain propositions or statements concerning our topic and then support those statements with objective evidence. The evidence we will rely on will consist of the evidence of the senses: can we taste it, smell it, touch it, see it, or hear it? The evidence of rational thought; that is, does our evidence or conclusion agree with reality? And, the evidence of expert testimony. In other words, is there some credible expert or resource that can provide evidence for our premise? However, the evidence of expert

testimony will be considered less weighty than the first two sources because we know that even experts can be unreliable. People can be swayed by opinion and personal agendas, and writings can be inaccurate as a result of translations, interpretations and many other factors. And, lastly, common sense.”

“I can agree with all of the sources you named for providing credible evidence except the last one. I’m not sure we can totally depend on common sense,” I commented.

“I agree in part. Common sense takes the obvious and accepts it on face value. However, if we take common sense, that intuitive capability that is usually correct, and apply critical analysis that consists of objective evidence, the rules of logic and accepted scientific method, common sense can become a powerful source of reliable evidence.”

“If we are able to show the accuracy of common sense in that way, I will agree that we can use common sense as a source of evidence.”

We were only a few minutes into our discussion and my head was already reeling with concepts that were confusing for someone who had not studied these things before. But, I was excited to see that Samuel was getting into the discussion and I was eager to hear what he had to say.

“So, we will begin our discussion with the premise that truth exists,” I said.

“And, that it is important,” he added. “If truth is absolute and conforms to reality, then truth is truth for everyone, universally, and it is not dependent or influenced in any way by individual desires, beliefs or opinions.”

“Okay, what you are saying is that truth is objective and not subjective. Just because I believe something is true does not make it true simply because I believe it is true or want it to be true.”

“Exactly,” he confirmed.

“It sounds like finding the truth about any particular thing takes a lot of time and effort.” I was beginning to see why most people don’t take the time to look deeper into what they believe.

“In most cases it does. Of course there are those instances where the truth is immediately obvious. We might call those self-evident truths.”

“You mean if I say that it’s a bright, sunny day and you look out of the window and see the sun shining, it would be immediately obvious that I am telling the truth.”

“Exactly. But most truth does take some investigation. The more complex the topic or issue, the more complex the search becomes. That’s one reason why I think so many people simply accept the status quo.”

“So truth is not relative? There are those who will argue that truth is affected by circumstances and situations.”

“By definition, it is absolute,” he explained. “That means that it does not change. However, let’s use the ball as an example again. The ball is a sphere. That’s the definition of a ball. That is the truth and it is absolute. But let’s say that someone comes along and smashes the ball flat. Now the ball is no longer a sphere. What is the truth about the ball?”

I had to think about this one. “Let’s see, the condition of the ball has changed, but the definition of a ball is the same. So a ball is still a sphere, but in this case, this ball is a flattened sphere.”

“Good. So the condition might change around the object, but the object, by definition, remains the same?” he asked.

“Yeah. I guess,” I answered.

“What about a wall that has a hole in it and we say the wall has a hole, but then we patch the wall and it no longer has a hole. Has the truth changed?”

“No, the wall is still a wall. It is the condition of the wall that has changed.”

“I agree. So, we have to be very careful when discussing things to specify whether we are talking about the object itself or the condition of the object.”

This was getting more difficult than I imagined. “What about concepts and ideas? Scientists once thought the world was flat. That was considered the truth. Later, when new information was available, it was discovered that what was being taught as the truth really wasn’t? How do we handle concepts and ideas?” I asked.

“What we know about something doesn’t alter the truth about it. Only our understanding changes as new information becomes available. The world was always the shape that it is now. Our misunderstanding of it or our lack of knowledge about it did not change that truth. We simply didn’t have enough information to conclude correctly.”

“That’s my point,” I exclaimed. “Can we find truth? Do we know everything there is to know about any one object, idea, or concept to determine the truth about it?”

“Probably not. That is why we must constantly reevaluate and rethink what we believe to ensure that it continues to satisfy the established criteria for truth, even concerning issues that we thought were settled years ago. We might discover that what we thought was the truth really wasn’t. Nothing is beyond investigation. We can always get closer to the truth. But when we find it, we can rest assured that it will be absolute and universal. It will always conform to reality.”

“So what’s next?” I was eager to move along.

“If we want to reach some logical conclusion that brings us closer to truth,” he began, “there are certain questions that we must address. The first is, does God exist? Since God is the basic and essential element in religion, we must agree that God exists and that the existence of God is reasonable and logical. If there is no God then, consequently, there is no reason for religion.

“Secondly, to reiterate what you have already said, since religious theology is based on the perceived nature of God, we

must attempt to determine who God is and what God is like. What is God's form? In other words, is God made of physical stuff as humans are or is God made of other stuff? Is God tangible or intangible? If God is made of physical stuff then God is limited to the laws that limit things that are made of matter, such as time and space. However, if God is not made of human stuff, then what is God's form? What is God's nature? That is, is God perfect or imperfect? If God is imperfect then God is not reliable or dependable since we can never know what mood God will be in at any given time. To be imperfect is to be inconsistent. To be inconsistent is to be human. On the other hand, if God is perfect then God is absolute. That is, every character trait that we attribute to God will be absolute or perfect, as well. However, since we are talking about a supernatural being, this perfection is a matter of choice. In other words, if God is perfect it is because God chooses to be perfect and not because that is the only way God can be. But, by being perfect, all of God's traits and actions will be the correct one, the perfect one, because that is the nature of being perfect. To be perfect is not to be human. To be perfect is to be truth because truth is, as we have defined it, without flaw, without inconsistency. Truth is absolute; therefore if God is perfect, God is truth.

“Third, using our criteria for truth, we must establish whether or not the Bible and Koran satisfy that criteria and are, therefore, infallible. If we find that they are not, then we must look for other sources that will provide us with more accurate information concerning the nature of God. Once we have found a source of reliable information, that is, it meets the criteria for truth, then we can say that we have discovered the truth in respect to God and religion.”

“Sounds simple enough.” I said sarcastically.

“I realize that it seems overwhelming, but also exciting. To do justice to our search and to come to some conclusion, we must tackle, or attempt to tackle these issues. Otherwise, we will be basing our conclusions on propositions that might be invalid, making our conclusions invalid, as well. But, let me stress that

what we will be discussing are not and cannot be opinions, but rather substantiated propositions that will lead us to our conclusions.”

“But, Samuel, once again, what if we don’t find anything? What if this discussion ends up being a big waste of time? The questions concerning God and religion are questions that have been addressed by some of the greatest minds in history and most have concluded without definitive resolution. Are you sure we will actually end up somewhere beyond where others have not been able to go?”

“Every person throughout history who has studied and discussed this topic has arrived at some conclusion. Whether they were scientists discussing the creation of the world or philosophers debating the existence of God, each has contributed something that can help us in our search. However, unlike us, many did not have the opportunity of seeing what others had discovered. They only knew the opinion of those who were nearby or had distributed their work to some limited extent. They didn’t have the opportunity to share ideas and argue opinions with others who were involved in the same endeavor as they were. We, on the other hand, have access to a myriad of information, more than any other generation. Because of the vast wealth of information on the worldwide web, we can study the ideas and works of so many of these great thinkers. And, by doing so, we can compare and analyze and draw our own conclusions, maybe even more accurately than they could because we have access to this abundance of knowledge.”

I agreed. We did have an advantage. Even in my wildest dreams I never thought I would be involved in a discussion like this one. I was not a great student in school. I hated history, math and science. I loved the arts. I guess I am more of the creative type. Now, here I was discussing questions that have been contemplated by some of the greatest and most intelligent minds in history. Questions that pertain to science and math and philosophy but this time it was going to be different. This time it concerned something that was important to me; something that

impacted my life. I might have trouble understanding a lot of it but I was determined to try.

Chapter 7

History shows that there is nothing so easy to enslave and nothing so hard to emancipate as ignorance, hence it becomes the double enemy of civilization. By its servility it is the prey of tyranny, and by its credulity it is the foe of enlightenment.

*-- Lemuel K. Washburn,
Is The Bible Worth Reading And Other Essays*

Samuel went into another room. In a few minutes he returned carrying a box filled with books and lecture notes. I felt like a kid who had missed class and needed to meet with the teacher for extra tutoring. He took his seat and class began.

“We should start at the beginning with that most basic question: is there a God? Let’s begin with these assumptions: either there is no God, he is a fabrication of man’s imagination; or there is a God and we have simply lost sight of who God is. If there is no God then there is no truth in any religion. I fully understand that belief in a deity or deities is primarily an act of faith, but it seems logical that there would be evidence that proves this Being exists. Wouldn’t a God who created humans with the amazing ability to reason provide reasonable and logical proof of its existence?”

“The struggle to prove the existence of God has been undertaken by many people, both common and wise. I’m not sure there is a way to prove that God exists. Shouldn’t we just assume that there is a God since we both agree that God is the foundation of religion and this discussion concerns religion, and, therefore, takes for granted that God exists?” I asked.

“You’re correct that religion, as we are defining it, involves belief in a god or a supernatural being. But, if we’re to stay consistent in our method of attempting to discover the truth about religion, based in part on reason and logic, then we must begin at the start to establish that there is logic for the existence of everything that constitutes religion and God is the basic

necessary ingredient. Besides, earlier you said that you did have doubts about God's existence."

"That's true," I was embarrassed to admit again. "Okay we can start there."

"I think for this part of our discussion we should take a little trip." He stood up and stretched. "I have a friend that lives close by. He has dedicated much of life to the study of science. While he doesn't consider himself a scientist, most people who know him respect his knowledge in that area. I think he can contribute a lot to our discussion."

I had no problem with taking a trip. I'll have to admit that I was getting a little weary from sitting. There's an old saying that the brain will only absorb what the butt can endure! My butt was just about maxed out.

"Sounds good to me. You don't think he'll mind if we drop by?" I asked.

"No. He always enjoys company."

We got our jackets and headed out. According to Samuel, Byron Donaldson had become interested in science late in life, around the age of fifty. It's sad that often times we don't realize our true passion until later in life. It could be because most of us focus on doing what we have to do to make a living so what we enjoy doing has to take a backseat. Or it might be because we set our goals based on financial considerations. Perhaps it is not until we have achieved some degree of success or realize that we are unhappy in our current endeavor that we recognize our true passion. For some, pursuing this craving becomes a hobby. Others actually change the direction of their career to that of their interest. Byron's passion was science.

Byron lived alone in a very small cabin in the hills. He came out to greet us when we arrived. When I first saw him, I thought I had stepped back into the nineteen-sixties. He wore a pair of old tattered blue jeans, a stained t-shirt and sandals. His hair was long, pulled back in a ponytail. But, I must say that he was one of the most jovial people I have met. His smile was sincere and he had an energetic bounce to his step. He invited us

into his modest dwelling and, after a few minutes of small talk, we took our seats and the discussion began. Samuel explained my situation and the purpose of our visit. Byron seemed delighted to join our discussion. Samuel introduced our topic.

“So, Byron, prove to us that there is a God!”

Byron laughed. “No problem,” he said with a smile.

“It should be obvious that there’s not a way to prove, definitively, that God exists or doesn’t exist,” he began. “Now keep in mind that when I talk about a supernatural Being I’m not talking about the gods who have been given all types of human characteristics portrayed throughout history by the various mythologies and religions. I’m referring to a supernatural entity that exists beyond the realm of human understanding. Many times when people discuss the existence of a deity they get bogged down in discussing the perceived nature of the deity or how religion has impacted civilization. If we are going to discuss the existence or non-existence of this entity, we must clear away all preconceived notions of what this deity is like and how society has used or abused their understanding of it. We must focus solely on whether or not it exists.”

“In other words, we shouldn’t get bogged down with the details,” I summarized.

“Right. Those things should be left for another discussion,” he replied. “Now, while I don’t believe there is a way to definitively prove its existence, there may be a way to prove that it is more logical to believe that a god or supernatural entity exists than to believe that one doesn’t.”

He walked over to a crowded dusty bookshelf. “I would like to begin by using nature as our primary source of evidence. Great men throughout history have championed the logic of an Intelligent Designer.”

“But didn’t they all fail to prove their point?” I argued.

“I don’t think they failed at all. Their message was drowned out by those who claimed to have had a more scientific solution to creation.”

“Go on,” I said. I was skeptical but interested. I had heard of these Intelligent Designer theories before.

“Most of those who have tried to disprove the existence of a Creator in creation have used evolution as proof that an intelligent power did not create the world. But evolution has little to do with the initial act of creation.”

“It sounds as though we are going to be making a lot of propositions in this discussion,” I said. “What makes your propositions different than anyone else’s?” I wanted to be sure I wasn’t getting just a lot of opinions.

Samuel joined the conversation. “Remember, as we look for truth, whether it is scientific or religious, we will use objective evidence to substantiate our propositions. Once we have substantiated our propositions, we will attempt to formulate a conclusion. If our conclusion meets the criteria that we have established for truth and it agrees with reality, we must presume that our conclusion is valid. The conclusion, then, becomes what we might call the accepted fact or truth about that issue until which time more information becomes available and our theory is modified to reflect the impact of that new information. This new information can then either further substantiate our theory or disprove the theory all together. The fact is, almost everything we believe is, in truth, a theory -- always subject to reevaluation based on new information and discoveries.”

“But what if the information we use to substantiate our premise is incorrect?” I asked.

“Then obviously,” Byron explained, “our premise or proposition, and consequently our conclusion, will also be incorrect. Almost all of our current theories were originally based on observation and common sense. We must always begin there. In ancient times, people observed that the sun rose and traveled from horizon to horizon. It made sense to assume that the sun was revolving around the earth. That assumption was considered the truth until new discoveries forced science to change its theory. Now we know that the earth rotates around the sun. This new information brought us closer to the truth. However, it began with common sense and observation. That’s

where we will begin and then we will build on that by considering the information that is available to us on the particular issue that we are discussing and employ logic and reason to formulate a theory.”

“Okay, so we’re back where we began. How does one go about proving there is or is not a god?”

“We will build our argument using certain ground rules. When discussing the existence or non-existence of a supernatural being we must remember that it is just that, supernatural. If a deity does exist, then it is otherworldly; it is beyond human understanding and is not bound by the limitations of this world. In other words, it is not human, not a physical being. If it is not a physical being and it is otherworldly then it is not restricted to the scientific boundaries and physical laws of this world. It is not limited by time and space. It is not made of matter and, therefore, does not have to follow the rules that apply to matter. In the beginning we must not attribute any characteristics to this deity. Once again, if it is not human, it does not necessarily possess any of the traits or attributes that humans do; such as compassion or jealousy or greed or any other such character traits. This entity must remain incomprehensible. Remember, the original question is not what is God, or who is God or what is God like. The original question is: is it more reasonable and logical and does it make more sense to assume that such a being exists than that it doesn’t.”

Samuel interrupted. “And, as a side note, one can never really disprove the existence of God. How can one disprove an idea or a concept that is indescribable and inconceivable? This is what the Supreme Being is if it exists at all, inconceivable because it is not of this world. It is of another dimension. The only way to disprove its existence is to walk into this unknown dimension and bang on the door. If no one answers, there is no God. However, since we don’t know of this dimension, locating it to see if God is there is just not possible. So, one either believes in it or they don’t.”

“So, it’s back to being a matter of faith!” I was getting lost in our discussion.

“Yes,” Byron said, “but our goal is to substantiate our faith with reason and logic.”

I repeated my question. “What evidence is there?”

“As I said, I would like to begin with observation and common sense,” Byron reminded us.

“Remember, common sense, critically examined, can be used as a source of reliable evidence when searching for truth,” Samuel interjected.

“But what about those who claim that God is no more than an invention of our imagination?”

“Byron, if I could?”

“Sure, Samuel, go ahead.”

“I will have to agree in part. Not that God is an invention of our imagination, but that God is in our imagination. What is the imagination? It is the part of our mind that allows us to see what is not visible. It enables us to visualize things that do not yet exist in the material world. It was through his imagination that Benjamin Franklin imagined harnessing electricity. It is the imagination that has prompted all invention. It is the source of all ideas and it is the conduit for revelation. Imagination is the engine that drives creativity and allows us to view things beyond the tangible. It allows us to enter the world of the supernatural, the mystical and imagine what’s possible, even when others try to convince us otherwise. It is the imagination that ignites the fire of discovery. It is a place where God can speak to us. So, God does exist in our imagination but God is not imaginary. This Being, if it does exist, is beyond our understanding. It is impossible to see the invisible, to conceive of the inconceivable. It is only through our imagination that we can catch a very sheer glimpse of this indescribable entity.”

“That makes sense. God exists in our imagination but God is not imaginary. I like that.”

Byron walked to his chair as he talked. “We should begin this part of our discussion with the basic question: where did everything come from? Where did our universe originate?”

“You mean the “Big Bang”? I asked.

“No, further back. While the Big Bang is the most popular theory concerning the beginning of the universe at this time, we need to go back before that event,” he explained.

“How can we do that?”

“We’ll begin with the assumption that nothing comes from nothing. Can we agree that common sense and observation provide us with evidence that this is a correct assumption?”

“At this point, I will agree,” I said. “Nothing comes from nothing.”

“So,” he continued, “something had to cause the Big Bang. I mean, what is there to bang if nothing exists? If there was nothing before the “bang” then we have no reason for the bang.”

That made sense. “I see what you mean.”

“In fact, there could not even have been empty space because there would have had to have been a cause for space. Nothing comes from nothing.”

“Okay, but that means that nothing would ever have existed. There had to be something at the start; something that started it all,” I insisted.

“That’s true. That “something” is what some people call the First Cause; something that has always existed.”

“But nothing comes from nothing.” I reminded him of our original assumption.

“But this entity didn’t ‘come’. It always was.”

“And you are assuming that this always-existent entity was God?”

“Let’s take it one step at a time,” he answered.

“But if we agree that something has always existed then it could have been anything. It could have been the universe.”

“Science tells us that our universe had a beginning. Even Stephen Hawkins was in an agreement with that,” he replied.

“Maybe it was space. Why couldn’t it have been space?” I argued.

“If space has always existed, it was empty space. Because if there was something in space it, too, would have had to have always existed. And we know that empty space, being void of all elements or substances could never have led to the birth of the universe because empty space is just empty space.”

“So maybe atoms have always existed. Aren’t they present in all things?” I asked.

“Yes, except that atoms are made up of three elements: protons, neutrons and electrons. So these three elements would have had to have always existed. Now we are saying that there was not one single ‘always-existent’ entity, but three.”

I gave up. “So what is the solution?”

“There are two options,” he explained. “The first is that whatever it was that existed is an unknown; some particle or substance, some matter that has yet to be discovered, that was present in the beginning but is no longer identifiable; or, secondly, that there has always existed an entity that is not matter that is capable of creating something out of nothing. With our sophisticated laboratories and advanced scientific capabilities, it is not reasonable to assume that such a particle or substance exists or existed that we have not been able to identify. Therefore, the most logical and reasonable conclusion is that this ever-existent entity is non-matter and that it has the power to create something out of nothing, The First Cause.”

I had to admit that this assertion was the most logical compared to the alternatives. “But that would imply that there exists a supernatural entity. How can that ever be proven?”

“It does introduce a dimension or realm that is beyond what we are familiar with. But just because we are not familiar with it doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. Many people are stuck in believing that the things common to this world are the only things that are real; that there is no reality other than what we know and experience on this planet. But that is not necessarily true.”

“But how can that be proven?” I repeated.

“Once again, we cannot offer definite proof but our objective is to see if it is more logical to believe that it exists than it is to believe that it doesn’t. Let’s go on. Since we’ve discussed the beginning of the universe, let’s talk now about where life originated. Where or how did it begin?”

“Where can we start to find such evidence? How can we know that?” I asked.

“Let’s examine the most popular arguments that exist today.”

It sounded like the conversation was about to get complicated. “Okay, I’ll try to keep up but I’ve never been very good at science,” I warned. Samuel smiled.

“Basically, these theories aren’t difficult to understand,” Byron began. “While there are many theories, I have found that there are only a few that are popular with a general and scientific audience. Creationism, Intelligent Design, and the Anthropic Principle are three; the fourth is the theory that claims that over time life evolved from nonliving matter. We’ll call that spontaneous generation. For the moment, I will combine Creationism and Intelligent Design because they both credit an intelligent entity with the creation of life and the world. Let’s take a look at these various theories briefly and logically.

“In a nutshell, the Anthropic Principle suggests that there are many planets, perhaps billions and billions in the universe and of these planets there are many that are probably friendly to life. That is, they would be life-friendly if life existed on them. And because of this life-friendly atmosphere, somewhere at sometime, life simply appeared. It theorizes that life just popped up because the conditions were conducive for life to exist.

“Probably the most popular theory is the assumption that over time, nonliving matter somehow came together in a primordial soup that resulted in a living organism. But what evidence is there to support this theory? While much experimentation has been done and is still being done today, even with our sophisticated laboratories, scientists have not been

able to produce life from nonliving substances. As far as we know from actual historical data, there are no examples that clearly offer proof that such a process has ever occurred.

“Simply put, the proponents of this theory, that life suddenly appeared spontaneously, believe that life was a result of chance. They propose that over time the necessary chemicals, having been produced as a result of the changing environment, mixed and mingled together and that this combining of chemicals resulted in the creation of the basic building blocks of life. And, eventually, over time, these building blocks became a living organism. In this scenario, chance was the creator of life. At this time, there is no evidence at all to support this theory. We have to remember that life is more than a chemical reaction. It involves complex systems and processes: a way to consume nourishment, a digestive system to process that nourishment, and a reproductive system for the survival of the life form. One of the most accepted definitions of life is the ability of an organism to grow and reproduce itself. Even in a very primitive organism, these capabilities or processes could not have evolved over time. They must have existed in the first living organism, even though it might have been a very primitive system. These processes are essential for sustaining life.

“There are other problems with this theory. If life did originate through a slow chemical process, did it occur only in one place with one organism being produced, or in several places with many organisms produced of slightly varying kinds? If it occurred in several places, the odds of such a chance meeting of just the right chemicals in just the right environment to create this new life are even more overwhelming. We just do not have any examples of life coming from non-living substances.

“On the other hand, we do have proof that non-living substances have come from living things.”

“You mean fossils?” I was happy to contribute to the conversation.

“Yes. Fossils were living organisms that died and became solid matter. Also there are petrified, stone-like objects that were the result of the demise of living organisms and substances.

And we should add that it has been shown that many of our natural resources such as oil and gas were also a result of decaying creatures. So, there is ample evidence of non-living matter coming from living things, but no evidence at all of living organisms being created by non-living matter or as a result of some chemical reaction. Furthermore, we have significant evidence of living organisms coming from living organisms.”

“You mean birth.”

“Of course. But not just birth. Every living thing reproduces. Although I assume the creation of a new being or organism would be very different, we can easily see how life can come from life.”

I thought I’d better try to summarize where we were to make sure I was still keeping up.

“So, you are saying that non-life can come from the living, but not the reverse and that life gives birth to living things. I suppose you are suggesting that God has always existed and is the original life that created life and all non-living matter. So, you are assuming that life, in some form, has always existed. But where is your proof?”

“We are coming to that,” he promised. “Our first proposition built on logic and historical evidence is that it is more logical for life to come from life than from non-life because we have examples of the former, but no examples at all of the latter. Now we turn to evolution to substantiate our original premise.”

“I knew you would eventually end up here. But do you really want to go there? I mean, it’s controversial enough discussing religion as we are, but to take on evolution only adds chaos to the conversation.”

“That may be true, but it is an essential ingredient in building our case. The reason it is necessary will become clear as we continue. You’ll just have to go along with me for a moment.”

“Alright, I’ll follow along the best I can,” I said.

“Thank you. Many people see a conflict between creation by design and science. Obviously, Samuel and I are not among those. If God is the creator of all things, then God is the creator of science and all of the other disciplines. If this is true then the more information we have concerning life and our universe, the more evidence there should be to support the theory that there is a Supreme Existence that has carefully and intelligently orchestrated the creation of the universe. Science and math can help us in our quest for understanding.”

“So, let’s talk evolution. And, by evolution, I suppose you are referring to Darwin’s theory?” I assumed.

“That is the most popular theory, and the most misrepresented.”

“How can that be? It is studied constantly. It is the main theory taught in classrooms all across our nation.”

“Yes, it is taught, but perhaps not altogether accurately. Very few of those who teach it have actually read *The Origin of Species* for themselves. They depend on others who have studied it and provided a synopsis, of sorts, picking and choosing what is being taught and what is being left out.”

“Like sheep aimlessly following a shepherd, we are taking the word of those who profess to be experts rather than researching the information for ourselves.” Samuel reminded me of the things we had discussed earlier.

“But not all of us have time to do our own research,” I argued. “That’s why we have subject-matter experts. And how do you know that those who teach have not studied it for themselves?”

“Because of the way it is being taught. Traditionally, it is taught that Darwin believed that evolution was the result of natural selection exclusively. But, according to his own words, Darwin is not arguing against the participation of a Supreme Creator in his book. What he is arguing against is the idea of the creation of each species being an independent act without the aid of evolutionary involvement. He says believing that theory,

‘...makes the works of God a mere mockery and deception; I would almost as soon believe with the old and ignorant cosmogonists, that fossil shells had never lived, but had been created in stone so as to mock the shells now living on the sea-shore.’²¹

Even Darwin believed in the hand of God in creation. In fact, on several occasions he refers to a Creator.”

“You’re right. I don’t think that’s what’s commonly taught.”

“Of course it’s not. That would support the idea of a Creator and there seems to be a national, if not universal resistance to the idea of a creator in creation,” exclaimed Byron. “The greatest failing of our formal education system is that it doesn’t provide all of the legitimate theories that have been proposed; robbing students of what the various possibilities might actually be. In regard to creation, it is logical to believe that life began with an intelligent, ultimate design and has evolved just as it was planned.”

“So you agree with Darwin’s theory of evolution?”

Byron stopped to think about his response. “Not entirely. There are other theories that are still being argued. And, there are still many holes that must be filled. Even Darwin admitted that. He had trouble explaining the evolution of such organs as the eyes. In *The Origin of Species* he says,

‘To suppose that the eye, with all its inimitable contrivances for adjusting the focus to different distances, for admitting different amounts of light, and for the correction of spherical and chromatic aberration could have been formed by natural selection, seems, I freely confess, absurd in the highest possible degree.’²²

“He then continues to explain some of the ways that these complicated organs could have developed, realizing all the while that his suppositions were strictly speculation. But, let me point

²¹ Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, Gramercy Press. P. 202

²² Ibid., p. 217.

out the difficulties with the development of these organs strictly on the basis of natural selection. In his book, *Darwin's Black Box*, Dr. Michael J. Behe, a professor of Biological Science at Lehigh University, calls such complex systems as sight and sound irreducibly complex. Here's the way he explains it:

‘By irreducibly complex I mean a single system composed of several well-matched, interacting parts that contribute to the basic function, wherein the removal of any one of the parts causes the system to effectively cease functioning. An irreducibly complex system cannot be produced directly (that is, by continuously improving the initial function, which continues to work by the same mechanism) by slight, successive modifications of a precursor system, because any precursor to an irreducibly complex system that is missing a part is by definition nonfunctional . . . Since natural selection can only choose systems that are already working, then if a biological system cannot be produced gradually it would have to arise as an integrated unit, in one fell swoop, for natural selection to have anything to act on.’²³

“Additionally, if an organism exists and has always existed in a world of darkness and silence, surviving and living successfully in that environment, even in the face of competition and changing conditions, then there is no logical reason for the development of such organs that produce sight and sound. Consider, in addition, with the appearance of that new organ, the eye for instance, the organism not only had to develop the physical eye with its complex retina, but also had to simultaneously develop an entirely new support system of nerves uniquely designed to collect the various intensities of light, convert the light to electrical impulses and communicate those impulses to a part of the brain that was capable of identifying that data and turning that information into images. The theory that this organ, with all of these unique nerves, and a brain that

²³ Michael J. Behe, *Darwin's Black Box*, Free Press, NY, 2006, p. 39

could translate this information into sight all occurring by chance, over time and yet simultaneously, is illogical. Especially given that the organism was already surviving without this capability. Certainly, adaptations like fins or other appendages that would help an organism to move more quickly would give them an advantage over the competition, but sight and hearing, having not been present in any previously existent organism, would not have been a “natural” progression necessary for survival. This same argument holds true for the development of all vital organs. As I mentioned, if evolution is mainly concerned with survival, then an organism with an already functioning system would not need to have that system modified, that is to say, not drastically modified.”

“I understand what you’re saying.” I actually did!

“And, along that same line of thought, if these modifications did occur slowly over time with the essential support systems being developed deliberately for their eventual use as part of some complex system, then something, somewhere had to know what the end result of this development would be. Something had to dictate how all of the parts would fit together in order to accomplish the final objective; that of hearing or seeing. Who knew that sight would be needed? Who knew that wings would be needed? Did evolution make these decisions? If we credit evolution with these intelligent designs we are simply saying that evolution is an intelligent creative supernatural entity. We are calling evolution God.”

“I really never thought of that. Why wings? Why legs and why arms? If these things developed slowly as environments changed in such a way as to require these capabilities, then who knew what the future conditions would be so that when they were needed they were available?” I was beginning to see the point.

“Finally,” Byron continued, “if evolution is mainly concerned with survival, then I will ask you, what creature has the best assurance of survival: one that is unisexual, possessing a male or female reproductive organ only, or one that is

hermaphroditic, one that possesses both reproductive organs and can reproduce by itself without a mate?”

“Well, logically,” I answered, “the one that has the best chance for survival would be the one that is self-sufficient, that could reproduce on its own, guaranteeing the survival of the species.”

“Exactly. So why was there a gender split: male and female? And how did this occur? If this split occurred as a mutation, chances are it would not have been able to reproduce itself, or it would have reproduced a mix of hermaphroditic and gender-specific individuals. And, if it were a mutation, it probably would have become extinct given that there were no available mates. Now, even though it is illogical, let’s suppose that this is what happened, that there was this gender split as a part of some mutation. Seeing that virtually all organisms have male and female gender, it means that this mutation not only occurred in one species, but in almost all of the species that exist today. What are the chances of that happening? So, the gender that survived would actually be the mutation that should not have survived due to the complexity of finding a mate to reproduce. It is not logical that the development of genders occurred as a part of natural selection since natural selection is concerned with what works best for survival. The appearance of gender is one of the strongest arguments against a system of natural selection as the only means of evolution. I would like to add one other problem with evolution strictly by natural selection. And one more argument.”

