

## Chapter 11

*It is the Infinite that is the source of abiding joy because it is not subject to change. Therefore seek to know the Infinite.*

*The Chandogya Upanishad, Chapter 7 Verse 23.1*

The walk had been good for me but I was ready to find a chair. The weather was still pleasant outside so we decided to stay on the deck for a while longer. There's something about the outdoors that helps to clear a person's mind. Considering the things we were discussing, I needed to have the clearest mind I could. Brenda brought us some refreshments.

"So, what's the next step?" I asked. "We've determined that religion is important and that it is logical to believe in a supreme being. We've also concluded, based on objective evidence, that the sacred documents contain inconsistencies and do not meet the established criteria for infallibility. This journey for truth has me somewhat concerned at this point. I'm curious where we go from here."

"I think it's important to determine where it all started, believing in gods, that is. Throughout history there have been hundreds if not thousands of religious ideas and myths. No one really knows when man first started worshipping gods, who started it or why it was started. Some people have suggested that very early in man's development he found the need to believe in a higher power, a stronger force than himself who watches over human affairs. The implication being that man created God instead of vice-versa. We know from archeological discoveries that signs of worship of one kind or another can be traced back at least 10,000 years or more. In fact, in his book, *A History of Religious Ideas*, Mircea Eliade claims there is evidence from cave drawings that religious ideas in some form were present as far back in history as 30,000 BCE.<sup>57</sup> One can only speculate how much earlier humans began believing in a greater power.

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<sup>57</sup> Eliade, p.7.

From the earliest records, it seems that originally many objects of nature like the sun and moon were considered gods. But whoever God was to these ancient humans, the fact is, from earliest times, humans have worshipped a deity or deities. Virtually every civilization had its own religious myth or set of religious ideas.

“Yes, you mentioned some of these at lunch.”

“I think it’s important for us to make a distinction here that when we talk about a myth we are not talking about a fable or something that is not true. When we refer to myths we are talking about stories, ideas and beliefs of a certain group of people.”

“I’ll have to admit that many of these myths sound like fables,” I confessed.

“That’s true. Looking back at what we can decipher from the evidence that exists, some of the earliest religions do seem odd, even bizarre. But it’s important to point out that the people living in those times believed in their gods as seriously as we believe in ours today. They believed so sincerely, in fact, that many offered themselves as human sacrifices, dying painful deaths in an attempt to appease their gods. Sometimes we demean these mythologies by writing them off as silly ideas conjured up by primitive ignorant people. We have even turned some mythologies into fairytales like the animated movie produced a few years ago entitled, *Hercules*. Zeus is portrayed as an old man with a long white beard having a very similar appearance to the character many people envision when they think about the God of Christianity. In reality, Zeus and the other gods of Greece were very important. The people built elaborate temples and worshipped these gods regularly. The remnants of some of these temples still exist today. To make light of these religious ideas is an insult. It would be like producing a humorous animated cartoon about the God of Christianity and his son, Jesus, who wandered the countryside confronting evil demons. I dare say, Christians today wouldn’t think it was very funny. A few years ago, a cartoonist made

light of Muhammad. Some Muslims took it so seriously that they threatened the cartoonist's life! So, in studying religion, we must understand that the people who believed in these ancient gods and religious ideas considered them to be the truth. Exactly like we think we are believing the truth today."

"So, what do you think? In the beginning did man create God?"

"Yes and no. In the very beginning of human existence, one has to wonder how such a primitive mind could conjure up something as unique as the concept of a god? Was primitive man that creative? Or did the real God actually plant that thought in the mind of man and man was simply acting on that intuition? Did this powerful indescribable Being give man the revelation of its existence through common sense and deductive reasoning as, perhaps, it still does today? Maybe these first humans looked at the sky and saw the brilliance of the sun and felt its heat and saw that when the sun was blazing, flowers opened their blooms and the earth seemed to come alive. Maybe they lay awake at night and gazed into the darkness and wondered at the majesty of the moon and stars. Maybe they held a newborn baby in their arms and marveled at the intricacy of its hands and fingers and toes. Or maybe their stomachs gnawed with hunger and just when they were about to give up hope the earth seemed to provide the food they needed through a wandering herd or a field of wild grain. But whatever it was, it made them thankful and left them in awe. Their explanation? That there was something or someone bigger and mightier who was providing humans with what they needed to survive. In Meditation Three in his writings, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes, a seventeenth century philosopher and mathematician, observed that since we are an finite creature and everything we know and understand is finite it is unlikely that the idea of the infinite could have originated naturally without the aid of the infinite. He says,

