

Chapter 8

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

-- Blaise Pascal

When we arrived back at Samuel's house, we decided that it was a good idea to take a short break and give our brains a chance to rest. This journey on which I had embarked had already taken me places I had not anticipated going.

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

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

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

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

“Explain what you mean.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And how do we make those decisions?”

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

“...and the experiences of others...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That's a valid observation,” he responded. “We've come a long way in understanding the universe in which we live. The

various sciences have greatly improved our lives. Maybe we really don't need God. *In A History of God*, Karen Armstrong writes,

‘How will God survive in the years to come? For 4000 years it (religion) has constantly adapted to meet the demands of the present, but in our own century, more and more people have found that it no longer works for them, and when religious ideas cease to be effective they fade away. Maybe God really is an idea of the past.’²⁶

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

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

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

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

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

²⁶ Quoted in Karen Armstrong; *A History of God*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1993, p. 377..

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

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

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

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

“Actually, China has had several national religions: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. It was only under Mao

that the government did not allow religion. But even at that time, there was always a clandestine dedicated group of deeply committed believers of one religion or another who has provided the underlying strength and hope that religion supplies. The spirit of man is a gnawing hunger that must be fed. Even when it is constantly suppressed, it will always find a way to be heard. The need for God, the need for hope, is as old as man and God is just as necessary today as in the past.”

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

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

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

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

“I agree,” I said.

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

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

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

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

“Man’s law is powerful, it’s true,” Samuel explained. “Governments and other authorities can force us to adhere to laws, but they cannot make us *want* to obey the rules. When a person believes that a standard is good for society and that it coincides with the will of a Supreme Being, then obedience to the laws or standards comes from the will of the person subject

to those standards. A standard imposed and enforced by human law might achieve compliance, but when enforcement slacks off, the standard is more likely to be violated because it is not one that is self-imposed like those that are considered God-willed. It might be the law that keeps some people from hurting others, but it is a religious moral standard that drives goodwill in most individuals. Religion is a vital part of human existence, that is, true religion.”

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

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

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