“Go ahead.” I was beginning to like this stuff!

“Once again, in *The Origin of Species*, Darwin observes that only those adaptations that benefited the survival of the organism became permanent in that organism.

‘Natural selection will never produce in a being anything injurious to itself, for natural selection acts solely by and for the good of each. No organ will be formed, as Paley

has remarked, for the purpose of causing pain or for doing an injury to its possessor.²⁴

Knowing this, we have to ask the question, how possible is it that adaptations and variations, not just in one organism, but a myriad of organisms, were beneficial one hundred percent of the time if we attribute those modifications to chance? Where in history or science do we have an example that illustrates how chance produces only positive results one hundred percent of the time? Conversely, it is simple to illustrate how chance cannot produce consistent results. Let's use an example. Let's suppose we have 5 dice and we throw those dice 10 times. What are the odds that all of the dice will result in the same number all ten times? Now, multiply the number of dice a thousand times, to represent each organism affected by natural selection and all of the aspects of nature that work together harmoniously and interdependently providing the perfect environment for life, and try to calculate the odds of that occurring by chance. Chance is not consistent or dependable. Chance is random. Chance is about odds and the odds that chance will always result in a positive outcome is illogical, unreasonable and does not conform to reality. Just ask anyone who has visited a casino and played a game of 'chance'. And, finally..."

"I thought you already offered your last argument," I reminded him.

"Just one more," he claimed.

"Okay." Actually, I was eager to hear it.

"Humans." He took a dramatic pause.

"Yeah, what about them?" I asked.

"Well, it might sound silly at first, but think about it: why are we humans the only creatures with a higher level of development; consciously, intellectually, psychologically and emotionally?"

"What do you mean?"

²⁴ Darwin, p. 229.

“I mean there were a lot of other creatures that evolved in the same areas that humans did; in the same environment, under the same conditions. Why didn’t they, too, evolve in similar ways to humans? Shouldn’t there be a species of tiger that can talk and think and use logic to make decisions? Shouldn’t a bear be sitting at the United Nations debating global warming? Why were humans the only ones to reach this pinnacle of development? Why were we the only ones whose brain grew and developed such capabilities as we have today?”

I had to admit that was perplexing. “That is an interesting observation,” I agreed. “All other creatures do seem to have reached a certain stage of development and then stopped. I’m not sure why that is. So what is your opinion?”

“The only logical conclusion is that evolution does occur to some extent, but the code or process for evolution, call it natural selection or whatever, was dictated by a well-defined design that was the result of the work of an Intelligent Designer; the Original Life, the First Cause. Once again, Darwin was not arguing the existence or non-existence of a Creator, which he acknowledges throughout his study on evolution. Scientists like Michael J. Behe in his book, *Darwin’s Black Box*, presents many scientific arguments to refute many of Darwin’s theories. However, we seldom hear of these arguments because acknowledging them would cause great distress throughout the educational and scientific communities.

“Recently, a group of scientists discovered what they are considering to be the most efficient shape in nature. As a result of more and more powerful microscopes, we are able to see things like never before. It seems the most efficient shape is one that is part of even the smallest organism. It is a branch-like shape. One scientist remarked that natural selection has given us a shape that has brought organization to chaos. He spoke as if natural selection was an intelligent force that had made a conscious decision concerning the creation of the shape. Natural selection is a title given to a process, it is not an intelligent, creative being. However, it is a process that was designed by an intelligent creative being.

“Many experts are so focused on their particular discipline that they tend to develop tunnel vision, seeing their specialization as the only science that matters. If we take a step back and look at all of nature as one entity, we can recognize that each area of science is no more than a part of the whole. If we examine astronomy, we can easily see the tremendous order of the universe. Can chance ever lead to anything but chaos? Can chance result in consistent seasons, invariable tides, in planets that remain, century after century, confined to their specific orbits, each affecting the movement of the others? Can the earth, sun and moon be positioned by chance so that we have light and warmth part of the day and cool darkness the other? If we examine behavioral science and recognize the wonder of cause and effect, action and consequence and how these things bring order to life; and if we add to that the examination of evolution, we cannot help but acknowledge the tremendous order and design of all things. Coincidence? There are far too many occurrences to be coincidence or chance. The odds against it are far too great. All of these aspects of nature, logically and reasonably, cannot have been accidental, but the perfect design of an indescribable, incomprehensible, intelligent, creative Existence.”

“Wow! I have to agree, it does seem to be a logical conclusion.”

“And then we must ask ourselves, what exactly is life?”

“What is life? I thought we defined it earlier.”

“Yes, we’ve given a basic definition. But isn’t there more to it than that? We have to ask, is life no more than various processes that enable an organism to grow and reproduce itself? What makes such an organism different from a non-living substance? Is it motion, or something greater? Is it intuition, instinct, consciousness, or the potential for consciousness? What makes it split itself or reproduce? What makes it seek nourishment? Is it something that has no actual place in evolution; a special quality that is not merely intended for survival but puts survival on a higher plane? Intuition, instinct, imagination, the ability to think, not just about eating and

sleeping and finding shelter, but the capacity to contemplate life itself. Instinct, intuition, thought and consciousness are not elements of evolution. These are part of something bigger. These capabilities represent the quintessence of life. The real value of life is not in merely existing, it is being conscious of that existence.”

Samuel picked up where Byron left off. “Baruch Spinoza was a seventeenth century Jewish philosopher. In her book, *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong says this concerning Spinoza’s attitude concerning God:

‘As an aggregate of all the laws in existence, God was the highest perfection, which welded everything into unity and harmony. When human beings contemplated the workings of their minds in the way that Descartes had enjoined, they opened themselves to the eternal and infinite being of God at work within them. Like Plato, Spinoza believed that intuitive and spontaneous knowledge reveals the presence of God more than a laborious acquisition of facts. Our joy and happiness in knowledge is equivalent to the love of God, a deity which is not an eternal object of thought but the cause and principle of that thought, deeply one with every single human being. There is no need for revelation or divine law: this God is accessible to the whole of humanity, and the only Torah is the eternal law of nature.’”

“So we will agree with Newton and Darwin and Plato and Descartes and many other great scientists and philosophers that there is a Creator and that this Creator is not in conflict with science,” I concurred. “Now what? Why was all of this important to our study in religion?”

Byron summed it up. “We have shown that belief in a Supreme Being of some sort is logical and reasonable, much more, in fact, than the alternative. I will admit that it finally comes down to faith but so does accepting all theories, in science as well as in religion. However, it requires much more faith to believe in the theory of spontaneous generation and chance

evolution. Creation, the universe as a whole, is irrefutable proof that there is an intelligent creator. There is an old story that has been told over the years that I enjoy retelling. It seems there was a man walking along the road when he happened across an old pocket watch lying on the ground on the side of the road. He bent down, picked it up and opened the case. He admired the ornate face and fragile hands. He watched as the second hand made its way, second after second with precision, around the circumference of the watch. Then he turned the watch over and opened the back. Looking inside, he marveled at its intricate workings. The tiny, scrupulously formed gears aligned perfectly so that the watch would keep time hour after hour, year after year. As he admired the meticulousness and workmanship of the watch he didn't try to imagine how, over time, each fragile part of the watch had slowly been molded and shaped by the wind and other elements. Or how, by chance, they had all somehow mysteriously been brought together and had assembled themselves into such an arrangement as they now were. Or how the spring had quite inadvertently been wound so as to start the watch and begin the time-keeping process. He simply thought: somewhere there is a watchmaker. As we examine the universe with its complexity and yet its precision; as we analyze nature in our own world with its diversity and yet interdependence; as we marvel at the human body with its life-sustaining systems and its complex brain, which we still have not begun to understand, we must say to ourselves, somewhere there is a creator. Any other option is illogical."

We thanked Byron for his time and we left. The drive back was quiet. Samuel knew that I needed some time to consider all of the things that we had discussed.

Chapter 8

Faith indeed tells what the senses do not tell, but not the contrary of what they see. It is above them and not contrary to them.

-- Blaise Pascal

When we arrived back at Samuel's house, we decided that it was a good idea to take a short break and give our brains a chance to rest. This journey on which I had embarked had already taken me places I had not anticipated going. The clouds had drifted away and the sun was out in full force. I walked outdoors to get some air. There was a spacious deck adjoining the family room. The countryside in Wimberley is nothing like other areas of Texas. Texas has such diverse landscapes. West Texas is so flat you can practically see the mountains in New Mexico. Wimberley, on the other hand is hilly. There's probably not three square feet of land that's level. The back of Samuel's house overlooked a canyon. The deck was built out over a precipice so you could see for miles. The canyon below was covered with scrub trees, cedar and cactus. This country has its own rugged beauty. The world is such a beautiful place. Even the clouds seemed to have been painted with wide elegant brush strokes. Samuel decided we should continue our visit outdoors. We found a couple of chairs on the deck and picked up where we left off.

"Now that we have shown that it is logical and reasonable to believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, the next step is to examine the religious theology of the various religions, comparing them to the information that is available to us, as well as using common sense and reason to see if they conform to the criteria for truth."

"You propose the examination of religion based on reason and logic and hard evidence?" I asked. "But, again, much of religion is based on faith. How can there be answers to questions of faith? Isn't faith defined as believing something for which there is no evidence?"

“Yes. But I don’t think faith is believing something when there is evidence to the contrary.”

“Explain what you mean.”

Samuel paused for a moment, trying to think of a way to help me understand.

“Many years ago people believed, pretty much by faith and observation, that the world was flat. You’ll remember that we used this example earlier. Since they could not see the natural curve of the earth that seemed like a reasonable assumption. And, since there was no scientific evidence to prove one way or the other, it seemed a reasonable conclusion. For the most part, the assumption was based on available information and accepted on faith. However, when there was scientific evidence that the world was not flat, continuing to believe that it was would have been an act of ignorance – not an act of faith. Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said that faith is ‘not wanting to know what is true’. There are some people who exemplify that statement.”

“Okay, I understand what you’re saying, but, in this instance, we are talking about spiritual and supernatural concepts when we discuss religion,” I insisted. “Can there be evidence to prove or disprove such things? I mean, I understand that Byron showed us that it is more logical to believe that God exists than that he doesn’t, but I’m not sure we can do the same with religion.”

“Religion is more than just believing in a supernatural being. It involves ideas concerning the nature of God, complex theologies that direct us in the way we should live and how we should build our relationships. It is vitally important that what we believe is the truth.”

“I agree that religion plays an important role in our lives.” I myself, have used that same argument in my journey to find truth.

“As you have already mentioned,” he continued, “there has to be more to religion than just faith. I believe the argument you used was, ‘Would a God who is intelligent enough to create this

universe expect his creation not to strive for logical answers to questions that determine the way they should act and think and upon which they should build their relationships both with other humans and with God? Does it make sense that religion would not be reasonable and logical?”

“Yes, I do believe I used those words. It does seem that God might have anticipated our curiosities, but...”

“I agree that faith is necessary in religion,” he affirmed, “and as we discussed, it is also necessary in science. But since all of the universe operates so systematically and consistently, with reasons for the way it functions, wouldn’t it make sense to assume that religious ideology, the most important aspect of life, should also be substantiated by reason and logic?”

“I think that it should. I have always felt that way. I’m just not sure how logic and reason can be applied to religion.”

“Let me ask you a question. What separates man from other animals?” he asked.

That seemed like a simple question. “Well, there are several things, but I suppose the most significant is man’s ability to make decisions rather than acting entirely on intuition or instinct.”

“And how do we make those decisions?”

“Again, I suppose we use the knowledge that we have gained and the experiences that we have had...”

“...and the experiences of others...”

“Certainly.” I continued, “and, using our intellect, we evaluate the information that we have, consider other circumstances that impact the situation and then attempt to make a logical decision.”

“I think you have explained the process accurately. Now, would a God who has given us that amazing ability, the ability to make decisions through the process you’ve just described, expect us to set that ability aside and exclusively use something called

faith instead? Especially in regard to perhaps the most critical of all decisions in life – formulating an ideology that will dictate our behavior, how we build our relationships and how we will live our lives?”

“It has always seemed a little out of character,” I had to admit.

“In fact, many teach that faith replaces or is in conflict with reason. It should be just the opposite,” Samuel explained, “reason should reinforce faith. When there is a conflict between the two, it should be resolved with careful examination.”

I had to think about that one. It made sense but I was always taught not to question faith. However, in consideration of our discussion it was obvious that if faith was all that was required for something to be true then anyone who had faith in anything would result in truth. If a person believed and had faith that a ball was a sphere then that would be the truth about the ball. It would be a sphere. But another who believed and had faith that the ball was a cube would also make that true based on their faith that the ball was a cube. So now the ball would be a cube. So they would both be right and no one would be wrong. Therefore, there would not be any objective truth concerning the ball. There would be no absolute truth because everyone could create truth simply by having faith. The same would apply to religion. If having faith constitutes truth, then all religions are true because all religions have members who have faith that what they believe is true! Faith alone cannot be all there is otherwise there is no absolute, universal, objective truth.

“Maybe we need to stop here and discuss something even more basic,” I suggested. “If we are discussing the need to examine religion shouldn’t we determine first why there is religion? What significance is there in belief in a God? Maybe it’s a concept that was important in the past but is no longer relevant.”

“That’s a valid observation,” he responded. “We’ve come a long way in understanding the universe in which we live. The various sciences have greatly improved our lives. Maybe we

really don't need God. *In A History of God*, Karen Armstrong writes,

'How will God survive in the years to come? For 4000 years it (religion) has constantly adapted to meet the demands of the present, but in our own century, more and more people have found that it no longer works for them, and when religious ideas cease to be effective they fade away. Maybe God really is an idea of the past.'²⁵

"If religion does not provide us with anything that makes life better, our relationships more satisfying, or our civilization more civil, then it is worthless and should be cast aside for something else that does make life better."

"So what does God provide that we can't get without him?" I asked. "If he is no more than a standard-setter for morals and ethics, as some people profess, can't a person choose a set of principles and live according to those standards without believing in a Supreme Being?" I waited while Samuel considered the question.

"Of course. There are those who claim not to hold to any religion who are very content with their lives. But history seems to indicate that there is an inherent part of man that needs spiritual nourishment in the form of worship and reverence for something greater than himself. Otherwise, religion would have met its end thousands of years ago. For some reason, man needs a god and religion.

"But why? We have already agreed that some of the world's greatest atrocities have occurred in the name of God."

He thought for a minute. "That's true. On the other hand, there is no greater force than the sincere commitment of a person who has faith in a god or in their religion. A committed believer will endure hardship, torture, and death rather than to deny his faith. Throughout history, it has been religion that has set the standard for society's ethics and morals. It has been the catalyst

²⁵ Quoted in Karen Armstrong; *A History of God*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1993, p. 377..

for charity and benevolence. It has provided the definition for love and the parameters for relationships. Even though it has been used as an excuse to commit atrocities by power-hungry warmongers, more good has come because of it than has harm from the misuse of it. When properly studied and followed, religion has helped the weak become strong, the poor to feel wealthy, and the meek to experience boldness. Max Horkheimer, a leader of the Frankfurt School of philosophers and scientists said this concerning God:

‘Without the idea of God there is no absolute meaning, truth or morality: ethics becomes simply a question of taste, a mood or a whim. Unless ethics and morality somehow include the idea of “God,” they will remain pragmatic and shrewd rather than wise. If there is no absolute, there is no reason that we should not hate or that war is worse than peace.’

“But most of all, I think religion’s greatest value is that of hope. No other source, other than the belief in a supernatural God, has provided so much hope to so many. Men have endured unspeakable hardships with the hope that things will improve because there’s someone or something bigger and more powerful than man who can make the bad better; who can make the sick healthy; who can bring nourishment to the starving; who can make an evil man good; and who can end the pain of death with the promise of a better future. A civilization with no religion, no belief in a supernatural, all-powerful being has little chance of survival because they have no hope.”

“But countries have survived without religion, haven’t they? China didn’t allow religion for centuries,” I argued.

“Actually, China has had several national religions: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. It was only under Mao that the government did not allow religion. But even at that time, there was always a clandestine dedicated group of deeply committed believers of one religion or another who has provided the underlying strength and hope that religion supplies. The spirit of man is a gnawing hunger that must be fed. Even when it

is constantly suppressed, it will always find a way to be heard. The need for God is as old as man and God is just as necessary today.”

“What about science? What about the hope that science will find cures for diseases? That science will find solutions to other problems that the world faces? Why does it have to be God?” I asked.

“Well, as we have discussed, science has made great strides in all areas of life. However, everyone knows that science is not infallible. Science does make mistakes. It is believed, on the other hand, that God does not make mistakes. Therefore hope in God, the one who can intervene supernaturally, is far more powerful than the hope that one might have in science.”

“But like I said earlier in our discussion concerning peace and false peace, if the hope that we have is based on false information, then it is false hope! If I start to cross a bridge and I’m told that the bridge is sturdy enough to hold my weight, I put my hope and trust in that information and I start to cross. But if the information regarding the bridge is untrue then my hope is a false hope and, realistically, the bridge could fail. Where I’m going with this is here, if I put my trust in the Bible and that trust results in me having hope in life, but the information in that book is not accurate, then, really, I have *no* hope. So, the only way religion can bring us real hope is for that religion to offer us the truth.”

“Very well put,” he said. “So I will reword my claim for religion. Whether true or not, religion’s greatest contribution is the hope that it *professes* to offer its members.”

“I agree,” I said.

“And,” he continued, “of course, religion has been used to establish morals and ethics from the earliest mythologies.

I quickly came back with a response. “I will agree that for thousands of years religion has given us moral and ethical standards. But is it necessary today? Can’t we determine what is healthy and good without the aid of traditional religion?”

“Certainly. And, as we have discussed, religion really has little to do with morals or ethics. Religion is about having a relationship with or a basic knowledge of the Supreme Creator of the universe. The establishment of morals is simply a byproduct of that relationship. However, we can determine a universal standard of moral behavior without religion. Actually, such a determination requires no more than common sense. You must agree that there are certain behaviors that are obviously destructive to human existence and breach our intuitive standard of fairness. These behaviors must be dealt with if society is to survive and our world is to remain a safe and bearable place to live. Murder and taking things that belong to others, or stealing, are examples of such behaviors. I’m certain that with the behavioral sciences we have today, combined with common sense, a moral standard can be achieved. However, it is religion that provides us with the spiritual motivation for adhering to those standards.”

“So you think we can’t just adhere to those standards because we want to and we know that they are the correct way to behave?” I argued. “And what about our justice system? Doesn’t that provide motivation for obeying our behavioral standards? Do you think religion carries more weight than these?”

“Man’s law is powerful, it’s true,” Samuel explained. “Governments and other authorities can force us to adhere to laws, but they cannot make us *want* to obey the rules. When a person believes that a standard is good for society and that it coincides with the will of a Supreme Being, then obedience to the laws or standards comes from the will of the person subject to that standard. A standard imposed and enforced by human law might achieve compliance, but when enforcement slacks off, the standard is more likely to be violated because it is not one that is self-imposed like those that are considered God-willed. It might be the law that keeps some people from hurting others, but it is a religious moral standard that drives goodwill in most individuals. Religion is a vital part of human existence, that is, true religion.”

“Which brings us back to our original question, is there truth in religion and does traditional religion provide us with that truth?”

“Perhaps, but as we have discussed, every generation should reexamine mainstream religion to make sure that nothing manmade has crept in, ensure that religion is pure and honest and, most of all, true. If that is done regularly, then religion is never traditional. It is always relevant and contemporary. While it might contain many of the same beliefs as the traditional form, it is reaffirmed based on the examination of newly discovered information and its evaluation against the criteria for truth.”

Samuel excused himself to get a jacket. It was still very cool outside.

Chapter 9

God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose. Take which you please - you can never have both.

-- Ralph Waldo Emerson

We took thirty-minutes to refresh ourselves. I washed my face and did a few pushups. Whenever I am involved in something that requires a lot of concentration it helps me to take a minute and do something physical. It helps clear my mind. Before long, we had taken our places on the deck and the discussion continued.

“It seems that we have accomplished our first task: proving that it is logical and reasonable to believe that a supernatural Being exists. And I will have to agree that religion is still important today. What’s the next step?” I asked.

“By using this method for determining truth, we can discuss the various religions, specifically Christianity, Judaism and Islam to see if their doctrines and source documents meet the criteria for truth. If we can determine what does and doesn’t stand the test of this universally accepted standard, we can come closer to discovering the truth in religion and further determine if what we have in religion today is, indeed, valid.”

Suddenly, it occurred to me that we had already made a shocking and disturbing discovery, one that sent chills down my spine and almost took my breath away.

“But, Samuel,” I stammered, “if truth is consistent as our criteria states, then the irregularities that we have discussed render the Bible untrue! Can that be?”

I guess I had subconsciously thought that might be a possibility but I had really never admitted such a thing to myself, much less to anyone else. I can’t express how the realization struck me. Was it possible that the Bible and other sacred documents such as the Koran were not infallible?

“I think that’s a fair and accurate conclusion based on the evidence that you, yourself, have identified,” Samuel responded. “That doesn’t mean that they don’t contain the truth, it simply means that there are problems that need to be examined. Remember, these are ancient documents from ancient sources that have been passed down for thousands of years; stories and information that have been touched and told by a multitude of individuals. It’s not difficult to imagine how alterations and enhancements might have crept in and created the inconsistencies that exist today.”

“So, you believe that all of these inconsistencies are a result of man’s embellishment?” I asked. “How do you think that happened and why?”

“It’s really quite simple. Again, archeology tells us that many of the earliest religions were polytheistic, that is, they believed in more than one god. But if we look closely at that polytheistic concept we can see where it might have come from. Primitive people witnessed the power of the sun, the miracle of the regeneration of plants, the wonder of childbirth, the blessing of the abundance of wild game and the success of the hunt. It’s not difficult to imagine that they thought of all of these wonders as being the work of different gods. They gave names to these gods. Even as late as the first and second centuries CE, we can read where the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans worshipped a multitude of deities. That was how they viewed the universe from what they knew and understood at the time. Through the study of religion we can learn something about each civilization and what was happening at that particular time because many aspects of their religion reflected the times in which that religion was popular. It is evident that religion was adapted to meet the needs of a specific people at a specific time in history. As civilizations progressed, religious ideas were modified to conform to those changes and needs.”

This sounded reasonable. “Can you give me an example?”

“Certainly. Perhaps the best example of the evolution of religion is the marriage of two faiths: Judaism and Christianity

and the emergence of the Islamic religion out of the religion of the Hebrews. In an area where Judaism had a large following, the teachings of Jesus, a Jew himself, suddenly made the Old Testament palatable to non-Jews. The result of Jesus's teachings was the New Testament. The Old Testament became integral to understanding the New Testament, thus creating a new document later known as the Bible. Christianity, then, became a new religion that was considered by the followers of Jesus to be the continuation or fulfillment of the Old Testament. In Islam, the Muslims believe in much of the Old Testament, but believe that the version we have today was corrupted. They hold to the Koran as the more accurate version.

“Religions evolve and new ones originate just as they have over the thousands of years of history. As for the modification of religion to meet a particular social environment, in Egypt during the time of the pharaohs the people believed that their kings were actually deities; that they were descendants of the gods – gods incarnate. This belief was important because it gave the pharaoh the respect of their subjects. The people believed that they actually had a god in human form living among them and leading their country. This belief was necessary at that time in the history of that culture.

“Another example is recorded in Jewish religious history. The Hebrews were slaves in Egypt. They were being abused and oppressed. A man named Moses declared that he was called by God to lead the people out of Egypt and slavery. Would they have followed a common man or did it help that he was able to say that God wanted them to leave and would protect them as they left? Did it help that Moses told them that God promised them that a wonderful home, the Promised Land, waited at the end of their journey? When they fought battles, it was God who told them to fight and stood beside them in the face of the enemy. God was their motivation and their provider. God furnished the Hebrews with laws that gave them unity and made them unique. Through the years, these ancient stories and laws have given the Jews an identity, a history.

“The Islamic faith provided a similar unification for a different group of people. At a time when the Arab tribes needed to be unified, Muhammad’s revelation from Gabriel brought harmony to these tribes and provided them with the spiritual unity they needed. The pages of the Koran are filled with promises that Allah will fight beside the Muslims in their struggle against the infidel or unbelievers. None of us can help but be affected by those things that touch our lives and the various religious documents of ancient religions reflect those situations and conditions that existed at the time the documents were written.”

“That makes sense, I suppose.”

“As for Gautama Siddhartha, the Buddha, the story is told of his early life excursions into the real world. He had been raised in an environment where he was protected from the harshness of life and given all of the luxuries that money could afford. It was on these excursions that he observed the difficulties of real life and what seemed to him to be the cruelty of the cycle of life where creatures devour each other in an endless struggle for survival. These observations were what led him to begin to analyze and evaluate the reason for existence and the purpose of life. He was influenced by what he saw and motivated by the events in his life and surroundings. His teachings, however, have more timeless value than many of the other ancient teachers and prophets because his philosophy was based on the observation of life rather than political events. But even in that context, once again, he was influenced by the environment and customs and traditions that were prevalent during the time in which he lived.”

“But isn’t that true for all of us? Aren’t we all affected by our own problems and situations?”

“Exactly. None of us can help being influenced by those things that touch our lives. As we mentioned, Mohammad was also caught up in social and political events that shaped his ideology. Some of his teachings were universal and some were directed specifically to the people who lived in his day.”

“How do you know that some of the teachings of the prophets were for the time when the prophet was living?”

“The best example in the Old Testament and in the Koran is the list of laws that were given to the people. Many of the laws pertain to washing or what kind of water is approved for drinking. There were laws on how to handle a dead body, or how to resolve legal disputes. These were laws that were intended for a primitive society. Certainly, most of them are not relevant for today’s population. Jesus’ teachings, like Buddha’s, were more universal. However, rather than totally focused on the individual, how to live with one’s self as most of Buddha’s teachings were, Jesus’ teachings were more concerned with how to live in peaceful harmony with others. Buddha’s teachings focused on ethical living. Jesus’ teachings were more concerned with compassionate living. However, he, too, was greatly influenced by the situations and conditions that existed during the time he lived.”

“If we must conclude that the sacred documents we depend on for communicating God’s message to us are not accurate, that is a serious claim,” I confessed.

“I understand the seriousness. But we must seek the truth in all things and this is one area that we should examine carefully. All of our ancient religious documents were transmitted through humans thus subject to human error or human embellishment. As we mentioned, we are all greatly influenced by the times in which we live and the situations with which we are confronted. And, as we have noted, these documents simply do not meet the criteria for truth.”

“But all of these documents claim that God has protected the accuracy of what is contained in these sacred writings.”

“Yes, and I believe that’s true. I’ll address that a little later in our discussion. However, once again, some of the information transmitted was certainly intended for the audience who initially received it. We must be careful in determining what was meant to be universal and what was intended for the civilization living in those ancient times. Over the years, through various

translations, some of the original text has certainly been lost, altered or misinterpreted. Humans are not infallible.”

“But someone had to write down these messages from God otherwise we wouldn’t have gotten them! Throughout history hasn’t God always communicated through humans?”

“God communicates any way God wants. I’d like to go into more detail on that later. But let me say here that there are two dangers in communicating through humans that we must acknowledge: one is that there is the risk of enhancement, and the second is that we tend to shift our attention from the source of the communication, God, to the messenger. Especially if that messenger is someone who we can actually see and touch; someone like ourselves.”

“So, you are saying that we have, perhaps, become followers of people, the messengers of God, rather than followers of God?”

“If we examine history, we can easily see evidence of that. We believe in a God who is spirit, a Being who is not of this world or subject to its natural laws; one who is beyond our comprehension, who cannot be experienced with any of our senses. That is, we believe in a God that cannot be touched or heard or physically seen. As humans, we need something that can be. That’s the way we are made. We are touchy-feely creatures. When a very special person comes along who teaches the things of God and helps us to understand spirituality then suddenly we have someone that we can see and hear and touch. We have what we consider a physical manifestation, an epiphany, of God.”

“And so, we transfer our worship from God who we cannot see to the messenger who we can.”

“Exactly. Whether the messenger wanted it that way or not. We live in a matter-oriented world. A world of the five senses – touch, smell, taste, hearing and sight. These are the things that appeal to us. These things we can understand. In ancient times, men erected idols that represented gods. Why?”

“Because they couldn’t experience God with any of their senses.”

“Right.” Samuel continued his explanation. “People needed something they could see and touch so they made images. From the earliest times, archeologists have been able to piece together the gods worshipped by early civilizations by examining the carvings found in excavations. But inevitably, when we mold a physical image or icon representing God we make God physical. We transform God from an inconceivable entity to an easily definable, limited being or object. The truth is we cannot visualize God. This great Deity is beyond our vision and our imagination. When we try to assign an image to God, regardless of what that image is, we are actually humanizing this non-human existence.”

“So, you think we have attempted to make God human?”

“If the historical records concerning religion are correct, then yes. This humanization began thousands of years ago. The earliest stories of almost every civilization tell of gods that made war with other gods, had sex and established families. These are human activities that are instigated by human weaknesses or the desire to reproduce in order to sustain the species. We call God a ‘he’ giving God a gender. Gender is only necessary for reproduction. There is no other reason for it. If God is the Creator then God has no need to reproduce or sustain the species. After all of these years things still haven’t changed. We are still trying to make God human. The Catholic religion advocates a holy family where God is the father, Mary is the mother and Jesus is the son. Putting gods into families was a common practice in the earliest religions. Why?”

“Because families are what we understand,” I replied.

