

Chapter 10

There's something in every atheist, itching to believe, and something in every believer, itching to doubt.

*-- Mignon McLaughlin
The Second Neurotic's Notebook, 1966*

It was mid-afternoon and there was still so much to talk about. So far we had discussed the inconsistencies in the Bible and the Koran and examined how these irregularities might have realistically occurred. We also determined, and substantiated by historical evidence that some of what was contained in the Bible and the Koran was written for the people who lived at the time the scriptures were written, while other things were meant to be universal and were applicable to all ages. And I remembered Samuel saying that just because these documents didn't meet the criteria for inerrancy, it didn't mean that they did not contain some truth. As far as Jesus' place in history, I had to give that some additional thought.

Samuel had returned sporting a well-worn Cardigan.

"Let's go for a walk," he suggested. "I feel like stretching."

It was a beautiful, cool day. I had to admit, though, that I was experiencing a little mental claustrophobia. I was trying to absorb a bombardment of new information, while at the same time comparing it to what I had already learned and weighing it against our criteria for truth. A walk was exactly what I needed, a breath of fresh air.

There was a path that led from the house down through the canyon and along a dry creek bed lined with small cedars. A fresh aroma lingered following the rain of a few days ago. We discussed the landscape for a few minutes and then I brought us back to the topic of our intended conversation.

"If we agree that religion is necessary and there is a God..."

"Or gods," he interrupted.

‘Or gods? Do you believe that there is more than one?’

“While many of the earliest religions appear to have been monotheistic, many ancient cultures quickly became polytheistic. As we discussed, I suppose it was more or less natural to see the sun and all the benefits of its light and heat and imagine that the sun was a god. The same can be said for many natural wonders, objects like the moon and certain important occasions, such as harvest time or the blessing of a successful hunt. In gratitude, one might easily imagine a god of the harvest, a lord of the beasts, a god of fertility and so on. However, even in the most primitive polytheistic cultures, there was always one supreme god at the top of the pantheon. Judaism, Christianity and Islam profess one God, but believe in angels. Hindus believe in many gods, but hold that there is one supreme god. What one religion interprets as angels, another might interpret as subordinate gods. If we have no real knowledge of the spirit world, how can we know what exists there? It’s really not an important issue, however, because it was always the ultimate, supreme god who received most of the worship. The important thing is that there is an ultimate Supreme Being.”

I hadn’t thought about that, but what he said made sense. “So we will agree that there is a God and subordinate gods or angels or whatever we choose to call them. Where do we go next?”

“I think we should begin by laying a basic foundation. Let’s begin this part of our discussion with attempting to understand the character of God.”

“But do you think we can really know or understand the character of God?” I asked.

“Absolutely not, not completely, that is. But if God created the world and humans as well, then there must be a way to know something about God’s nature. Maybe we can’t know much, but it seems logical that God would be aware that we would want to know about him. Knowing this, God would provide a way for us to understand what little we can, realizing that we can’t know very much because of our inability to

comprehend this incomprehensible Existence and the world in which God exists. If there is not a way to know something about this Great One, then mankind will be left to speculate and this speculation will inevitably lead to a mixed bag of ideas resulting in what we see today: foolish speculation and religions fighting religions.

“If we study religion and man’s concept of God,” Samuel explained, “it’s easy to see why there have been so many different ideas about who God is and what God is like. All major religions teach that God is spirit, that God is supernatural. We, on the other hand, are human. We are physical beings totally unfamiliar with spiritual existence and supernatural capabilities. Yet, we want to understand, or say that we understand, God. So over the years in an effort to understand this Incomprehensible Being, as we mentioned earlier, mankind has managed to make God human. Giving God human traits makes this Deity more comprehensible. If one closely studies the source documents of the various ancient mythologies, reads the stories about God’s alleged actions and reactions, we must admit that God sounds more corporeal than spirit, more human than God. In many of the ancient creation stories, the gods have sexual relations. They war against each other. They scheme and deceive.”

“But those were ancient ideas. We have a better understanding of God today, don’t you think?”

“No, I don’t,” Samuel stated quite emphatically. “In the sacred texts used by the major religions today, God is a dealmaker telling the Israelites that if they worship only God, He will bless them. God is a lawmaker giving the Israelites over 600 laws that they must obey.⁴⁹ Muslims also believe that they were part of the promise that they are God’s chosen people.⁵⁰ As we have already discussed, these ancient scriptures picture God as an angry God who smites those who stand against him.⁵¹ God

⁴⁹ Bible, Exodus, Leviticus

⁵⁰ Koran 4:13

⁵¹ Bible, Deuteronomy 31:17

is a jealous god.⁵² And on and on we could go. These character traits: anger, jealousy, vindictiveness, are indicative of how humans react to situations. So, we have humanized God and reduced this indescribable Being to a mere mortal. The awesomeness of the true God has disappeared in a mist of deceit.”

