

My Spiritual Journey

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Faith is not something that goes against the evidence, it goes beyond it. The evidence is saying to us, "There is another country. There is something beyond mere reason."
~ Alister E. McGrath

Introduction

This is the story of my personal search for meaning and for God. I have never had a "lightning bolt from heaven", a visit from an angel (that I aware of), or any divine visions or dreams. It is just plain old me, plodding along, and trying to figure things out as best as I can. So I am comforted by Jesus' statement in John 20:29, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and still

believe.” There are no proofs, mathematical or otherwise, to make my direction, or anyone’s direction, certain and sure. Whatever anyone believes about God can never be proved, and therefore is always a matter of faith (“without faith it is impossible to please him, for he who comes to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of those who seek him” Hebrews 11:6). Religion is primarily a matter of the heart but being a Rational Engineer type of guy with a deep love of history, everything to me, including faith, has to be logical and make sense, and therefore is also a matter of the head. So this is the tale of my faith journey, with both my heart and my head.

I was born in 1951, the son and only child of lower-middle-class immigrant parents (first- and second-generation Danes). With no siblings to educate and protect me and with an un-athletic dad who was himself finding his way in American society, I was insecure and hated my insecurity, but was too young to be able to vocalize and explain it, or to do anything about it. Kids can easily sense weakness in other kids and then exploit it in order to prop up their own egos; it often seemed to me that children could be crueller than adults. My mother told me that she named me after the “Coeur de Lion” – Richard the Lionheart, but I was nothing at all like my ancient counterpart. My childhood was reasonably happy, but always clouded with self-doubt and personal insecurity.

In my time there were no school buses for us, so I walked to school (it was not quite as bad as the old joke, “We trudged to school, in the snow, uphill, both ways...”) Nevertheless, on the way to and fro I was sometimes bullied and would buy candy or ice cream bars for other boys to pawn them off. I did poorly in confrontational situations and afterward would despise my own behavior and failure to stand up for myself, but nevertheless it was a pattern that took many years to deal with. Also, my church was on the way between home and school, and I would sometime stop there as a place of refuge. I refused to join organizations such as the Boy Scouts because I was afraid of other kids, but silly me – I recall an older neighborhood kid wanting a boxing partner, to which I reluctantly and stupidly agreed (I had a hard time saying no, which was another source of angst). Getting repeatedly hit by his longer reach further emasculated me and made me doubt myself, and I never again put on boxing gloves. However, I also hated complaining and refused to cry, so this and other aspects of my upbringing, such as the fact that both of my parents worked and often left me to entertain myself, made me a self-reliant loner. I had to figure everything out for myself.

Perhaps because of my lack of self-confidence and athletic non-prowess, I loved to read and was interested in many topics (when I returned home after college and went up into the attic looking through boxes of books, I realized that I had read all of them). This desire was stimulated by my mother, who was a professor of child psychology at the University of Minnesota. It was from her that I learned critical thinking skills, and a desire to delve deeply into history and the nature of things. She also gave me a love of learning, and as well as a realism about highly educated individuals. Mom had had extensive experience, both with eminent scholars, as well as with arrogant and small-minded PhDs who considered themselves to be God’s gift to humanity. Fairly early in life, for example, I came despise Sigmund Freud as an educated idiot. In a paper I recently wrote on him for a PhD course in psychology, I reviewed his life in much more detail, which confirmed her assessment and my early feelings of scorn for his theories and practices.

“Practicing psychiatry without faith in God is like meeting a hungry man and giving him a toothpick.”

Mom was at the university when the educational sea-changes of the 60's were implemented: the introduction of new and poorer reading methods, the removal of many disciplinary standards, and the introduction of early childhood sex-education. The latter was promulgated by SIECUS (Sex Information & Education Council of the US) which was formed by Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood, in what ultimately became a clever marketing ploy to generate teen pregnancies that would in turn fund her abortion clinics, along with legislation allowing abortions without parental notification. Mom was an adviser for student teachers; she saw what was happening and fought it as best she could, but having only a Master's degree, she was not tenured, and therefore was sidelined and marginalized. She eventually left the university in frustration, feeling that public education was becoming increasingly polluted. I remember her later citing the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*, “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.” Her assertion was that the real problem was not the lack of funding, but rather the wrong core philosophy and the top leadership by the NEA (National Education Association) and NFT (National Federation of Teachers) who should have been fired long ago. However, even today, forty years later, they retain a vice grip on power and policy, courtesy of the government. Public schools have continued to decline under their aegis even as funding has increased.

It was in high school when my personality started to change, and I began to find myself. I got involved in doing school photography, which at the time was an entirely student-run activity; we were completely responsible and did all of the shooting, developing, and organizing the pictorial content for both the school paper and the yearbook with virtually no faculty oversight. I was also involved in doing school plays, and acting for me was a very liberating experience. But what helped me the most was involvement in sports. For three of my high school years I was a wrestler, and the “mano-a-mano” nature of the sport helped give me confidence. But I was never a popular kid and girls were not attracted to me. Despite making the honor role, I was never a top student but still soldiered on.

During my entire childhood and adolescence I was involved in Christianity, and both my high school and college were Christian. It's hard to escape one's religious upbringing, but like many if not most kids, I began to question what I had been taught. Furthermore, my background in reading and my experience with political correctness and questioning authority taught me that I needed to consider such important subjects from all angles. I had been enamored with “Christian philosophy” since childhood, seeing in it an amazing balance for many areas of life. Thomas Aquinas, author of *Summa Theologica*, is still the greatest, the most lucid, and the most balanced philosopher of all time.

“St. Thomas' work has a constructive quality absent from almost all cosmic systems after him. For he is already building a house, while the newer speculators are still at the stage of testing the rungs of the ladder, and generally quarreling about whether they can even make the tools that will make the house. *Aquinas is whole eons ahead of them, and is ages in advance of our own age... Most modern*

philosophies are not philosophies, but philosophic doubts; that is, doubts about whether there can be any philosophy... Unlike Kant and most of the Hegelians, Aquinas has a faith that is not merely a doubt about doubt. It is not merely what is commonly called a faith about faith; *it is a faith about fact.* [Italics, mine]"¹

But at the same time I was repelled by the hypocrisy of some so-called Christians as well as those that are sometimes referred to as “fundamentalists” – people that define their spirituality by the things that they don’t do – no dancing, drinking, card playing, etc. Sex was especially dangerous and questionable; given my background it was an issue that took me a long time to understand.² I played cards as a kid, and later came to enjoy dancing and even imbibing alcoholic beverages; all of these things are not necessarily moral issues. As I saw later, such things can certainly become moral issues if, for example, one becomes an alcoholic or gets involved in early sexuality through dancing. Fundamentalism does make sense in some ways, and abstinence could prevent such things and protect both teens and adults from screwing up their lives. But too much restriction also provokes rebellion, which is the perennial challenge of parenting.

Up through my college years I had Christianity “in my head” but not “in my heart”, so I began to consider other religions. The Vietnam War was in progress, and during my freshman year in college Kent State happened (May 4, 1970). The campus exploded in protest sessions and discussions lasting long into the night. I had been in ROTC (Reserve Officer’s Training Corp) with the plan of eventually being commissioned as a 2nd lieutenant in the army. But as my college years continued, I could not see myself becoming a soldier and a “military asset”, especially as I saw reports of how the war was being conducted and its reception by the nation. If I was to fight and possibly die then it needed to be for a valid reason. Despite my support of the military, the war in Vietnam was nonsensical to me; in my estimation it was devoid of honor and purpose. As I later came to see, the real cause of the war was the not the military, but rather politicians on both sides of the political aisle who pushed it, and who used the military and polluted it in much the same manner as what took place in the public education sphere described above.

