

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 this understanding 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.’⁵⁹

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.’⁶⁰

“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 God 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

⁵⁹ Bible, Ephesians 1:20-21

⁶⁰ Bible, Acts 7:55.

Spirit? Isn't God big 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,⁶¹ 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

⁶¹ 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.

Also, remember, we already discussed that Jesus, himself, didn’t consider himself, or was considered by others, according to the New Testament, to be divine. It wasn’t until the Gospel of John, written around 90 CE that we read of Jesus’s deity. Also, it was not until 325 CE at the Council of Nicea that Jesus was officially declared to be divine.”

“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. But it is doubtful because it doesn’t seem necessary and it invalidates the idea that God is self-sufficient and doesn’t need or depend on anyone or anything else for anything.

“It’s time to realize the simple truth in religion: whether there is a Trinity or not, there is one Supreme God and it doesn’t

matter what name you give it: God, Allah, Jehovah, Self, or whatever you choose to call this great Being, it is one God.”

EVIL

“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’s 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, as we grow older we humans have the ability to override or supersede those basic instincts with decision-making capabilities. But the instinct for survival still has significant influence 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 acquire and store 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 is also a significant influence. That’s why it is so important that the ideology of religion is one that will result in a positive effect on society. Unfortunately, some religious instruction is detrimental to the adherent as well as society. However, even those teachings that are beneficial don’t seem to be very effective in improving conditions in the world.”

“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,⁶²

‘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, 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.⁶³ 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.’⁶⁴

“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.”

⁶² Bible, Joshua 8: 24-25.

⁶³ Bible, Exodus 13:15

⁶⁴ Koran 2:191

“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 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,” I continued, “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 The 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. Riots and protests are prevalent in small towns as well as large cities around 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,” he insisted.

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.

“In addition, 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 what Samuel meant. 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. 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,” Samuel replied emphatically. “Evil is the result of a decision. If a person makes a decision to do what is harmful to others or to society then we say he did what was wrong. He committed evil. We create evil every time we make a decision that results in negative consequences or pain to 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 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.⁶⁵ 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,” I said. “‘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

⁶⁵ Translated by Marvin Meyer, *Nag Hammadi Scriptures: On the Origin of the World*, HarperOne, New York, 2007, p.199.

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 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.⁶⁶ 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

⁶⁶ Elaide, p. 60.

order to attain a successful journey through the underworld passages leading to the afterlife.⁶⁷

“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 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. That is, our form will probably not be physical or material as we understand physical on this planet. 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 follows 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 to 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.

⁶⁷ Introduction by Paul Mirecki, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Papyrus of Ani*, Barnes and Noble, New York, 2005, p. Vii.

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 life. They might decide at some time that they don't love me. They may turn their back on me and choose never to speak to me again. But *I* 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. Love is not always a two-way street. In fact, many times it's not."

"But hell has been a part of religious ideology for ages," I argued.

"That's true," he agreed, "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, or self-will, 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 on 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 of 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 for 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 efficiently 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,” he concurred. “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,” I said, “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 responded with a raised eyebrow.

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?” he questioned.

“I think it has been proven medically that stress plays a role in our health.”

“Listen to this.”

Samuel picked up an article conveniently resting on a table nearby.

“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.⁶⁸

“These experts have spent 20-odd years researching how stress affects the immune system. We also have strong indications that guilt can lead to depression and depression can contribute significantly to stress.”

“I think that’s true in some instances,” I agreed.

“And would you further agree that it has been medically proven that what goes on in our subconscious, or unconscious mind can also 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

⁶⁸ *Scientific American* – August 15, 2008 p. 22

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 think it is a distinct possibility. 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 maladies 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?” I insisted.

“As you know,” he continued, “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, that 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?”

“Once 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 or the *completeness* of peace 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.’⁶⁹

“And you can prove this?” I asked.

“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 of our own.”

“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

⁶⁹ *Brihaduranyaka Upanishad*, Chapter 3, Section 8, verse 11.

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?” I asked.

“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.

“I understand that and there’s nothing wrong in dreaming about a place where our troubles won’t exist and our bodies won’t hurt. But dreams won’t make our troubles go away and they won’t heal the hurt. Resolution of these things only comes when we search for remedies in the real world. Why not concentrate, instead, on finding solutions to our problems and remedies for our pain? 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.” He took a sip of water.

“What do you say about the Hindu’s belief in reincarnation?”

He thought for a moment.

“As we’ve 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 this 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 hope as we lay on our deathbeds? Isn’t that the value of a religious ideology that advocates a positive 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 that 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 loved and cherished his family; if he made his purpose to help those in need, no matter how large or small that need was, then those last fleeting moments of life hold something different, I think. 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 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.”

He took a breath and his mood changed slightly.

“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 bit of difference. We won’t know for sure what waits for us after this life until we get there.”

“So, in the final analysis we must conclude that we live our entire lives preparing for death,” I exclaimed.

“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 as a young man.”

“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 the kind of 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.”