“Exactly. These are all attempts to better understand a Being that cannot be understood; an attempt to make God familiar. Thomas Aquinas said,

‘Hence in the last resort all that man knows of God is to know that he does not know him, since he knows that

what God is surpasses all that we can understand of him.”²⁶

“You’re right, we still do it today. We still attempt to limit God by giving this Great One human characteristics and traits.”

“And we have adopted icons, or idols, that help us create a version of God that we can see and touch,” Samuel noted. “In Christianity there is the cross. Early church fathers warned against using the cross in churches for fear that people would begin to worship it as an idol; that it, rather than God, would become the focus of their worship. For many, this is exactly what has happened. In some churches just attempting to remove the cross that hangs in the sanctuary or doing something that might be considered disrespectful to it is considered blasphemy! The cross has become a place where people go to pray and in many instances, it is the object of their prayers. They wear it around their neck for protection. It has become an idol. What the early church fathers feared would happen, has.”

I thought about my own experiences. I remembered those times when we would all gather before the cross and pray. “Having something that we can see or touch does seem to help,” I admitted.

“Certainly it does. But it can have a devastating effect on how we perceive the character of God. And, by the way, these images don’t necessarily have to be a thing made by human hands.”

“Ah, I see where you’re going with this. You think a person can also become an idol?”

“Of course. We have idolized movie stars and other influential people for centuries. A good example is Jesus. Christian theology claims that God sent Jesus to earth and was, in fact, the power behind what Jesus did. From his birth, to his miracles, to his crucifixion, to his resurrection, it was God that performed the miracles through Jesus. But rather than worship

²⁶ Armstrong, p. 205.

God for these miracles, Christians worship Jesus when, in actuality, he was only a tool, so to speak, used by God to communicate with us. If you examine the hymns of a Protestant hymnal, you will find the vast majority of hymns are written in praise of Jesus not God. Jesus worship has become a substitute for the worship of God.”

“But Christians claim that Jesus is God!”

“Yes. So let’s discuss that a little further. As you know, God becoming man is called the incarnation. So, let’s assume that it’s true, that God came to earth in the form of a man. Why in the form of a human?”

“Because that’s what we are, humans. God communicates with us as one of us.”

“And, so as a human, God was given a human name, Yeshua, or Jesus. It could have been John or Frank or any other name.”

“Yes, I suppose it could have.”

“So, when the communication was complete, when the job was done, when God had finished with the body called ‘Jesus’, what happened?”

“Well, Jesus was killed. He died.”

“The physical body dropped off and the name was no longer needed. God was back to being God, so to speak. Right?”

“I suppose. But then Jesus was resurrected, so he still existed!”

“It doesn’t matter. It was still God in a human skin. That’s what incarnation means, the embodiment of God in human flesh. Before, as well as following the resurrection, Jesus was still the incarnation of God. God was still playing human. So, when he returned to heaven why hang on to the name and the person of Jesus if it was God all along? If Jesus was only the vessel or tool used by God to communicate to humans, why give credit to

Jesus for the things that he said and did and taught if it was really God talking and performing the miracles?”

“But wait! The Christian doctrine says that Jesus has always existed along side of God. Therefore, God didn’t come to earth as Jesus, The God-Jesus came to earth as the Man-Jesus. It was the God-Jesus who was incarnated in the flesh.”

“That’s a bit of confusing theology! So, regardless of that scenario, Jesus always gave credit for things he did and things he said to God the Father. So it is God who should be getting the credit and the worship.”

“I think I’m following you. Jesus did say that he could do nothing on his own, that everything was from the Father. In John 14:10 he said,

‘Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.’

I guess you could say he was the messenger.”

“Exactly. My point here is that God should be getting praise, but Jesus, being in human form, became a substitute for God because he could be seen and experienced in a physical way. Jesus has become an idol, an image of God. In Jesus we have an anthropomorphic god; a god with human characteristics. After thousands of years of trying, we have finally created a god in our own image. Certainly, we should still admire Jesus’ dedication and commitment as we should all prophets. But it is God who should be worshipped.

“In Islam, the prophet Mohammed is revered to the extent that if someone insults this prophet, they put their life at risk. Mohammed was, historically, a man just like any other man in this world. The difference is that he found a way to get closer to God than most men do. According to some biographies, at first, Muhammad really didn’t want the job of prophet. Like Moses, he was hesitant to take on the task, as probably anyone would be. In reality, we should all be able to accomplish the same kind of

enlightenment experienced by Mohammad, Buddha and Jesus. These men were sincerely seeking to tap the power of God and they achieved it.

“It is ultimately God who is responsible for revelation, not humans. Humans may serve as messengers, the conduit, but it is God, the source of the message that should get the credit, or in this case, the worship. And since the messenger’s teachings might have been influenced by the events and history of his day we are caught in a dilemma: how to separate the teachings that were applicable to that specific place and time from those teachings that are universal and timeless. As a result of this dilemma, we have people doing things like wearing the same kind of clothing as the prophets wore and trying to capture the same living environment in which the prophets lived. When in fact, the prophet only lived and dressed the way they did because it was the way people lived and dressed at that time! If they lived today they would no doubt dress and live as modern people do because that is what is contemporary. Holding on to these ancient customs only serves to make religion appear outdated and irrelevant. Adhering to ancient dress and rituals and customs only restricts our spiritual freedom and draws our attention away from the real object of our worship...”

“God.”

“Exactly.”

I tried to summarize what I thought I heard in our discussion. “So you are suggesting that some of the messages from these prophets constitutes universal truth and the rest was meant for the time in which the prophet lived and should be ignored by believers today?”

“Not ignored. We can always learn from history, but we should not try to bring that exact teaching into today’s environment because it just doesn’t always apply. And there is another caution we should note.”

“And what is that?”

“The teachings of these great men were not written down by the prophets themselves. Others wrote down their teachings after the death, and in some cases, many years after the death of the teacher. In the case of Buddha who lived around 560 BCE, although the basics of his teachings were much more ancient, the things he taught were passed along by word of mouth for centuries. They were not written down until some 500 years after his death. With Hinduism, again while the religion itself dates back to as early as 4,000 BCE, or earlier, the first written record of the teachings or Vedas, were not composed until around 1500 BCE. The Hebrew Scriptures were composed around 500 BCE by scribes using a very primitive form of writing who based their records on verbal reiteration of ancient stories. Followers of Jesus wrote the letters, or books of the New Testament not long after his death, but the actual canonized New Testament was compiled over several hundred years. The Koran was allegedly written by companions of Muhammad during his ministry, around 610-632 CE, but was not actually compiled until 633 and standardized in 653 CE.²⁷ We have already discussed the way in which stories and information can become skewed by misinterpretation and personal agendas so the big question is: were these manuscripts that are considered to be the actual words of the teacher and of God modified, altered or enhanced in any way? As we have discussed, in Christianity, the Apostles never understood Jesus when they talked with him on a daily basis. What makes us think that they understood his teachings or his ministry when he wasn't there to correct them? They were left on their own to remember and interpret his sayings and his complex parables. It was their recollections and interpretations that were used to write the books of the New Testament. In the case of Muhammad, he was not present to check the accuracy of the written material once it was committed to script. Was there anything misinterpreted or added by those who wrote? How can we know?

‘Enhancements and alterations of these ancient writings could also have been a result of mistranslation or

²⁷ Wikipedia – *Koran*

misinterpretations. Throughout history, men have manipulated these sacred documents in order to use God as an excuse to get people to act in certain ways. In some instances to even commit atrocities; inhumane actions against other humans. God has been used to frighten people into obeying certain laws or giving money to the church. As we have discussed, even today our biggest wars are fought in the name of God. So it is obvious that the original message from the Ultimate One has been adapted or enhanced for the sake of social or political agendas or to address certain conditions that existed in various times throughout history.”

“Do you think using God in such a way was intentional?”

“Sometimes it was and sometimes it wasn’t. Take the Crusades for example. Again, it is obvious that religious leaders conspiring with the government understood the power they had over people and made the decision to abuse that power intentionally. However, in many more situations, the messenger, whether it was Moses or Mohammed felt that God was on the side of their people and therefore they conveyed a message that they sincerely felt was from God, and perhaps it was – but much of it was a message for a specific time and a particular people.”

“Those revelations have had a great impact on history.”

“Yes, they did and still do. But by including so many messages for a specific time, the more universal, timeless information has become obscured.”

“So you think the universal message is still there, just hidden.”

“Hidden not only by a mixed bag of messages, but also by the enhancements and alterations over the years of history that we have just discussed. And, I think there are other reasons how the original message from God became altered.”

“How was that?”

“As you know, many of the sacred texts considered to be the original communication from God was given before writing

existed. In those ancient times information was communicated by word of mouth. Sometimes this information was conveyed through storytelling. By the time it had been passed down from generation to generation, slight changes, or even extreme modifications might have occurred. When I was very young we used to play a game at parties that illustrates my point. A large group, say twenty of us, would sit in a line. The first person in line would whisper some information into the second person's ear. That person would whisper what he heard, or thought he heard to the third person and so on until the message had made its way all the way down the line. The last person would then share the information with the entire group. Most of the time it was amazing how the information was altered as it traveled from one person to another. One participant might have misunderstood, or heard the wrong word or wasn't listening very well and just got all the information incorrect. This was in a small room over a very short period of time with very simple information passed on from person to person none of whom had a particular agenda. Even today, if you ask a group of people to recount a story they heard on a current newscast you will get a variety of interpretations and descriptions of what they remembered hearing. That's because some will have heard the entire story being broadcast, some might have just heard a portion and others might have gotten the story from someone else who heard the report and was merely trying to repeat what they had heard from a secondhand source. The reporters, themselves, might have gotten the story wrong and reported false information, or allowed opinion to influence their report.

As we mentioned, before writing, storytelling was the means by which information was conveyed. So, imagine over thousands of years, a message being passed down from generation to generation with hundreds of people passing along the story, each trying to adjust the story slightly to make it a little more interesting or entertaining or more applicable to their specific society and culture; many individuals passing along the story having their own agenda, seeing opportunity to alter the message to suit their particular objectives. How distorted might that message become?"

“Yes, I can see how that might happen.”

Samuel continued. “Let’s assume that one of God’s first messages to mankind was ‘God created everything.’ Wouldn’t that be simple enough to understand? Wouldn’t that motivate men to worship God when they experienced the wonders of nature? Now, imagine that a child asks his mother or father where flowers came from? Or where the animals came from. So, the child’s parents would tell him that God made the world. That was the original simple truth. And the child would then follow up with the question that children always ask, ‘How?’ And so, the parents might try to explain how things were created. Since they want their child to remember that it was God who did the creating, they might come up with an explanation in the form of a story that would be colorful enough for the child to remember even though they had no idea how it was actually accomplished. As you know, things are always easier to remember when they can be related to a story. Through the telling of the imaginary story, the simple, basic truth becomes a fable. The Bible is filled with these kinds of stories that are meant to communicate a simple truth.”

“So while the truth is still there it has become camouflaged as part of a legend or fable.”

“Or a parable or a creative story. The moral or essence of the story is hidden or enhanced by man’s imagination. That’s why there are dozens of creation and flood stories that have been passed down through history. Religion has become so altered over the years by human embellishment and self-serving agendas that truth in religion is no longer distinguishable. But here’s the biggest reason why religion has become so altered. It is historically evident that as tribes and civilizations invaded other civilizations the philosophies or myths of the two cultures mingled. Sometimes the religion of the conquering people was forced on the conquered population. At other times the religions would simply mesh, taking some gods from one myth and adopting them into the other. The Greeks and Romans are a good example of this occurrence. In the later years, BCE, the Romans adopted many of the Greek gods and simply gave them

Roman names. So as these religious ideas became more and more integrated one with another, the further they deviated from the original ideology.”

It all seemed to make sense. Even today when Bible scholars write books that help to deliver God’s message to readers they use modern examples that will make the message seem more relevant and easier to understand. They use modern illustrations to communicate the ancient principles being taught. Certainly, writers have used this method throughout history.

“It’s no wonder that our religions today are so confusing,” I noted. “But do you think that has happened with the religions that are prevalent today? Do you think these ancient myths have influenced contemporary religion?”

“Absolutely. For instance, in Christian theology we run into what seems to be ancient reoccurring themes. In fact, Christianity contains more elements of other ancient myths than any other contemporary religion. December 25, celebrated by Christians as the birth of Christ, was originally a pagan holiday, Saturnalia. It was a celebration of thanksgiving to Saturn, the god of agriculture. Saturnalia was a festival that preceded the winter solstice that included the abundant presence of candles symbolizing the quest for knowledge and truth. The renewal of light and the coming of the new year were celebrated in the later Roman Empire at the *Dies Natalis* of Sol Invictus, the ‘Birthday of the Unconquerable Sun,’ on December 25.²⁸

“The popularity of Saturnalia continued into the 3rd and 4th centuries CE, until the Roman Empire came under Christian rule. In 350 CE, Pope Julius I declared that Christ’s birth would be celebrated on December 25, perhaps an attempt to make it as painless as possible for Romans to convert to Christianity.²⁹

“Easter was also originally a pagan holiday that followed the vernal equinox, celebrating the goddess Eastr, a fertility

²⁸ Robert A. Kaster, *Macrobious: Saturnalia, Books 1–2*, Loeb Classical Library, 2011.

²⁹ Kenneth C. Davis, *Don’t Know Much About Mythology*, HarperCollins, 2005, New York, pp 259.

goddess who brought an end to winter and the beginning of spring.”

“Yes, I’ve heard these things before.”

“There is also a similarity between Christianity and Hinduism regarding end times,” Samuel continued. “According to the Hindu religion, the world is soon coming to an end.

‘In the incredibly complex mathematics of the Hindu universe, a day in the life of Brahma – called a kalpa – lasts the equivalent of 4,320 million earth years. A “night of Brahma” is the same length. Divided into constant, smaller cycles, each of these kalpas ultimately ends as the world is consumed by fire and the universe is destroyed and recreated. According to Hindu thought, the current age is called the Kali-Yuga, the final act of a kalpa began eons ago, an age that is approaching its end, after which the world will be destroyed once more and prepared for another cycle of creation.’³⁰

“This dark age of Kali-Yuga is to be characterized by dissension, war and strife, in which materialism rules desires, virtue is nonexistent, and the only pleasure is found in sex.”³¹

“The earth being destroyed by fire sounds a lot like the Christian belief that the earth will be destroyed by fire and a new heaven and earth will be created,” I remembered.

“That’s true. In fact, there is another similarity between Christianity and Hinduism in regard to the end times. In the Hindu tradition, Kalki, a Hindu avatar of Vishnu, will appear and end the current evil age.

‘In an apocalyptic vision, Kalki will ride a white horse and carry a great sword to punish evildoers in this world, and usher in a new Golden Age.’³²

³⁰ Davis, p. 338.

³¹ Ibid., p. 344

³² Ibid., p. 345

“This is very similar to the apocalyptic description of the end of time as described in the New Testament in the book of Revelation.

‘I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.’³³

“In a similar ancient prediction, many people thought the Mayans predicted that the world would end on December 21, 2012.

“These similarities in predictions are further evidence of the synthesis of religious ideas across different religions and civilizations.

“There are many more. It is recorded in the scriptures that Jesus’ birth was the result of the union between a human and the spirit of God; that he was “King of the Jews”, that he died on a cross and that he rose from the dead. And yet, in many different ancient religions that were popular long before the birth of Jesus, many of these same occurrences were said to have happened to other people, gods and kings. There were ancient religions where kings were known to have sacrificed their lives for their subjects. As we have mentioned, Pharaohs of Egypt were said to be ‘sons of the gods’, and were, themselves, human incarnations of popular deities. In the Greek religion that was prominent just before and during the early years of Jesus, the Greeks believed in many god-men. One famous god-man was Hercules who was the son of the great Roman god, Zeus, also called Jupiter, and an earthly mother, Alcmena. Several gods were even killed, but later rose from the dead. Osiris, one of the most popular gods in Egypt and worshipped throughout Mesopotamia, was one of the first resurrection salvation gods. The Egyptian religion was certainly known to the Jews in the region of Jesus’ birth.

³³ Bible, Revelations 6:8.

“But the most profound example is of Gautama Siddhartha, the Buddha. In his book, *The Essence of Buddhism*, Jo Durden Smith records,

‘Great lives deserve great and important births – and so it was with Siddhartha Gautama, the prince and later sage (Sakyamuni) of the Sakya people, for he was conceived when his mother, Mahamaya (or Maya) dreamed that a Bodhisattva (Buddha-to-be) came down from Tushita Heaven – the home, by tradition, of contented gods –and entered her body in the form of a white elephant with a red face.

‘...a great light covered the earth as the baby appeared, unstained and fully aware, and rain fell to wash both mother and child. Then the baby took seven steps, looked to the four corners of the world and said (in one of several versions): “For enlightenment I was born, for the good of all that lives. This is the last time that I have been born into this world of becoming (samsara). There is now no existence again.”

‘... At the baby’s naming ceremony, his father arranged for his future to be predicted by a wise man called Asita, who found thirty-two auspicious marks on his body and prophesied that he would either become a powerful ruler – perhaps the monarch of the whole of India—or a great sage. If he took up the religious life and turned his back on his birthright, he said, Siddhartha could become a teacher of both men and gods, even the savior of the world.’

“This story was told about Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus. The story holds many similarities to that of the birth of Jesus. One is an immaculate conception with Buddha having an earthly mother and a god as father just like the stories of Jesus. At the birth of Jesus there was a bright star. At the birth of Buddha there was a bright light that covered the earth. At the naming of Buddha, a prophet told of his future proclaiming that he could be the savior

of the world. Following his circumcision, at the consecration of Jesus, a prophet named Simeon said of Jesus,

‘Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.’³⁴

“And, finally, Krishna, one of the deities of the Hindu religion resembles Jesus in that he was considered the incarnation of the god Vishnu, the second god in the trinity of Hinduism. As you might know, the Hindu trinity consists of Brahma, the creator god, Vishnu, the preserver god, and Shiva, the destroyer god. Krishna lived hundreds, perhaps thousands of years before Jesus. It is taught that he, too, was born without sexual union, but was the result of ‘mental transmission’ from his father to his mother. Hindu philosophical and theological traditions portray him as a god-child and the Supreme Being.³⁵”

“That’s amazing. I had no idea.” This was shocking information but the stories were a matter of record taken from very old documents that told of the history of those specific religions past down over thousands of years.

“Few people do,” he agreed. “In fact, one story of the birth of Muhammad is very similar to the stories told about the birth of Jesus. His birth, too, echoes these same mythological themes. In the Sira, the accepted biography of Muhammad the Prophet, Sirat Rasoul Allah writes:

‘It is recorded that when the mother of the apostle of Allah became pregnant with him she had a vision, and a voice spoke to her, saying, “Thou art pregnant with the prince of this nation. When he is born on this earth, thou must say, ‘I place him under the protection of the only One, from the wickedness of every envious person.’ And thou must name him Muhammad.” While she was

³⁴ Bible, Luke 2:29-32.

³⁵ Wikipedia - Krishna

carrying the child in her womb she saw a light issue from her which illuminated even the castles of Busra in Syria. And Abdullah b. Abdul-Muttalib, the father of the apostle, died while the child was yet unborn.

The apostle of Allah was born on a Monday, on the thirteenth day of the month of Rabi in the year of the Elephant. At the time of the apostle's birth a Jew standing on the flat roof of a house in Medina called forth the Jewish people and when they assembled around him, saying, "Woe to you. What is the matter?" he told them "This night the star has risen, under which the apostle is born."³⁶

I recalled the stories that I have read every Christmas. "It does have many of the same elements: a vision that foretold the birth of the child, what he should be named, and that he would be great. In the New Testament, Luke tells the story of the birth of Jesus.

'In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you. Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."³⁷

"...And the light that shown, as well as the reference to a star marking the birth of the prophet," Samuel added.

³⁶ Sirat Rasoul Allah, Translation of the Sira as published on Faithfreedom.org

³⁷ Bible, Luke 1:26-33.

“There was even the announcement of his birth by another human. This information is really a surprise,” I confessed. “All of these themes have been repeated throughout history about gods and god-men. But do you really think that the stories about the births of Jesus and Muhammad aren’t true?”

“Who knows? The story of Buddha was surely known to the followers of Jesus, as were the other myths of gods and human incarnations of deities taught by other religions that were prominent in the area where Jesus lived and taught. Certainly, the followers of Muhammad knew the stories of Jesus. As we have said, we know from history that as cultures spread and came into contact with other cultures, their religions also mixed and became synthesized, taking some from one religion and some from the other. With all of these elements common with other popular religions, and by incorporating the Old Testament scriptures of the Jews, Christianity offered something for everyone. Were the birth stories of Jesus and Muhammad merely a synthesis? Here we have examples of religious ideas from the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Mesopotamians, the Jews and such religions as Hinduism and Buddhism as well as several other religions that existed in the known world. Were these stories true or were they enhanced to fit the formula of great people and incarnate gods? There isn’t enough evidence concerning Jesus’ life from other sources to draw a conclusion one way or another. If these birth stories are not true, I have no doubt that it was not Jesus’ or Muhammad’s intention that such stories should be fabricated. Maybe these are just coincidences. But there does seem to be a formula established for religious greatness. But let me add here that, regardless of what we conclude about these births, there can be no doubt that the life and teachings of these two great men, or prophets, have had a significant impact on the world.”

At this point, I was having difficulty trying to process everything that we had discussed. All of this information was so new to me. I could understand how religions could merge and mix because I was familiar with the merging of the Hebrew religion and Christianity since it is taught that Christianity is the

fulfillment of Old Testament prophesy. It is almost like the two religions merged into one. That is, for Christians.

“I’m having trouble processing all of this stuff about how we see so many ancient mythological themes popping up in today’s religions. This knowledge can have a great impact on religion!”

“I am not saying emphatically that some of these ancient beliefs were applied to Jesus so that he would meet the criteria of a god-man, but it does raise legitimate questions as to their credibility. It is proof that religions have shared ideas and religious concepts.”

“I can see that. I have struggled with these questions for many years and I’m sure many others have as well, but have been too shy to discuss them openly. But Jesus did claim to be the Son of God.”

“Let’s discuss that,” Samuel continued. “According to the writings of his followers, he did. He also said we were all sons of God. In Matthew 5:8-9 Jesus said,

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.’

“Those who endorse peace are called sons of God.”

“But he said, ‘if you’ve seen me you’ve seen the Father’, and ‘I and the Father are one,’” I argued.

“How were they one? In physical appearance?” he asked.

“No,” I replied, “these religions claim that God is spirit and has no physical body.”

“True. So how are they one? If I am assigned by my employer to go into one of his shops as his representative and I am told exactly what to do and what to say, then how will I represent myself to his employees in that shop? Won’t I tell them that the employer and I are one? I speak his words. I represent his interest. And if they tell me they want to see the

employer, won't I say that to see me is to see the employer? Why? Because I have come to do the will and speak the words of the employer. Technically, in this situation, we are one. But in a more spiritual sense, there is much ancient Eastern theology in Jesus' teaching."

"You think Jesus studied Hinduism?"

"Who can say with certainty? Remember, in ancient times religions did not have names. There was no Hinduism or Judaism or Buddhism by name. Christianity was not called Christianity until the mid-first century. The Bible tells us that followers of Jesus were first called Christians in Antioch.³⁸

"In the earliest times, each culture had its own supreme god and usually a pantheon of other gods who were called by specific names. For example, early Mesopotamia had Apsu and Baal, also called Marduk; Egypt had Re, Greece had Zeus, the Celts had Nuadu, and the East had Brahman and Tao. Over time, ideas and philosophies became accepted by a culture and were attached to their specific gods. So, as we have discussed, when one culture came in contact with another, the ideology, as well as the gods of one culture would mix with the other. To accept some aspects of philosophy from another culture was not necessarily to accept its god. If the newly introduced philosophy contained an idea that made sense, it might be adopted as part of the most widely accepted ideology of the culture where it was introduced and attached to the god of that culture. It was not like they were accepting a formal religion like Hinduism or Taoism since these philosophies had no names. They were simply accepting different ideas in an attempt to understand either God or life."

"Do you have proof that this occurred?" I needed some evidence of what Samuel was saying.

"Of course. Many cities had places where men would meet and discuss philosophy. In Roman cities these places or discussions were called forums. The Synagogue was also a

³⁸ Bible, Acts 11:26.

place where religious ideas were discussed. In the New Testament, Paul went to the Areopagus and introduced Jesus to local officials who were discussing philosophy and religion.³⁹ We know that Plato and Socrates also held or attended forums. These discussions included ideas from all over the known world.”

“And you think Jesus attended these discussions?”

“That possibility certainly exists. Remember, he spent time in the synagogue and this was one of the places where these discussions were held. He was obviously an intelligent seeker of truth. There is no historical record of what he was doing from the age of thirteen until he was around thirty years old. What was he doing during this time? Doesn’t it make sense that he would be spending some of that time learning? Remember, Jerusalem and that entire area was a major trade route. It was a region that was visited by travelers from all over the known world. We know from historical records that these forums and discussions were one of the ways ideas spread.

“Remember when Jesus said that he and the Father were one? In the Vedas, the earliest known spiritual writings, the emphasis throughout the text is on the assumption that God exists in all of creation; that God permeates the universe. They call this presence, Self. Self is in all of us and Jesus certainly believed this when he said: ‘that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.’⁴⁰ And, ‘I and the Father are one.’⁴¹ In the Upanishads, a son is asking his father for answers to life’s biggest questions. Concerning God, or Self, his father says,

‘It is everywhere, though we see it not.
Just so, dear one, the Self is everywhere,
Within all things, although we see him not.
There is nothing that does not come from him.
Of everything he is the inmost Self.

³⁹ Bible, Acts 17:19.

⁴⁰ Bible, John 10:38.

⁴¹ Bible, John 10:30.

He is truth; he is the Self-supreme.
You are that, Shvetaketu, you are that'.⁴²

Al-Hallaj, a student of the 10th century Islamic mystic al-Junayd wrote this poem:

'I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is I;
We are two spirits dwelling in one body.
If thou seest me, thou seest Him,
And if thou seest Him, thou seest us both.'"⁴³

"So, are you claiming that Jesus was not deity?" I exclaimed.

"I am saying that everything Jesus did pointed to God. When Jesus was asked which of the commandments was the greatest, he said,

'The most important one,' answered Jesus, 'is this:
'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.'⁴⁴

"He didn't say that God was three gods in one. What if his followers took the religion that Jesus talked about and made it a religion about Jesus? It is evident from the New Testament scriptures that the Apostles never understood Jesus or his mission. In the story of his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane Peter tried to fight off the soldiers who had come to arrest Jesus still thinking that he was going to set up an earthly kingdom as the Messiah. So when Jesus was crucified they must have been devastated. What should they do? Perhaps they began to speculate and enhance the story of Jesus to make it palatable and cohesive and understandable, even though they, themselves, didn't understand. When we worship Jesus, what if we are worshipping a man rather than worshipping God? And think with me just for a minute, what if he was a man? Think of the power and promise in the fact that there was a man who was so dedicated and committed to God that he lived a perfect life; that

⁴² *The Changogya Upanishad*, Chapter VI, 13:3.

⁴³ Quoted in Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*, Routledge, Kegan Paul, London, 1914, p. 151

⁴⁴ Bible, Mark 12:29

he successfully emulated the Inconceivable One right up to death! What an example for all of us. In fact, much more than to think of him as a god-man who had the power to achieve things that we cannot since we are not superhuman. It is much more inspirational to consider him as a real person not possessing supernatural power that enabled him to know things that we cannot know that helped him through the tough times; but to consider him a real human being who took what life dished out just like it does to all of us, and in spite of it all, lived a perfectly God-centered life! Maybe he was used as a tool to heal the sick and raise the dead, but what if all of us can do those things if we are as God-centered as he was!"

"But, in his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis said that we only have three options when it comes to the claims of Jesus; either he really was God, he was deliberately lying, or he was not God but thought that he was which would make him delusional or insane."

"I don't think those are the only alternatives," Samuel continued. "Remember, Jesus did not write down any of his own teachings. Nor were any of his teachings written down until years after his death and they were scribed by men who based their writing on hearsay from men who did not understand Jesus when he was alive. Men who never personally met Jesus wrote most of the text in the New Testament. The other alternative is that his followers turned him into the god that they wanted him to be."

"So, what do you conclude concerning Jesus?"

"As I just said, we must consider the possibility that men took what Jesus taught and made it a religion about Jesus. That Jesus never intended to be considered the only Son of God and that he never intended to start a new religion. It is entirely possible that well-intentioned men created this idea of Jesus' godship.

"Remember, Jesus always pointed men to God and not to himself. His greatest teachings are found in Matthew, Chapter 5 of the New Testament, a Chapter called the Sermon on the

Mount. In this Chapter, he never talks about being the Messiah or the only Son of God.”

I had to think about that for a minute. This was probably the biggest blow to my belief. What if Jesus was *not* the Son of God? How would I handle such an idea? Maybe there were inconsistencies in the Bible, but there was never any doubt in my mind that Jesus was the Messiah. Samuel could see my concern. He continued.

“I know this might come as a shock, but, as you know, Christianity is the only religion that believes that Jesus was the Messiah. There are reasons why the Jews don’t believe it.”

“Like what?”

“They claim that Jesus did *not* fulfill the messianic prophecies.”

“What is the Messiah supposed to accomplish?”

“Well, let me explain their argument.”

Samuel walked over to the bookshelf and selected a Bible from among the books. He began searching the pages as he talked.

“One of the central themes of biblical prophecy is the promise of a future age of perfection characterized by universal peace and recognition of God. Specifically, the Bible says he will build the third Temple. Ezekiel 37:26-28 says,

‘I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever.²⁷ My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people.²⁸ Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever.’

“In Isaiah 43:5-6 it says that in the last days he will gather all Jews back to the land of Israel:

‘Do not be afraid, for I am with you;
 I will bring your children from the east
 and gather you from the west.
⁶I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’
 and to the south, ‘Do not hold them back.’
 Bring my sons from afar
 and my daughters from the ends of the earth.’

“The Messiah is to usher in an era of world peace, and end all hatred, oppression, suffering and disease. As it says in Isaiah 2:4:

‘Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall man learn war anymore.’