This was the era when powerful hallucinogenic drugs such as LSD became popular. It was also the height of the ZPG movement (zero population growth), as well as feminism and the start of gender dysphoria. For example, Dr. John Money, the author of *Fuckology*, began his famous case in 1967 of trying to turn the boy David Reimer into a girl (Reimer ultimately committed suicide). Like me, college kids were going off in all directions.

Humanism Considered

The religion of America was supposedly Christianity, but in reality that was a thin veneer over the real religion of much of the west – humanism and its philosophical companion, post-modernism. People don’t think of humanism as a religion because there are no churches or

¹ G.K. Chesterton, *Saint Thomas Aquinas – The Dumb Ox*, Doubleday, NY, 1956, p. 156

² For a view of my thoughts and exploration on the topics of romance and sexuality, see: “Religion and the Corruption of Eroticism”, https://www.academia.edu/42169250/Religion_and_the_Corruption_of_Eroticism, and “The Redemption of Eroticism”, https://www.academia.edu/42186012/The_Redemption_of_Eroticism

religious services, but it is one nevertheless because it is a belief system about the nature of God, the nature of mankind, and the source of morality. Humanists believe either that God doesn't exist, or if he does exist, then he is irrelevant and uninvolved. God is therefore plastic and can be morphed into any way that we imagine him (or her) to be – in essence we become god, and humanism is the worship of self. We are therefore left completely to our own devices and are the “sole captains of our fate.” Morality is therefore also fungible – it has no secure source and is thus determined and modified by personal desires and government fiat. Likewise, guilt doesn't actually exist, and we supposedly can be liberated from our conscience so that we can be completely free. Post-modernism tells us that truth is relative and self-defined, although in practice this is typically limited to issues of theology, morality, and sex (e.g., the feminist slogan, “get your morality off my body”). Science is thus the only truth that applies to everyone, and to be considered as true, something must be seen as “scientific”, even though it may only be a theory.

Humanism is thus an attractive American worldview especially for teenagers and young adults (i.e., college students like me at the time) who want to rebel against their parents and do their own thing, as instructed by songs such as *Go Your Own Way* by Fleetwood Mac. In the words of William Murray, “Humanism or atheism is a wonderful philosophy of life as long as you are big, strong, smart, good looking, in good health, have plenty of money, and are between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. But watch out if you are in a lifeboat and there are others who are younger, bigger, richer, or smarter.” It is also attractive for social justice aficionados such as feminists who want to destroy patriarchy and eliminate all distinctions between the sexes.

Like all religions, humanism requires an explanation of how we got here, hence the continual pushing of Darwinian evolution as an explanation for the origin of life, and the insistence that Darwinism is not a theory and is therefore “scientific.” As Richard Dawkins, one of the main spokesmen for Darwinism expresses it: “The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.” My undergraduate degree was in biology and I studied Darwinism extensively. I was initially skeptical that you could get something from nothing, especially the supposed accidental development of consciousness and the human brain which we are far from understanding. The more I studied the topic, the more impossible and stupid the theory was shown to be.

I remember a biology class where the evolution of love and romance was discussed – it was as if a brilliant mind was trying to explain how two plus two could possibly equal five. How could so many scientists believe in a theory that was inherently ridiculous? I have since written my own comprehensive critique entitled “The Darwinian Emperor is Naked”³

Especially troubling for scientific Darwinists is the phenomenon of near-death experiences (NDEs). Thousands of people worldwide have had one or more such experiences, and in a number of documented cases the individuals were brain-dead (for example, Dr. Mary Neal drowned in a kayak and was under water for over thirty minutes,⁴ and Tricia Barker had flatlined on the operating room table after being in a serious car accident⁵). Nevertheless, these

³ https://www.academia.edu/42232462/The_Darwinian_Emperor_is_Naked

⁴ <https://ndestories.org/dr-mary-neal/>

⁵ <https://ndestories.org/tricia-barker/>

individuals later recalled being outside their bodies and seeing the people trying to save their lives; they even reported conversations that took place while they were presumably dead. According to naturalistic scientists, our existence is over when the brain dies, but through the study of NDEs we now know that human consciousness somehow survives death. How does that work?

Then for one of my college courses I wrote a paper on *weltanschauung* – the development of worldviews, and I began to see the power of religion – that humanists had to prop up and cling to Darwinism and defend its stupidities because it is an essential requirement of their worldview, belief system, and religion. Once someone fully adopts and internalizes a particular belief system it became very hard for him or her to change, especially if he or she has an advanced degree, because the person would then have to critically and painfully reexamine many aspects of his or her thinking and admit that they were wrong. As Tom Stoppard said, “Humanism/atheism is a crutch for those who cannot bear the reality of God.”

The foundation of humanism’s belief in the nature of man is Jean-Jacque Rousseau’s famous characterization of the “noble savage”, even though he didn’t use that term. In Rousseau’s estimation we are born sinless, so where does human sin come from? It supposedly comes from society and in particular from capitalism, private property, and the profit motive. Hence, the drive of many to eliminate capitalism and promote socialism. But anyone who has been a parent, or who has worked with small children understands that kids are naturally selfish and are often cruel. Goodness and unselfishness require training, and the Bible explains that sin is essentially a genetic human condition (e.g., Jeremiah 17:9, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick – who can understand it?”). All of us are sinful by nature, which explains why there has been so much evil, corruption, immorality, vice, betrayal, and wickedness throughout human history. This is a much better and more realistic answer. Ironically, the deployment of communist and socialist political systems in the 20th century (in Russia, China, Cambodia, Romania, Germany, Argentina, Venezuela, Africa, etc.) have resulted in more misery, torture, starvation, and death than in all of the previous centuries of human history combined.

Hypocrisy in America is thus not limited to Christians, but being a basic human malady, it is abundantly evident in our liberal elite, who are so hypocritical that they refuse to even acknowledge that there are other positions, and attempt to shut off all discussion, lest any rays of light penetrate their darkness.⁶ Many of the social pathologies of America can be directly traced to the outworking of humanist and post-modern philosophy (marital dissatisfaction, high divorce rates, broken homes, troubled kids, school violence and shootings, and so on), as discussed in books such as Robert Shaw’s *The Epidemic: The Rot of American Culture, Absentee and Permissive Parenting, and the Resultant Plague of Joyless, Selfish Children*. Later I read Allan Bloom’s devastating critique of post-modernism:

“There is one thing that a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative... The relativity of truth is not a theological insight but a moral postulate, the condition of a free society, or so they see it... The true believer is the real danger. The study of history and of culture supposedly teaches that all the world was mad

⁶ For example, democrat politicians are currently attempting to shut down conservative media networks.

in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all.

We should not think our way is better than others. The intention is not so much to teach the students about other times and places as to make them aware of the fact that their preferences are only that – accidents of their time and place [and that American society has typically made the wrong choices].

[Parents typically] have nothing to give their children in the way of a vision of the world, of high models of action, or profound sense of connection with others. The family requires a certain authority about the ways of the heavens and of men. The parents must have knowledge of what has happened in the past, and prescriptions for what ought to be, in order to resist the philistinism and the wickedness of the present... People sup together, play together, travel together, but they do not think together. Hardly any homes have any intellectual life whatsoever... Parents do not have the legal or moral authority that they had in the Old World. They lack a self-confidence as educators of their children... Specialized competence and success are all that they can imagine.

Picture a thirteen-year-old boy sitting in the living room of his family home watching MTV. He enjoys the liberties hard won over the centuries of philosophic genius and political heroism, consecrated by the blood of martyrs; he is provided with comfort and leisure by the most productive economy ever known to mankind; science has penetrated the secrets of nature in order to provide him with the marvelous lifelike sound and image reproduction he is enjoying. And in what does this progress culminate? A nonstop, commercially prepackaged masturbational fantasy.”