'For although the idea of substance is in me by virtue of the fact that I am a substance, that fact is not sufficient to explain my having the idea of an infinite substance,

since I am finite, unless this idea proceeded from some substance which really was infinite.’<sup>58</sup>

“Regardless of how it happened, it seems that from the very beginning, throughout the ages, mankind has worshipped a deity or deities in cultures and civilizations around the world. The concept of gods has survived the ages. I have to think there must be a reason for it. Just as man has evolved, so has religion. A study of religious ideas will carry one from the ridiculous to the sublime, from human sacrifice to mysterious secret meetings with bizarre rituals; from elaborate initiations to stories of gods, angels and demons that make the most contemporary action movie look like a Disney film. And somewhere in the midst of all of these ideas and rituals and good intentions there exists the truth about the one true God.

“In final answer to your question, let me conclude by saying that over the centuries I think man has created gods but these created gods are only a reflection of the real God. These created gods are an attempt by man to control this inconceivable Being. We actually have an example of that today. In the Catholic faith, people who have done exceptionally good things during their life have been designated as saints after their death. They have even been bequeathed special powers. For example, Saint Christopher is the protector of travelers. Some people pray to that saint for protection. Some people worship Mary, the mother of Jesus. The question is how can humans assign such a position and power to a human? They are creating, in essence, a god. I understand that Catholic leadership will argue that they are doing no more than calling on the saint as one would call on a friend to ask for advice or help, but do they believe that a friend has the ability to intervene with supernatural power and provide assistance?”

“Of course not.” I, myself, had a friend who always had an icon of St. Christopher hanging from his rearview mirror.

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<sup>58</sup> Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*; *Meditation Three*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1993, p.77.

Samuel continued. “This is the power man has ascribed to a saint, the power that, historically, belongs to a god. For centuries, mankind has tried so hard to have control over the real God that he has brought God down to a level where God has become as familiar as one of our neighbors.

“Giving this inconceivable Being a name is another attempt to make the non-human One human. As we give names to things, we make them more familiar. Naming this great Deity is another reason for the rivalry between religions today. One religion calls the Almighty One, Allah, one calls It God, one Brahman, another Ra, another Ptal, and still another, The Great Spirit. Because this Great One is called by different names some people think of each name as being a different deity even though they all claim that their Deity is the one Supreme Spirit. If they are all worshipping a Supreme Deity, it doesn’t matter what name you call It, It is the same Deity! As we have said, we should not attempt to give this inconceivable Being a name at all! God is beyond all names.”

“The next question is,” I continued, “if it all started with this Supreme Being imparting truth about itself, why are there so many religions? Certainly all religions claim they teach the truth but we’ve already determined that the documents used as the foundation of those religions do not provide us with the absolute truth. So where do we go to find it?”

“Those are good questions. In my search many years ago, I began by reading the literature of the various religions: the Bible, the Apocrypha, the Koran, the Nag Hammadi Scriptures, the Analects, many of the Vedas and Upanishads, the teachings of Buddha, as well as many others’ writings in search of something that would offer me a revelation of truth.”

I interrupted. “I did very much the same thing. Unfortunately, I found contradictions and inconsistencies in all of them.”

“So did I, which indicates that they are not inerrant. However, the fact that these documents are not absolutely true doesn’t mean that they don’t contain the some truth.”

I was wondering when we would get back to that.

“We have identified irregularities in most of the ancient sacred documents due to the embellishments of humans. And yet, you say they provide truth? How can they be inconsistent and still be accurate?”