“And, he will spread universal knowledge of the God of Israel, which will unite humanity as one. As it says in Zachariah 14:9:

‘God will be King over all the world – on that day, God will be One and His Name will be One’

“The Jews claim that if an individual fails to fulfill even one of these conditions, then he cannot be the Messiah.”

I hadn’t heard any of this before. “But the Jews didn’t believe in the second coming of Christ. Aren’t these things supposed to be fulfilled at that time?”

“If you read The Revelation, it is a very violent time. If these things are supposed to come to pass at all, I suppose it’s *following* the holocaust told about in Revelations. In fact, Jesus, himself, never claimed to be the prince of peace. In Matthew 10:34 he is credited with saying,

‘Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.’

“And, the second coming is not mentioned in the Old Testament at all.

“Also, they argue that many prophetic passages speak of a descendant of King David who will rule Israel during the age of perfection. In Isaiah 11:1-9 it says:

- ‘A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
 from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
²The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
 the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
 the Spirit of counsel and of might,
 the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—
³and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.
 He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
 or decide by what he hears with his ears;
⁴but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
 with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the
 earth.
 He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
 with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
⁵Righteousness will be his belt
 and faithfulness the sash around his waist.
⁶The wolf will live with the lamb,
 the leopard will lie down with the goat,
 the calf and the lion and the yearling^[a] together;
 and a little child will lead them.
⁷The cow will feed with the bear,
 their young will lie down together,
 and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
⁸The infant will play near the cobra’s den,
 and the young child will put its hand into the viper’s
 nest.
⁹They will neither harm nor destroy
 on all my holy mountain,
 for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the
 LORD
 as the waters cover the sea.’

“Jeremiah 23:5-6 says:

‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD,
 “when I will raise up for David^[a] a righteous
 Branch,
 a King who will reign wisely
 and do what is just and right in the land.
⁶In his days Judah will be saved
 and Israel will live in safety.
 This is the name by which he will be called:
 The LORD Our Righteous Savior.’

“This message is reiterated in Jeremiah 30:7-10, 33:14-16; Ezekiel 34:11-31, 37:21-28; and Hosea 3:4-5.”

“I was madly taking notes.”

“The Jews maintain that the Messiah must be a descendant specifically on his father's side from King David. They use Jeremiah 33:17:

‘For this is what the LORD says: ‘David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of Israel...’

“They also quote Genesis 49:10, Isaiah 11:1, and Ezekiel 34:23-24. According to the Christian claim that Jesus was the product of a virgin birth, he had no father – and thus could not have fulfilled the messianic requirement of being descended on his father's side from King David.”

“But don’t some Christians claim that Joseph adopted Jesus, and passed on his genealogy through adoption.” I remembered from a sermon I’d heard.

“I believe they do, but there are two problems with this claim: there is no biblical basis for the idea of a father passing on his tribal line by adoption. A priest who adopts a son from another tribe cannot make him a priest by adoption, and Joseph could never have passed on by adoption that which he didn’t have.”

“What do you mean?”

“Joseph descended from Jeconiah so he fell under the curse of that king that none of his descendants could ever sit as king upon the throne of David. Jeremiah 22:28-30 says:

‘Is this man Jehoiachin a despised, broken pot,
an object no one wants?

Why will he and his children be hurled out,
cast into a land they do not know?

²⁹ O land, land, land,
hear the word of the LORD!

³⁰ This is what the LORD says:

“Record this man as if childless,
a man who will not prosper in his lifetime,
for none of his offspring will prosper,
none will sit on the throne of David
or rule anymore in Judah.’

“Jeconiah also means Jehoiachin according to the footnotes in Matthew.”

“But can’t we trace Jesus’ heritage back to King David through his mother, Mary? Wasn’t she a descendent of David?” I was trying desperately to win this argument.

“Well, it does mention that in the third chapter of Luke. However, there are several problems with this theory, as well. First of all, there is no evidence that Mary descended from David. The third chapter of Luke traces Joseph's genealogy, not Mary's. Secondly, even if Mary’s genealogy could be traced back to David that doesn't help Jesus since tribal affiliation goes only through the father, not mother. Here they use Numbers 1:18 to show that it is the male that carries the promise.

‘and they called the whole community together on the first day of the second month. The people registered their ancestry by their clans and families, and the men twenty years old or more were listed by name, one by one,...

“And, finally, even if family line could go through the mother, Mary was not from a legitimate messianic family.

According to the Bible, the Messiah must be a descendent of David through his son *Solomon*. The Jews use 2 Samuel 7:14:

‘I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands.’

“And they quote 1Chronicles 17:11-14:

‘I declare to you that the LORD will build a house for you: ¹¹When your days are over and you go to be with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹²He is the one who will build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever. ¹³I will be his father, and he will be my son. I will never take my love away from him, as I took it away from your predecessor. ¹⁴I will set him over my house and my kingdom forever; his throne will be established forever.’

“So, you see, the third chapter of Luke is irrelevant because it describes lineage of David's son *Nathan*, not Solomon. So, these are a few of the reasons why the Jews do not accept Jesus as the Messiah.

My mind was reeling with information. Why hadn't I been told of these things before? “So, where does that leave us concerning him? Is he to become no more than a great prophet?”

“Absolutely not! His contribution to the spiritual aspect of humanity is enormous. At a time when there were many religions in the area of his birth and, therefore, many concepts about God and who God was, through his life he showed what a man should be, how a man should behave, how a single life could impact the world simply by living a God-centered, God-committed life. Even in death, he did not strike back at his enemies. Even in death he forgave them and showed how strong one man could love another by emulating the love of God. His teachings further emphasized the concept of a God that wants only good for mankind: love your neighbor as yourself; love

those who take advantage of you; when a man asks for help, give it; the meek shall inherit the earth; if a man asks you to go a mile with him, go two; and we could go on and on. His teachings called for positive, loving actions toward all men. In fact, he was one of the first men to show the need to update the scriptures in order for them to more effectively meet the needs of a changing social environment.”

“Really?” I couldn’t tell where Samuel was going with this.

“If you’ll remember,” Samuel reminded me, “Jesus altered several of the Old Testament scriptures. In Exodus 21:23-25 it says,

‘But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.’

“But in Matthew 5:38-39 Jesus said,

‘You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth. But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also’.

“In Deuteronomy 24:1, the Old Testament law declares that any man who finds his wife to be indecent can obtain a divorce. It states,

‘If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house...’

“But in Matthew 5:31, Jesus says,

‘It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce. But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.’

“In Exodus 20:13, the Old Testament scriptures declare,

‘You shall not murder.’

“But in Matthew 5:21-23 Jesus enhances or clarifies the scripture and says,

‘You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, “Raca”, is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, “You fool!” will be in danger of the fire of hell.’

“The original scriptures were meant for a very primitive civilization and were, therefore, very basic. The modifications offered by Jesus made them more applicable to a more advanced society. His life and his teachings were a great example of the nature of God. His teachings were logical and rational,” he concluded.

“It’s possible I suppose, that some things might have been added or misinterpreted during the writing of these documents. But as I mentioned, many believe that God has carefully protected His message so it has been transmitted accurately. It is believed that the accuracy of the Bible was protected by the guidance of the Holy Spirit and that the Koran was dictated directly to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel,” I insisted.

“I understand those arguments. But if that is the case, then, once again, why are there so many contradictions and inconsistencies? Is God so inconsistent? Why does God’s message say one thing to the Jews, another to Muslims and yet another to Christians? How can they all be true if they contradict each other and even contain contradictions within their own pages? Why do so many religious ideas exist and have endured around the world? As you stated, if there is one Supreme God, shouldn’t there be one religion and one message for everyone universally? And if there are many religions, then who has the

correct one, or does anyone? Does God mean to confuse us? Or is it the human element that confuses us?"

That was a good point. There was silence while I considered what Samuel had said. After a few seconds, he continued.

"Let me interject something else here that I think is very relevant."

"Okay."

"We have been discussing the inconsistencies in the scriptures and the ways and means that these might have occurred. But here's something else to consider. Thomas Paine published a book in the late 1700's titled, "The Age of Reason". In it he argues that if God's message was intended for all people of the world then why did he choose to deliver it in a particular language, knowing how vulnerable language is to manipulation and modification and how it is virtually impossible to accurately interpret one language to another. Paine says,

'Human language is local and changeable, and is therefore incapable of being used as the means of unchangeable and universal information. The idea that God sent Jesus Christ to publish, as they say, the glad tidings to all nations, from one end of the earth unto the other, is consistent only with the ignorance of those who know nothing of the extent of the world, and who believed, as those world-saviours believed, and continued to believe for several centuries, (and that in contradiction to the discoveries of philosophers and the navigators,) that the earth was flat like a trencher; and that a man might walk to the end of it. But how was Jesus Christ to make anything known to all nations? He could speak but one language, which was Hebrew; and there are in the world several hundred languages. Scarcely any two nations speak the same language, or understand each other; and as to translations, every man who knows anything of languages, knows that it is impossible to translate from one language into another,

not only without losing a great part of the original, but frequently of mistaking the sense; and besides all this, the art of printing was wholly unknown at the time Christ lived.’

“In other words, language was the *worst* method for communicating a universal message, even if that message was, at first, a message for one specific group of people. We have evidence of this problem today. There are many translations of the Bible, each trying to translate the original meaning and intent more accurately. Sometimes translation problems are minor, but sometimes they can have an enormous impact.”

“Like what?” I questioned.

“Well, for instance, one critical place where it appears that there is a mistranslation is in Matthew 1:22-23 where the writer of Matthew translates the Hebrew word, *alma*, as *virgin*. Matthew says,

‘The **virgin** will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).’

“In regard to this claim, Rabbi Tovia Singer, a Jewish scholar says,

‘For nearly two millennia the Church has insisted that the Hebrew word *almah* אַלְמָה can only mean “virgin.” This is a vital position for defenders of Christianity to take because Matthew 1:22-23 translates *alma* in Isaiah 7:14 as “virgin.” The first Gospel quotes this well known verse to provide the only “Old Testament” proof text for the supposed virgin birth of Jesus. The stakes are high for Christendom. If the Hebrew word *alma* does not mean a virgin, Matthew crudely misquoted the prophet Isaiah, and both a key tenet of Christianity and the credibility of the first Gospel collapses.’

‘How accurate is this Christian claim? The only place to explore this assertion is in the Jewish Scriptures. If the Hebrew word *alma* means virgin, then each usage

in the Bible must be either a clear reference to a virgin or at the very least appear ambiguous. The word *alma* appears in the Jewish Scriptures seven times in the feminine and twice in the masculine. If even one reference refers to a woman who is clearly not a virgin, then Matthew's rendition of Isaiah 7:14 becomes untenable.

'In the same way that in the English language the words "young woman" does not indicate sexual purity, in the Hebrew language there is no relationship between the words *almah* and virgin. On the contrary, it is usually a young woman who bears children. The word *alma* only conveys age/gender. Had Isaiah wished to speak about a virgin, he would have used the word *betulah*⁴⁵ (בְּתוּלָה) not *almah*. The word *betulah* appears frequently in the Jewish Scriptures, and is the only word – in both biblical and modern Hebrew – that conveys sexual purity.'⁴⁵

"Did Matthew make a mistake in translation? Maybe."

"But this is a crucial part of Christian theology!" I argued.

"That's why it's so important. You see, this is evidence that language is *not* an efficient conduit for communicating a particular message to people who did not share the same language. And we know from the scriptures that this message was to be universal, for everyone.

"Some people would call what you are suggesting Universalism."

"Absolutely," Samuel exclaimed. "Religion *should* be universal. God *should* be universal. Truth *should* be universal. God created us all and put us in a world that was made for us. That's all-inclusive, universal. And, I do agree that a God big enough to create the world is also capable of protecting his

⁴⁵ www.outreachjudaism.org - Rabbi Tovia Singer

message through the ages. I would like to discuss this more a little later.”

We had discussed so much. Samuel had introduced so many radical, and yet, reasonable ideas that I had to ask to take a break so I could consider the things that we had talked about. I had to be very careful not to get too caught up in the discussion so that I lost my objectivity. I wanted to be sure that I was hearing arguments that were supported by evidence of some kind. As far as I could remember, everything we had discussed had been substantiated with either hard evidence, history or common sense. There were a few conjectures that I had to think about but overall, I was excited about what I was learning.

Chapter 10

There's something in every atheist, itching to believe, and something in every believer, itching to doubt.

-- Mignon McLaughlin

The Second Neurotic's Notebook, 1966

It was mid-afternoon and there was still so much to talk about. So far we had discussed the inconsistencies in the Bible and the Koran and examined how these irregularities might have realistically occurred. We also determined, and substantiated by historical evidence, that some of what was contained in the Bible and the Koran was written for the people who lived at the time the scriptures were written, while other things were meant to be universal and were applicable to all ages. And I remembered Samuel saying that just because these documents didn't meet the criteria for inerrancy, it didn't mean that they did not contain truth. As far as Jesus' place in history, I had to give that some additional thought.

Samuel had returned sporting a well-worn Cardigan.

"Let's go for a walk," he suggested. "I feel like stretching."

It was a beautiful, cool day. I had to admit, though, that I was experiencing a little mental claustrophobia. I was trying to absorb a bombardment of new information, while at the same time comparing it to what I had already learned and weighing it against our criteria for truth. A walk was exactly what I needed; a breath of fresh air.

There was a path that led from the house down through the canyon and along a dry creek bed lined with small cedars. A fresh aroma lingered following the rain of a few days ago. We discussed the landscape for a few minutes and then I brought us back to the topic of our intended conversation.

"If we agree that religion is necessary and there is a God..."

"Or gods," he interrupted.

"Or gods? Do you believe that there is more than one?"

“While many of the earliest religions appear to have been monotheistic, many ancient cultures quickly became polytheistic. As we discussed, I suppose it was more or less natural to see the sun and all the benefits of its light and heat and imagine that the sun was a god. The same can be said for many natural wonders, objects like the moon and certain important occasions, such as harvest time or the blessing of a successful hunt. In gratitude, one might easily imagine a god of the harvest, a lord of the beasts, a god of fertility and so on. However, even in the most primitive polytheistic cultures, there was always one supreme god at the top of the pantheon. Judaism, Christianity and Islam profess one God, but believe in angels. Hindus believe in many gods, but hold that there is one supreme god. What one religion interprets as angels, another might interpret as subordinate gods. If we have no real knowledge of the spirit world, how can we know what exists there? It’s really not an important issue, however, because it was always the ultimate, supreme god who received most of the worship. The important thing is that there is an ultimate Supreme Being.”

I hadn’t thought about that, but what he said made sense. “So we will agree that there is a God and subordinate gods or angels or whatever we choose to call them. Where do we go next?”

“I think we should begin by laying a basic foundation. Let’s begin this part of our discussion with attempting to understand the character of God.”

“But do you think we can really know or understand the character of God?” I asked.

“Absolutely not, not completely, that is. But if God created the world and humans as well, then there must be a way to know something about God’s nature. Maybe we can’t know much, but it seems logical that God would be aware that we would want to know about him. Knowing this, God would provide a way for us to understand what little we can, realizing that we can’t know very much because of our inability to comprehend this incomprehensible Existence and the world in

which God dwells. If there is not a way to know something about this Great One, then mankind will be left to speculate and this speculation will inevitably lead to a mixed bag of ideas resulting in what we see today: religious chaos, religions fighting religions.

“If we study religion and man’s concept of God,” Samuel explained, “it’s easy to see why there have been so many different ideas about who God is and what God is like. All major religions teach that God is spirit, that God is supernatural. We, on the other hand, are human. We are physical beings totally unfamiliar with spiritual existence and supernatural capabilities. Yet, we want to understand, or say that we understand, God. So over the years in an effort to understand this Incomprehensible Being, as we mentioned earlier, mankind has managed to make God human. Giving God human traits makes this Deity more comprehensible. If one closely studies the source documents of the various ancient mythologies, reads the stories about God’s alleged actions and reactions, we must admit that God sounds more corporeal than spirit, more human than God. In many of the ancient creation stories, the gods have sexual relations. They war against each other. They scheme and deceive.”

“But those were ancient ideas. We have a better understanding of God today, don’t you think?”

“No, I don’t,” Samuel stated quite emphatically. “In the sacred texts used by the major religions today, God is a dealmaker telling the Israelites that if they worship only God, He will bless them. God is a lawmaker giving the Israelites over 600 laws that they must obey.⁴⁶ Muslims also believe that they were part of the promise that they are God’s chosen people.⁴⁷ As we have already discussed, these ancient scriptures picture God as an angry God who smites those who stand against him.⁴⁸ God

⁴⁶ Bible, Exodus, Leviticus

⁴⁷ Koran 4:13

⁴⁸ Bible, Deuteronomy 31:17

is a jealous god.⁴⁹ And on and on we could go. These character traits: anger, jealousy, vindictiveness, are indicative of how humans react to situations. So, we have humanized God and reduced this indescribable Being to a mere mortal. The awesomeness of the true God has disappeared in a mist of deceit.”

“I have struggled with these things for many years,” I confessed.

“Xenophanes, a Greek theologian and philosopher who lived around 500 BCE said:

‘In my opinion mortals have created their gods with the dress and voice and appearance of mortals. If cattle and horses, or lions, had hands, or were able to draw with their feet and produce the works which men do, horses would draw the forms of gods like horses, and cattle like cattle, and they would make the gods’ bodies the same shape as their own. The Ethiopians say that their gods have snub noses and black skins, while the Thracians say that theirs have blue eyes and red hair.’

“We see God as being like us because we cannot see God as he is.”

“I see what you mean.”

“So, we need to decide what God is and what God is not.”

“What do you mean, what God is not?” I questioned.

“As we have already discussed, because we are made of flesh and blood and have a physical appearance, we tend to give those same attributes to all things.”

“Yes, it makes things more real to us.”

“That’s true, or at least more familiar. If we are to attempt to understand the majesty of this Being, we have to remember that it was the Almighty One who created us, *we did not* create

⁴⁹ Bible, Exodus 20:4

God. I had lunch a few years ago with a good friend who said, 'In the beginning God created man and we have been trying to return the favor ever since.' I think history proves that's true. God is not a human, but rather a being that we call a spirit that has no physical appearance."

"You mean we should not see the Almighty One as an old man with a long white beard resembling one of the band members from ZZ Top."

Samuel smiled. "Exactly. And if God is not human then God doesn't necessarily possess any of those physical attributes that are common to humans. It is obvious that God has no body, no physical appearance. By visualizing God in a physical, tangible way, we limit, in our minds, what God is and what we think God can do."

"You mean if God has a body then it is impossible for him to be everywhere at once?"

"If we can't be everywhere then how can God? If, that is, God is physical, made of matter?"

"So, we say that God is a spirit. But we've never defined what that means."

"That's a good point," he responded. "How can we describe God in terms that help us, in some small way, understand what this Spirit is like? Obviously, we cannot and will not ever understand or even begin to comprehend the essence of God, a being that is so different than what is familiar to us. However, if we are to relate in some small way with this Being then we must find a way to identify who God is or what God wants us to know about Him while not diminishing who and what God really is - indefinable. What word do we have that might describe this Being more effectively in human terms and give us a better definition the word 'spirit'?"

"I'm really not sure. I haven't given it much thought," I confessed.

“Let’s list what we have been told or what we think we know about God at this time. It is said that God is everywhere at once, God is omnipresent.”

“God is creative since we attribute the creation of the universe to this Being,” I added.

“If God can create something as huge and powerful as the universe, we must also conclude that God is all-powerful.”

“I agree.”

“So, what can be everywhere at once and is the essence of power?”

“You got me. Do we even have a word for that?”

“Energy! What moves the planets? What causes the stars to burn with such intensity? What bangs the molecules together to form the wind? The universe is in perpetual motion. Energy is everywhere! We can see energy in all living things. God’s activity is creative, intelligent energy. Energy was the initial force in the universe that existed before anything else. And, it was this energy that created everything there is. It is the energy of life. When we breathe, it is the energy of God. When our heart beats, it beats with God’s energy. And when that energy leaves our bodies we cease to live. It seems our best description of God’s activity, as insufficient as it is, is amazing, creative, intelligent energy; everywhere at once, all powerful! When science talks about the Big Bang, they are describing the initial creative work of this Almighty God, the Ultimate Energy!

“That is an excellent way of describing God!” I exclaimed. “I really have never thought of it like that. It certainly takes God out of the context of being human. While it might be terribly difficult to visualize God in these terms, it is very easy to understand how God can be everywhere and have immense power since we can see this awesome power in the energy of the sun and the sea and the wind.”

“This idea is not a new one. As a matter of fact, when explaining the Spirit to people of his day, Jesus, used the example of the wind.

‘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.’⁵⁰

“Of course, like I said, it’s difficult to visualize energy. That somehow makes God less personal.” I observed.

“Actually, it’s better if we can’t visualize God. We need to remember that God is beyond our understanding; that God cannot be controlled or owned. This concept also helps us understand how we can all be related. It is the energy of God that resides in all living things that makes us all one, as the Hindus teach and as Jesus taught. There is amazing unity in the universe. That is why we are all dependent on each other for survival. It is this inconceivable Energy that lives in all of us giving us life and unity.”

“A wonderful revelation!”

“But we must remember,” he warned, “that this energy is only God’s activity in the world, it is not God’s essence.”

“What do you mean, God’s essence?”

“What I mean is, energy is not what God is. Energy is merely God’s activity in the world. In his Epistle 234, St. Basil of Caesarea said,

‘...but we say that we know our God from His activities, but do not undertake to approach near to His essence. His activities come down to us, but His essence remains beyond our reach.’

“Philo, the Jewish philosopher who lived in the first century CE, also thought of the activity of God as energy. He made a distinction between . . .

⁵⁰ Bible, John 3:8

‘God’s essence (*ousia*), which is entirely incomprehensible, and his activities in the world, which he called his “powers” (*dynameis*) or “energies” (*energeiai*). . . Philo called them the Kingly power, which reveals God in the order of the universe, and the Creative power, whereby God reveals himself in the blessings he bestows upon humanity. Neither of these powers is to be confused with the divine essence (*ousia*), which remains shrouded in impenetrable mystery.’⁵¹

“What God *is* we will never know with our limited capacity to understand those things that are outside of the world of time and space and matter. God is other-dimensional, above and beyond all that exists. So, the best we can do is attempt to understand something about God by studying God’s activity in the universe. When we begin to understand this concept of the Invincible One, we can start to appreciate the awesomeness of this Being. In the Nag Hammadi Scriptures, in the Secret Book of John, the writer attempts to describe ‘The One’:

‘...The One is a sovereign that has nothing over it. It is God and Parent, Father of the All, the invisible one that is over the All, that is incorruptible, that is pure light at which no eye can gaze.

The One is illimitable, since there is nothing before it to limit it,

unfathomable, since there is nothing before it to fathom it,

immeasurable, since there was nothing before it to measure it,

invisible, since nothing has seen it,

eternal, since it exists eternally,

unutterable, since nothing could comprehend it to utter it,

unnamable, since there is nothing before it to give it a name.

The One is immeasurable light, pure, holy, immaculate. It is unutterable, and is perfect in incorruptibility. Not that it is

⁵¹ Armstrong, p. 69.

just perfection, or blessedness, or divinity: it is much greater.

The One is not corporeal and it not incorporeal.

The One is not large and it is not small.

It is impossible to say,

How much is it?

What kind is it?

For no one can understand it.

The One is not among the things that exist, but it is much greater. Not that it is greater. Rather, as it is in itself, it is not a part of the aeons of time. For whatever is part of a realm was once prepared by another. Time was not allotted to it, since it receives nothing from anyone; what would be received would be on loan. The one who is first does not need to receive anything from another. It beholds itself in its light.

The One is majestic and has an immeasurable purity.

The One is a realm that gives a realm,

life that gives life,

a blessed one that gives blessedness,

knowledge that gives knowledge,

a good one that gives goodness,

mercy that gives mercy and redemption,

grace that gives grace.

Not that the One possesses this. Rather, the One gives immeasurable and incomprehensible light.

What shall I tell you about it? Its eternal realm is incorruptible, at peace, dwelling in silence, at rest, before everything. It is the head of all realms, and it is the one who sustains them through its goodness.”⁵²

“What a wonderfully insightful description.”

“Isn’t it?” he exclaimed. “The Hindu religion stresses the unity that exists in the world. In the Chandogya Upanishad, a child is discussing wisdom with his father. The father tells him,

⁵² Edited by Marvin Meyer, *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The Secret Book of John*, HarperOne, New York, 2007, pp. 108-09.

‘In the beginning was only one Being, One without a second. Out of himself he brought forth the cosmos and entered into everything in it. There is nothing that does not come from him. Of everything he is the inmost Self. He is the truth; he is the Self-supreme. You are that, Shvetaketu; you are that.’⁵³

“Since we have come to this place in our discussion,” Samuel said, “I think we should change how we refer to God.”

I bent down and picked up an interesting looking stick. “What do you mean?”

“I mean from this point forward we should refrain from referring to the Incomprehensible One as a gender. Once again, using the pronoun, he, implies a physical characteristic. While it might sound impersonal, the Great Spirit, as the American Indians called God, is an It, not a he or a she. I know the word “it” usually refers to a thing rather than a being and it sounds very impersonal, but unfortunately, “It” is the only word we have in our language to refer to something that is not gender specific.”

“I see where you’re going with this. If we see this indescribable Being as a man, we might tend to attribute to God certain attributes that are common to man. Again, we would be humanizing God.”

“Exactly.”

We rounded a bend that took us back in the direction of the house.

⁵³ *The Chandogya Upanishad*. Chapter 6:2.2-2.3

Chapter 11

It is the Infinite that is the source of abiding joy because it is not subject to change. Therefore seek to know the Infinite.

The Chandogya Upanishad, Chapter 7 Verse 23.1

The walk had been good for me but I was ready to find a chair. It was still comfortable outside so we decided to stay on the deck for a while longer. There's something about the outdoors that helps to clear a person's mind. Considering the things we were discussing, I needed to have the clearest mind I could. Brenda brought us some refreshments.

“So, what's the next step?” I asked. “We've determined that religion is important and that it is logical to believe in a supreme being. We've also concluded, based on objective evidence, that the sacred documents contain inconsistencies and do not meet the established criteria for infallibility. This journey for truth has me somewhat concerned at this point. I'm curious where we go from here.”

“I think it's important to determine where it all started, believing in gods, that is. Throughout history there have been hundreds if not thousands of religious ideas and myths. No one really knows when man first started worshipping gods, who started it or why it was started. Some people have suggested that very early in man's development he found the need to believe in a higher power, a stronger force than himself who watches over human affairs. The implication being that man created God instead of vice-versa. We know from archeological discoveries that signs of worship of one kind or another can be traced back at least 10,000 years or more. In fact, in his book, *A History of Religious Ideas*, Mircea Eliade claims there is evidence from cave drawings that religious ideas in some form were present as far back in history as 30,000 BCE.⁵⁴ One can only speculate how much earlier humans began believing in a greater power.

⁵⁴ Eliade, p.7.

From the earliest records, it seems that originally many objects of nature like the sun and moon were considered gods. But whoever God was to these ancient humans, the fact is, from earliest times, humans have worshipped a deity or deities. Virtually every civilization had its own religious myth or set of religious ideas.

“Yes, you mentioned some of these at lunch.”

“I think it’s important for us to make a distinction here that when we talk about a myth we are not talking about a fable or something that is not true. When we refer to myths we are talking about stories, ideas and beliefs of a certain group of people.”

“I’ll have to admit that many of these myths sound like fables.” I confessed.

“That’s true. Looking back at what we can decipher from the evidence that exists, some of the earliest religions do seem odd, even bizarre. But it’s important to point out that the people living in those times believed in their gods as seriously as we believe in ours today. They believed so sincerely, in fact, that many offered themselves as human sacrifices, dying painful deaths in an attempt to appease their gods. Sometimes we demean these mythologies by writing them off as silly ideas conjured up by primitive ignorant people. We have even turned some mythologies into fairytales like the animated movie produced a few years ago entitled, *Hercules*. Zeus is portrayed as an old man with a long white beard having a very similar appearance to the character many people envision when they think about the God of Christianity. In reality, Zeus and the other gods of Greece were taken very seriously. The people built elaborate temples and worshipped these gods regularly. The remnants of some of these temples still exist today. To make light of these religious ideas is an insult. It would be like producing a humorous animated cartoon about the God of Christianity and his son, Jesus, who wandered the countryside confronting evil demons. I dare say, Christians today wouldn’t think it was very funny. A few years ago, a cartoonist made

light of Muhammad. Some Muslims took it so seriously that they threatened the cartoonist's life! So, in studying religion, we must understand that the people who believed in these ancient gods and religious ideas considered them to be the truth. Exactly like we think we are believing the truth today."

"So, what do you think? In the beginning did man create God?"

"Yes and no. In the very beginning of human existence, one has to wonder how such a primitive mind could conjure up something as unique as the concept of a god? Was primitive man that creative? Or did the real God actually plant that thought in the mind of man and man was simply acting on that intuition? Did this powerful indescribable Being give man the revelation of its existence through common sense and deductive reasoning as, perhaps, it still does today? Maybe these first humans looked at the sky and saw the brilliance of the sun and felt its heat and saw that when the sun was blazing, flowers opened their blooms and the earth seemed to come alive. Maybe they lay awake at night and gazed into the darkness and wondered at the majesty of the moon and stars. Maybe they held a newborn baby in their arms and marveled at the intricacy of its hands and fingers and toes. Or maybe their stomachs gnawed with hunger and just when they were about to give up hope the earth seemed to provide the food they needed through a wandering herd or a field of wild grain. But whatever it was, it made them thankful and left them in awe. Their explanation? An intuition that there was something or someone bigger and mightier who was creating and supplying humans with what they needed to survive. In Meditation Three in his writings, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes, a seventeenth century philosopher and mathematician, observed that since we are an finite creature and everything we know and understand is finite it is unlikely that the idea of the infinite could have originated naturally without the aid of the infinite. He says,

"For although the idea of substance is in me by virtue of the fact that I am a substance, that fact is not sufficient to explain my having the idea of an infinite substance,

since I am finite, unless this idea proceeded from some substance which really was infinite.’⁵⁵

“Regardless of how it happened, it seems that from the very beginning, throughout the ages, mankind has worshipped a deity or deities in cultures and civilizations around the world. The concept of gods has survived the ages. I have to think there must be a reason for it. Just as man has evolved, so has religion. A study of religious ideas will carry one from the ridiculous to the sublime, from human sacrifice to mysterious secret meetings with bizarre rituals; from elaborate initiations to stories of gods, angels and demons that make the most contemporary action movie look like a Disney film. And somewhere in the midst of all of these ideas and rituals and good intentions there exists the truth about the one true God.