Openness, as currently conceived, is a way of making surrender to whatever is most powerful, or the worship of vulgar success, look principled... Students now arrive at the university ignorant and cynical about our political heritage, lacking the wherewithal either to be inspired by it, or to be seriously critical of it. As respect for the Sacred – the latest fad – has soared, real religion and the knowledge of the Bible have diminished to the vanishing point.

The gradual stilling of the old political and religious echoes in the souls of the young accounts for the differences between students I knew at the beginning of my teaching career and those I face now... Thus, what is advertised as a great opening is actually a great closing.”⁷

While in college I recall seeing Jean-Paul Sartre’s play *No Exit*, which conveys the ultimate bleakness of this worldview. Most people close their eyes to the stark reality that in humanism there is “nothing out there but blind, pitiless indifference”, and they typically put their heads in

⁷ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind – How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students*, Simon & Shuster, NY, 1987, pp. 25-61

the sand about the implications of their beliefs, unlike the philosopher Nietzsche, who went mad in an attempt to be true to his philosophy. Humanism may be fine for those who content themselves with material things, but what if cars, houses, careers, and sex are not enough? Is it true that “he who dies with the most toys wins”? There has to be more to life than that.

Eastern Religion Considered

Eastern religion was very popular at the time I was in college, with rock groups such as the Beatles supporting various gurus. From ten thousand feet it seemed to me that it was mostly sex, drugs, and rock music (I liked the music and the sex aspects, but drugs were always anathema to me). However, since many kids were attracted to eastern religion, I started looking at it more deeply as well.

Hinduism is the oldest one and began around 2,500 BC in India. As in the case of many eastern religions there was no single founder, and hence many variations of belief – some Hindus are monotheists with a central god (Brahman), whereas other variations are polytheistic, pantheistic, and perhaps even atheistic. A number of other religions began as reactions against perceived excesses or problems with Hinduism, but all of them are known as “dharmic” religions, in that their major focus is a system of ethics and a prescribed way of life and behavior. Because of its pluralistic foundations Hinduism is somewhat open to other religious traditions and concepts, giving it an aura of toleration. But Hinduism as well as other eastern religions generally hold to certain core teachings, such as the concepts of reincarnation (rebirth after death in a higher or lower form) and nirvana (release from suffering and desire by absorption into the cosmic all as being the goal of human existence).

Some eastern religions such as Taoism, Confucianism, and Shinto are essentially forms of ancestor worship fused with ethics. As such they were outgrowths of Chinese and Japanese cultures, and therefore not very applicable elsewhere. Shintoism, for example, is the ancient religion of Japan, and is part ancestor worship and part spiritism, in which the identity of the spirits, known as “kami,” are not clear (angels? demons? deceased ancestors?). Early in Japanese history Shintoism was comingled with Buddhism, in order to have the best of both. For example, Japanese weddings are typically Shinto whereas funerals are Buddhist (in traditional Shinto one rots after death in contrast to reincarnation in Buddhism). Shinto stories of the gods and the creation of Japan are known as the “Kojiki.” For centuries these were purely oral traditions and were first written around 700 AD, with the oldest surviving copies from around 1400 AD. They are polytheistic and quite strange – for example, Izanagi, a male god who had gone down into hell to search for Izanami his wife, washes himself after returning, and other gods and goddesses are created from the wash water (Amaterasu mentioned below is one of them). In the past Japan had had an inferiority complex towards China, so when Chinese Confucian scholars mocked the foundational stories of the Kojiki as silly and nonsensical, Shinto scholars responded by indicating that no thinking person would have written these stories, so their nonsensicality was proof of their divine nature; in contrast Confucian religion was written “by puny human minds, for puny human minds.”

The most popular of all of the eastern religions is Buddhism, which was founded after Hinduism and incorporated many of the same concepts and was absorbed into a number of cultures. One of

the early proponents of Buddhism was Siddhartha Gutama (c. 560 – 480 BC) who was later called “the Buddha” (the enlightened one). I learned about the “eight-fold path” of Buddhism which was Gutama’s “middle way” between the extremes of asceticism and hedonism. It can be summarized as follows:

1. Correct view and understanding the Four Noble Truths:
 - a. That suffering (samsara) is an inevitable characteristic of life on earth.
 - b. The origin and cause of suffering is craving for things, along with the negative mental states and negative actions that flow from those cravings.
 - c. The cessation of suffering is nirvana, where we lose ourselves and our desires.
 - d. The way to nirvana is following the steps of the path.
2. Correct intentions, avoiding thoughts of attachment, hatred, and harmful intent.
3. Correct speech, refraining from verbal misdeeds such as lying, divisive speech, harsh speech, and senseless speech.
4. Correct action, refraining from physical misdeeds such as killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct.
5. Correct livelihood, avoiding trades that directly or indirectly harm others, such as selling slaves, weapons, animals for slaughter, intoxicants, or poisons.
6. Correct effort, abandoning negative states of mind that have already arisen, preventing negative states that have yet to arise, and sustaining positive states that have already arisen.
7. Correct awareness of body, feelings, thought, and phenomena.
8. Correct concentration and single-mindedness.

If all of this sounds difficult, if not impossible to perform, it is. Buddhism requires a person to reform their sin nature strictly by their own efforts. Some Buddhist sects teach that it is essentially impossible to understand Buddhism (i.e., how do you know what “correct” actually means and how far do you need to go?), because it is beyond the ability of words to convey. Therefore, the way to understanding is said to be through physical actions: 1) Mudras, which are hand motions (e.g., the raised palm of Buddha statues); 2) Mantras, which are chanted words (e.g., “Om”) that don’t necessarily have any meaning in themselves, but the sound has trace-like effects; and 3) Mandalas, which are many pictures of Buddhas, each of which has a set of mudras and mantras. So the mandalas are a large series of correspondences similar to the Kabbalah in Judaism. In Shingon Buddhism the goal is to keep all of the mandalas along with the associated mudras and mantras in one’s mind at the same time, which can supposedly only be

done by an adept – a monk who has devoted his or her life to this effort. Zen Buddhism in some ways is the opposite – the goal is a clear mind where you think about nothing. Despite the differences of various sects, Buddhism teaches that human desire leads us astray from the truth, that our senses are deceptive, that the rational mind is a source of confusion rather than enlightenment, and that Buddhist salvation lies in the removal of desire. We may perceive things through trances, meditation, or the effect of drugs, but the rational mind is the only way that we can evaluate and understand what we have perceived, resulting in a conundrum.

How can a person comprehend all of this, deal with all of these complexities, and become an enlightened one? One common approach is like the prayer of St. Francis, “God, give me chastity, but not yet!” I don’t want to give up my desire for possessions, relationships, power, or sex, so perhaps I should endure a few more cycles of reincarnation and work on abandoning my desires in a future life. Another popular variation of Buddhism in Japan is known as “Pure Land” which was developed in response to the complexity of the mandalas and the difficulty for common people to comprehend them. One of the mandalas is known as the “Amida Buddha”; if you call on Amida for help he will save you, even though you may have lived a corrupt life. Pure Land is similar to Christianity in that salvation is based purely on faith in Amida, as opposed to other forms of Buddhism which are “works-based” in that you have to do good things and behave in good ways in order to enter nirvana. Pure Land is therefore a “death-bed conversion” form of Buddhism – anyone can call on Amida regardless of how vile and wicked they were, which seems to be a religious copout and a betrayal of divine justice, similar to the Papal practice of buying an indulgence. Furthermore, how do we know that Amida has the power to save beyond what a historical monk told us?