“I have struggled with these things for many years,” I confessed.

“Xenophanes, a Greek theologian and philosopher who lived around 500 BCE said:

‘In my opinion mortals have created their gods with the dress and voice and appearance of mortals. If cattle and horses, or lions, had hands, or were able to draw with their feet and produce the works which men do, horses would draw the forms of gods like horses, and cattle like cattle, and they would make the gods’ bodies the same shape as their own. The Ethiopians say that their gods have snub noses and black skins, while the Thracians say that theirs have blue eyes and red hair.’

“We see God as being like us because we cannot see God as he is.”

“I see what you mean.”

“So, we need to decide what God is and what God is not.”

“What do you mean, what God is not?” I questioned.

“As we have already discussed, because we are made of flesh and blood and have a physical appearance, we tend to give those same attributes to all things.”

“Yes, it makes things more real to us.”

“That’s true, or at least more familiar. If we are to attempt to understand the majesty of this Being, we have to remember that it was the Almighty One who created us, *we did not* create

⁵² Bible, Exodus 20:4

God. I had lunch a few years ago with a good friend who said, 'In the beginning God created man and we have been trying to return the favor ever since.' I think history proves that's true. God is not a human, but rather a being that we call a spirit that has no physical appearance."

"You mean we should not see the Almighty One as an old man with a long white beard resembling one of the band members from ZZ Top."

Samuel smiled. "Exactly. And if God is not human then God doesn't necessarily possess any of those physical attributes that are common to humans. It is obvious that God has no body, no physical appearance. By visualizing God in a physical, material way, we limit, in our minds, what God is and what we think God can do."

"You mean if God has a body then it is impossible for him to be everywhere at once?"

"If we can't be everywhere then how can God? If, that is, God is physical, made of matter?"

"So, we say that God is a spirit. But we've never defined what that means."

"That's a good point," he responded. "How can we describe God in terms that help us, in some small way, understand what this Spirit is like? Obviously, we cannot and will not ever understand or even begin to comprehend the essence of God, a being that is so different than what is familiar to us. However, if we are to relate in some small way with this Being then we must find a way to identify who God is or what God wants us to know about Him while not diminishing who and what God really is - indefinable. What word do we have that might describe this Being more effectively in human terms and give us a better definition the word 'spirit'?"

"I'm really not sure. I haven't given it much thought," I confessed.

“Let’s list what we have been told or what we think we know about God at this time. It is said that God is everywhere at once, God is omnipresent.”

“God is creative since we attribute the creation of the universe to this Being,” I added.

“If God can create something as huge and powerful as the universe, we must also conclude that God is all-powerful.”

“I agree.”

“So, what can be everywhere at once and is the essence of power?”

“You got me. Do we even have a word for that?”

“Energy! What moves the planets? What causes the stars to burn with such intensity? What bangs the molecules together to form the wind? The universe is in perpetual motion. Energy is everywhere! We can see energy in all living things. God’s activity is creative, intelligent energy. Energy was the initial force in the universe that existed before anything else. And, it was this energy that created everything there is. It is the energy of life. When we breathe, it is the energy of God. When our heart beats, it beats with God’s energy. And when that energy leaves our bodies we cease to live. It seems our best description of God’s activity, as insufficient as it is, is amazing, creative, intelligent energy; everywhere at once, all powerful! When science talks about the Big Bang, they are describing the initial creative work of this Almighty God, the Ultimate Energy!

“That is an excellent way of describing God!” I exclaimed. “I really have never thought of it like that. It certainly takes God out of the context of being human. While it might be terribly difficult to visualize God in these terms, it is very easy to understand how God can be everywhere and have immense power since we can see this awesome power in the energy of the sun and the sea and the wind.”

“This idea is not a new one. As a matter of fact, when explaining the Spirit to people of his day, Jesus, used the example of the wind.

‘The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.’⁵³

“Of course, like I said, it’s difficult to visualize energy. That somehow makes God less personal.” I observed.

“Actually, it’s better if we can’t visualize God. We need to remember that God is beyond our understanding; that God cannot be controlled or owned. This concept also helps us understand how we can all be related. It is the energy of God that resides in all living things that makes us all one, as the Hindus teach and as Jesus taught. There is amazing unity in the universe. That’s why we are all dependent on each other for survival. It is this inconceivable Energy that lives in all of us giving us life and unity.”

“A wonderful revelation!”

“But we must remember,” he warned, “that this energy is only God’s activity in the world, it is not God’s essence.”