“In final answer to your question, let me conclude by saying that over the centuries I think man has created gods but these created gods are only a reflection of the real God. These created gods are an attempt by man to control this inconceivable Being. We actually have an example of that today. In the Catholic faith, people who have done exceptionally good things during their life have been designated as saints after their death. They have even been bequeathed special powers. For example, Saint Christopher is the protector of travelers. Some people pray to that saint for protection. Some people worship Mary, the mother of Jesus. The question is, how can humans assign such a position to a human? They are creating, in essence, a god. I understand that Catholic leadership will argue that they are doing no more than calling on the saint as one would call on a friend to ask for advice or help, but do they believe that a friend has the ability to intervene with supernatural power and provide assistance?”

“Of course not.” I, myself, had a friend who always had an icon of St. Christopher hanging from his rearview mirror.

Samuel continued. “This is the power man has ascribed to a saint, the power that, historically, belongs to a god. For

⁵⁵ Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy; Meditation Three*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1993, p.77.

centuries, mankind has tried so hard to have control over the real God that he has brought God down to a level where God has become as familiar as one of our neighbors.

“Giving this inconceivable Being a name is another attempt to make the non-human One human. As we give names to things, we make them more familiar. Naming this great Deity is another reason for the rivalry between religions today. One religion calls the Almighty One, Allah, one calls It God, one Brahman, another Ra, another Ptal, and still another, The Great Spirit. Because this Great One is called by different names some people think of each name as being a different deity even though they all claim that their Deity is the one Supreme Spirit. If they are all worshipping a Supreme Deity, it doesn't matter what name you call It, It is the same Deity! As we have said, we should not attempt to give this inconceivable Being a name at all! God is beyond all names.”

“The next question is,” I continued, “if it all started with this Supreme Being imparting truth about itself, why are there so many religions? Certainly all religions claim they teach the truth but we've already determined that the documents used as the foundation of those religions do not provide us with the absolute truth. So where do we go to find it?”

“Those are good questions. In my search many years ago, I began by reading the literature of the various religions: the Bible, the Apocrypha, the Koran, the Nag Hammadi Scriptures, the Analects, many of the Vedas and Upanishads, the teachings of Buddha, as well as many others' writings in search of something that would offer me a revelation of truth.”

I interrupted. “I did very much the same thing. Unfortunately, I found contradictions and inconsistencies in all of them.”

“So did I, which indicates that they are not inerrant. However, the fact that these documents are not absolutely true doesn't mean that they don't contain the truth.”

I was wondering when we would get back to that. “We have identified irregularities in most of the ancient sacred documents due to the embellishments of humans. And yet, you say they provide truth? How can they be inconsistent and still be accurate?”

“Just as you said earlier, a God as great as this one certainly is capable of ensuring that Its original message, simple and true, has been preserved throughout the ages in spite of man’s manipulations and interpretations. God has maintained Its basic message in all of the major religions. Somewhere in all religions there is commonality. Find these things that are common and, perhaps, one might find the basic truth in religion that God has passed down to us, now hidden within the volumes of material that we have available.”

“So, the challenge is to muddle through all of the major religious writings and identify those elements that are common to all?” I asked.

“Yes. That would mean, regardless of the culture or human agendas, God has kept the truth alive and available even though people must search for it and discern what is of God and what is of man.”

“Seek and you will find?”

“Exactly.”

“That sounds like an impossible task, for once again, we are on our own to determine what is actually from God. How can we distinguish between the basic truth and non-essential content?” I questioned.

“By comparing the content of each of the documents to a standard or benchmark; that original message from the Creator to the created.”

“A benchmark?”

Samuel explained. “What if God has given us guidelines to help us identify the God stuff from the human stuff? A message wherein God tells us and shows us who God is and what God is

like, as much as we can understand these things, given our very limited capacity to understand.”

“So what is this message, this standard?” I asked.

“In my search for truth I made an assumption,” Samuel explained. “I assumed that if I could trace religion back to its beginning, its roots, locate that initial message from the Ultimate One to mankind at the dawn of civilization I would find the original, uncorrupted truth that the Supreme God communicated to humans. Muhammad also went in search of this original message. He called it the religion of Adam.”

“I never thought of that, but it seems like a reasonable assumption.”

“That’s what I thought. I assumed in order to communicate with those first primitive humans God had to be very specific and very basic. So that’s when I began to study the history of religious ideas from as far back as history and science could take me.”

“It sounds like you were on the right track.”

“Unfortunately, I found that I faced a problem in this quest very early on. There was a flaw in my original assumption,” he admitted.

“And what was that?”

“I wasn’t able to go back to the beginning. As you know, primitive forms of writing did not appear until almost 3500 BCE. Even by that early date, there were already a myriad of religious ideas. Already, man had taken the opportunity of modifying and enhancing that original message. So I still struggled with the same question: which one was true? What was the original message? There was no way to go back beyond what had been written to find the source of the myths.”

“What about cave drawings and ancient artifacts? Couldn’t they tell you something?” It seemed logical to me.

“They have. Those are the kinds of discoveries that have led archeologists to believe that ancient humans did, in fact, worship. Remember we noted earlier that there is evidence provided by primitive drawings, burial sites and intricately carved objects that religious activities were conducted and some kind of worship did exist from earliest times. In addition, from evidence found in burial sites, there are indications that religious ideas such as the concept of some type of resurrection of the body or life after death were prevalent in many religions from the very beginning. But there is not enough information to piece together an accurate understanding of what those first ideas and rituals were.

“In spite of this shortcoming, I still maintained the theory that as primitive man evolved to the extent that he began to experience intelligent creative thought, with him was the initial word from God: the truth. From that point forward, alterations and modifications began to creep in.”

“So what did you do?”

“I tried to determine how God originally spoke to those first primitive humans.”

“Okay, and what did you find?” I asked.

“Think about it. It had to be very simple because man was very simple. It had to be obvious because man probably wasn’t looking for it. And, it had to be dynamic enough to get man’s attention. But, most of all, it had to be enduring realizing that, over time, men would alter that original message and we would need a way to be reminded of what the basic truth really is.”

“I’ll have to give it some thought.”

“What do we have in common with those first humans?” he asked. “What did they have that we still have that remains a pure message from God? What do we have that man has not been able to embellish or modify significantly?”

“Can I have a clue?” Struggling for an answer I tried to remember everything that we had talked about.

“What was the first indication that there was a God? What did the first humans worship?”

“Nature?”

“Exactly!” He was beginning to get excited. “Now you can see why we went through the exercise of discussing evolution and the fact that it is logical and reasonable to conclude that God is the author of creation and everything that exists; that even Darwin, the father of evolutionary thought, believed in a Creator. Except for humans messing it up, the universe is pretty much the way God created it. Certainly, there have been modifications due to natural evolution according to God’s design, but the universe is still God’s creation. Creation, or nature, was perhaps God’s first message to mankind and it still provides the plain and simple truth about what God is like, as far as we can know God. Is it fair to say that by looking at a painting you can tell something about the artist?”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” I replied.

“I mean that every artist has a style. Rembrandt, Picasso, all great artists painted in a style that was unique to them. Would you agree?” he questioned.

“Yes, I believe that is true in most cases.”

“And can we also say that this same style is manifested in the craft of almost every craftsman? For example, a builder of cabinets will show his style in his work. A mason will do the same. We can look at a piece of handmade furniture and see that the person who crafted it was meticulous with his scrollwork. We can say that Rembrandt had an eye for detail and that Picasso loved vivid colors.”

“I believe the work of an artist and craftsman says something about him.”

“So, we can conclude that Picasso loved color, Rembrandt was detail oriented and our furniture builder was a perfectionist.”

“I think that would be a fair conclusion,” I agreed.

“So, if we believe that God created the universe then we should be able to look at creation and discover the same kind of things about its creator. Nature is God’s handiwork. It showed those first primitive humans who God is, what the One is like. It is still the only resource that we have today that has not been manipulated by humans. Certainly, it has been impacted by civilization, but it remains the best example of God’s activity in the world and offers the best glimpse of who God is. It remains the most accurate depiction of what God is like. Creation tells the truth!” he exclaimed.

I was beginning to get the picture. “But how does nature talk to us?”

“Isn’t this world filled with beauty; flowers, mountains, rivers, clouds, sunsets?”

“It is. I agree.”

“So, can we conclude that God loves beauty? Think about it, the world didn’t have to be created in color, did it? Everything could have been black and white or shades of some other boring colors.”

“I see what you mean. That seems like a fair assumption based on the evidence. As we look at how life processes work – respiratory, circulation, reproduction, we might also conclude that God is meticulous and systematic in creation. Nothing seems to be left to chance.”

“That’s true. In this world there is a precise balance. Everything seems to depend on everything else in some way for its existence. We are all interdependent. In addition, when environments become altered due to natural evolutionary changes in atmosphere and such, nature carefully adapts so that the system might be somewhat modified, but it still functions efficiently. Of course, we must exclude the radical, unnatural changes to the environment brought about by the actions of man that can cause serious modifications to nature’s processes,” he added.

He got out of his chair and started pacing as he spoke.

“And what about consistent?” I continued, “Observing the cosmos: the movement of the planets and the stars, and the seasons, can we also conclude that God is consistent?”

“Consistency is certainly obvious. When an apple falls from a tree, we expect it to always fall to the ground, not float away into space. Our greatest mathematical and scientific theories are based on the consistency of the laws of nature.”

“Go on.” I was starting to get a little excited, myself. “What others?”

“Since all of the things that our bodies require to sustain life are available, can we say that God cares?” He turned to me. “By looking at creation and the meticulous way in which it is put together, and by studying the way the human body was designed with all of its complexities – the heart beating perfectly sixty or more times per minute for seventy or eighty years, the way the brain works, sending out messages throughout the body communicating the slightest touch, or smell, or taste, I think we can agree that the One is perfect in everything It does. If God is all-powerful which It would have to be to create such a vast universe and be present everywhere at once, being energy, or spirit rather than a physical being, then we must conclude that God is perfect in each of Its specific characteristics.”

“I would have to agree. As we have concluded, if God is not perfect, then God would not be consistent.”

“And, I would like to include one last characteristic: love.” There was a pause. He looked at me waiting for a response.

“I can understand how God cares for Its creation by realizing that God has provided what we need to survive, but I’m not sure how we can go so far as to say it is love.”

He leaned closer to me. “Think about it. Humans, and only humans, as far as we know, have been given a higher consciousness. We have the capability to go beyond survival. We have the added luxury of experiencing the beauty and awesomeness of the world. We can appreciate art and music. We have been created with the ability to reason, to evaluate

information and make decisions based on that information. We have emotions that enable us to go beyond the primitive and experience the higher qualities of compassion and love and fairness. This goes beyond simply caring. I would say that these gifts certainly are signs that this great Creator loves.”

He had made a wonderful observation. I could not help but agree.

“And, since none of these characteristics that we have listed are in conflict with another, and since they comply with reality and common sense, they effectively meet the requirements for truth.”

I considered carefully what he was saying. “I think you’re right.”

He continued. “So, we can agree that we have sufficient evidence in nature and the universe to conclude that God is perfect and therefore does nothing that is imperfect. As we mentioned earlier, not because God cannot do what is imperfect but being perfect, God always makes perfect decisions. I’m sure we can learn much more about The One by studying nature, but let’s begin with these. Can we say, then, that these characteristics meet the criteria for truth, being that they are evidenced by things we can all see and understand and that they comply with reality, and are most probably accurate descriptions of God’s nature since we have already agreed that God is the creator of all things?”

“Yes, I think we can, even though there are many more, I’m sure. But that seems so simple.”

“As it should be. Basically, religion should be simple.” Samuel walked to the table and took his seat. He seemed to be getting weary. I could understand why. It was obvious that this was a topic that he had spent a lot of time and effort studying. In a matter of hours he had explained to me what had taken him years to discover. I thought about how he said that religion should be simple. I had a little problem with that.

“But it’s not,” I said. “Religion is not simple. With all of the rules for worship, for attaining salvation, and the rest of the complex theology that some religions teach, religion can be very confusing.”

“Yes, it can. That’s why we need a measuring stick, or plumb line to help us decide what is from God and what has been added by humans. If nature was God’s first message to humans, it remains our greatest communication from the Great Creator. So, nature becomes the standard against which we can measure the accuracy of all other things pertaining to the character of the one true God, as much as God wants us to understand, and as much as we are capable of understanding. And it becomes the standard for analyzing the doctrine and ideology of religion.”

“It seems to me that if we use this standard, we do achieve consistency. This is truly an exciting revelation! And it has profound implications.”

“Yes it does.”

He leaned back in his chair and looked out over the hills that surrounded us. It was extremely quiet; I could hear the sound of the breeze blowing gently through the cedars. I considered where we had come to at this point in our discussion. The impact of these revelations on religious theology was enormous! I had not even begun to consider all of the repercussions but already I could think of so many areas of religion that would be touched by these astonishing discoveries.

Chapter 12

The belief in a supernatural source of evil is not necessary: men alone are quite capable of every wickedness.

-- Joseph Conrad – Novelist

Look how mortals are blaming the gods, for they say that evil comes from us, but in fact they themselves have woes beyond their share because of their own follies.

-- Homer, The Odyssey (c. 750 BCE)

It was nearing evening. The sun was getting low in the sky. From now until sunset the warm yellow light would grow more intense, bathing the hills in a vibrant golden glow. The coolness was beginning to creep in. We decided to brew some coffee and escape to the family room where we could build a warm fire. Once the logs were adequately ablaze, our conversation continued. Samuel began slowly with a review.

“So, since we have agreed that the Ultimate Being created the universe and this conclusion was a reasonable and logical one when compared to the options available, now we can, with confidence, say that reasonably and logically nature can show us the character of God as far as we have the capacity to understand the things of a dimension and a Being that is ultimately beyond our comprehension. Nature allows us a glimpse of the character of God.

“Furthermore, if we use nature as the standard for identifying what is from God and what has been added by man in religion, we will be able to discover the truth in religion. Using this standard we can eliminate all of the differences that exist among the various religions. This will allow us to identify the truth that God has protected throughout the ages. However, it requires us to look beyond traditional theology, and objectively examine religious ideas while being guided by this standard, a standard that has been around since the beginning of time.”

“And,” I added, “it is simple enough to be grasped by everyone. Think of it, we are being spoken to in the same way as our ancestors thousands of years ago. But now let’s discuss the profound implications that our revelation has on the theology of mainstream religion because, as I see it, there are a lot of them.”

“Yes, I know,” he admitted.

“First of all,” I began, “if nature shows us that this Incredible Spirit exists, and it helps us have a basic understanding of what the Spirit is like then that means religion should be very simple, as you have already pointed out.”

“Yes. That’s the way it should be, simple enough for anyone to understand. After all, knowing God is the most important aspect of life. Therefore, it is vitally important for it to be simple enough so that even the smallest child can understand.”

THE TRINITY

“So why do some of the major religions make believing in God so difficult? For instance, Christian doctrine proclaims the concept of the Trinity. They call it the Three-in-One God. It consists of God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

“That’s true,” he replied, “but, again, as we mentioned earlier, many of the early stories and concepts that were part of one mythology were adopted by others who wanted to make their religion more palatable and acceptable for new proselytes or converts of other religions. If you offer a little bit of what other religions teach, then it becomes easier to get people to accept a new religion because some of the ideology is recognizable and has already been embraced. The concept of a three-in-one god, or the trinity, which was officially defined by the Christian church around the end of the 4th century C.E., was not an original one. The idea of a trinity or triune godhead is ancient. We can site one example in Hinduism. Thousands of years before Christianity, Hinduism adopted the concept of the trinity – one God consisting of three entities: Brahma the creator,

Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva who can be compassionate and erotic. However, all of these gods combine to create one Supreme God, Brahman. In Christian theology, the trinity is similar in that each member or person of the trinity has a different task. God is the Father. He is the head of the trinity. In comparison to Hinduism, the God of Christianity is like the Brahman. It is Jesus who provides salvation and forgiveness. It is the Holy Spirit who is active in the world, convicting people of wrongdoing and teaching them about Jesus. However, they are all considered to be the same God. Regardless of how it is explained, it is basically a form of polytheism proclaiming the existence of three gods. It is said that Jesus is on God's right hand:

‘He (God) exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.’⁵⁶

And again:

‘But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.’⁵⁷

“These scriptures clearly illustrate how Jesus and God are two separate entities. The Trinity is a very confusing bit of theology. Remember, the trinity is not mentioned anywhere in the Bible. Christian scholars say that it is implied. But it is confusing.”

“Well, yes, and it always has been,” I agreed.

“Here’s why,” he explained. “If God is omnipotent as Christian doctrine claims, and therefore, doesn’t need anyone for anything, then why does this omnipotent Spirit suddenly need two other helpers? Once again, if God is a spirit as Christianity teaches, then why does a spirit, God, need a spirit, the Holy

⁵⁶ Bible, Ephesians 1:20-21

⁵⁷ Bible, Acts 7:55.

Spirit? Isn't God big enough to be spirit enough to get the job done? Why complicate things? In fact, it seems that in very early times Rabbis used the term Holy Spirit as an indication of God's presence or activity on earth. It was not considered to be a separate divine being,⁵⁸ which makes much more sense.

“And, as we discussed previously, if Jesus was God incarnate, that is, if God came to earth in the form of a human and was named Jesus, wasn't he really God in a human costume, if you will, who was called by the name, Jesus? Isn't a rose by any other name still a rose? If I go somewhere and wear a mask and someone calls me by a name other than my own, when I get home and take off the mask aren't I still who I really am and not the character who I portrayed when I went visiting? So, if God came to earth and was called Jesus, wasn't God still really God? And when God went back to heaven, as Christianity claims, and dropped off the human body, wasn't God back to being God? So why do we need to hang on to the name Jesus and the Holy Spirit and worship them when they are both merely forms or manifestations of God? Why not just have God? And if they are different and distinct entities, then there are *three* gods and not just one, which makes Christianity polytheistic, rather than monotheistic. Do you see what I mean?”

“Yes, I do. I really never thought of it that way. It is very confusing.”

“And yet, as we discussed, Jesus, himself, is given credit for saying that God is one God. In Mark 12:29 (a), Jesus said,

‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.’

In Deuteronomy 6:4, it states,

‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.’

“The Old and New Testament agree that God is one, not three in one. You see how humans complicate the issue of who God is? In addition, there is another popular ideological theme occurring here, the idea of family. As I mentioned earlier, in

⁵⁸ Armstrong, p. 75

ancient mythology almost all of the various civilizations had a family of gods. That is, a father, a mother, and children. For instance, in Egypt it was Osiris, Isis and their son Horus; In Christianity, there is God the Father, Mary the Mother, and Jesus the Son. Additionally, if she is the mother of Jesus, and if Jesus is God, then she is the mother of God! This would make her greater than God since she is the one who gave birth to God and must have, therefore, existed before God. So, we have deified a human being and created a new god and continued the ongoing themes of ancient religions. We have become very good at god-creating and enhancing religion with deceptive teachings. The Trinity is merely another reoccurring theme from other ancient mythologies. And, allow me to add one other consideration.”

“Go ahead.” I urged.

“Most of the religions that were popular in the area where Christianity originated were polytheistic. By creating the Trinity, Christianity offered a type of polytheism making it attractive to members of other religions, but still satisfied their Hebrew tradition by claiming that the three gods were really just one. It was a way of offering something for everyone.”

“So, what is the answer? What is your conclusion? Is there a Trinity?”

“Who knows? No one can know the real answer because we cannot know what it is like in the realm where God exists. It’s time to realize the simple truth in religion: whether there is a Trinity or not, there is one Supreme, High God, and this God is the one who should be worshipped out of respect and awe. It’s really not important if there are angels or other gods or saints or many forms of the one true God. What is important is that there is one Supreme God and our worship and attention should be directed to this amazing preexistent Being. We are, perhaps, committing a great injustice to the inconceivable God by diverting our worship to anyone or anything other than this amazing intelligent deity.”

“That seems reasonable.” I had to consider this a little more before committing to how I really felt about it.

RULES AND LAWS

“Let me bring up another aspect of religion that can cause confusion and seems like it is designed to control the members of the various religions,” he continued, “rulemaking. Humans are great at making rules. As I mentioned, religion should be about having a relationship with the God of creation. It should *not* be about rules. Every popular ideology today has made religion about rules and rituals. Behavior is not the end of religion, it is a result of a very special relationship and the desire to emulate the character of God, to the extent that we *can* understand it. Even the earliest Christians got it wrong.”

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“In the Didache, the earliest known writings of the Christian church written in the late first century, there is a list of rules and behavioral guidelines. It has little to do with relationships. Christianity is supposed to be founded on the teachings of Jesus and yet Jesus’ teachings didn’t focus on rules. He focused on relationships. He basically had two rules: love God and love your neighbor.⁵⁹ All of the other rules and rituals were added by others. Jesus was concerned about having a relationship with God who he called the Father. The Islamic faith also dictates a volume of behavioral guidelines in the Sunnah. So, things get confusing. But most of all, these rules become a distraction from the main objective of religion, having a relationship with the indescribable One; God, Allah, Self, or whatever you choose to call this great Being.”

“I can see how that might happen. We do seem to be obsessed with rules. But, you must admit, rules are important.”

“Of course, but they should not be the main objective of religion. If we follow those two basic, simple guidelines: love God and love others all other rules are pretty much covered. As we discussed earlier, rules concerning washing and worship were mainly for the people living at the time the documents were written. They made the people unique or special.”

⁵⁹ Bible, Luke 10:27

EVIL

“Speaking of behavior, what about evil? I have always been taught that man suffers from an inherent inclination to sin; that since the time of Adam mankind has been born with a sinful nature. It is called original sin. What conclusion does our study suggest concerning this issue?”

“Do you believe an animal is bad by nature?” he asked.

“I don’t guess I ever considered it.” I wasn’t sure where he was going with this.

“Let’s consider it for a minute. Let’s take a lion cub for example. At birth, it has the intuitive desire for nourishment. It doesn’t have the capacity to make a decision concerning it, it just knows instinctively to go to its mother for sustenance. Instinct is the only reason for its behavior. Sigmund Freud called this the Id. As it gets older, the cub play-fights with other siblings. Already at a very young age, it’s learning how to defend itself and how to establish a pecking order, not because it’s greedy for power, it is simply following the instinct for survival. Finally, its mother brings in a fresh kill for dinner. Again, instinctively, it fights for its share. Not out of greed or selfishness, but out of that same inherent drive to survive. The “I” in survival is prevalent because it has to be. The cub is not acting out good or bad behavior. It is acting out of instinct. Now, whether we want to admit it or not, humans are animals that possess that same survival instinct. As infants, we desire nourishment. As infants, we interact with others, seeking our place. And when it comes to food, or toys, or attention, we are driven by that same instinct for survival. The “I” is prominent in survival for us just as it is for the lion cub. However, unlike the lion cub, we humans have the ability to override or supersede those basic instincts with decision-making capabilities. But the instinct for survival still has significant power in the early stages of decision-making causing some actions and behaviors to be interpreted as selfishness, or a natural inclination for greed. In reality, the child is not acting out good or bad behavior. It is just reacting as it is led by the survival instinct.

“At a very young age, a child begins to accumulate information through the senses. It sees and hears and experiences things that influence its reactions and behavior beyond that of instinct. As the child grows, then, it has the ability to evaluate the information it has accumulated through the years and make decisions that are, or should be, more greatly influenced by reason than by instinct. This survival instinct remains a significant, though sometimes unconscious influence and so the battle between instinct and reason continues throughout an individual’s life. These urges are not driven by a sinful nature, they are a natural inclination propelled by instinct. However, there comes a time, or should come a time, when, as adults, reason, logic and experience become the primary influences for decision-making. Religion should also be a significant influence. Unfortunately, it is not obvious that it has been.”

“So if you don’t think religion is making things better, has religion failed man, or has man failed religion?”

“Both,” he answered. “Man has failed religion by adding his own thoughts and ideas. Religion has failed man, because popular religions with their inconsistencies and contradictions have failed to provide the truth concerning God.”

Now I was getting a little confused. “How do you mean?”

“Religious ideology, whether it’s Judaism, Christianity or Islam, as it is being taught and interpreted today, using the sacred documents that have come down to us through the years, is leading men on a path of destruction. Forgive me for reiterating what you have already said, but I must in order to offer you examples of what I mean. In the Old Testament, God is a God of war, commanding the Hebrews to kill those who oppose them. For example, in the book of Joshua,⁶⁰

‘When Israel had finished killing all the men of Ai in the fields and in the wilderness where they had chased them, and when every one of them had been put to the sword,

⁶⁰ Bible, Joshua 8: 24-25.

all the Israelites returned to Ai and killed those who were in it. Twelve thousand men and women fell that day—all the people of Ai.’

“The killing in this story was allegedly committed at the command of a loving God! If you were to type the word, “kill” in an on-line Bible concordance search engine, you’d be shocked at how violent the Old Testament is. Time after time, men of the Old Testament pray that God will help them in their battles by killing their enemies, making it sound like God takes sides and condones killing. In one story, God actually does the killing.⁶¹ In the Koran, God tells His followers to hate the infidel and condones killing them.

‘And kill them wherever you find them, and drive them out from whence they drove you out, and persecution is severer than slaughter, and do not fight with them at the Sacred Mosque until they fight with you in it, but if they do fight you, then slay them; such is the recompense of the unbelievers.’⁶²

“And on and on we could go. You have already made this observation. These things not only make God sound like an advocate of war, it makes God an advocate of hatred. It further indicates that God is inconsistent and this causes the scriptures to be contradictory. This kind of teaching has led to the devaluation of life. That is one of the greatest problems that we face in the world today: we have lost sight of the value of life; all life. If we truly understood the value of life there would be fewer wars, a lot less violence and we would do more to help those who are dying from disease and hunger.”

“I don’t think people living in those early times understood how things work,” I argued. “Perhaps they felt that war was necessary for survival. In some instances, they were protecting their territory and at other times they were going into a new land because they either didn’t have a home of their own or they had

⁶¹ Bible, Exodus 13:15

⁶² Koran 2:191

depleted the resources where they were. So they expected their God to help them.”

“If that’s true, we are still doing it today, aren’t we? We still fight over resources. We are still depleting our own and fighting to get someone else’s. And, all the while, claiming that God is on our side.”

“But as far as the Bible goes, when Jesus came, he showed what God was really like. In the New Testament, the God of war disappeared. Didn’t he?”

“I would agree if it weren’t for the last book in the New Testament. In Revelation, once again, the God of wrath and retaliation reappears. In the Koran, the God of war is present throughout. However, let’s leave that topic for now and revisit it later. One look at the news and it is obvious that people are angry. They are angry with governments that have promised economic security and have failed to deliver. Look at the civil unrest all over the world today. People are angry at businesses that care more about their profit than their people. Look at the protests in the streets of Washington in the fall of 2011. Look at the unrest throughout the nations of the world. People are dissatisfied and part of that dissatisfaction is with religion and the religious laws that actually suppress its members. They are tired of hearing the same old rhetoric week after week while seeing no positive change and finding no lasting satisfaction or sustainable hope. The increase in violence, broken homes and teenage suicide is a direct result of this anger and futility. These are the kinds of actions that effective religion should help to eliminate. But instead, religion is actually one of the reasons for this anger.”

Even though deep down I agreed, I was beginning to get a little defensive. “Maybe these problems and this anger is a result of men who don’t really practice their faith. Maybe it’s mankind and not religion that has failed.”

“Actually, many of our problems today are due in part because some people *are* living out what they believe.” I was totally caught off guard with this statement. Samuel continued before I could respond.

“As we have discussed, the theology of Christianity and Islam teach a type of exclusivity that leads to resentment that can and has resulted in as much violence as any other source of conflict. Terrorism, Jihad, is a war being fought for Allah. The men committing these acts of terrorism are living out their faith. Exclusivity leads to intolerance; intolerance leads to the persecution of those who will not be tolerated and arrogance by those who will not tolerate.

“But certainly it is also evident that man has failed religion by enhancing the sacred documents in order to achieve his own agenda. It is obvious that religion, as defined by Christianity, Judaism and Islam has failed man and man has also failed religion.”

I sat quietly for a minute thinking about my own experiences and the things that I had studied about the history of religion. I could see where Samuel was going. Over the years many religious leaders have become consumed with power. Many years ago in the Roman Catholic Church the Popes exercised unrestrained power over their congregations and they used that power to commit untold atrocities. The Inquisitions of 1232 and 1542 are evidence of that. Today, in Christianity, we can see the crass and blatant robbery of people by televangelists; those predators who prey on innocent well-intentioned people who are urged to give sacrificially to a ministry of self-indulgent narcissists. Millions of people are bilked of their financial resources, in some instances far beyond their means, in order to satisfy some religious leader's claim that good converts should give of their resources sacrificially, and that there will be a great reward for this kind of giving. The actions of these men and women have turned as many away from religion as they have recruited.

In the Islamic faith, in the more extreme factions, religious leaders have instilled hatred and hostility in young Muslims and advocated violence by manipulating certain scriptures for no other reason than to advance their own personal political agendas. Women are suppressed by antiquated notions of inequality. Religious leaders have become obsessed with

politics, turning their pulpits into political platforms, practically dictating how their congregation should stand on political issues when Jesus, himself, never got involved with politics. In fact, when confronted with a political dilemma, he told his disciples to “render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s”.⁶³ Throughout his lifetime He did not get involved in politics. The involvement of churches and religious organizations in politics has caused division, hostility and rage among members and division with other organizations, turning many people away from religion altogether. Religion has been transformed from a spiritual to political focus and people are recognizing the futility of such religions. Some are leaving religion altogether while others are continuing to be led away from the truth like a bull with a ring in its nose. This is happening in Judaism, as well.