So to get deeper into Buddhism, I read Herman Hesse’s book *Siddhartha*, about a Brahmin boy who leaves his Hindu home, becomes a Jainist/Samana ascetic, leaves that to consider Buddhism, again leaves to focus on a life of pleasure and luxury, and ultimately finds his own “middle” way in a fulfillment of Buddhist ideals:

“Siddhartha practiced self-denial and meditation. He had one goal – to become empty of thirst, desire, dreams, pleasure, and sorrow – to let the Self die. When the Self was conquered then the innermost Being must awaken – the great secret!... A heron flew over the bamboo wood and Siddhartha took the heron into his soul, flew over the forest and mountains, ate fishes, suffered heron hunger, used heron language, and died a heron’s death. A dead jackal lay on the sandy shore and Siddhartha’s soul slipped into the corpse; he became the dead jackal, swelled, stank, decayed, was dismembered by hyenas, picked at by vultures, became a skeleton, became dust, mingled with the atmosphere. And Siddhartha’s soul returned, died, decayed, turned into dust, experienced the troubled course of the life cycle... He traveled the way of self-denial through voluntary suffering and conquering of pain, through hunger, thirst, and fatigue; through meditation and emptying of the mind of all images. He lost his Self a thousand times and for days at a time dwelt in non-being. But although the paths took him away from Self, in the end they always led back to it.

Siddhartha reflected deeply. I will no longer try to escape from Siddhartha, to mutilate and destroy myself in order to find a secret behind the ruins. How deaf and stupid I have been!

He followed the Buddha into town and listened to him preach. The Illustrious One talked about suffering, the origin of suffering, and the way to release from suffering. Life was pain, the world was full of suffering, but the path to release from suffering had been found. There was salvation for those who went in the way of the Buddha. The Illustrious One taught the four main points and the eightfold path.

'Do not be angry with me, O Illustrious One,' spoke Siddhartha. 'You have reached the highest goal which so many of Brahmins and Brahmin's sons are striving to reach. But you have done so by your own seeking, in your own way... and so I think that no one finds salvation through teachings.'

As Siddhartha left the grove in which the Buddha, the Perfect One remained, he felt that he had left his former life behind him in the grove. 'I will no longer study Yoga-Veda, Atharva-Veda, asceticism, or any other teaching. I will learn from myself and be my own pupil.'

He looked around him as if seeing the world for the first time. Here was blue, here was yellow, here was green, sky and river, woods, and mountains, all beautiful, all mysterious and enchanting... All of this was despised by deep thinking Brahmins who scorned diversity and who sought unity. His path went alongside a brook, and at the edge of the brook a young woman was kneeling and washing clothes. When he greeted her, she raised her head and looked at him with a smile. She exchanged light remarks with him and then placed her left foot on his right and made a gesture, such as a woman makes when she invites a man to that kind of enjoyment of love which the ancients call 'ascending the tree.' He kissed the brown tip of her breast.

Then he entered the town with only one goal. Pursuing it he surveyed the town and wandered about in its maze of streets... He said to the woman, 'I can think, I can wait, and I can pray... There is not much more that is lacking, most excellent lady: fine clothes, fine shoes, and money in my purse. Siddhartha has undertaken to achieve more difficult things than these trifles and has attained them.'

For a long time Siddhartha had lived the life of the world without belonging to it. He had tasted riches, passion, and power, but for a long time he remained a Samana in his heart. The people of the world were still alien to him, as he was apart from them... Just as the potter's wheel, once set in motion, turns for a long time and then turns only very slowly, so did the wheel of the ascetic still revolve for a long time in Siddhartha's soul.

The years passed. He had become rich. Like a veil, like a thin mist, a weariness settled on Siddhartha, slowly, every day a little thicker, every month a little darker, every year a little heavier. But Siddhartha only noticed that the bright and clear inward voice that has once awakened in him and had always guided him in his finest hours, had become silent. The world had caught him; pleasure, covetousness, idleness, and finally also that vice that he had despised and scorned as the most foolish – acquisitiveness. Property, possessions and riches had finally trapped him. They were no longer a game and a toy; they had become a chain and a burden.

Awakening from his dream he was overwhelmed by a feeling of great sadness. It seemed to him that he had spent his life in a worthless and senseless manner; he retained nothing vital, nothing in any way precious or worthwhile. He stood alone, like a ship-wrecked man on the shore... Why should he go any further, where, and for what purpose? There was no more purpose; there was nothing more than a deep, painful longing to shake off the whole confused dream, to spit out this stale wine, and to make an end of this bitter and painful life.

‘How strange his life had been,’ he thought. ‘But what a path it had been! I have had to experience so much stupidity, so many vices, so much error, so much nausea, disillusionment, and sorrow, just in order to become a child again, and begin anew.’

From that hour Siddhartha ceased to fight against his destiny. There shone in his face the serenity of knowledge, of one who is no longer confronted with the conflict of desires, who has found salvation, who is in harmony with the stream of events, with the stream of life, full of sympathy and compassion, surrendering himself to the stream, belonging to the unity of all things.

[Speaking to his friend Govinda, Siddhartha said,] Everything that is thought and expressed in words is one-sided. When the Illustrious Buddha taught about the world, he had to divide it into Samsara [the wheel of suffering] and Nirvana [absorption into the cosmic all], into illusion and truth. One cannot do otherwise, there is no other method for those who teach. But the world itself, being in and around us, is never one-sided. This only seems so because we suffer the illusion that time is real. Time is not real... Words do not express thoughts very well. They always become a little different, a little distorted, a little foolish... I must confess, my friend that I do not differentiate very much between thoughts and words. Quite frankly, I do not attach much importance to thoughts either. I attach more importance to things.

‘We are now old men,’ said Govinda. ‘We may never see each other again in this life. I can see, my dear friend, that you have found peace, and I realize that I have not found it. Tell me one more word, tell me something I can understand! Give me something to help me on my way; my path is often dark and hard.’ ‘Bend near to me.’ Siddhartha whispered to Govinda. ‘Come still nearer.’ Although

surprised Govinda obeyed, and as he leaned close something wonderful happened, even as he strove in vain to dispel the concept of time and to imagine Nivana and Samsara as one... Govinda no longer saw the face of his friend Siddhartha. Instead he saw other faces, many faces, a long series, a continuous stream of faces – hundreds, thousands, which all came and disappeared and yet all seemed to be there at the same time, and which were all Siddhartha... And Govinda saw that this smile of unity over all of the flowing forms was exactly the same as the smile of Gotama, the Buddha, as he had perceived it in awe a hundred times, and he bowed low, down to the ground.”⁸

There are, of course, many more aspects to eastern religion. It does have religious texts, such as the Vedas and the Upanishads, but none of them claim divine authority – all of them are the ideas of people stating what they think God is like and how a person can connect with Him. So there are no writings recognized as being authoritative and of divine origin in any of the eastern religions, but Hesse seems to have captured the essence (he names his protagonist after the historical Buddha in order to subtly indicate that his story is the “fulfillment” of Buddhism).

The idea of nirvana, of becoming one with the cosmic all and connected to everything, is very attractive. James Cameron in his movie *Avatar* pictures God (supposedly female) as a willow-like tree with long branching tendrils with which the creatures of that world could connect. In the same way, a man connects with a woman by entering her, and with the aid of mysticism is able to penetrate beyond her womb, so that their minds connect. This idea, although not unique to eastern religion, is very powerful. Such sexuality, far from being lewd, vulgar, raunchy, or bawdy, is not only intensely intimate and erotic, but also noble, holy, and sacred – a profound act of both conquest and surrender, as well as communion and sharing. Hence the focus on exclusivity (i.e., marriage) – being able to fully know and then fully trust that one partner; having one relationship where you can be completely honest and lay down your guard, knowing that you will always be heard, accepted, and loved. The *Song of Solomon* in the Bible echoes these same themes.⁹ It is unfortunate that many people throughout history have been desperately unhappy, afraid, and disconnected despite having wealth, power, and sexual variety, and perhaps because of such things.

