

## Chapter 6

*Man has always sacrificed truth to his vanity, comfort and advantage. He lives... by make-believe.*

*W. Somerset Maugham, The Summing Up, 1938*

During lunch we had an opportunity to talk about Samuel's past. His knowledge of religious history was very impressive. Much of his time had been spent in the study of ancient mythologies. I guess I never thought about all of the religious ideas that had developed within the various civilizations around the world. I had only been exposed to the religions of the Middle East, the history of the Hebrews specifically, as described in the Bible. I never thought about what was happening in the rest of the world during that same time. Samuel explained that he, too, had spent many years on the quest for truth, a journey very much like mine. His quest was also prompted by his disillusionment with traditional religion. After a quick lunch, we took our tea and headed back to the family room.

"How will we begin this search for religious truth?" I questioned.

"First we will establish a criteria for truth. In other words, what are the requirements that must be met for something to be true."

"That sounds reasonable."

"There are universally accepted standards for truth that we will use. While we might not be able to arrive at any definitive conclusions, depending on the amount of information available to us, our goal will be to get as close to the truth as possible."

"Is this going to be hard to understand? It sounds like we're about to get really philosophical and I'll have to admit that I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer!" I said jokingly.

“You should be able to keep up,” he said. “The criterion for truth is quite simple. First, you must understand that there are three ‘primary truths’ inherently accepted in the investigation of knowledge and truth. They are: the first fact. That states that the objective of our discussion does indeed exist. In other words, if we are discussing the truth concerning a ball, we must first agree that the ball exists.”

“Okay, I get that. That’s pretty simple. I’m with you so far.”

“Secondly,” he continued, “is the first principle. That is that there are no contradictions in the facts or information concerning the object of our discussion. If we say that the ball is a sphere, it would be a contradiction to say that the ball is also a cube at the same time. The ball can only be one shape at any given time. So, it is either a sphere or a cube.”

“That makes sense. So, we are saying that truth is without contradiction. It is consistent.”

“Yes. And thirdly, the first condition: the ability of the mind to know truth. That is, that we are capable of understanding the truth concerning the objective of our discussion.”

“Okay, I can accept that.”

“It’s important for us to have a foundation from which to begin our search. This criterion for truth is the most widely accepted so this is where we will start.”

I agreed. “Sure. I understand.”

“In our discussion, we will make certain propositions or statements concerning our topic and then support those statements with objective evidence. The evidence we will rely on will consist of the evidence of the senses: can we taste it, smell it, touch it, see it, or hear it? The evidence of rational thought; that is, does our evidence or conclusion agree with reality? And, the evidence of expert testimony. In other words, is there some credible expert or resource that can provide evidence for our premise? However, the evidence of expert

testimony will be considered less weighty than the first two sources because we know that even experts can be unreliable. People can be swayed by opinion and personal agendas, and writings can be inaccurate as a result of translations, interpretations and many other factors. And, lastly, we will consult common sense.”

“I can agree with all of the sources you named for providing credible evidence except the last one. I’m not sure we can totally depend on common sense,” I commented.

“I agree in part. Common sense takes the obvious and accepts it on face value. However, if we take common sense, that intuitive capability that is usually correct, and apply critical analysis that consists of objective evidence, the rules of logic and accepted scientific method, common sense can become a powerful source of reliable evidence.”

“If we are able to show the accuracy of common sense in that way, I will agree that we can use common sense as a source of evidence.”

We were only a few minutes into our discussion and my head was already reeling with concepts that were confusing for someone who had not studied these things before. But, I was excited to see that Samuel was getting into the discussion and I was eager to hear what he had to say.

“So, we will begin our discussion with the premise that truth exists,” I said.

“And, that it is important,” he added. “If truth is absolute and conforms to reality, then truth is truth for everyone, universally, and it is not dependent or influenced in any way by individual desires, beliefs or opinions.”

“Okay, what you are saying is that truth is objective and not subjective. Just because I believe something is true does not make it true simply because I believe it is true or want it to be true.”

“Exactly,” he confirmed.

“It sounds like finding the truth about any particular thing takes a lot of time and effort.” I was beginning to see why most people don’t take the time to look deeper into what they believe.

“In most cases it does. Of course there are those instances where the truth is immediately obvious. We might call those self-evident truths.”

“You mean if I say that it’s a bright, sunny day and you look out of the window and see the sun shining, it would be immediately obvious that I am telling the truth.”

“Exactly. But most truth does take some investigation. The more complex the topic or issue, the more complex the search becomes. That’s one reason why I think so many people simply accept the status quo,” he clarified.

“So truth is not relative?” I asked. “There are those who will argue that truth is dependent on circumstances and situations.”

“By definition, it is absolute,” he explained. “That means that it does not change. However, let’s use the ball as an example again. The ball is a sphere. That’s the definition of a ball. That is the truth and it is absolute. But let’s say that someone comes along and smashes the ball flat. Now the ball is no longer a sphere. What is the truth about the ball?”

I had to think about this one. “Let’s see, the condition of the ball has changed, but the definition of a ball is the same. So a ball is still a sphere, but in this case, this ball is a flattened sphere.”

“Good. So the condition might change around the object, but the object, by definition, remains the same?” he asked.