“So,” I continued, “even if we determine that mankind is not inherently evil, people still make decisions that result in negative consequences. The struggle in our world is still basically between good and evil, the result of man’s freedom to choose and his inevitable decision to do what is wrong. So much of religious theology is molded around this battle between good and evil: the concept of hell, the precept of salvation, the notion of forgiveness and repentance are all driven by this conflict. If we perceive the Almighty to be perfectly loving, what does that idea do to these aspects of religious theology? Didn’t God create evil?”

“I shouldn’t think so. Evil is the result of a decision. If a person makes a decision to do what is harmful to society then we say he did what was wrong. He committed evil. We create evil every time we make a decision that hurts someone else. Conversely, we create good when we do something that benefits others. God has given us the ability to make choices, we create evil when we make bad ones.”

“But what about the concept of the devil?”

“Evil is not a person or a being. The concept of the devil or Satan or Lucifer comes from two areas. The first is to satisfy our

⁶³ Bible, Matthew 22:21.

need to know where evil comes from. If we study the earliest religious ideas concerning creation we see that primitive people gave names to various qualities: wisdom was named Sophia, faith was Pistis.⁶⁴ Evil needs a name, an identity, so according to the Bible, it is Satan, Lucifer or the devil. Other cultures also had a name for evil or chaos. In the Enuma Elish, the creation story from Babylonia, it was Tiamat. So we have given evil a personification. This gives us someone to blame when we make bad decisions. It gives us the opportunity to shift the blame to someone else or something else for the evil that we have created.”

That did make sense. “I see your point. ‘The devil made me do it’ has been the cry of many people who wanted to shun the responsibility for making a bad decision.”

“The other reason for the creation of the devil is that we live in a world of opposites. If there is an ultimate good character, God, there must also be an ultimate bad character; the devil. But, in reality, evil is not a person or a thing. It is the result of making a bad decision.”

“So, basically, we create evil.”

“Yes. And we have no one to blame for it but ourselves.”

“So what about the concept of hell? What about the idea that is shared by most popular religions that justice occurs after we die and enter the afterlife? What would you say to that?”

THE AFTERLIFE

“If nature is our standard, it really doesn’t give us any indication of another life after this one, whether in heaven or hell. The closest indication that we have of an afterlife is the rejuvenation of plants. From earliest times the idea of a plant dying and a new plant emerging the following season has always been considered as a sign of new life springing up after death. Also many ancients thought of the rising and setting sun as the

⁶⁴ Translated by Marvin Meyer, *Nag Hammadi Scriptures: On the Origin of the World*, HarperOne, New York, 2007, p.199.

death and resurrection of a new day. The celebration of the new year symbolized the end or purging of the world and its regeneration, or rebirth.⁶⁵ However, it seems as far back as there have been religious ideas there has been the belief in a resurrection or some kind of life after death. The best evidence that this concept of resurrection was prevalent in early religion is from artifacts discovered from the excavation of ancient burial sites. Men were buried with food or wagons or weapons. Some were even buried with servants, horses and wives. Early believers were convinced that these things would make the journey easier or more comfortable for the individual who had died as they traveled to the next life. One of the most intriguing documents concerning death and the afterlife is the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, also called *The Book of Going Forth by Day*. In his introduction to the *Book of the Dead: The Papyrus of Ani*, Paul Mirecki explains the purpose of the ancient writings:

‘The Book of the Dead did not have a single author, as it is a composite work written by unknown Egyptian priests over a period of nearly 1000 years. Beginning in about 2400 BCE the priests and their educated scribal assistants inherited some of the writings now in *The Book of the Dead* and added new ones as needs arose. They first wrote these hieroglyphs on tomb walls, then coffins, and finally on papyrus scrolls for members of the royal family and the elite classes. These priests claimed to hold the keys to knowledge of life itself, including the nature of the underworld and the afterlife, and most importantly the rituals the deceased must perform in order to attain a successful journey through the underworld passages leading to the afterlife.’⁶⁶

“In addition, the idea that we were made in the image of the Creator, and believing that the Creator is immortal, would seem to imply that we, too, might possess a soul or spirit that is

⁶⁵ Elaide, p. 60.

⁶⁶ Introduction by Paul Mirecki, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Papyrus of Ani*, Barnes and Noble, New York, 2005, p. Vii.

immortal. If we assume that we do possess this immortal spirit, then some kind of life after this one might be waiting for us following this earthly life. But we should also understand that whatever it is it will be totally different from this one since it will be a spiritual world and not a physical one. Furthermore, if we have concluded correctly that God is perfect in goodness and love, then any kind of afterlife would be a very positive experience. Being subjected to a place of torment like a torturous hell, would be contrary to the character of the Almighty One.”

“You mean if God is perfectly good to us while we are on this earth, then it would follow that God would also be good to us in the next?”

“It would seem to be a reasonable conclusion. To be otherwise would be inconsistent. So, I suppose the concept of hell would be eliminated altogether.”

“But what about free will? As a protestant, I believe that God has given us all a free will so that we can make our own decisions. I should be able to choose whether I love God or not and I should be able to choose my own destiny.”

Samuel leaned over in his chair to get closer to me. “Can a man choose who his mother and father will be? And when we are born to that couple, aren’t they our parents for as long as we live on earth? Oh, sure, we might choose to be adopted and under the law get new parents, but our birth parents, those with whom we share our blood, will always remain the same. God has created us all. We are God’s creation and we always will be. Do we make decisions in this world that determine our destiny? Evidence from history indicates that we do. Other people also make decisions that can determine or greatly impact our destiny. But we are always God’s. Is there anything that can separate us from the love of God? Even if we decide not to love God in return, will God not love us still? Do you have children?”

“Yes. Two sons.”

“Do you love them?” he asked.

“Of course, with all of my heart.”

“And you will always love them?” he questioned.

“I will, always.”

“Listen,” he continued, “I, too, have children, a boy and a girl. They will make decisions that will impact their lives. And I, too, will always love them even if they despise me. You see, they have no control over my love. As noted earlier, if God’s love is unconditional then it is not dependent, nor affected by our decision to love God back.

“But hell has been a part of religious ideology for ages,” I argued.

“That’s true. But we must once again look closely at the order of life on this earth to understand the justification for the existence of hell. As we have discussed, this world functions on a system of opposites. If there is good, there must be bad. If there is joy, there must be sorrow. So, it only follows that if there is a good place where good people go when they die then there must be a bad place where bad people go. The creation of one place, a good place, requires the creation of a second place of opposite value, a bad place. In addition, there are those who seem to need some kind of threat of punishment in order to make good decisions; both morally and ethically.”

“You mean they don’t possess the self-control to do what is right?”

“Partly due to the lack of self-control, I suppose you could say.” He got up and put another log on the fire.

“There seem to be those who refuse to act within the bounds of socially acceptable behavior unless they are threatened with some kind of disciplinary action. This disposition might be a result of the environment in which they were raised, or there might be a myriad of other causes. But the fact is, if there is no threat of punishment then these people will behave impulsively or act out of greed or selfishness, which will have a negative effect on the community or other individuals. For many, it is the

threat of eternal punishment that is a deterrent for wrongful actions.

“On the other hand, some people simply do not take the time to adequately and logically weigh the consequences of their decisions. Therefore, their behavior is based solely on impulse and immediate gratification. So it becomes hell and the eternal punishment of God that is the threat or deterrent that keeps these people on the ‘straight and narrow.’”

“Can you think of any examples in nature that might substantiate the assumption that there is no hell?” I asked.

“No. But as I mentioned, I can’t think of any that support it, either. I cannot think of any examples of life after death at all in nature. So the afterlife is more a conjecture based on the assumed immortality of the soul and the rebirth of the dead plant and the rising and setting sun. However, neither really needs proof.”

“What do you mean?” I was curious where he was going with this.

“What I mean is this: if we live our lives after the example of the Creator; kind, loving, and caring, and we accept that the Almighty One calls us to care for others, as well as the earth on which we live, then we don’t have to worry whether there is a heaven or hell or even if there is an afterlife. Whether it is heaven, or reincarnation, or nothing at all, if we have lived this life doing the best that we can then the next life will take care of itself. In the Hindu religion it is taught that what a person does in this life constitutes his karma. When a person is reincarnated, his karma, his actions in this life, determines what form he will take when he returns to earth. So it holds true in every religion: what we do here and now, the decisions we make in this life, affects our existence in the next. Since there is no real proof of an afterlife of any kind, we should live as if this life is the only one we have and we should do our best to be the best we can be and contribute the most that we can here and now.”

“But if there is no belief in an afterlife,” I argued, “heaven or hell, then those people who need those things to stay on the ‘straight and narrow’ might say, ‘if that’s all there is then let’s get as much as we can any way we can’. How will we handle this situation? Because if enough people choose to do what is harmful, then the world could ultimately be destroyed by bad choices.”

“You’re absolutely correct. Remember earlier when you played the creator and created humans?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Now, we need go beyond how we will design humans and discuss how we will create the world to accommodate these creatures.”

“But we’ve already created the world, haven’t we?”

JUDGMENT

“To some degree. Now we need to decide how we will design a process that will serve as a fail-safe to keep man from destroying himself and the world.”

“I think we’ve bitten off more than we can chew.” I wasn’t exactly sure what he meant by a fail-safe. “We’re not actually God so we are left to our own limited abilities for overcoming a very complex problem.”

“The answer has already been given. The fail-safe has already been created and is actively functioning in the world. All we need to do is determine how God did it and build it into our own world.”

“So, where is the fail-safe?” I questioned.

“We will design into our world a system of checks and balances, cause and effect, action and consequence.” He watched the fire burn as he spoke.

“For every action there is a reaction, or a consequence,” he explained.

“Yes, I understand that.”

“There is an old saying, ‘what goes around comes around,’” he said.

“I remember the saying, but is that always true? Do people always reap what they sow?”

“Maybe they do in several ways,” he went on to explain. “Experience tells us that there are at least two types of consequences: natural and social. Natural consequences are those that are the natural results of an action or behavior.”

“You mean, if I decide to drive through a stop sign at an intersection without yielding, I might get hit by another automobile? That would be the natural consequence?”

“Exactly,” he responded.

“And if I get hit, the natural consequences could be damage to the vehicles, as well as injuries to myself and the occupants of the other auto that was involved in the accident. And, consequently, any long term health effects, medical bills and all other issues that resulted from my decision to drive through the stop sign would all be considered natural consequences.”

“That’s correct. We can think of hundreds of examples of natural consequences. The second are social consequences. In other words, how society reacts to our action or behavior. The most obvious example of a social consequence is the judicial system that has been established to deal with socially unacceptable behavior. God has led us, through experience, to understand that as social creatures living in communities it is necessary to have rules that govern the way we should act within that community. So we have created a judicial system that is designed to impose certain consequences for certain unacceptable actions.”

“I’m afraid our justice system is not always fair,” I observed. “Many of our laws themselves impose penalties on the innocent and do not always exact justice on the guilty.”

“Of course. And that’s one reason why we must always be vigilant in reassessing our legal system and striving to make it as

fair as we possibly can; always remembering that we are operating under very limited knowledge of the situations and circumstances surrounding any particular incident. We must always be cautious not to rush to judgment, but painstakingly examine all available evidence in order to draw the most accurate conclusion and assess the fairest verdict or punishment for the crime committed.”

“I agree. But in spite of our best efforts, there will still be times when true justice is not served.”

“Maybe there is another way that ensures justice is always accomplished.”

He sat down and leaned back in his chair. I thought for a moment but I couldn’t come up with anything.

“Another way?” I asked.

“God’s way.”

“You believe God personally intervenes and penalizes those who wrong others?”

“Perhaps not directly. But remember that God has built into this world a fail-safe, a system for ensuring that justice is accomplished. I think history will prove me out.”

“And how do you think that happens?” I was really curious about this idea.

“Through the complex way that our brain has been wired,” he answered.

“I’m a simple man. Can you be more specific?”

“I can try,” he continued. “I know you might find my theory difficult to grasp, but please indulge me. It makes sense and it is consistent with what we know about how the mind works.”

“Yes. Go on.”

“Do you agree that stress can cause severe physical, emotional and psychological illness?”

“I think it has been proven medically that stress plays a role in our health.”

“In an article written for *Scientific American* by Melinda Wenner entitled, *The Danger of Stress - Getting stressed isn't just a state of mind. It can also seriously harm the body*, Melinda reviewed a speech given by Ohio State University psychologist Janice Kiecolt-Glaser and her partner, Ronald Glaser, an OSU virologist and immunologist, at the annual conference of the American Psychological Association in Boston. Melinda summarized their speech concerning stress and health.

‘It might seem counterintuitive, but Kiecolt-Glaser believes that stress makes our immune systems less effective because it actually elicits an immune response itself. Stress, she says, causes the body to release pro-inflammatory cytokines, immune factors that initiate responses against infections. When the body produces these cytokines over long periods of time—for instance, as a result of chronic stress—all sorts of bad things can happen. Not only does it hamper our body's ability to fight infection and heal wounds, but chronic inflammation also increases our risk of heart disease, osteoporosis, and autoimmune diseases including type 2 diabetes. What's more, because regular stress causes a chronic immune response, it can also increase a person's risk for allergies, which occur when the body elicits a chronic immune response against something that's not really dangerous (like pollen). In her most recent study, announced yesterday, Kiecolt-Glaser found that when people are under lots of stress — for instance, when they are forced to deliver a speech or do difficult math problems on the spot—their allergies worsen over the course of the next day.’⁶⁷

“These experts have spent 20-odd years researching how stress affects the immune system. We also have strong

⁶⁷ *Scientific American* – August 15, 2008 p. 22

indications that guilt can lead to depression and depression can contribute significantly to stress.”

“I think that’s true in some instances.”

“And would you further agree that it has been medically proven that what goes on in our subconscious, or unconscious mind also can have an effect on our health?”

“I’m not sure I know enough about that to say one way or the other.”

Samuel got up and walked to an overcrowded bookshelf next to the fireplace. He examined the books. Finally, he pulled out a three-ring binder.

“While considering these things, I did quite a bit of research to ensure that each of my propositions was credible. I won’t bore you with a volume of material, but let me read a short excerpt from a couple of articles on the subject. In an article written by Daniel Goleman in March of 1988, for the New York Times he says,

‘Behavioral scientists report that these people, referring to those who suppress emotions, are not simply successful at masking emotion or staying cool under pressure; often they are not even aware of their own inner stress, even as the body registers it with higher blood pressure or more rapid heartbeat. As a result, studies are showing these "represser" personality types are more prone than others to some diseases. The ability to tune out feelings like anger and anxiety is reflected in brain function. A recent study of stiff-upper-lip types found they had a lag in the time it took certain information to get from one hemisphere of the brain to the other. The lag was only for disturbing messages, not for neutral ones, according to the study by Richard Davidson of the University of Wisconsin.’

“Decades ago Freud postulated that important feelings could be stifled before they entered consciousness. And in the

years since, others have asserted that repressed feelings could emerge as illness’.”

He flipped to another page.

“This article is excerpted from the Alternative Medicine Guide's Cancer Diagnosis – What to do next, by W. John Diamond, M.D. and W. Lee Cowden, M.D.

‘Although scientists have long debated the role of repressed emotions in cancer, at least three studies offer compelling evidence validating that role. In each of these studies, people were followed over time to determine their rates of disease in relation to various behaviors or exposures. Taken together, the results indicate a link between cancer resistance and emotional expression or its suppression.’

“So, you see, these repressed feelings find their way into the subconscious mind where they don’t just lie dormant. Even though they might not be at the front of the mind, they still have the same effect as conscious thoughts that have the potential to induce stress, anxiety or depression.”

“Alright, I can see your point.”

“Now, let’s say that a person has stolen something very valuable from someone else and they have not been caught so they are not subject to the social consequences of the law. It is absolutely possible that simply the knowledge of having committed the wrong can have a devastating effect on the one who committed the action through the reaction or response of the subconscious mind.”

“You actually believe we have a built-in justice system in our brain?” I asked.

“I do. If the one who committed the wrongful action is a person with an active conscience, the stress associated with the guilt of committing such an act can cause serious emotional and even physical illnesses. Perhaps many of the illnesses that

people experience are a result of wrongs they have committed and their bodies are suffering the consequences.”

“But there are some people who don’t seem to have a conscience at all. They don’t appear to feel guilt over anything.” I argued

“That’s true, as you said, they don’t *appear* to experience guilt. Not consciously, that is. However, the knowledge alone of committing the wrongful deed might result in physical, emotional or psychological problems due to the fact that the subconscious mind may react in the same way in the unremorseful person as the conscious mind does in the person who feels remorse.”

“How can that be if the perpetrator doesn’t feel guilty at all for his actions?”

“As you know, the mind is a powerful force. Although it might be subconscious, the person who committed the wrong is aware of committing the act and, consequently, the awareness alone might be enough to put the mind to work in such a way as to affect his health. Remember, the subconscious mind is where intuition and instinct reside and both of those have a significant impact on the way we behave. Additionally, there have been studies conducted of the personal consequences experienced by those who suffer from personality disorders and who don’t seem to acknowledge remorse.”

He flipped a few more pages in the binder. “Here’s a brief paragraph from an article written by psychologist Joseph M. Carver, Ph.D., published in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition:

‘Personality Disorders are individuals who have a long history of personality, behavior, emotional, and relationship difficulties. This group is said to have a “personality disorder” – an enduring pattern of inner experience (mood, attitude, beliefs, values, etc.) and behavior (aggressiveness, instability, etc.) that is significantly different than those in their family or culture. These dysfunctional patterns are inflexible

and intrusive into almost every aspect of the individual's life. These patterns create significant problems in personal and emotional functioning and are often so severe that they lead to distress or impairment in all areas of their life.'

"In other words, even those with personality disorders suffer from their unacceptable social behavior."

"But how can this theory of yours be proven?" I asked.

"Unfortunately, it is virtually impossible to prove. One would have to find someone who has committed crimes for which he has not been penalized by social law, get him to confess his guilt and then examine that person's mental, emotional and physical health to see if he has suffered extraordinarily over the years. There is extensive research being done now to try to understand the power that the unconscious mind has on health. However, there is presently sufficient evidence from current studies to show this theory to be a credible one."

"But isn't this going back to the old theory that all illnesses are the result of what the Jews called sin? If I remember correctly, the Biblical character, Job, was accused of committing sins for which he was being punished through a series of ailments. In ancient times, weren't many illnesses thought to be a result of bad behavior?"

"There was that school of thought. And, how can we say that it was totally incorrect? And don't misunderstand, I am not claiming that God causes the illness. I'm merely saying that the subconscious mind may function in such a way as to react to certain stimuli or behaviors that it knows through childhood lessons, or intuition, or observation, to be wrong or unfair. And this knowledge alone could result in a less effective immune system due to stress or feelings of guilt. Certainly, not all sicknesses are a result of bad behavior. There are illnesses in the world that are a result of a thousand different causes. But what I am saying is that some illnesses, in some circumstances, might be a result of committing a wrongful action that is not punished

by social law. The point that I'm trying to make is that only God knows all things and has made accommodation for all things. And in every other aspect of life the Creator seems to have written into the order and functioning of this world a system of consequences to offset every action. True justice has been established not to punish the wrongdoer, but to demonstrate that there are negative consequences for behavior that negatively affects society. Consequences are actually a lesson in doing good; making good decisions. Therefore, it is only reasonable that God has established a system for justice in a world where social justice does not always come into play or in those instances where it is ineffective."

"An interesting theory. So, if punishment is accomplished here, in this life, what is your conclusion concerning hell?"

"Again, that it is a concept contrary to the nature of the Almighty One. Once again, if justice is accomplished here and now then it is an even greater deterrent to bad behavior because suffering the consequences is not something that will happen later in some other world, it will be immediate. It might be as a result of our justice system, social consequences, natural consequences or, as we have just discussed, by way of a psychological reaction to the unacceptable behavior. It is possible and consistent with the efficient design of this universe that various processes have been incorporated into the world to protect creation and civilization. If a person understands this concept, then they are more likely to act within the bounds of acceptable social behavior because they realize that the ramifications of unacceptable behavior are immediate and imminent. This seems much more logical in the order of things and much more consistent with the assumed nature of God than does the idea of some torturous place of eternal doom. A place called Hell where a person experiences torment for eternity is certainly inconsistent with a perfectly loving and merciful God. And, let me add one more argument concerning this issue."

"Go on."

He replaced the binder on shelf and walked back to his chair.

“As I mentioned earlier, I have two children. I love those kids with all of my heart. There is nothing that they can do to make me stop loving them. No matter what they do, I would never send them to a place of eternal torment; even if their actions upset me and they deserved to be punished in such a place. Even if it were their choice, I would never allow them to be subjected to such a hideous punishment. If I, being human, with a limited capacity to love, feel that way about my children, how much more will a loving God, of limitless capacity, protect Its creation from experiencing such a punishment even if it is deserved.”

“Yes. I’ve often wondered about that. According to your theory, then, there are consequences for unacceptable behavior. But what if I choose not to believe in God? Are there any consequences for that?”

“Yes. Certainly.”

“So, you think they also suffer from illnesses and failure?”

“Not at all. History provides us with proof that there have been many people who have chosen not to believe in God who have lived healthy successful lives. But, if we were created by God and God is in all of us as a creative, intelligent, compassionate life force, then we will never be complete until we acknowledge this force and attempt to understand it as much as we can. Let me explain. As we discussed earlier, we define the depth of an emotion based on what we have personally experienced. When I was young, I fell in love. I thought the love I felt was the greatest love there could be because it was the greatest feeling of love that I had ever experienced. But, when I was older, I fell in love again. The first relationship gave me something with which to compare the second relationship; a baseline, so to speak. This time, the love that I experienced was even greater than that of the previous relationship. I now had the capacity to realize a greater level or depth of love. Likewise, I have experienced pain in my life. My first experience with pain

set the standard for pain in my life. Since then I have compared every subsequent pain to that first one, or the greatest one. In other words, the highest level of any emotion that exists for me is the level of that emotion that I have personally experienced. We cannot know the depth of any emotion based on someone else's experience. This is not information that can be communicated by words or learned vicariously. So, it follows that the level of joy or contentment, or peace that we have personally experienced is the only level that we can know of these emotions.

“We were created as physical and spiritual beings. That is, we have a physical form and a non-physical form. Call this non-physical entity what you will, spirit or consciousness or energy. If the Creator is spirit and It exists in our lives as a creative, intelligent life force, then we will never know the ultimate dimension of emotion or creativity or intellect that is available to us until we acknowledge God's spirit in our lives. It is this relationship that allows us to fully comprehend the qualities of life. The person who chooses not to believe in this Deity might have peace and contentment, and even be enormously successful, but they will never experience their ultimate potential until they have established a relationship with this inconceivable Being. The Hindus called this Self. Man needs God because without God man is incomplete. God is the source of life, the energy that brings breath, makes the heart beat and the blood flow. God is the author of expression and intellect, the very source of consciousness. God is in us and we are in God. In the Brihaduranyaka Upanishad it is written:

“The Imperishable is the seer, though unseen; the hearer, though unheard; the thinker, though unthought; the knower, though unknown. Nothing other than the Imperishable can see, hear, think, or know. It is in the Imperishable that space is woven, warp and woof.”⁶⁸

“And you can prove this?” I asked.

⁶⁸ *Brihaduranyaka Upanishad*, Chapter 3, Section 8, verse 11.

“Our proof comes from the testimony of thousands of people who have lived without having this relationship for years and then have discovered it. It can only be proven in two ways: through the testimony of those who have experienced it, or through a personal experience.”

“So, no hell,” I concluded. “What about heaven? No heaven, either? There are those who find great comfort in thinking about such a place as heaven.”

“I understand that, but the very idea that we can even begin to imagine what a place such as heaven or paradise is like is impractical. It has been said that in heaven there is no pain, no suffering, and no sorrow. If there is no pain and no sorrow, then how can we understand what joy is? As we have discussed earlier, we understand life based on opposites. The ups and downs are what make life interesting and definable. One who experiences only joy will soon forget what joy feels like because there is nothing to which to compare it. As it becomes mundane to be happy, one would certainly grow sad with the boredom of always feeling good.

“You see, if there is a place like heaven then certainly it is unlike anything that we experience in this world. So, what such a place will resemble is inconceivable because we can only conceive of those things that we have experienced, those things that are familiar to us. There is also a potential danger with the concept of a wonderful life after death.”

“And what is that?”

“There is the danger that a person will get so caught up in the expectation of the next life that they will forget to live this one to its fullest,” he explained.

“But sometimes, when a person is experiencing extreme grief or is caught up in a difficult situation, thinking about a better life in a better place can bring comfort and hope,” I argued.

“Why not concentrate, instead, on making this world a better place? Rather than using the afterlife as an escape from

reality, why not use that same energy to improve conditions here? Again, the obvious and reasonable answer is to strive to live a good life, helping and caring for our world, our family and our fellowman. And if we do that, the afterlife will take care of itself.”

“What do you say about the Hindu’s belief in reincarnation?”

“As we have discussed, both Hinduism and Buddhism teach reincarnation or transmigration of the soul. As a person lives his life on earth, good deeds and bad actions are evaluated to determine his karma, or quality of character. It is this karma that determines if a person has reached enlightenment, which the Hindus call Moska and Buddhists call Nirvana. If a person has not attained this ultimate enlightenment, his karma determines in what form he will return to earth. A person could come back, or transmigrate, as another human, or, if the individual has a really bad karma, he could return as an animal or some other lower creature. The concept of reincarnation has its share of unanswered questions. However, since we know nothing about what comes after this life, if anything at all, reincarnation is as viable an option as any other. The entire concept of heaven and hell and reincarnation are ideas based on nothing and it is useless discussing them.”

“But in the final analysis,” I continued, “mustn’t we conclude that life is futile? I mean, after all of this discussion and lengthy discourse you must agree that in the end, we all succumb to the same end...we all die. And in light of that fact, must we not further conclude that regardless of how we have lived our lives, whether we are rich or poor, good or evil, death is the ultimate reality for all men?”

“I will agree that there is much futility in physical existence as we know it here and now.”

“And can’t we agree,” I suggested, “that it is the hope of a positive eternal existence, life in a better place, that gives us that fragment of peace as we lay on our deathbeds? Isn’t that the

value of a religious ideology that advocates an eternal existence for the spirit of men?”

“I don’t agree with that completely,” he replied. “It’s true that we all meet the same end. It’s true that death is inevitable for everyone regardless of the kind of life we have lived. But isn’t it also possible that in those last hours and minutes of life, in the time when death approaches, one can find value in existence and real peace without belief in paradise?”

“And how is that?” I asked.

“If a person reflects on his life, as I believe all men do who are aware of their imminent fate. And if that person’s life has been filled with self-centeredness, getting what he can, gaining power, accumulating wealth and using that wealth for no other reason than for himself and his own selfish desires, then yes, as the final moments of life flee, he will experience only futility. Common sense tells us, in a loud voice, that our possessions will be left to others who will not appreciate them, our wealth will be divided among those who will throw it away on their own desires, power will vanish as our heart takes its final beat and the fame we have achieved and the memories that linger of our accomplishments will soon be forgotten as if we never existed at all. We will be gone. That is the reality of the futility of life. But, if a person has lived his life caring for others when he can; if he made his purpose to help those in need, no matter how large or small that need is, then those last fleeting moments of life hold something different. The memories of making one moment of life better for another person; the realization that in this life of hardships, of loneliness and dark despair, he has been responsible for bringing a moment of hope, of joy, of light into someone’s life will bring a deep authentic feeling of peace and happiness knowing that his life was not wasted on meaningless, superficial stuff. Those are the ones, those who cared and loved, who can face the future, whatever that may be or may not be, with optimism knowing that their existence counted for something beyond the corporeal because they lifted the spirit of another. For one brief moment, time and time again, they made life more bearable, happier and better for another human being.

It is that realization that will bring them joy and hope and peace in those final seconds before death. Living a good, benevolent life, caring for others and acknowledging God is the only sure path for overcoming the futility of life, the only way of bringing meaning to this otherwise meaningless existence.

“On the other hand, if it brings joy and contentment to a person to dream of some kind of paradise, then let him dream. It really doesn’t make a difference what a person believes about the afterlife except for the dangers that we have just mentioned.”

“So, in the final analysis we must conclude that we live our entire lives preparing for death.”

“Yes and no. We live our lives for the here and now. That’s all we can do to prepare for the afterlife, whatever that may be. But remember, if there is life after death, God, who has provided a wonderful place for us to live on this earth, will certainly do the same when the next life rolls around. I, personally, am excited about what comes next. I believe it will be an adventure. If it is reincarnation, I’ll have another opportunity to experience a life similar to the one I’m living now. Maybe I’ll do a better job the next time around. If it turns out to be some kind of blissful other-dimensional world then I will enjoy that. However, if it is nothing at all, then I won’t be aware of it anyway so it won’t matter.

“But now let me suggest that we take a break for the evening. I’m getting weary. I don’t have the stamina that I used to have.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” I readily agreed.

I was suffering from information overload. There were three blank pages left in my notebook. I needed to find a new writing tablet before tomorrow. As I glanced through the pages of my notes I was astounded at what we had covered. So much made sense. So much met the criteria for truth and yet so much was very different than what I had believed for decades; what I had been taught all of my life. I knew that the time was coming when all of this information would need to be plugged into my

life. I wasn't sure yet what I would do with all that I had learned. These were things I wanted to know when I began my quest, or at least I thought I did. Now, I wasn't so sure. I remembered a quote from Anatole France who said:

“All changes, even the most longed for have their melancholy; for what we leave behind us is a part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can start another.”

Chapter 13

Truth only reveals itself when one gives up all preconceived ideas.