But however attractive, there seemed to me to be a fundamental disconnect between eastern religion and human nature. The last seven steps of the eight-fold path are similar in many ways to the ethics presented in the Bible which people are told to follow (e.g., the ten commandments). But the Bible goes on to explain several key truths that are missing from Buddhism: 1) Regardless of how hard a person tries, he or she will never be able to follow all of the steps of the path and become perfect. As Govinda cries out in the story above, “Give me something to help me on my way; my path is often dark and hard!”; 2) Jesus, the God-man who followed all of the elements of the path and lived a perfect life, gave his life as a sacrifice for us, so that if we put our trust in him rather than in our own goodness, we can be forgiven and will live with God; 3) The nature of heaven is very different than nirvana. Heaven is cessation from suffering, but much more than that. We want to connect with others in meaningful ways, but even more-so, we

⁸ Herman Hesse, *Siddhartha*, New Directions, NY, 1951

⁹ See, for example, “Commentary on the Song of Solomon”,
https://www.academia.edu/42179283/Commentary_on_the_Song_of_Solomon

are individuals, and both want and need to retain our individuality. Nirvana is a very different concept than heaven because it means absorption into the cosmic all, while heaven is entering paradise with your individuality still intact, and as a glorified version of your former self. Nirvana also means a cessation of all desires, whereas Heaven means a fulfillment of all desires – that our desires will be perfected rather than removed. Heaven will be a return to the Garden of Eden – a fulfillment of all of one’s gifts and talents, and in the way that each person was created and meant to be. Eastern religion is thus a pre-Christian and human-only version of the way to God without the guidance provided by the Bible. It is people attempting to find their own way to God with any truly divine light.

Eastern religion is attractive to the West for the same reason as humanism, in that you can do whatever you want, and supposedly with no guilt. But doing so will keep you on the “wheel of Samsara” – into repeated dissatisfaction and suffering, and with a potentially bad reincarnation. So asceticism, the opposite of hedonism, is seen by many as the answer; it is a common aspect of many religions. Asceticism can be very appealing as it gives a person control over their own body and its appetites, and in many cases is necessary for those who wish to devote themselves to athletic or martial goals. For example, the Japanese Samurai ethic of bushido (“the way of the warrior”) had many elements of asceticism and Buddhism. The Bible speaks of periodic fasting as a spiritual discipline and an aid to prayer. But rather than promoting humility and bringing us closer to God, ascetic practices such as sleeping on a bed of nails, whipping oneself, abandoning society to live in a cave, and so on, can make us more independent and arrogant, and increase feelings of superiority and disdain for others, as Siddhartha discovered above; his attempt to abandon Self led instead to a magnification of Self. Asceticism in and of itself does not make a person more spiritual and can thus be a trap.

A related problem with eastern religion is its preoccupation with death. Eastern religion sees death as a natural and normal part of life, so death is always associated with reincarnation. But reincarnation is not good – you will supposedly die, decay, turn to dust, the dust molecules will be reassembled into another creature, you will then be reborn, and the cycle can be repeated many times. If you led a sinful life you will return as a lesser being – perhaps as a slime (as in the case of a recent Japanese novel) or a cow (which is why cows are not eaten in India). This is in accord with many of the cyclical facets of the natural world which the Bible also speaks of:

“The sun rises, the sun sets, and hurries to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.”
Ecclesiastes 1:5-7

But reincarnation conflicts with our individuality and with our uniqueness as persons. We are similar to computers in that we have “hardware” (our bodies) and “software” (our personalities, minds, and souls). The software needs hardware in order to have a physical presence, but the hardware is an empty shell and is nothing without the software. The Bible teaches our software lives on forever; in contrast to reincarnation, the Bible says, “It is appointed for each person to die once, and then the judgement.” Hebrews 9:27.

In its preoccupation with death eastern religion is completely “earthly”, i.e., it is associated only with our present world, and has no real elements of divinity beyond what humans are capable of. In other words, it is merely human, it is limited to what nature can provide, and it is lacking divine enlightenment. The Bible states that both death and suffering are unnatural – they are enemies that were the products of human sin; one day God will do away with both of them. Death is therefore not the worst thing that can happen to a person; the worst possible event is separation from God. The Western fear of death and obsession with prolonging life exposes a lack of trust in God’s existence and his goodness.

“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as in Adam all die, so as all in Christ will be made alive... For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet, and the last enemy to be destroyed is death... The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” 1 Corinthians 15:20-22, 25-36, 56-57

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee,
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so...
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.
John Donne

Eastern religion is tolerant and syncretistic which is also deeply attractive to post-moderns, because one of the most serious sins of post-modernism is intolerance. As in Japan where Buddhism is often comingled with Shintoism, so a person can add whatever elements they desire – crystals, worshiping mother earth, transcendental meditation, spiritism, orgiastic sexuality, etc. Much of Buddhist teaching is a mystery and supposedly cannot be reduced to words, so one can essentially design their own religion, which is very attractive to post-moderns, and adds a religious gloss. This was one of the main reasons that Buddhism was originally promoted in China and especially in Japan, as it promised mystical blessing on the rulers if they built and maintained Buddhist temples and shrines and helped to legitimize their rule. But how can you know that the path you are on leads to God? Unlike humanism and eastern religion, Christianity teaches that the way to God is narrow – as Jesus said, “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. But the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.” (Matthew 7:13-14). The Bible claims to be the authoritative Word of God and it explains how we can reach Him – in the words of Jesus, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life – no one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6).

Eastern religion also does not provide any answer to the creation issue of how we and the rest of the world got here beyond the creation myths of India, China, Japan, and other countries. However, in my view, the most significant problem with eastern religion is that God is impersonal and pantheistic (he is in the rocks, the trees, the water – God is everything and everything is God). But people are intensely personal – how and why would an impersonal God

bring personal people such as us into being? Ancient Druidism was somewhat similar in that it was a nature religion in which an adept could supposedly enter a rock or a tree, run with a boar, or fly with an eagle, as Siddhartha did above with the heron and the dead jackal. Nature can surely provide much, but is that all there is? The ancient Celts wanted more. In the story of King Arthur they sought for the Holy Grail; they wanted something higher than the mountains, taller than the trees, above the eagles, and they ultimately sought for God and heaven. As in the song of Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*, “I want more!” I want connection with a God who is beyond this world, who is a personal like me, and who has passions and loves like I do. Is that possible?

Islam Considered

I never considered becoming a Muslim, but nevertheless I did read much about it and its history. Islam has some attractive features: a life of prayer and discipline along with enjoyment, especially for men, and support for the poor. But the main problem with Islam is that it is essentially a man-made religion invented by only one individual – Muhammad. Its original purpose was to achieve power and authority for himself and by extension for the Arab people and for others who become Muslim. Through his career as a caravan organizer, Muhammad came to learn about the Bible through Jews and Christians. The concepts of Allah as delineated in the Quran are essentially a simplified and cut-down version of Jehovah from the Bible, and virtually all of the saints of Islam come from the Bible (Noah, Abraham, Moses, and even Jesus). Muhammad began seeing visions of the angel Gabriel in a cave and was told to recite and remember what the angel told him, which ultimately became the Quran.

At some point during this time he transitioned from being merely a recipient of supposedly divine messages to having a focused vision of his own authority. Muhammad styled himself as a prophet but was rejected by the people of Mecca, his hometown, so he moved to Medina. There he seized power by convincing the Arab population around him that he was God’s prophet by cleverly appealing to their own desire for power. Soon afterward he returned to Mecca as the head of an army and conquered it.

Before his death in 632 AD Muhammad instituted jihad as a means of conquering and subjugating the world for Islam – societies in their path had three choices: convert, become slaves, or die. Worldwide conquest is still the goal of Islam. Allah seems to be a remote God of anger who inspires people to martyrdom in order to kill Jews and non-believers, and there is no assurance of salvation other than by becoming a warrior or a martyr.