“Yeah. I guess,” I answered.

“What about a wall that has a hole in it and we say the wall has a hole, but then we patch the wall and it no longer has a hole. Has the truth changed?”

“No, the wall is still a wall. It is the condition of the wall that has changed.”

“I agree. So, we have to be very careful when discussing things to specify whether we are talking about the object itself or the condition of the object.”

This was getting more difficult than I imagined. “What about concepts and ideas? Scientists once thought the world was flat. That was considered the truth. Later, when new information was available, it was discovered that what was being taught as the truth really wasn’t? How do we handle concepts and ideas?” I asked.

“What we know about something doesn’t alter the truth about it. It’s our understanding that changes as new information becomes available. The world was always the shape that it is now. Our misunderstanding of it or our lack of knowledge about it did not change that truth. We simply didn’t have enough information to know what that truth was.”

“That’s my point,” I exclaimed. “Can we find truth? Do we know everything there is to know about any one object, idea, or concept to determine the truth?”

“Probably not. That’s why we must constantly reevaluate and rethink what we believe to ensure that it continues to satisfy the established criteria for truth, even concerning issues that we thought were settled years ago. We might discover that what we thought was the truth really wasn’t. Nothing is beyond investigation. We can always get closer to the truth. But when we find it, we can rest assured that it will be absolute and universal. It will always conform to reality.”

“So what’s next?” I was eager to move along.

“If we want to reach some logical conclusion that brings us closer to truth concerning religion,” he began, “there are certain questions that we must address. The first is, does God exist? Since God is the basic and essential element in religion, we must agree that God exists and that the existence of God is reasonable and logical. If there is no God then, consequently, there is no reason for religion.

“Secondly, to reiterate what you have already said, since religious theology is based on the perceived nature of God, we

must attempt to determine who God is and what God is like. What is God's form? In other words, is God made of physical stuff as humans are or is God made of other stuff? Is God corporeal or incorporeal? If God is made of physical stuff then God is limited to the laws that limit things that are made of matter, such as time and space. However, if God is not made of human stuff, then what is God's form? What is God's nature? That is, is God perfect or imperfect? If God is imperfect then God is not reliable or dependable since we can never know what mood God will be in at any given time. To be imperfect is to be inconsistent. To be inconsistent is to be human. On the other hand, if God is perfect then God is absolute. That is, every character trait that we attribute to God will be absolute or perfect, as well. However, since we are talking about a supernatural being, this perfection is a matter of choice. In other words, if God is perfect it is because God chooses to be perfect and not because that is the only way God can be. But, by being perfect, all of God's traits and actions will be the correct one, the perfect one, because that is the nature of being perfect. To be perfect is not to be human. To be perfect is to be truth because truth is, as we have defined it, without flaw, without inconsistency. Truth is absolute; therefore if God is perfect, God is truth.

“Third, using our criteria for truth, we must establish whether or not the Bible and Koran satisfy that criterion and are, therefore, infallible, that is incapable of being incorrect. If we find that they are not, then we must look for other sources that will provide us with more accurate information concerning the nature of God. Once we have found a source of reliable information, that is, it meets the criterion for truth, then we can say that we have discovered the truth in respect to God and religion.”

“Sounds simple enough.” I said sarcastically.

“I realize that it seems overwhelming, but also exciting. To do justice to our search and to come to some conclusion, we must tackle, or attempt to tackle these issues. Otherwise, we will be basing our conclusions on propositions that might be invalid,

making our conclusions invalid, as well. But, let me stress that what we will be discussing are not and cannot be opinions, but rather substantiated propositions that will lead us to our conclusions.”

“But, Samuel, once again,” I insisted, “what if we don’t find anything? What if this discussion ends up being a big waste of time? The questions concerning God and religion are questions that have been addressed by some of the greatest minds in history and most have concluded without definitive resolution. Are you sure we will actually end up somewhere beyond where others have not been able to go?”

“Every person throughout history who has studied and discussed this topic has arrived at some conclusion. Whether they were scientists discussing the creation of the world or philosophers debating the existence of God, each has contributed something that can help us in our search. However, unlike us, many did not have the opportunity of seeing what others had discovered. They only knew the opinion of those who were nearby or had distributed their work to some limited extent. They didn’t have the opportunity to share ideas and argue opinions with others who were involved in the same endeavor as they were. We, on the other hand, have access to a myriad of information, more than any other generation. Because of the vast wealth of information on the worldwide web, we can study the ideas and works of so many of these great thinkers. And, by doing so, we can compare and analyze and draw our own conclusions, maybe even more accurately than they could because we have access to this abundance of knowledge.”

I agreed. We did have an advantage. Even in my wildest dreams I never thought I would be involved in a discussion like this one. I was not a great student in school. I hated history, math and science. I loved the arts. I guess I am more of the creative type. Now, here I was discussing questions that have been contemplated by some of the greatest and most intelligent minds in history. Questions that pertain to science and math and philosophy but this time it was going to be different. This time it concerned something that was important to me, something that

impacted my life. I might have trouble understanding a lot of it but I was determined to try.

“But Derrick,” he added, “please remember that we are talking about a being that is not of this world. The best we can do is try to get as close as we can to understanding this inconceivable entity using what is available to us.”