

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's 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've had for many years concerning my faith."

"And what faith would that be?"

"Christianity." I answered.

"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." There was a moment of silence as I tried to decide how to begin. "I guess the problem is that even though I've 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 your religion, specifically, are you having problems with?”

“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. I suddenly found myself saying all of the things that I had been feeling for years and I couldn't stop.

"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. Go ahead.”

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 ‘flawless’. 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 flaw, 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,

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

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

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

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

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

that men kill other men for no other reason than because of where they were born or what their heritage might be, or what 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,” he agreed.

“But on the other hand,” I continued, “what if these 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?”

“That’s a good question. Let’s discuss the concept of contradictions for a minute,” he suggested. “Let me share with you Socrates’ argument concerning opposites.”

Uh oh. Now we’re talking about 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. Out of love and concern for the child, wouldn’t I be justified in striking out at the man and stopping the unjust abuse? 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 a God of love. 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 teaches 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 their primary objective while the other teachings of Jesus are neglected or are considered less important. Jesus also taught that those who are 'blessed' will feed the hungry,¹⁰ the New Testament says to help

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

¹⁰ Matthew 25:31-40,

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 that 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 that teaching as well.

“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's important for us to thoroughly discuss everything that concerns you."

"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 concerning the nature of God. 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, 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 from 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 people around the world 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.

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

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."

"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 cause him to 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

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

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.”

“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.”