“What do you mean, God’s essence?”

“What I mean is, energy is not what God is. Energy is merely God’s activity in the world. In his Epistle 234, St. Basil of Caesarea said,

‘...but we say that we know our God from His activities, but do not undertake to approach near to His essence. His activities come down to us, but His essence remains beyond our reach.’

“Philo, the Jewish philosopher who lived in the first century CE, also thought of the activity of God as energy. He made a distinction between . . .

⁵³ Bible, John 3:8

‘God’s essence (*ousia*), which is entirely incomprehensible, and his activities in the world, which he called his “powers” (*dynameis*) or “energies” (*energeiai*). . . Philo called them the Kingly power, which reveals God in the order of the universe, and the Creative power, whereby God reveals himself in the blessings he bestows upon humanity. Neither of these powers is to be confused with the divine essence (*ousia*), which remains shrouded in impenetrable mystery.’⁵⁴

“What God *is* we will never know with our limited capacity to understand those things that are outside of the world of time and space and matter. God is other-dimensional, above and beyond all that exists. So, the best we can do is attempt to understand something about God by studying God’s activity in the universe. When we begin to understand this concept of the Invincible One, we can start to appreciate the awesomeness of this Being. In the Nag Hammadi Scriptures, in the Secret Book of John, the writer attempts to describe ‘The One’:

‘...The One is a sovereign that has nothing over it. It is God and Parent, Father of the All, the invisible one that is over the All, that is incorruptible, that is pure light at which no eye can gaze.

The One is illimitable, since there is nothing before it to limit it,

unfathomable, since there is nothing before it to fathom it,

immeasurable, since there was nothing before it to measure it,

invisible, since nothing has seen it,

eternal, since it exists eternally,

unutterable, since nothing could comprehend it to utter it,

unnamable, since there is nothing before it to give it a name.

The One is immeasurable light, pure, holy, immaculate. It is unutterable, and is perfect in incorruptibility. Not that it is

⁵⁴ Armstrong, p. 69.

just perfection, or blessedness, or divinity: it is much greater.

The One is not corporeal and it not uncorporeal.

The One is not large and it is not small.

It is impossible to say,

How much is it?

What kind is it?

For no one can understand it.

The One is not among the things that exist, but it is much greater. Not that it is greater. Rather, as it is in itself, it is not a part of the aeons of time. For whatever is part of a realm was once prepared by another. Time was not allotted to it, since it receives nothing from anyone; what would be received would be on loan. The one who is first does not need to receive anything from another. It beholds itself in its light.

The One is majestic and has an immeasurable purity.

The One is a realm that gives a realm,

life that gives life,

a blessed one that gives blessedness,

knowledge that gives knowledge,

a good one that gives goodness,

mercy that gives mercy and redemption,

grace that gives grace.

Not that the One possesses this. Rather, the One gives immeasurable and incomprehensible light.

What shall I tell you about it? Its eternal realm is incorruptible, at peace, dwelling in silence, at rest, before everything. It is the head of all realms, and it is the one who sustains them through its goodness.”⁵⁵

“What a wonderfully insightful description.”

“Isn’t it?” he exclaimed. “The Hindu religion stresses the unity that exists in the world. In the Chandogya Upanishad, a child is discussing wisdom with his father. The father tells him,

⁵⁵ Edited by Marvin Meyer, *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The Secret Book of John*, HarperOne, New York, 2007, pp. 108-09.

‘In the beginning was only one Being, One without a second. Out of himself he brought forth the cosmos and entered into everything in it. There is nothing that does not come from him. Of everything he is the inmost Self. He is the truth; he is the Self-supreme. You are that, Shvetaketu; you are that.’⁵⁶

“Since we have come to this place in our discussion,” Samuel said, “I think we should change how we refer to God.”

I bent down and picked up an interesting looking stick. “What do you mean?”

“I mean from this point forward we should refrain from referring to the Incomprehensible One as a gender. Once again, using the pronoun, he, implies a physical characteristic. As we have said before, the only reason for gender is reproduction and God has no reason to reproduce. While it might sound impersonal, the Great Spirit, as the American Indians called God, is an It, not a he or a she. I know the word “it” usually refers to a thing rather than a being and it sounds very impersonal, but unfortunately, “It” is the only word we have in our language to refer to something that is not gender specific.”

“I see where you’re going with this. If we see this indescribable Being as a man, we might tend to attribute to God certain attributes that are common to man. Again, we would be humanizing God.”

“Exactly.”

We rounded a bend that took us back in the direction of the house.

⁵⁶ *The Chandogya Upanishad*. Chapter 6:2.2-2.3