Islam can be attractive because Middle eastern society is very hospitable and family-oriented and, like Christianity, it has provisions for the support of the poor. It is also a simple “works” religion that is easy to understand and much less complex than Christianity. All you have to do is six things in order to be a good Muslim (the five pillars of Islam with one added requirement):

1. Shahada – the profession of faith (“There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet.”)
2. Salat – ritual prayer done five times a day.
3. Zakat – giving alms to the poor and for the support of religious institutions.
4. Sawm – daytime fasting during the month of Ramadan.

5. Hajj – a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca.
6. Jihad – striving for Allah, interpreted in various ways by different Muslims.

But Allah doesn't inform us how far one has to go, so who is to say if you have done enough? In contrast to Christianity, Islam is intolerant of anyone questioning its history or veracity, such as the extreme reaction to Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and to Charlie Hebdo in France. I am reminded of the Wizard of Oz – "Whatever you do, don't look behind the curtain!" This is similar to the Papacy which in the past reacted violently against any teaching that it considered heretical and that challenged its authority.¹⁰

I have often pondered the raw, visceral, and intense hatred of the Jews by Muslims – their animosity seemingly knows no bounds. There is a continual flow of vitriol from Islamic religious leaders and hatred is a typical topic of their Friday sermons.¹¹ The Palestinians are the only people on earth who are devoted to a negative goal – the destruction of Israel and the Jews. The Palestinian government has a policy known as "Pay-for-Slay" in which they financially support terrorists and their families. It pays those who kill or maim Israelis or participates in anti-Israeli riots, especially if the terrorist dies in the act.¹² The budget is now around \$200 million per year – hence funding from the UN and the continual cry for donations to the Palestinian Authority. Some Palestinian families even encourage their kids to become martyrs in order to get Pay-for-Slay cash from the government.

This conflict originated in antiquity between the sons of Abraham – Ishmael, the father of if the Arabs, and Isaac, the father of the Jews. But there have been many instances of sibling rivalry through the ages – why is this one so intense, and why does the animosity run so deep? The answer is that God chose the descendants of Isaac to be the bloodline of Christ, and He made the following promise to Abraham in Genesis 17:20-21: "As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year." The hatred therefore comes largely from the refusal of Ishmael and his descendants to make peace and accept a Jewish Messiah. Instead Muhammad, a descendant of Ishmael, set up a counterfeit religion in opposition to Judaism and Christianity with himself as the most significant prophet. Even sadder is that both Arabs and Jews typically did not and do not understand that race and ethnicity has nothing to do with acceptance by God. Jehovah accepts anyone who truly comes to Him. As the Apostle Paul said: "For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel... In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring." Romans 9:6-8. The children of the promise are those who come to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Islam is touted as a "religion of peace" and so it is for some of its adherents. But unlike Buddhism and Christianity, many of Islam's religious leaders encourage violence and promote hatred. Muhammad said, "Paradise is in the shade of the sword," so it is claimed that killing

¹⁰ See, for example, "Criticism of the Church", https://www.academia.edu/42210577/Criticism_of_the_Church

¹¹ See, for example, Kenneth R. Timmerman, *Preachers of Hate – Islam and the War on America*, Three Rivers Press, NY, 2004

¹² See, for example, <https://www.algemeiner.com/2020/12/01/what-will-biden-do-on-pay-for-slay/>

Jews and Christians is the will of Allah. A good example of this is Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem prior to and during World War 2. Husseini met with Hitler in 1941, congratulated him for persecuting Jews and “wished to convey his thanks to the Fuhrer of the Greater German Reich who was admired by the entire Arab world.” Husseini provided at least moral support for the Holocaust, and was a spiritual mentor to Yasser Arafat, the PLO leader. After Arafat gained power, he imposed educational directives on the Palestinians, teaching even small children that it was their duty to kill Jews. His policies of intifada, terrorism, and suicide bombing set the Palestinian destiny of poverty, dependence, and violence by continually pressing on the nerve of hate.

Other contemporary cults have used Muhammad’s idea of launching one’s own religion for personal power and profit. For example, Joseph Smith started Mormonism in 1830 with his golden plates that he supposedly found and used to translate the book of Mormon from “reformed Egyptian” (derived from records written in the fictitious “Nephite” language), but the plates were never revealed and have disappeared. Strangely, the book of Mormon has the same translation errors from Greek that the King James Bible had.

I recall being briefly interested in Rosicrucianism and Scientology because of magazine ads that promised “higher spiritual insights” if you joined and sent money. But then I read more about them and realized that they were actually cults that scammed people. L. Ron Hubbard, who founded Scientology in 1950, was a failed naval officer and science fiction writer who used the idea of starting a religion in order to get rich – to have his revenues become tax deductible so that he could create his own financial empire. He wrote the book *Dianetics* as an attempt to combine religion with science and psychology in order to “cure mental illness and save the planet” but the American Medical Association and psychologists considered his theories as quackery and junk science.¹³ Scientology requires parishioners to pay for advancing up the spiritual ladder and has come under intense legal pressure in many countries. In response, L. Ron Hubbard attacked his critics relentlessly, went to sea on a private fleet of ships, and later tried to take over the city of Clearwater in Florida. Despite its recruitment of movie stars such as Tom Cruise, and its strange affiliation with the Nation of Islam, there have been numerous exposés from ex-Scientologists that have revealed its sordid nature. The most prominent is the actress Leah Remini who along with others are exposing it as an evil, Mafia-like racket that separates and destroys families, abuses people, requires huge “donations”, endlessly hounds parishioners for money (even opening credit cards and going after their retirement accounts), and viciously attacks its critics. The act of questioning the religion transforms a Scientologist into an enemy, and the church freely uses its vast tax-deductible resources, now in the billions of dollars, to investigate, harass, and sue journalists and ex-Scientologists who have spoken about and exposed the church as a fraud. Hubbard’s own son said under oath in court that almost everything his father said and wrote were lies.¹⁴

¹³ See, for example, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dianetics>

¹⁴ *Leah Remini: Scientology and the Aftermath*, a three-season A&E documentary series viewable on Netflix and other platforms. This program reveals, for example, the fact the Scientology has relentlessly pursued and attempted to destroy its critics in its policy known as “fair game”, in one case even stealing personal stationary and writing fake bomb threat letters in an attempt to have the critic (in this case a journalist) prosecuted and jailed. Typical examples of harassment include articles and picketing falsely accusing the critic of child pornography, spouse abuse, theft, and other crimes. They are routinely followed and filmed by private investigators, have had their trash taken for inspection, and have had malicious and deceptive personal attacks against them in a variety of forums.

More recently the quasi-religion Nexium (or NXIVM) was exposed as a sex-cult and a multi-level marketing scheme.¹⁵ Similar to Scientology, it hooked people in with “Executive Success Programs” which were marketed as a set of personal and professional development courses. The programs were a way for participants to overcome their “limiting beliefs,” fears, and anxieties, and hence realize their full potential in life – supposedly overcoming anxieties, phobias, and even medical conditions and obsessive-compulsive disorders, all for small cost of \$2,700 for the first course. Keith Raniere, the founder of Nexium, was hailed as an elusive, god-like savant within the company, and the Dalai Lama even visited to commend Raniere’s work in May 2009. Before founding NXIVM, Raniere created the firm Consumers Buyline which New York Attorney General accused being a pyramid scheme; Raniere signed a consent order in 1996 in which he pay a \$40K fine and to be permanently banned from “promoting, offering or granting participation in a chain distribution scheme.” After the fall of NXIVM Raniere was charged with identity theft, extortion, forced labor, sex trafficking, money laundering, wire fraud and obstruction of justice, and was sentenced to prison for life.

It is a travesty that organizations such as the Papacy in the past and Scientology and Nexium in the present have used religion as means of achieving money and power by coercing and/or brainwashing its parishioners. Given the fact that our era is one of designer religions and a multiplicity of cults in addition to the ones discussed above (e.g., Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Church of Christ/Scientist, Children of the Way, the Unification Church, Hare Krishna, the Branch Davidians, the People’s Temple, Boko Haram, etc., etc.), one must carefully consider the history and nature of a religion before getting involved.