“Errancy in part of something does not invalidate the whole. It just makes it more difficult to determine the inaccurate from the accurate.

“However, just as you said earlier, a God as great as this one certainly is capable of ensuring that Its original message, simple and true, has been preserved throughout the ages in spite of man’s manipulations and interpretations. God has maintained Its basic message in all of the major religions. Somewhere in all religions there is commonality. Find these things that are common and, perhaps, one might find the basic truth in religion that God has passed down to us, now hidden within the volumes of material that we have available.”

“So, the challenge is to muddle through all of the major religious writings and identify those elements that are common to all?” I asked.

“I suppose that’s one way. That would mean, regardless of the culture or human agendas, God has kept the truth alive and available even though it requires people must search for it and discern what is of God and what is of man.”

“Seek and you will find?”

“Exactly.”

“That sounds like an impossible task,” I complained, “for once again, we are on our own to determine what is actually from God. How can we distinguish between the basic truth and non-essential content?” I questioned.

“By comparing the content of each of the documents to a standard or benchmark, that original message from the Creator to the created.”

“A benchmark?”

Samuel explained. “What if God has given us guidelines to help us identify the God stuff from the human stuff? A message wherein God tells us and shows us who God is and what God is like, as much as we can understand these things, given our very limited capacity to understand.”

“So what is this message, this standard?” I asked.

“In my search for truth I made an assumption,” Samuel explained. “I assumed that if I could trace religion back to its beginning, its roots, locate that initial message from the Ultimate One to mankind at the dawn of civilization I would find the original, uncorrupted truth that the Supreme God communicated to humans. Muhammad also went in search of this original message. He called it the religion of Adam.”

“I never thought of that, but it seems like a reasonable assumption.”

“That’s what I thought. I assumed in order to communicate with those first primitive humans God had to be very specific and very basic. So that’s when I began to study the history of religious ideas from as far back as history and science could take me.”

“It sounds like you were on the right track.”

“Unfortunately, I found that I faced a problem in this quest very early on. There was a flaw in my original assumption,” he admitted.

“And what was that?”

“I wasn’t able to go back to the beginning. As you know, primitive forms of writing did not begin to appear until almost 3500 BCE. Even by that early date, there were already a myriad of religious ideas. Already, man had taken the opportunity of modifying and enhancing that original message. So I still struggled with the same question: which one was true? What was the original message? There was no way to go back beyond what had been written to find the source of the myths.”

"What about cave drawings and ancient artifacts? Couldn't they tell you something?" It seemed logical to me.

"They have," he replied. "Those are the kinds of discoveries that have led anthropologists to believe that ancient humans did, in fact, worship. Remember we noted earlier that there is evidence provided by primitive drawings, burial sites and intricately carved objects that religious activities were conducted and some kind of worship did exist from earliest times. In addition, from evidence found in burial sites, there are indications that religious ideas such as the concept of some type of resurrection of the body or life after death were prevalent in many religions from the very beginning. But there is not enough information to piece together an accurate understanding of what those first ideas and rituals were."

"In spite of this shortcoming, I still maintained the theory that as primitive man evolved to the extent that he began to experience intelligent creative thought, with him was the initial word from God: the truth. From that point forward, alterations and modifications began to creep in."

"So what did you do?" I was eager to hear his solution.

"I tried to determine how God originally spoke to those first primitive humans."

"Okay, and what did you find?" I asked.

"Think about it. It had to be very simple because man was very simple. It had to be obvious because man probably wasn't looking for it. And, it had to be dynamic enough to get man's attention. But, most of all, it had to be enduring, realizing that over time men would alter that original message and we would need a way to be reminded of what the basic truth really is."

"I'll have to give it some thought."

"What do we have in common with those first humans?" he asked. "What did they have that we still have that remains a pure message from God? What do we have that man has not been able to embellish or modify significantly?"

“Can I have a clue?” Struggling for an answer I tried to remember everything that we had talked about.

“What was the first indication that there was a God? What did the first humans worship?”

“Nature?”