-- *Unknown*

The next morning I found Samuel having his coffee on the deck. We exchanged greetings. He invited me to join him. He expressed his concern that we might be talking about things that didn't interest me. I assured him that everything we had discussed was important. In fact, I was eager to continue. I put a little sugar in my coffee and the discussion picked up where we had left off the night before.

"I would like to continue," I said, "talking about how our perception in regard to the character and nature of God affects contemporary theology. How does our concept of a perfectly loving God impact forgiveness?"

FORGIVENESS

"Once again, if God is perfectly loving then forgiveness is certain."

"You mean it comes more or less automatically?"

"If this incredible Deity is all-knowing then It already knows, in advance, what you and I are going to do and It has already made accommodation for that action. And, if It loves us, then It will always forgive us. Of course, we still suffer the consequences for our actions: emotionally, physically, mentally, socially, or any combination of these, but God, being a loving God, forgives us. This consistency, knowing that God will always forgive, is what brings us hope. We never need to feel that God is against us. My children know that no matter what they do, what trouble they cause or what circumstances plague their life, they can always come home if they need to. We need to know that we can always come to God and find love."

"Some religions teach that wrongdoing, or sinning, creates a wall or barrier between the one who committed the sin and

God. It is further taught that the barrier is not removed until the person asks for forgiveness. What do you think about that?" I asked.

"Here is the basic question," he replied, "was the sin committed against God or someone else? If God is perfectly loving then God cannot be offended. God will always understand. However, if the harmful deed or words offended another person, then forgiveness needs to be sought from that person and not from God."

REPENTANCE

"What about repentance?" I asked.

"Repentance and the concept of forgiveness is really for our benefit when you think about it."

"How do you mean?"

"It's really a natural progression: we understand that what we have done is wrong because it hurt someone else, we feel remorse for our actions or words and we vow not to do it again. This is repentance. It is simply being sorry for something that we have done that hurt someone else and then vowing to not do it again. And, in making that decision, we feel better about ourselves knowing that we have made an improvement. If we are not sincerely repentant then we will more than likely repeat the action again and, once again, suffer the consequences."

"And the guilt for what we have done?"

"Experience tells us that most people will still feel the guilt for having done or said something that hurt someone else. After all, the damage we have done cannot be undone. The consequences have been put into motion and they cannot be stopped. However, pledging that we will not do such a thing again will, perhaps, ease some of the guilt. Also, we have the peace and assurance that comes from knowing that God has already forgiven us. There is another action that comes into play here."

CONFESSION

“Confession?” I asked.

“Yes. In Matthew 2:23-24, Jesus is credited with saying,

‘Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.’

“It seems that the point was not so much to confess to God, but to go to the person that was offended and ask for their forgiveness. By confessing we accept responsibility for our actions and this can bring peace, or eliminate some of the guilt that we might experience as a result of hurting someone else.

“Also, and more importantly, that kind of confession will help heal the wounded relationship that might have been a result of the offending deed or words.”

SALVATION

“What about salvation? Christianity teaches that salvation only comes by believing in Jesus as being the Son of God. Islam teaches that a person must believe in Allah, the Koran and must acknowledge that Muhammad was God’s prophet.”

“And Judaism,” Samuel continued, “while much more vague in their guidelines for salvation, dictates that a person must observe Jewish law, be circumcised and adhere to traditional customs. Each religion teaches that they have the only way to salvation, they are the only way to God; each claim to be God’s chosen people. Therefore, this formula for salvation makes them unique or exclusive. They own God. This feeling of exclusivity can lead to an attitude of arrogance and self-righteousness. Exclusivity is certainly contradictory to what we have discovered about the consistency and perfect love of the Almighty One.

“In addition, as you have already noted, all three religions claim that the Almighty One’s love is like a covenant – a one-

way agreement. If this is the case then we do not have to do anything to merit God's love and affection. If we did, it would be a contract, not a covenant. Remember, Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:45b,

‘He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.’

“God is no respecter of persons. In the One's sight, it seems we are all the same. That's consistency.

“Also, there is a danger associated with obtaining salvation through a certain act or by performing certain deeds, or observing certain rituals,” he explained. “Once a person feels that they have obtained this salvation, there might be a tendency to think that's all there is, that they have done all they need to do, that they have accomplished all they need to accomplish. This feeling of complacency can result in a lack of personal involvement in the activities that are really important: helping others and helping to make this world a better place in which to live. Once again, it is important to reiterate that it is this attitude of exclusivity that has caused conflict between religions and led to much of the strife that we are experiencing in the world today.”

PRAYER

“And what about prayer? What does our conclusion about the nature of God tell us about prayer?”

“Prayer is one of the most challenging issues in religious philosophy. Obviously, there is nothing in nature to give us a clue concerning prayer. However, if we examine the concept of prayer, we can draw some conclusions that are rational and logical. So let's discuss the logic behind prayer.”

“But can there be logic applied to something like communication with a supernatural being?” I asked.

“Bear with me, if you will.”

“Go ahead.” I couldn't wait to hear how he planned to deal with this topic.

“Why do people pray?” he asked.

“I guess there are a lot of reasons. Sometimes we pray because we need help, sometimes it’s to offer praise and at other times it might be to ask God to help someone else who is in need.”

He nodded in agreement. “I think you’ve covered some of the reasons. There are several implications that are inherent when we discuss prayer. First, when we ask God for something we are implying that God isn’t aware that we have a certain need or desire so we have to bring it to God’s attention. If God is perfect in knowledge, then God already knows what we need or desire. Remember, what Jesus said concerning prayer:

‘And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.’⁶⁹

“Secondly, prayer implies that we can be persuasive enough to convince God to give us what we need or want. In other words, we think we have the power to influence how God will work in our lives and the lives of others. That implies that we can have control over God.

“Thirdly, prayer infers that we know better than God what should be done or should not be done in a specific situation. Again, the implication here is that we are more knowledgeable than God. Do we think we know better than God when it is God who understands and sees everything fully whereas we can only see things from a very limited perspective?”

I had to agree. “I guess, like you said, with our limited knowledge of what is involved in any given situation, we might actually be praying for something that would result in a worse situation if God answered that prayer and gave us what we requested!”

⁶⁹ Bible, Matthew 6:7-8.

“I think that’s a good point. And, fourth, prayer infers that God will alter everyone else’s schedule or life in some way so that we can get what we want. If I pray that God will give me a specific job, for instance, will God answer that prayer and give me the job when someone else is more qualified and needs the job more than I do? Will God give me the job in spite of the fact that there is a better job for me somewhere else, just waiting for me to find it? Will God alter everyone else’s life to give me what I want in spite of the fact that it is not what is best for me or for others? Probably not. Our prayer should be that God will lead us to the best opportunity and allow us to be able to recognize it when we see it.”

“So, what is your conclusion?” I wondered.

“We can conclude that prayer is really not logical when approaching prayer in this way because God already knows what we need or desire. God knows better than we do what decision should be made and, since God’s decisions are always perfect, we probably will not change the God’s mind through our argument no matter how persuasive we might be.

“Our prayers should be that God will help us in our decisions, give us guidance and allow us the sensitivity to recognize and discern what is from God and what is from our own desires. We should also praise God at every opportunity. Not for God’s sake, but because we should feel humbled that this incomprehensible Being cares for us and has given us all that we have.

“Besides, as we have discussed, God is already actively participating in answering our prayers in another way that does not involve supernatural activity.”

“Remind me. How is that?”

“Let’s take a career choice for example. Let’s suppose that a person prays that God will lead him to the best career. God has given that person a talent and an interest, perhaps even a desire in some specific area. So, God has already pointed the way. If that individual considers his talent and what he enjoys doing then

he has reached the first step. Then, if he adds to the formula a list of his responsibilities, that is, his financial requirements, and any other influencing factors and uses these ingredients to make a decision about a career, he should be well on the way to finding what he is looking for. God has given us all we need to make this and all other decisions in our lives. God participates by giving us the tools and capabilities we need to make logical decisions. And, as we mentioned, God is available to assist us through a variety of resources such as other people and a wealth of information from a myriad of sources.”

“I think when many people pray for something they are hoping to get some supernatural sign.”

“You’re right. One of the greatest dangers regarding prayer is that the person doing the praying won’t do anything but sit around and wait for an answer, a supernatural revelation of some kind, an epiphany.”

“And do you think God gives it?”

“A supernatural revelation?”

“Yeah.”

“Not most of the time,” he replied. “God answers prayers by helping us make right decisions but we have to be actively involved in the decision-making process. God’s sign or revelation comes to us as we get involved in trying to find the answer to our dilemma. For instance, in seeking a career, we learn more about ourselves as we experiment with jobs and then experience the changes in our perception of that job as we participate in or develop that career. Then we can make new decisions based on those changes, all the while, learning more about life and ourselves. Some people want an immediate answer to their prayers, but we must realize, again, as history and experience tell us, that some things take time. As we search for answers to our prayers or become actively involved in the answer to our prayers, we are learning valuable lessons that can result in patience and wisdom. God has already given us what we need to act. I think this is true with all of our decisions. We

have the greatest creative, intelligent energy in our lives. All we need to do is learn to tap that amazing power. But as for answering prayer supernaturally, God is God and God will do whatever It sees fit and necessary to do. So nothing is out of the realm of possibility.”

“So praying for food, shelter and clothing is a waste of time?”

“Certainly not a waste of time. But, if God is truly omnipotent, then God already knows what we need. So, we are merely reiterating what God already knows. Perhaps it makes us feel better to have asked for it, but the Incomprehensible One already knows our needs and our desires. But, once again, remember, we must be actively involved in getting these things for ourselves. If we pray for food and then sit around waiting for a handout or for a steak to fall from the sky we might just starve to death. We always have to be involved in the process. The secret is to offer praise to God for providing these things to us.”

“So, in your evaluation, God is the enabler?” I concluded.

“Yes, but more than that. God also gets involved by putting people and other influences in our lives that can help us. God provides us with a wealth of information if we look for it. And God offers us wisdom, as well. So God is not just an enabler, God is also an active provider as well as the power or energy behind our thoughts. God is always with us assisting us with our decision-making.”

“How about praying for healing?”

“Let’s face the truth, if God answered the prayer of every person who prayed for healing, no one would be sick and no one would die! Additionally, when a person doesn’t get better and does die, is it God’s fault for not answering the prayer? Or is it life? The consequences of life must be played out if there is going to be a balance in this world. That’s the way the world was designed. Do you see what I mean? The simple fact is that if God answered every prayer by every person according to their desires, there would be no sickness, no death, no sorrow, no

pain, no responsibility for our actions because God would always step in and fix the situation. I guess we would call that heaven! Unfortunately, this is not heaven. On this earth, in this life, there is pain and sorrow and death. That is the order of this world.”

“But at times do you think God will step in and supernaturally alter a situation.”

“Again, nothing is beyond God. Since the Spirit does whatever it chooses to do, supernatural involvement is not beyond reason when it comes to a supernatural being. But I’m not sure that supernatural intervention comes as a result of a prayer request. God knows and God acts. Sometimes when it’s best for someone to be miraculously cured, it happens. When there is a situation that needs an immediate, supernatural remedy, it comes. Some people might call that coincidence but one man’s coincidence is another man’s miracle. There have been too many such occurrences in my own life to be considered coincidence. I’m not sure why or when God does it, but logical or not, God acts when and where God pleases and it is always the correct decision.”

“So you do or don’t believe in prayer?” I was still a little confused in how he stood on this issue.

“I do. But, as I mentioned, prayer, talking to God is very complex. Most religions set certain criteria for prayer: you must face a certain direction, pray at a specific time of day, say certain words over and over, pray in someone’s name, hold hands. All of these things imply that the Almighty One cannot or will not hear the prayer if those conditions are not met. If a loving parent will listen to their children under any circumstance then why would a loving God set such parameters before hearing our prayers? It seems totally out of character.”

“But aren’t these rituals good. Don’t they remind us to communicate with God?”

“Maybe. But the danger in following these rituals, praying a certain number of times a day or before meals or at bedtime, might become so automatic that they are meaningless except to

make the person praying feel better about himself because he has met the requirement of performing that rite. Maybe we should define what prayer is.”

“In what way?”

“Prayer is communication. If God exists around us and within us, then our very thoughts are prayers. Earlier I said that prayer is not logical. However, if we realize that God is living in us, then communication is not only logical, it is natural. God knows our thoughts, therefore every thought is communication. If a person wants to make conversations with God more formal, that’s his option, but we must be aware that God is always participating in our lives, constantly communicating through our thoughts. Besides, it seems that prayer has become more for the individual doing the praying than it is a conversation with God.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Prayer offers hope,” he continued. “Hope makes a person more optimistic. People who are optimistic tend to look for positive answers or results. If you pray and have faith that God will answer your prayer then you are more positive about the outcome of whatever it is being prayed about or for. If a group of people is praying for the same thing, then the optimism, or hope, is increased even more. So, these things are good. From another aspect, though, prayer can also have dangers associated with it.”

“You mean the person doing the praying might sit around and wait for an answer rather than to actively participate in the situation being prayed about?” I was remembering our earlier discussion.

“Yes, that’s one danger we’ve discussed. The other danger is that God gets the blame if a prayer is not answered in a positive way. As we have discussed, since we are subject to consequences, both our own and those of others, bad things happen. And, when bad things happen there is a tendency to blame God. God becomes the scapegoat. God is the one who we blame instead of accepting the responsibility ourselves or

admitting that what happened was a natural consequence of life. Until we can accept responsibility for our own actions and understand that we are subject to the consequences of the actions of others, we will always be looking to blame someone or something else for our situations or misfortunes. We need to acknowledge that life brings good and bad and we are subject to both. For instance, let's say that I jump in my car and head for work. I'm running late so I pray that God will help me get to work on time."

"I've done that!"

"Unfortunately, on the way to work, I encounter a horrific traffic jam. As a result, I'm going to be late for work. So while I sit there in traffic, biting my nails in frustration, I say to myself, "Why me? Why did this have to happen today, God?" Which implies that the traffic jam was God's fault and that God should have altered everyone's decision that led to that situation just so I could get to work on time. Instead, I should have reprimanded myself for leaving for work later than I should have. I should have consulted the local news stations for traffic reports so I could have avoided the problem altogether. You see, we must learn to be responsible for ourselves and learn to take responsibility for our own decisions. When we do, we are able to learn from these experiences and become better and wiser individuals."

"Blaming God can also cause us to resent God and therefore avoid communication and cease our attempts to establish an ever closer relationship with the Ultimate Power that lives within us," I added.

"And that can have a devastating effect on our life, because, as God's creation, we were made to be one with this awesome Power and if we neglect that relationship we will be incomplete."

"I can see how that might happen."

MEDITATION

“There is another activity that must be considered in regards to prayer,” he continued.

“What is that?”

“Meditation. Meditation makes prayer a two-way communication. Meditation allows us to reflect and focus on the problem or situation at hand. Being quiet enables a person to analyze a problem or situation more clearly. It can help provide solutions by allowing us to see the big picture. Being quiet enables us to hear God reminding us of what we have read, or seen, or heard that impacts our decision. God communicates with us in many ways, through intuition, or wisdom, or even through other people. Meditation helps us consider all aspects of a situation and use our minds and the creative energy that God gives us to find answers. God, the amazing intelligent Energy is within all of us just waiting to be tapped. Remember, our mind is the most powerful tool God has given us. We still do not fully recognize just how powerful it is.”

“So meditation is a form of prayer?” I inquired.

“Absolutely. Basically it is an essential part of two-way communication. There is talking and there is listening. Meditation is the listening part.”

“So what do we do? What do we conclude about prayer?”

“That prayer is natural. Prayer helps us and serves as an inspiration to others. Prayer brings optimism and hope. God already knows our concern, but it is good for us to express it. Prayer makes a difference, but only to the one doing the praying and to those, perhaps, privy to the prayers being prayed. But, it is presumptuous to think that prayer will affect the outcome of a particular situation.”

PREDESTINATION VS. FREEDOM OF CHOICE

“So, do you think, based on your observations and conclusions, that the Almighty is involved in day-to-day activities?”

“Conceptually, if we credit the Almighty One with being omnipresent, that is, in all places at all times, and if we agree that the One is not subject to time or space, then there is no past, present or future. God simply is. Therefore, God has participated in all of life already.”

“But we live in this time. We are subject to time and space and that time is now. Do you think the Spirit gets actively involved in day-to-day activities? Does God alter situations and circumstances in order to accomplish some ultimate plan for the world?” I asked.

“This question is complex because it concerns two concepts that are closely related: predestination and freedom of choice. Has God predestined our lives so that our choices are really not choices at all but merely exercises we go through as a part of living? Or do our choices in life really impact our destiny?”

“So, what do you think?”

“For answers to these questions we have to rely more heavily on history and experience for answers than nature since most of nature acts almost exclusively out of intuition and instinct. There are several arguments that can be made against the concept of predestination. First, if our destiny is already planned then we, too, should act strictly out of instinct. If that were the case, there is no reason for the whole system of action and consequence. We would simply react to situations automatically or instinctively. Secondly, in the case of predestination, there is no reason for us to have been given, or developed, a brain that is capable of analyzing and storing information upon which to make decisions. It would be a cruel joke to give humans this extensive ability and then not allow us to actually use it.”

“But if God knows everything, being omnipotent and having perfect knowledge,” I pointed out, “then God knows our destiny and what decisions we will make. Isn’t that true?” I argued.

“We are not talking about knowledge, we are talking about predetermining our future. There is a difference. If I offer my youngest son, who really likes chocolate, the choice between having a candy bar or an apple, I know in advance which he will choose. Why? Because I know him. I know he will choose the candy bar. Even with this knowledge, he still has the freedom to choose. The decision is his. I have not controlled or manipulated his power to choose in any way. My knowledge does not impact his decision. God not only knows us in an even more intimate way than I know my son, God already knows the future. So, God knows what decisions we will make but that knowledge does not impact our decisions.

“The fact that God established the world in such a way as to allow for consequences, both good and bad depending on our choices, and the fact that we have been given the ability to make decisions are evidence that our choices do make a difference. Add to that the lessons that we have learned from history, the catastrophes and atrocities that have occurred at the hands of humans, it is clear that we are making decisions that impact our life and can have a real effect on the world. To believe that God planned the destruction of the Jews in World War II would be inconsistent with the nature of God. To believe that God was responsible for the attack on the World Trade Center in New York would be to say that the Creator advocates the destruction of Its own creation. To believe that God approves of the killing of people in any form is inconsistent with God’s nature. These are a result of man’s decisions, not God’s. This system of consequences tied to decisions is why bad things happen to good people and vice-versa. When a person makes a bad decision a lot of other people suffer from the consequences of that decision.”

“What about supernatural involvement?”

“As we discussed earlier, God’s supernatural involvement is probably limited because life is played out depending on cause and effect, action and consequence. It is the way the Spirit has designed life to function on this earth. It is the order of things. But, God is God and It can do anything It pleases. However, it

would seem that supernatural involvement is very minimal since God participates in a much more natural way.”

“You mean through our thoughts?”

“If God is present in all of us as a creative, intelligent energy, then God assists us in a very real way to make decisions. This ability to make decisions gives us the opportunity and responsibility for our own destiny. We have the freedom to choose, and yet the advantage of having God’s input in the decision-making process.

“Our choices, our decisions are real. They affect us, other people and things around us. We are responsible for our actions. We cannot blame anyone or anything else. And, because our actions and our decisions impact others we must always consider our choices and make our decisions carefully.”

“So, if you don’t think God has a plan, what’s to become of the world?” I was curious to hear his opinion.

“I didn’t say that God doesn’t have a plan. But if God does, who can know what it is? However, our best indication through creation of God’s plan for the future is that God is good and therefore wants good things for us. We see this especially in evolution. Remember we pointed out earlier that Darwin makes the observation that variations that did not benefit an organism did not survive as a permanent variation of the organism. In other words, in evolution, only the good things that contributed to the survival of the organism lasted. God wants good for us. If there is a plan for the future, based on the fact that there are consequences for our actions; positive consequences for good actions and negative for bad actions, then we must conclude that God expects us to make good decisions that will result in positive consequences, that will in turn, lead to a healthier environment and a better world in which to live. Perhaps God’s plan is for us to care for each other and be good stewards of the world.

“If this world it is ultimately destroyed, it will be as a result of man’s actions, not God’s. And, ironically, based on the

world's situation today, if the world is destroyed it will more than likely occur as the result of man waging war for religious reasons.

“In this century, although it is still early, there have been perhaps more major catastrophes than in any century in recent history. We have had earthquakes, a tsunami, a record number of damaging tornadoes, wild fires of unprecedented numbers, draughts, floods and disease outbreaks that have kept the news media scrambling to keep up. It's no surprise that some people are wondering if we are experiencing the end of the world. In fact, in 2011, one Baptist minister announced that the world would come to an end on May 5 at 6:00. Is God to blame for these devastating events? Or is the earth simply going through another stage of evolution? After all, our planet has experienced radical changes in the prehistoric past. What makes us think that it will not continue to go through these changes? We are sometimes under the impression that the earth was created for us and that we are God's greatest creation and therefore the earth and the heavens will remain in their present condition for our benefit forever. This is an inaccurate assumption. The earth and the universe are constantly changing. There is sufficient evidence provided by current events and scientific studies that we are about to experience a major alteration in our planet and we will have to make significant changes in our lifestyle in order to survive in this new world. In addition, politically and socially, we are experiencing unprecedented instability. Populations in countries around the globe are rising up in protest against governments that have fallen short of citizen expectations. Regimes are being toppled. Violent conflicts due to civil unrest, political disgruntlement and religious differences promise to change the face of everyday life as we have known it for hundreds of generations. The face of our world, physically, politically, economically and socially is about to change more extensively than we have seen in hundreds, perhaps even thousands of years.”

“You don't think this is God's doing?” I asked.

“The universe has been created subject to the natural laws of cause and effect. As objects in the universe change position, direction, velocity or undergo any number of other changes, those modifications, regardless of how insignificant they may appear, have an effect on many other entities, including our own planet. Things do not remain in their present state forever. Again, all we need to do is study history to see proof of that. Is God responsible for these changes? Perhaps in a way since God designed the world the way it is, but change is necessary and ultimately good. It might not seem so good for those who are actually caught up in the middle of that change, but in the big picture, these changes are necessary.

“In any case, rest assured the world is changing. Is every tornado or earthquake God’s doing? I really don’t think so. They are part of the law of cause and effect, the result of our ever-evolving universe.”

Chapter 14

Truth is victorious, never untruth. Truth is the way; truth is the goal of life, reached by sages who are free from self-will.

-- *The Mundaka Upanishad III.1.6*

We should not be ashamed to acknowledge truth and to assimilate it from whatever source it comes to us, even if is brought to us by former generations and foreign peoples. For him who seeks the truth there is nothing of higher value than truth itself; it never cheapens or debases him who reaches for it but ennobles and honors him.

-- *Yaqub ibn Ishaq al-Kindi*
Muslim Philosopher (870 CE)

We had covered a lot of ground but I wanted to discuss everything that had been bothering me. “There is another very important issue that I think we should discuss.”

“What is that?”

“Well, civilizations change as conditions change, like, for example, when the Bible was written things were a lot different than they are today.”

“Of course they are,” he agreed.

“So as things changed, as civilization progressed, God spoke, or sent a new revelation to people; to the Jews through Moses and to the Gentiles through Jesus. Later, it seems that he sent a new message to the Arabs through Muhammad. Each message was designed to meet the spiritual needs of the people at that time. And yet today, most religions teach that this great Deity has delivered Its last revelation to mankind. It seems like we’ve decided that we have things just the way we want them so we have chosen to silence God!”

“It does seem like that’s the case. Christians believe that the Bible is God’s final word. The Jews believe it is the Torah and the Muslims believe it is the Koran. Christians teach that Jesus was the last prophet and the Muslims believe that

Mohammad was the last and that God will not offer a new revelation,” he said.

“That’s true. Those three religions claim that God has offered Its last major revelation to the world. But how can that be? Who are we to silence God? Who are we to say that God cannot speak to this new generation in a language that they can understand? Who is to say that God will not show Itself in a fresh revelation, consistent with the former revelations, but in a way familiar to the way people communicate and think today; a message for this generation, who are facing the problems and challenges that are unique from previous generations? We have much more information upon which to base our decisions. This new information has greatly impacted our world. The fact that we are experiencing such a globalization of business and social interaction has affected the way we view the world. Many of the mysteries of the universe and our own world have been solved through science. We see the world differently and we approach religion differently. As we have already discussed, some of the messages from the Incomprehensible One were directed specifically to the people living at the time these ancient documents were written. So, it seems consistent, that we might experience that same kind of unique communication today.

“My point is, if God spoke to those people so long ago, then why couldn’t God speak again? It just seems like we are trying to silence God,” I insisted.

He leaned back in his chair. “All religions teach that God still speaks to people. I guess it’s true that Judaism, Islam and Christianity don’t believe that there will be another major revelation. But, like you said, who are we to silence God?”

“As you know, in the 1940’s archeologists uncovered the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi scriptures. As these are interpreted and deciphered, there’s no telling what we will discover from those ancient texts if those who are involved in the interpretation are allowed to release that information to the public. Through these kinds of discoveries, God may reveal new and exciting things. Like you said, God may even introduce a

new prophet. This prophet might proclaim the same, consistent message as earlier prophets, but do it in a way that communicates more efficiently with today's population, faced with today's challenges."

"But if that happens how can we know whether these new revelations are from God or humans?" I asked.

"If the message is consistent with what we have learned about God from nature, then we are probably safe in concluding that it is from God. The Almighty might use any method It chooses to converse with us. We should always be open and sensitive to the voice of God. We should never think that God is finished with us. If God wants to speak, God will."

"I have to agree. Religious folks call that progressive revelation. As we progress as a civilization, the revelation might also progress."

"Exactly," he said, "otherwise, religion can grow stale and seem outdated, even irrelevant. Truth, and religious truth in particular, should never be outdated. It is only by reassessing all theories, both religious and scientific, and analyzing all theology that we can ensure that they meet the standard of truth."

It was about ten-thirty. The sun was out in full strength so the deck was getting warm. We decided to go for a walk and find some shade.

Chapter 15

Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you. This is the essence of all that is taught in the law and the prophets.

-- Jesus of Nazareth

Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.

-- Confucius

For ten or fifteen minutes we walked in silence. Everything I had learned and believed seemed to be threatened but for some reason I did not feel saddened. What we had discussed and the way we had used a specific criteria for determining truth, I felt at ease knowing that my questions were finally being answered. Religion and God were finally beginning to make sense.

“Taking what we have learned in this discussion, is there a new theology based on our perceived knowledge of God? Are we to discard all that we have believed and followed for centuries?” I asked.

“No,” he replied, “there is no new theology, only a very old one. One that proclaims that regardless of what other gods or angels there might be, there exists one true and unimaginable Deity that created and permeates the universe. It is an ideology that recognizes that we are a unified creation, made one through the presence of this unbelievably intelligent and creative Energy in our lives. It is an ancient theology that reminds us that we are the caretakers of the world and we are responsible for everything living in it. This Deity has no name. It is by giving this indescribable Being a name that we have created such division as exists in the world today. Do we believe in God, or Jehovah, or Allah, or Brahman? What we call this amazing Force doesn’t matter, the Great Spirit is the same no matter what we choose to call It.”

“That sounds like a simple philosophy.”

“It is, and yet it is extremely difficult to adhere to such a simple creed.”

“Why is that?”

“It is much more difficult to follow the simple teaching to love or care for one another than it is to follow a more detailed list of what that love includes. You see, if we have a detailed definition of what love means, we can always find loopholes that will allow us to act the way we want, justifying our actions by manipulating the definition. However, if we simply say that we are to care for others, it is all-inclusive and there are no loopholes. It simply means that we are to care for all people, in all places, in all circumstances. In addition, if we are given a set of rules, we can concentrate on satisfying the rules as they are stated and disregard going beyond the rules by participating in activities that we know we should participate in but don't because they are not listed in the formal set of rules that we have chosen to follow.”

“You mean we follow the letter of the law but not the spirit of the law.”

“Exactly.”

“So, under this theology do we discard the old: the rituals, the celebrations, the formalities?”

“No. Not at all. These are not bad things. As you mentioned, they help remind us to be thankful for what we have been given. But, we must always be cognizant of participating sincerely and not just mechanically. Remember, I said that there is truth in all of the religions? And, I said that God has protected Its message to the world?”

“I do.”

“There are amazing commonalities in the ancient documents as well in the teachings of all great prophets and philosophers. These commonalities are the teachings that God has protected and passed down to us throughout history; the truth. If we carefully study these documents, as well as the works of other prophets and philosophers, there seems to be one essential teaching. It may be said a little differently, but it all means the same thing: Jesus said,

‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’⁷⁰

In the Koran it is stated:

‘It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces to the East and the West; but righteous is he who believeth in Allah and the Last Day and the angels and the Scripture and the prophets; and giveth wealth, for love of Him, to kinsfolk and to orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and to those who ask, and to set slaves free; and observeth proper worship and payeth the poor-due. And those who keep their treaty when they make one, and the patient in tribulation and adversity and time of stress. Such are they who are sincere. Such are the God-fearing.’⁷¹

And again,

‘Surely (as for) those who believe and do good deeds for them will Allah bring about love.’⁷²

Confucius said,

‘Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.’”

“So, what are you saying? What is the truth?”

“What I am saying is this, if we examine those teachings that are common in the ancient sacred writings and we evaluate their consistency with what nature tells us about God, then we should find that truth, or at least, that part of the truth that we can actually understand.”

“So, once again you are suggesting that I need to read all of those ancient sacred documents to find truth?”