“Exactly!” He was beginning to get excited. “Now you can see why we went through the exercise of discussing evolution and the fact that it is logical and reasonable to conclude that God is the author of creation and everything that exists; that even Darwin, the father of evolutionary thought, believed in a Creator. Except for humans messing it up, the universe is pretty much the way God created it. Certainly, there have been modifications due to natural evolution according to God’s design, but the universe is still God’s creation. Creation, or nature, was perhaps God’s first message to mankind and it still provides the plain and simple truth about what God is like, as far as we can know God. Is it fair to say that by looking at a painting you can tell something about the artist?”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” I replied.

“I mean that every artist has a style. Rembrandt, Picasso, all great artists painted in a style that was unique to them. Would you agree?” he questioned.

“Yes, I believe that’s true in most cases.”

“And can we also say that this same style is manifested in the craft of almost every craftsman? For example, a builder of cabinets will show his style in his work. A mason will do the same. We can look at a piece of handmade furniture and see that the person who crafted it was meticulous with his scrollwork. We can say that Rembrandt had an eye for detail and that Picasso loved vivid colors.”

“I believe the work of an artist and craftsman says something about him.”

“So, we can conclude that Picasso loved color, Rembrandt was detail oriented and our furniture builder was a perfectionist.”

"I think that would be a fair conclusion," I agreed.

"So, if we believe that God created the universe then we should be able to look at creation and discover the same kind of things about its creator. Nature is God's handiwork. It showed those first primitive humans who God is, what the One is like. It is still the only resource that we have today that has not been manipulated by humans. Certainly, it has been impacted by civilization, but it remains the best example of God's activity in the world and offers the best glimpse of who God is. It remains the most accurate depiction of what God is like. Creation tells the truth!" he exclaimed.

I was beginning to get the picture. "But how does nature talk to us?"

"Isn't this world filled with beauty; flowers, mountains, rivers, clouds, sunsets?"

"It is. I agree."

"So, can we conclude that God enjoys beauty? Think about it, the world didn't have to be created in color, did it? Everything could have been black and white or shades of some other boring colors."

"I see what you mean. That seems like a fair assumption based on the evidence. As we look at how life processes work – respiratory, circulation, reproduction, we might also conclude that God is meticulous and systematic in creation. Nothing seems to be left to chance."

"That's true. In this world there is a precise balance. Everything seems to depend on everything else in some way for its existence. We are all interdependent. In addition, when environments become altered due to natural evolutionary changes in atmosphere and such, nature carefully adapts so that the system might be somewhat modified, but it still functions efficiently. Of course, we must exclude the radical, unnatural changes to the environment brought about by the actions of man that can cause serious modifications to nature's processes," he added.

He got out of his chair and started pacing as he spoke.

“And what about consistent?” I continued, “Observing the cosmos: the movement of the planets and the stars, and the seasons, can we also conclude that God is consistent?”

“Consistency is certainly obvious. When an apple falls from a tree, we expect it to always fall to the ground, not float away into space. Our greatest mathematical and scientific theories are based on the consistency of the laws of nature.”

“Go on.” I was starting to get a little excited, myself. “What others?”

“Since all of the things that our bodies require to sustain life are available, can we say that God cares?” He turned to me. “By looking at creation and the meticulous way in which it is put together, and by studying the way the human body was designed with all of its complexities – the heart beating perfectly sixty or more times per minute for seventy or eighty years, the way the brain works, sending out messages throughout the body communicating the slightest touch, or smell, or taste, I think we can agree that the One is perfect in everything It does. If God is all-powerful which It would have to be to create such a vast universe and be present everywhere at once, being energy, or spirit rather than a physical being, then we must conclude that God is perfect in each of Its specific characteristics.”

“I would have to agree. As we have concluded, if God is not perfect, then God would not be consistent.”

“And, I would like to include one last characteristic: love.” There was a pause. He looked at me waiting for a response.

“I can understand how God cares for Its creation by realizing that God has provided what we need to survive, but I’m not sure how we can go so far as to say it is love.”

He leaned closer to me. “Think about it. Humans, and only humans, as far as we know, have been given a higher consciousness. We have the capability to go beyond survival. We have the added luxury of experiencing the beauty and

awesomeness of the world. We can appreciate art and music. We have been created with the ability to reason, to evaluate information and make decisions based on that information. We have emotions that enable us to go beyond the primitive and experience the higher qualities of compassion and love and fairness. This goes beyond simply caring. I would say that these gifts certainly are signs that this great Creator loves.”

He had made a wonderful observation. I could not help but agree.

“And, since none of these characteristics that we have listed are in conflict with another, and since they comply with reality and common sense, they effectively meet the requirements for truth.”

I considered carefully what he was saying. “I think you’re right.”

He continued. “So, we can agree that we have sufficient evidence in nature and the universe to conclude that God is perfect and therefore does nothing that is imperfect. As we mentioned earlier, not because God cannot do what is imperfect but being perfect, God always makes perfect decisions. I’m sure we can learn much more about The One by studying nature, but let’s begin with these. Can we say, then, that these characteristics meet the criteria for truth, being that they are evidenced by things we can all see and understand and that they comply with reality, and are most probably accurate descriptions of God’s nature since we have already agreed that God is the creator of all things?”

“Yes, I think we can, even though there are many more, I’m sure.”

Samuel walked to the table and took his seat. He seemed to be getting weary. I could understand why. It was obvious that this was a topic that he had spent a lot of time and effort studying. In a matter of hours he had explained to me what had taken him years to discover.

"But let me add something here. What we have done is attribute to God certain characteristics that are common to us: emotions and qualities that we are familiar with. In doing so, are we participating in making God human?"

I had to think about that.

"But we don't have a choice do we?" I asked. "I mean these attributes are all that we know. How can we know God by any other qualities than those that we are familiar with?"

"I think that we can boil it all down to two attributes that are the most obvious, and perhaps extend beyond our dimension; energy and intelligence, or knowledge. It required energy and intelligence to create and nothing more. It takes energy and intelligence to sustain the universe and nothing more."

"But what about love and compassion?" We just mentioned that these were qualities that were inferred by studying nature," I insisted.

"Yes, but is emotion really necessary? Perhaps God doesn't possess any emotions at all. Emotions enhance life, but as far as we know, many living things don't possess emotions and they exist quite nicely. It seems to me that attributing emotions to God only serves to make God more human."

"I don't understand," I confessed.

Samuel explained.

"If I see a starving man I don't need compassion or love to provide him with food. I only need to have the knowledge that it requires food to sustain life and that man was meant to live so this man needs food. I give it because that's what is required. Through God's unfathomable intelligence, God knew how It intended to create the universe as well as the earth and everything that's in it. And so, God provided what was needed in order to execute that plan. It only required energy and intelligence. So, even if we can't attribute these other qualities to God, we can, with assurance, credit God with amazing energy and profound intelligence."

“But that seems so simple.”

“As it should be. Having a basic understanding of God should be simple since we don’t have the capacity to really understand God’s essence. Basically, religion should be simple,” he stated.

“But it’s not,” I said. “Religion is not simple. With all of the rules for worship, for attaining salvation, and the rest of the complex theology that some religions teach, religion can be very confusing.”

“Yes, it can. That’s why we need a measuring stick, or plumb line to help us decide what is from God and what has been added by humans. If nature was God’s first message to humans, it remains our greatest communication from the Great Creator. So, nature becomes the standard against which we can measure the accuracy of all other things pertaining to the character of the one true God, as much as God wants us to understand, and as much as we are capable of understanding. And it becomes the standard for analyzing the doctrine and ideology of religion.”

“It seems to me that if we use this standard, we do achieve consistency. This is truly an exciting revelation! And it has profound implications.”

“Yes it does.”

He leaned back in his chair and looked out over the hills that surrounded us. It was extremely quiet; I could hear the sound of the breeze blowing gently through the cedars. I considered where we had come to at this point in our discussion. The impact of these revelations on religious theology was enormous! I had not even begun to consider all of the repercussions but already I could think of so many areas of religion that would be touched by these astonishing discoveries.