⁷⁰ Bible, Matthew 22: 37-39

⁷¹ Koran 2:177

⁷² Koran 19:96

“I think you should. There is a wealth of wisdom contained in their pages. If I were going to begin with the basic writings, though, I would recommend the basic Upanishads that includes the Isha, Katha, Brihadaranyaka, Chandogya, Shvetashvatara, Mundaka, Mandukya, Kena, Prashna, Taittiriya, Attareya, Tejobindu, Atma, Amritabindu and Paramahansa. There is so much wisdom and inspiration in those writings that they will have an impact on your life if they are studied sincerely. Then read the Bible, the Dhammapada, the teachings of Buddha, and the Koran. Be careful not to get sidetracked by those laws and instructions that pertain to political or social issues that existed at the time the prophets lived. Also, be careful to look for the lessons being taught in the various stories and don’t get caught up in the accuracy of the details of the story itself. Concentrate on those teachings that concern themselves with relationships and that are consistent with what nature tells us about God. But, always remember that religion should still be as simple as it was when the Creator first introduced Himself to those early primitive humans. And, don’t forget that it all boils down to two guidelines: love the inconceivable God, not because God demands it, but because we should want to worship this great and mighty God out of awe and thankfulness; and, the second, love others. This includes all of God’s creation: other people, as well as the world and every natural thing in it. If everyone observed these two guidelines, there would be no hunger, no war, and no prisons. Isaac Newton believed that religion was originally very basic. In his book, the *Philosophical Origins of Gentile Theology*, he believed that Noah had founded the primordial religion that had been free from superstition and had advocated a rational worship of one God. The only commandments were love of God and love of neighbor; where Nature was the only temple.⁷³ Another great philosopher, Francois-Marie de Voltaire a major contributor to the Enlightenment, also thought that religion should be very simple. In his book, *Philosophical Dictionary*, he writes of religion:

⁷³ Armstrong, p. 305

‘Would it not be that which taught much morality and very little dogma? That which tended to make men just without making them absurd? That which did not order one to believe in things that are impossible, contradictory, injurious to divinity, and pernicious to mankind, and which dared not menace with eternal punishment anyone possessing common sense? Would it not be that which did not uphold its belief with executioners, and did not inundate the earth with blood on account of unintelligible sophism?...which taught only the worship of one god, justice, tolerance and humanity?’”⁷⁴

“But what about the hundreds of laws that we read about in the Bible and all of those that are outlined in the Koran?” I asked.

“Those are man’s rules designed, for the most part, to make the particular faction or sect for whom the scriptures were written unique from other tribes or sects. All of the social rules listed in all religious teaching are an attempt to elaborate on those two basic rules that we have mentioned. If one clearly understands what it means to love or be concerned about our world and our community, to face life logically and with concern for others, all other rules and laws could be eliminated. And, as for the religious rules like meeting at the temple, or giving of one’s resources to help others, or praying facing a certain direction or at specific times of day, are unnecessary. They are an attempt to make a certain religion different because their rules are different. They are an attempt to make God exclusive. God cannot be limited to those kinds of rules. We are free to worship God in our own way. After all, the Almighty God is in us all, as close to us as our own being. God permeates the universe and everything in it. God is infinitely free and we should be, as well.”

⁷⁴ Francois-Marie de Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. Theodore Besterman (London, 1972), p.357

“You really believe that it comes down to love God and others? But this is common sense! Did we have to make this entire journey just to arrive at this obvious conclusion?”

“Yes, it is common sense. But even common sense must sometimes be tested. And, along this journey, we have discovered much deception and embellishments that are intended to keep people bound by guilt and repressed by rules and frightened by the threat of punishment. Religion should make us free, just as God is free. When we realize this freedom and the power that exists within us, then we will experience the liberation and potential that is available to everyone. The possibilities of what we can accomplish are endless. And, the peace and satisfaction that comes from the freedom that we can have with this indescribable Deity is overwhelming.”

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a small, thin booklet.

“I carry this little book with me everywhere I go. I have written down many of the verses and quotes that speak to me in a special way. I guess you could say it’s my Bible.”

He thumbed through the pages.

“This writing from the Hindus is a lengthy discourse, but it’s filled with power and wisdom. Listen to what the writer says in the Paramahansa Upanishad. When a seeker asks the Lord of Love what are the characteristics of a person who has discovered the truth and become illumined or enlightened, the Lord replies:

‘ ...He has renounced all selfish attachments
 And observes no rites and ceremonies.
 He has only minimum possessions,
 And lives his life for the welfare of all.
 He has no staff nor tuft nor sacred thread.
 He faces hot and cold, pleasure and pain,
 Honor and dishonor with equal calm.
 He is not affected by calumny,
 Pride, jealousy, status, joy, or sorrow,
 Greed, anger, or infatuation,

Excitement, egoism, or other goads;
 For he knows he is neither body or mind.
 Free from the sway of doubt and false knowledge,
 He lives united with the Lord of Love,
 Who is ever serene, immutable,
 Indivisible, the source of all joy
 And wisdom. The Lord is true home,
 His pilgrim's tuft of hair, his sacred thread;
 For he has entered into a unitive state.

Having renounced every selfish desire,
 He has found his rest in the Lord of Love.
 Wisdom is the staff that supports him now.
 ...The aspirant who is seeking the Lord
 must free himself from selfish attachments
 to people, money, and possessions.
 When his mind sheds every selfish desire,
 He becomes free from the duality
 Of pleasure and pain and rules his senses.
 No more is he capable of ill will;
 No more is he subject to elation,
 For his senses come to rest in the Self.
 Entering into the unitive state,
 He attains the goal of evolution.
 Truly, he attains the goal of evolution.⁷⁵

He closed the book. I took a deep breath. Again today the
 air was fresh with the smell of cedars.

⁷⁵ *The Paramahansa Upanishad.*

Chapter 16

Thought and reason had their place, but they could only take us so far. When we had come to the limit of reason, feeling would complete the journey to the Absolute...Feeling was not opposed to human reason but an imaginative leap that takes us beyond the particular to an apprehension of the whole.

-- Karen Armstrong – A History of God

Our walk took us to a shady spot where a small stream of water ran through the rocky terrain. There were some large cedars nearby so we decided to stop and rest. We found two stumps from fallen trees that we used for chairs. For a few minutes Samuel sat in silence. Finally he spoke.

“Derrick, logic and reason are important but there’s something else necessary in religion; something that I think we should discuss. Something that is as important as anything else that we’ve talked about.”

“And what is that?” I was curious what could possibly be left that we had not discussed.

“Great men of history have tried to prove that God exists using logic and reason.”

“Which is what we have been trying to do.”

“Yes. But like all those who try to prove the existence of God as a logical or reasonable conclusion, we will inevitably fall short of our goal because anyone who depends on logic and reason *alone* will ultimately realize that there’s something missing.”

“What do you mean?”

“Men throughout history like Pascal, Anselm, Descartes and Newton argued that the existence of God is logical and could be found through the intellect. Still other great thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas tried to prove that God was the God of the philosophers: that God could only be shown to exist

through philosophical means. Still others felt that God could only be found through the imagination or mysticism.”

“And your conclusion?”

“Let’s suppose that you suffer from a serious illness and you’re told that there is a medicine that will provide you with a cure. First, it is explained how the medicine was made, how the ingredients were identified and how they were carefully combined to create this amazing potion. Then you are told how this medicine will improve your life because you will feel better, no longer experiencing the pain caused by the illness. As a result of this enlightening discourse, you come to believe strongly that this medicine will help you; that it will make you better physically by taking the pain away and emotionally by eliminating the stress and depression that is a byproduct of being in constant agony. But, you will never know the actual benefits of the medicine, or experience the reality of the medicine’s effect on your life until you actually believe in it enough to take it. It is not until then that it will change your life. Before you can benefit from it, it must become part of your mind and body. In her book, *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong puts it this way,

“The experience of Brahman or Atman cannot be explained rationally any more than a piece of music or a poem. Intelligence is necessary for the making of such a work of art and its appreciation, but it offers an experience that goes beyond the purely logical or cerebral faculty.”⁷⁶

“Brahman means God and Atman means the soul. What she is saying is that we may see that it is logical to believe in the existence of God but until we believe that God is real in a sense that God is in us and around us, we will really never know God.”

“But doesn’t belief lead to emotionalism? And haven’t we discussed how emotion is a great deceiver?” I argued.

⁷⁶ Armstrong, p.31 (parenthesis mine)

“Certainly, it can be when it goes unchecked. But emotion is important, and in this situation, when emotion is supported by logic and reason it is good and necessary. We must admit that emotion is a vital part of our existence. However, we must always be in control, curbing our emotions with reason. As an historical example, Bernard, the abbot of the Cistercian Abbey of Clairvaux in Burgundy, a vigorous supporter of the Second Crusades of the 12th century believed in the separation of the heart, or emotion, and the mind, or intellect. In *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong writes,

‘Bernard, however, seemed afraid of the intellect and wanted to keep it separate from the more emotional, intuitive parts of the mind. This was dangerous: it could lead to an unhealthy dissociation of sensibility that was in its own way just as worrying as an arid rationalism. The Crusade preached by Bernard was a disaster partly because it relied on an idealism that was untempered by common sense and was in flagrant denial of the Christian ethos of compassion. Thus Bernard’s treatment of Abelard was conspicuously lacking in charity, and he had urged the Crusaders to show their love for Christ by killing the infidels, and driving them out of the Holy Land... What was required was an informed and intelligent subjectivity, not an emotionalism of “love,” which represses the intellect violently and abandons the compassion which was supposed to be the hallmark of the religion of God.’⁷⁷

“A more recent example of this kind of unbridled emotion is the war in the Middle East that has now spread throughout the world through terrorism. Once again, like the Crusades, men are told to kill out of love for God, with no thought of the compassion and mercy that is at the heart of the Koran.

“Conversely, emotion checked by common sense and reason is essential in the religious experience. There is a great difference in knowing that God exists and knowing God. The

⁷⁷ Armstrong, p. 204.

only way we can know God, as much as we can in this life, is to believe that God does actually exist in each and every one of us. It takes faith. It requires all of these things, the intellect, the imagination, the emotion and faith to grasp the reality of this incomprehensible, awesome God. And, it is our experience that confirms our emotion and our faith. God is the God of the scientist, but God is also the God of the philosopher. And, more than this, God is the God of the common man. Through our intellect we can bring reason to the things of God. Through philosophy, we can understand the significance of God. But it is only through experience that we can realize the true reality of the universal and, yet, personal existence of this great Being. If we believe that God exists because it is logical, we can know that God exists. But it is only when we accept the reality, yes, through faith, that this amazing intelligent, creative God exists in us and sustains life in us and in the universe, that we actually experience the power and majesty of God; and this realization, when experienced, that will result in an intense and heightened perception of reality and a feeling of ecstasy.”

“So it all eventually comes back to faith.”

“Yes, but a certain kind of faith. Certainly not blind faith, but a faith that is re-enforced by reason,” he insisted.

We sat quietly for a few moments. I was reviewing what we had just discussed. I remembered how Samuel had explained that he, too, was raised in a religious environment. I knew that he had gone through all of the emotions and confusion that I was now experiencing.

“Let’s walk,” he suggested. We left our stump-seats and started back to the house.

“How has all of this affected you?” I asked. “I know you grew up in a home where religion had a strong influence.”

“This was the most difficult journey of my life as I’m sure it has been for you,” he replied. “My entire belief system has been shaken. As I searched and began discovering these things it seemed that virtually everything that I was taught for the first 40

years of my life was not completely true. As a result of my studies and revelations I went from being frustrated to devastated.”

“And now?”

“Now I have more peace than I’ve ever had, knowing that I am closer to the truth than I have ever been. When I drive by an old country church I still have fond memories of the years I spent praying and singing those great old hymns when I was younger. I still feel a rush of emotion when I read some of the scriptures that I studied so long ago. But times change, they must. Emotion is good and healthy but it cannot be the sole reason for our decisions. Today I don’t live in the fear of having someone point out inconsistencies in my ideology that I have to rationalize or justify with superficial answers, or for which I must offer lame excuses. I experience more freedom than I ever have, knowing that God is consistently loving and merciful and that I cannot do anything to drive God away. I am more optimistic, realizing that God is in my life, not as a judge, but as a powerful creative intelligent force that I can depend on to help me make it through life – not just in times of trouble, but a limitless power that will unite with my individual spirit and enable me to accomplish anything imaginable, and perhaps unimaginable. I feel part of the universe. I have an attachment to all people and all of God’s creation. This unity is exciting and awesome. I have a deeper appreciation for all things and a greater respect for life. This knowledge of oneness can have a huge impact on our lives. It enables us to realize that our lives have purpose, that life makes sense. It gives us a whole new attitude toward others because when we realize that this awesome intelligent creative Energy is in our lives, helping us make decisions, leading us, working in cooperation with our individual energy or spirit, then, I think, we will treat other people differently. And once we realize that unique oneness and develop the patience and understanding that this knowledge brings, we will experience greater peace and satisfaction and have fewer problems with things like greed, self-centeredness and anger. This wonderful

knowledge that God is in us, in *all* of us, has helped me live in greater harmony with my fellowman and all of nature.”

“And this is available to everyone.”

“Absolutely.”

He opened his little book again.

“You’ll remember that the Hindus believe in several gods, but their ultimate God is called Brahman. In regard to oneness, in the Aitareya Upanishad it is written:

‘This One is Brahman; this is Indra, this is Prajapati; this is all these gods; and this is these five elements, viz. earth, air, space, water, fire; and this is all these (big creatures), together with the small ones, that are the procreators of others and referable in pairs – to wit, those that are born of eggs, of wombs, of moisture of the earth, viz. horses, cattle, men, elephants, and all the creatures that there are which move or fly and those which do not move. All these have Consciousness as the giver of their reality; all these are impelled by Consciousness; the universe has Consciousness as its eye and Consciousness is its end. Consciousness is Brahman.’”⁷⁸

“In other words, God is consciousness. God is life.”

“Not entirely, but consciousness is what allows us to experience God. It is knowledge that substantiates God’s existence, it is faith that makes God accessible, and it is experience that makes God real.”

He was right. I was beginning to feel the same freedom that Samuel had just described. It was like an enormous weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I now had nothing to prove, nothing to be afraid of, nothing was left but potential: the potential I had going forward; the potential of my spirit working together with the spirit of the amazing creative, intelligent Spirit

⁷⁸ *The Upanishads*; Aitareya III.1.3

within me to fulfill my dreams and goals. I felt there was little left to talk about.

Chapter 17

The happiness which brings enduring worth to life is not the superficial happiness that is dependent on circumstances. It is the happiness and contentment that fills the soul even in the midst of the most distressing circumstances and the most bitter environment. It is the kind of happiness that grins when things go wrong and smiles through the tears. The happiness for which our souls ache is one undisturbed by success or failure, one which will root deeply inside us and give inward relaxation, peace, and contentment, no matter what the surface problems may be. That kind of happiness stands in need of no outward stimulus.

-- Billy Graham – Evangelist

Our walk back to the house was solemn. I guess we both needed some quiet time. It's funny. When you don't really know someone silence can feel awkward. I guess that's the way you can tell that you really know someone; when silence is not uncomfortable. There was so much to consider. I felt like I needed to wrap things up; bring some closure to our discussion.

"So, where have we come in our discussion? Where has our journey taken us? Can we summarize what we have discussed and our conclusions?" I asked.

"I think we can."

"Concerning God?"

"That the existence of God is logical and reasonable, far more than the alternatives available to us, but it goes beyond logic. God must be experienced if we are to get a glimpse of this awesome Energy, the Shekinah glory of the Indescribable One."

"So, does this logic eliminate the need for faith?"

"Not at all. In fact, belief in God is still very much an act of faith. Logic and reason give us evidence that such a Being exists, but it takes a great deal of faith to actually accept the fact that It does exist. As I mentioned before, trying to conceive of

the inconceivable, to comprehend something that is far beyond our comprehension, and accept that this Being is real, given that it is not physical or tangible, takes faith. Actually, believing in this Great One requires our whole mind: logic tells us that its existence is reasonable, faith enables us to accept this deity as being real. But it is experience, putting our trust in the existence and reality of this incredible God, and then living with that knowledge everyday, being sensitive to Its presence in our life and experiencing what It is doing in our life that ultimately gives us the assurance and definitive proof that this Great God is indeed real.”

“In regard to God as the Creator?”

“Once again, when considering the theories concerning the origin of life, the belief in an Intelligent Designer is far more logical than the alternative option of spontaneous generation or the evolution of life from non-living matter. Our conclusion is based on the complex organization of the universe as opposed to the chaos that would be the result of chance. We have agreed that it is logical that evolution, as proposed by Darwin and others, is also reasonable with the exception of several problems that Darwin, himself, admits. However, if one admits that the variations that appear problematic were designed into evolution by a Creator these problem areas make sense. Darwin believed in a Creator. He concluded his book by saying,

‘There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.’⁷⁹

“It’s really not important how God created this wonderful world and everything in it. It is just important for us to know that God did it.”

⁷⁹ Darwin, pp. 459-460.

“In regard to the character of God?” I asked.

“We have concluded and agree with all great thinkers in history that God is incomprehensible. We can never, in our limited understanding know who God is or what God is like. However, by examining God’s activities in the world such as nature, the laws of nature, action and consequence, we can understand, in some very limited way, who God is and what God must be like.”

“And our conclusion based on these indicators is that God is perfect. That is, that God is consistent and dependable and without contradiction.” I stated.

“Yes. But God is this way not because God cannot be another way, but because God, being perfect, always makes perfect decisions and is, therefore, consistent because God chooses to be.”

“In regard to current religious theology?”

“That there are basically only two guidelines: love God and love others, including all of God’s created things. If we do these two things, we will live in a world that is conducive to life now and in the future.”

“In regard to contemporary religions?”

“That there is truth in all religions,” he continued, “however, there has been so much human involvement and enhancement that one must search diligently and patiently, using creation as a standard when examining those sacred documents to accurately find the truth in each.”

“Concerning the presence and participation of God in the world?”

“That God’s amazing intelligent creative energy is present in all things universally and it is that energy that gives life. Since God is present in us and in all living things, we have the ability and opportunity to tap that Power within us to achieve great things. My theory is that we have two non-physical entities within us: the energy that is God’s presence and the intelligent

creative energy that has been created by God and contains our personality. It is God within us that gives us unity with the world and it is our personal energy or spirit that makes us unique individuals. These two energies work together, the extent to which is determined by how much we, as individuals, have been able to grasp the reality of God within us and tap that amazing Power. These two spirits constitute who we are.”

“Concerning life?”

“That life should be a very positive experience, free from guilt. If we could only grasp the unbelievable power available to us, as Jesus did, as the writers of the Vedas did, as Buddha did, as great philosophers and inventors have then we, too, could impact the world in a very positive way. But we must also remember, that we are responsible for our actions and our destiny. We cannot pass the buck by blaming God for our actions or the actions of others that cause great problems in the world. We are responsible for taking care of God’s wonderful creation.”

He paused, then thoughtfully continued.

“In short, we humans are the real problem in the world today and in many instances, religion is fueling the fires of destruction. With the concepts that attempt to make each religion exclusive, the battle to own God is creating the greatest division among people in the world today. Wars, hatred and discrimination are a direct result of the doctrines that inspire and rouse Godly people to commit ungodly acts. Unity is what our world needs; the understanding that we are one, made one by the powerful bond of the great inconceivable Deity who created us and lives in all of us. It is this oneness that, when realized, will give us a greater respect for all life, motivate us to care for one another and our universe and lead us to a place of peace, prosperity and promise. This is the world that is within our grasp.

“Let me read one more thing for you. There is a short verse that contains a great truth from the Upanishads. As I mentioned, the Hindus call the supreme God, Brahman. Those who call the

Almighty ‘God’ or ‘Allah’ or any other name can substitute that name for Brahman.

‘Brahman cannot be realized by those
 Who are subject to greed, fear, and anger.
 Brahman cannot be realized by those
 Who are subject to the pride of name and fame
 Or to the vanity of scholarship.
 Brahman cannot be realized by those
 Who are enmeshed in life’s duality.
 But to all those who pierce this duality,
 Whose hearts are given to the Lord of Love,
 He gives himself through his infinite grace;
 He gives himself through his infinite grace.’”⁸⁰

⁸⁰ *The Tejobindu Upanishad.*

Chapter 18

Badness you can get easily, in quantity: the road is smooth, and it lies close by. But in front of excellence the immortal gods have put sweat, and long and steep is the way to it, and rough at first. But when you come to the top, then it is easy, even though it is hard.

-- Hesiod (C. 700 BCE) *The Theogony*

I could see the house in the distance. I knew that our talk would soon be over and I would be headed back to the real world. But how would I see it now? How would my perspective of the people and things around me change? Would they change at all?

“Once the things that we have talked about this weekend spreads to others, and I believe it will, do you think these revelations will have an effect on the people who hear it?”

“No, I don’t think it will.”

“Really?” I exclaimed, “Why not? It all makes perfect sense!”

“There are several reasons. Religion is a huge, well-oiled machine. It provides jobs for hundreds of thousands of people. Religious organizations own valuable property all over the world, take in millions of dollars, and wield unbelievable political power over a vast international congregation. Religion has been bundled in a neat little easy-to-manage package. Theologies are set in cement. It will take more than our little discussion to rock the boat of religion no matter what it may reveal. Do you think preachers, teachers, religious universities and thousands of religious bookstores are going to make any kind of radical change? Of course not. Tradition is a commanding force. Religious holidays are celebrated annually. People are comfortable with the stories and religious ideologies that have been passed down for centuries. Any concerns or skepticism about religion, while bothersome, are not

troublesome enough to cause most people to go to the effort of making radical changes. The clergy and leadership of all religions will label these truths that we have discussed as blasphemy or heresy. They will attempt to convince their congregations with the same old rationale and rhetoric that they have used for years that while the things discussed here are reasonable and logical and effectively satisfy the questions concerning the inconsistencies of the various religious documents and doctrines, they are not stronger than faith; and the masses will follow as they always have," he said sadly.

"But we are talking about the truth! We are talking about the unification of the world! We are talking about a religion that has existed from creation, a religion that offers freedom and a better world in which to live!" I insisted.

"That's true, but popular religions don't want a universal religion even though they say they support it. Acknowledging a universal religion would take away much of their power and their identity. They would no longer be exclusive. They would no longer own God. The only universal religion they would accept would have to be their own. In earlier times, religion was a way to establish an identity. Once, the Hebrews were no more than a small part of the general population, nomads wandering from place to place. But when God, through Abraham, selected them to be the chosen people having their own God and their own set of religious rules, they became a unique people. Similarly, in the Middle East, until Muhammad had his vision and message from God through Gabriel to his people, they had no real identity. But with the message from God they became unique with a special religion of their own. Having a unique religion was like having your own country with distinct boundaries, except with religion the boundaries were set by laws and a unique ideology. Today, with international travel and global business, we are experiencing the rapid synthesis of cultures. More than ever, people are striving to maintain their uniqueness. Religion is one way of maintaining that distinction. Therefore, due to the potential loss of religious identity, popular religions will not listen to the truth, no matter how much sense it

makes. If God, Itself, proclaimed this truth with a thunderous voice from the mountaintops it would fall on deaf ears.”

We reached the house and climbed the stairs to the deck.

“The second reason this information won’t have an impact is because many people feel that they need to belong or be a part of something. Religious organizations satisfy that feeling of belonging. Some find contentment in just being part of a family, but many others need a larger family to satisfy this yearning. That’s why civic organizations, social clubs, religious institutions and even political parties have survived for so many hundreds of years. If we can get together with other people who think like we do, believe what we believe or enjoy what we enjoy then we feel at home. We feel like we have somewhere we belong. Even if there might be some aspects of that organization that we disagree with, it is better to have a place and friends and a cause that we can call our own than it is to rock the boat and feel left out.”

“So this message will not be heeded?”

“No.” He paused briefly and then looked over at me. “What about you? You say you believe that the things we’ve discussed should make a difference in the world. What about you? You were raised in a religious environment and are active in traditional religion. Will you make changes in your life as a result of this discussion?”

I thought for a moment before answering. I didn’t want to be dishonest in my response. “I think I will, to some extent,” I confessed. “I will admit that I am very deeply planted in my faith. I, too, have grown accustomed to the hymns and stories that I have heard since my childhood. I will have to admit that changing these things will be extremely difficult. I will have to give it serious thought.”

“But I thought you agreed that a change is warranted in light of these discussions,” he replied.

“Warranted, yes. But will it lead to a major change in my religious faith? I’m not sure. I know it should because I believe

what we have discussed makes sense and is closer to the truth than what my religion teaches, but plugging that in, making those changes, trying to overcome years of indoctrination will be very difficult if not impossible. I love the songs that I grew up singing, the prayers that I grew up praying, the stories that I grew up hearing, and the theology that I grew up believing. I'm not sure how this discussion will change me. I do know I will look at things differently. I will study, and maybe slowly, over time, I will be able to make adjustments, but I'm not sure. I believe I have the answers to my questions. I don't know how I will handle sitting in church now and hearing things that I truly believe are deceptive. I'm just not sure what the future will bring for me."

"Even though you believe what we have discussed is closer to the truth than what you now profess?"

"I'm ashamed to admit it, but truthfully, yes. As you have said, tradition is a powerful force," I admitted.

"I admire your honesty. And that's exactly why this discussion will do little to change anything. I do think there will be those who are seriously interested in discovering the truth who will consider these things and it will make a difference in their lives. I believe there will even be some ministers, priests, rabbis, Imams and other religious leaders who will see the truth in these discussions; those who have already been uncomfortable with what they have been preaching and teaching for years. They will know that what is spoken here is closer to the truth than what is being proclaimed in the churches, synagogues, mosques and temples. But, will they change? Maybe, but probably not."

We found our chairs and gave our feet a rest. The breeze had picked up and the smell of rain was in the air. Dark clouds had drifted in. Samuel continued his thoughts on the future of religion.

"Fortunately, the future of religion depends on the young, the twenty and thirty-something's who are not satisfied with the status quo. Those who have not been indoctrinated since

childhood into the teachings of traditional religion; those who are searching for answers to the deeper, more important questions of life and are disillusioned by the inconsistencies of religious doctrine; those who are weary of getting the same old unsatisfactory explanations from religious leaders concerning those inconsistencies; those who recognize the ineffectiveness of religion. Those are the ones who might make a difference in the years and decades to come. Those are the ones who will usher in the new reformation.”

“But what if a person wants to know the truth. What if they are willing to change for the sake of truth? Where do they start?”

“I believe they must start where all men do when contemplating the more important aspects of life, the place where all great prophets started.”

“And where is that?”

“Where did Jesus go just before he started his ministry? What did Buddha do when he was searching for enlightenment?”

“Well, I think the Bible teaches that Jesus went into the desert.”

“I think you’re right. He went into the desert by himself for an extended period of time to think, to meditate and pray. And while he was there the Tempter came and tempted him to live his life in a way that might have been more lucrative for him, but not in the best way for mankind. It is interesting that a very similar story was told much earlier of the Buddha just before his enlightenment. It seems he was exhausted trying to discover the way of illumination so he sat down under a tree, determined to sit there until he was enlightened. While he was there, the Tempter came to him and tempted him with many of the same temptations that were offered to Jesus: physical pleasure, financial gain. But Buddha, like Jesus, chose the best way, the way to peace and benevolence. Once they had made their decision, they had a rush of peace and knowledge, or as Buddha called it, enlightenment. Similar parallels can be made with

Mohammad and even Moses who went to the mountaintop to talk with God in order to find direction.

“The journey begins with a sincere desire to discover the truth, no matter what it takes and no matter where it leads. It requires an open mind, realizing that what you discover might stand in stark opposition to what you have always believed. And then, it requires time and patience. The old scriptures do offer the truth: seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened. If you sincerely, open-mindedly and persistently search for truth, you will find it. You will have to make some serious decisions when confronted with the truth just like these great prophets did, but peace and purpose follow the right decision. And then, you must realize that the search never ends. We must always test our beliefs and convictions to ensure that we are still on the right path. Guatama Buddha said,

‘Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it. Do not believe in anything simply because it is spoken and rumored by many. Do not believe in anything simply because it is found written in your religious books. Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders. Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations. But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it.’”

“But you think the majority of people will not change.”

“I’m afraid not. Remember, real change comes slowly as men and women become disillusioned with the status quo. As the inconsistencies of religion give birth to skepticism, many will seek to know the truth. As they view the world’s condition and realize that religion is being used as a tool for creating division among the nations, rather than making the world a better place in which to live they will question the value of religion. As they seek truth, change will inevitably come. Truth will not be hidden for long. It will always survive. It will always find a voice.”

“After making this arduous journey that has taken so long and, now, to assume that it will not make a difference, how does that make you feel?” I asked.

“It has made a difference in me,” he confessed. “I am not responsible for what comes from this effort,” he said quietly. “I am only responsible for seeing that it has been accomplished. My spirit and the spirit of God within me agree that what needed to be revealed has been revealed.”

The weekend was over. It had been an amazing three days. I left that afternoon. In one weekend I had been transformed from a person who doubted God and religion to a man who lives with certainty; from a man who felt the weight of the world to a man freed to experience life with no fear of what is to come. The God of the universe who lives in all creation also lives in me and there is nothing in this world we cannot do together. As I drove down the dusty road I remembered Samuel telling me about a mystical vision experienced by Black Elk, an American Indian Holy Man. This was what he saw.

“Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy.”⁸¹

⁸¹ John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, Washington Square Press, New York, 1972

Recommended Reading

The Bible

The Koran

Upanishads. Translated by Eknath Easwaran – Nilgiri Press

The Epic of Galgamesh.

Don't Know Much About Mythology. Kenneth C. Davis – Harper Collins

A History of God. Karen Armstrong – Ballantine Books

A History of Religious Ideas (3 Volumes). Mircea Eliade – The University of Chicago Press

The Nag Hammadi Scriptures. Edited by Marvin Meyer – Harper One

The Essence of Buddhism. Jo Durden Smith - Chartwell Books, Inc

The Origin of the Species. Charles Darwin – Gramercy Press

Dhammapada. The Teachings of The Buddha. Edited by Friedrich Max Muller – Fall River Press

The Apocrypha

Native American Wisdom. Edited by Kristen Maree Cleary – Fall River Press

The Analects. Confucius. Translated with D.C. Lau – Penguin Classics

The Age of Reason. Thomas Paine. The Gutenberg Library