Karl Marx said, “religion is the opiate of the people.” Is all religion just a scam? Is it a placebo or a drug like OxyContin to numb our mental pain? Is there anything truly holy, truly divine, and truly sacred that can give us a reason to live and that is actually worthy of our total commitment?

In the history of recorded thought regarding the human condition there are only two main streams – the spiritual and the material. These were originally championed by the two great Greek philosophers: Plato and Aristotle; Raphael’s famous painting, *The School of Athens*, illustrates the difference, with the figure of Plato pointing upward and Aristotle downward as shown below. Both of these streams are essential to us, but there is a dichotomy – how can the gulf between the spiritual and the material be bridged, and how can people who are material reach a God who is spiritual? Even Socrates understood this problem when he wrote, “I don’t understand how divinity can forgive sins.”

¹⁵ See, for example, <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a33658764/what-is-nxivm-sex-cult-celebrities-stars-the-vow-hbo-true-story/>



Bridging this gap is what Christ did, because he was the God-man, both divine and human, and whose death was the payment for human sin. The Apostle Paul wrote of how he resolved his personal struggle, “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Romans 7:24-25. Later philosophers such as Augustine wrestled with the same issue and went from one philosophy and belief system to another until he found the writings of Paul and realized that Christ was the personal revelation of God. He was blown away by this realization and his life was transformed.

The Platonists, the Gnostics (the intellectual offspring of Plato), and unfortunately even Augustine in his later years, had a distain for material things. To them the spiritual was the only thing of importance. This led them to despise sexuality and to denigrate women. Platonic and Gnostic thought is thus largely responsible for the promotion of medieval asceticism, the denigration of sexuality, and the insistence of celibacy for the clergy that took place in the Catholic Church. But the solution to the spirit/material conundrum is that Christ “combined Plato and Aristotle” and went beyond both of them. This may seem simple, but to appreciate the huge impact this had on the world we need to reflect on the power and complexity of what God did. So the answer for me is Jesus, just as it was for the Apostle Paul who wrote:

“Whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ... That I may know him, the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings; being conformed to His death in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect... but forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”
Philippians 3:7-14

Judaism and Christianity Considered

All of the original Christians were Jews, so why did the split between Judaism and Christianity occur? It happened because even though Jesus was the Messiah, he was rejected by most of the Jewish religious leaders because unlike Judas Maccabeus¹⁶ and later Simon Bar-Kosba,¹⁷ he was not a military commander. Jewish Rabbis have long believed that there were two Messiahs: the suffering one “Ben-Joseph” and the conquering one “Ben-David.” What they have never understood or accepted is that Jesus was and is both of these – the suffering Messiah in his first coming, and the conquering Messiah in his second and future one. For more information on the differences between Judaism and Christianity see the document below.¹⁸

Both are both based on the teaching of the Bible, with Judaism using only the Old Testament (known to them as the Torah and the Tanakh), and Christianity employing both Old and New Testaments. The authority and veracity of the Bible is therefore critical, and both have been repeatedly questioned and attacked. How can we know that the Bible is true?

Unlike the Quran and other religious writings, the books of the Bible were written by forty different authors over a 1,600-year period, with little financial or power motives, but with an amazing unity of theme and purpose. For example, the Old Testament has over three hundred prophecies that were fulfilled by Christ, including the place of his birth, where he would grow up, the fact that he would be falsely accused, betrayed by a follower for thirty pieces of silver, and crucified, that he would rise from the dead, and that he was the Messiah and the future king of kings. The Bible is by orders of magnitude the most popular book ever published (it is so far ahead that it is not even mentioned in the list of best-selling books), and its history and accuracy are very well attested. There have been many who questioned its sources, but it has stood the test of time. There are however a number of questions that people repeatedly ask and are troubled by, such as the following:

- Is the text of the Bible reliable?
- Is the Bible myth, and why do some archaeologists think so?
- Is the Bible compatible with science?
- If God is good, why do evil and suffering exist?
- Why would a good God order the killing of people?
- Is Jesus the only way to God, and if so, what will be the fate of non-believers?
- Why would God allow us to be confused with many religions and denominations?
- Are the four Gospels accurate in their depiction of Jesus?
- Was Jesus just a “good man” or was he actually divine and a member of the Godhead?
- If one becomes a Christian, can he or she be rejected by God?

¹⁶ Judas Maccabeus was a Jewish leader who freed the Jews from Syrian control in 160 BC. This victory was followed by a cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem, which is celebrated by the Jewish feast of Hanukkah.

¹⁷ Simon Bar-Kosba was a Jewish leader after Jesus and after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. He was hailed by non-Christian Jews as the Messiah, and for three years successfully defeated the Romans. But Roman armies eventually invaded Israel, killed thousands of Jews, and wiped Judea off the map in 135 AD. The Roman Emperor Hadrian then renamed the country from “Judea” to “Palestine.”

¹⁸ https://www.academia.edu/42748548/Accuracy_of_the_Bible_and_Questioning_God

- Is Christianity a cult?
- How is Judaism different from Christianity?
- Why doesn't prayer work?
- What should we make of the many reported psychic and near-death experiences?
- Was Jesus married to Mary Magdalene or some other woman?

These questions and others are considered in the paper "Accuracy of the Bible and Questioning God" and are important to consider for anyone who questions and/or doubts the Bible or Christianity.¹⁹ So if you are troubled by any the above questions you may want to check that article out first.

I should also indicate that I am not espousing any particular church or denomination as those are human organizations – I seek Jesus who is beyond this world. In my opinion, participation in a church is a necessary activity and a part of my spiritual responsibility, but I take the Bible as my source of truth, rather than any church or church leader. In regard to affiliation, I am Protestant, but aside from the Vatican,²⁰ I equally respect Catholics even though I disagree with them on some topics.

After all these years, and all the reading and searching, why have I chosen Christ?

"The world is passing away, and also its lusts, but the one who does the will of God shall live forever." 1 John 2:17

"And there arose loud voices in heaven saying, 'The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he will reign forever and ever.'" Revelation 11:15-16

If everything is lost, thanks be to God,
 If I must see it go, watch it go, watch it fade away and die,
 Thanks be to God that He is all I have, and if I have Him not, I have nothing at all.
 Nothing at all, only a farewell to the wind, farewell to the grey sky.
 If all is lost, thanks be to God, for He is He, and I, I am only I.
 Dom Julian

1. **Rationality.** As I mentioned at the outset, religion to me has to be logical and make sense. There are, of course, mysteries and dilemmas in all religions, but Christianity by far makes the most sense and provides the best answers for the three essential questions of existence: 1) Where did I come from? 2) Why am I here? 3) Where am I going?

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction."
 Proverbs 1:7

¹⁹ https://www.academia.edu/42748548/Accuracy_of_the_Bible_and_Questioning_God

²⁰ The Vatican has been a source of corruption since its founding. As I have indicated elsewhere concerning the popes, "There were a few points of light in a general sea of darkness." See: https://www.academia.edu/42210577/Criticism_of_the_Church

The word “religion” implies human effort to reach up to God, and all religions are therefore a system of works – a set of instructions about what a person must do. But Christianity is the opposite – God reaches down to us.

“God demonstrates His love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:8.

It is also at this point that the value of other religious and cultural traditions need to be stated. For example, the Buddhist emphasis on the impermanence of life and the benefits of simplicity can be a good thing – life is short, and less is often more; the Zen practice of “no mind” (i.e., not over-thinking things) can be very valuable, especially in sports; using meditation as a means of calming and focusing one’s spirit is beneficial (depending on the subject of the meditation); we should emulate the Muslim practice of giving to the poor, and praying five times a day is a good way of connecting with God, depending on the content of the prayers. The point is that being Christian does not bind us to a specific cultural context or set of practices, because every culture in the world has some things of value, and others of little or negative value. Why not incorporate the best of everything?

“Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, meditate on these things” Philippians 4:8

2. **Relationship.** The answers to the above questions involve philosophy (an organized worldview and a way of thinking), as well as religion (a set of moral principles and a way of living), so everyone has both a philosophy and a religion of some sort. In contemporary Western thought religion is typically disconnected from “real life” – you go to church and are “religious” on Sunday and then return to real life for the rest of the week. But religion in the New Testament sense encompasses all of life, and to me that is the true definition. However, Christianity goes beyond religion because the real substance is relationship – a relationship with a personal God who wants to have a relationship with everyone who will come to him. There are many complexities, but at its core Christianity is simple and easy enough for even a child to understand. Jesus said, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” When the theologian Karl Barth was asked, “What is your profoundest thought?” he answered, “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

The God of the Bible is personal and relational, so it should not be a surprise that we are exactly the same – we were created in his image as the book of Genesis tells us. All of the characteristics that make us distinctly human – our consciousness, our senses, our passions, our reasoning ability, our desire to make and to do, our moral sense and desire for justice, and our capacity for love all come from God, who has the same attributes, albeit in a perfect form.

The fact that God is personal can be a major source of misunderstanding. In reading the Old Testament, some conclude that God is perpetually angry and vengeful, whereas in reading the New Testament other conclude that God is always loving and merciful. Sometimes God

seems to act more “male”, like a warrior fighting for his people, and sometimes more “female”, like a mother caring for her kids. Many people see God in negative terms – a demanding tyrant who will smite us, a grumpy judge who is primed to condemn, a distant and uninvolved authority who can’t relate to the problems we have, etc. But when we finally understand that God is personal just like us, then we realize that at times he can have all of emotions that we do in response to people and situations. So he can be loving, angry, merciful, judgmental, aggressive, nurturant, etc. He has feelings and emotions, but at the same time is righteous and holy.

God is the ultimate psychologist so he understands what we need and how to motivate us, to the extent that we are willing to be motivated (God will never force us against our will). My granddaughter will often tell me, “I can do it myself!” God created us that way and He lets us make our own decisions and allows us to fail. But He also sees through the psychological games that we often play and the bullshit that we try to sling; we could picture him shaking his head and saying, “C’mon man!” He understands the insecurities, difficulties, and problems we have with sin and dishonesty (“He knows our frame and remembers that we are dust.” Psalms 103:14). But at the same time he hates arrogance, especially when it is combined with deception and hypocrisy, as when people look directly into the camera and lie (e.g., “I didn’t have sex with that woman!”)

This difference is reflected in the first two kings of Israel – Saul and David – and why the first one failed with God, but the second one succeeded despite the fact that both of them were very human. Saul had many things going for him – he was tall, macho, and like an actor he looked the part of how a king is supposed to look. But on the inside, he had a deep sense of insecurity, and this insecurity combined with his enlarged ego made him distrust and disobey God. He was too proud to get close to God, and so he withdrew, and this became his long-term pattern. But at the end of his life he was in a deep crisis and seeking God – the following day he had to lead his troops into a hopeless battle against the Philistines, and God wasn’t answering him, so he looked for a psychic medium to call the prophet Samuel back from the dead to advise him. Samuel appears, but then rebukes Saul and tells him that he will die the next day. What happens is even worse – in the subsequent battle Saul is wounded by Philistine archers and then falls on his own sword and commits suicide. David in contrast was short, ruddy, and looked like a teenager, but had both strength, humility, an incredible courage, and a deep trust in God. In contrast to Saul who had one wife and a good family, David had a number of women and a lot of family trouble. His son Amnon from one mother raped his daughter Tamar from another mother, and the daughter’s brother Absalom killed Amnon. David had not dealt with either crime, so despising his father, Absalom led a revolt against him which was almost successful but resulted in Absalom’s death. David then compounded his family problems by having an adulterous affair with Bathsheba, and had her husband killed after she became pregnant. Both of these kings therefore did bad things and were punished by God for what they had done, but the difference was that David always came back to God whereas Saul moved away.

What has helped me come close to God is the example of David – being in awe of God, but not being afraid. I will no longer shrink back in fear or discouragement, but the opposite. I have realized that He is my celestial daddy, and I am coming back to Him (“Just as a father

has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.” Psalms 103:13). Jesus himself emphasizes this by his constant reference to God as “the Father” with everything that the term employs: the originator, the authority, the lover, the protector, and the provider. What is also amazing is to realize that God typically involves people in divine actions that affect the earth and society. Like parents who determine to involve their children in the work of the family even though it would be easier for them to just do it themselves, so God acts in the same way. For example, in the Old Testament God involves Moses in all of the actions with the Israelites, from stretching out his staff prior to a miracle taking place, to praying for and leading the people. In the New Testament Jesus involves his disciples in both of the feeding miracles – having them obtain the loaves and fish which he then multiplies as well as handling the organization and distribution process.

Becoming a grandfather has helped me understand God better. God loves all of his kids in the same but much deeper ways than I love my grandkids – seeking the best for us, but also giving us the freedom to fail and to figure things out for ourselves. His message in effect is “You have a brain – use it! You have to learn how to solve and properly sort things out, and not engage in stupid and wrong stuff because then you will suffer the consequences.” Like a good parent He is both positive and negative, but mostly positive, blessing us, being on our side, and sometimes giving us chocolates like my granddaughter is always asking for. At the same time, He never engages in smother love, but rather is a responsible parent and a coach who disciplines us and kicks our butt at times when we need it. In other words, I am not drawn to God because I am scared about going to hell, or afraid that I’m not good enough. Rather, I am drawn because He knows me better than I know myself, and He still wants the best for me despite that fact that I’m not good enough. He encourages me to sit in his lap at times, He tells me to get off the couch and climb that mountain, and He tells me that I have an eternal destiny – all of this is because of the blood of Christ. As C.S. Lewis indicated, God is a hedonist at heart – “In your presence is fullness of joy, and in your right hand there are pleasures forevermore.” Psalms 16:11

3. **Nobility.** The nobility, the majesty, and the “realness” of Christ, that enabled him to stand tall, look people in the eye, and debate with his detractors so effectively that eventually they stopped confronting him. Peter, the blundering but also powerful apostle, emphasizes this, “For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.” 2 Peter 1:16.

The gospel writers noted Christ’s air of authority: (“When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at his teaching; for he was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.” Matthew 7:28). In his famous parable of the soils Jesus understood and taught that many came to him from mixed motives, and that not everyone would truly follow him, (“Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; he who comes to me will not hunger, and he who believes in me will never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me, and yet do not believe.’ As a result of this many of his disciples withdrew and were not walking with him anymore.” John 6:35-36, 66). People may be initially enthusiastic, but later lose interest and fall away. Jesus understands this and tells us, “Choose this day whom you will serve”, so he leaves the choice of whether or not to follow him up to us.

But Jesus' characteristics of power and charisma were amazingly combined with compassion, mercy, and humility. The Bible informs us that despite being the designer and creator of the cosmos, Jesus gave all of that up for a humble birth and a life of service and sacrifice (consider that we don't even know for sure the date of his birth). Despite being the King and the Lord of all, he abandoned his glory in order to fully identify with people, and he spent the three years of his ministry, not engaging in wars, and not in a luxurious palace, but rather helping, healing, and teaching people. During his trial before Pilate he said, ("My kingdom is not of this world, otherwise my followers would fight... You would have no authority over me unless it had been given to you from above"). Pilate was blown away, and in his famous act, he brought out a bowl of water and washed his hands to declaim any responsibility for Jesus' death.

Jesus liked parties (his first miracle was to turn many gallons of water into wine for a wedding feast), and he associated with all kinds of people – the poor, the middle class, the rich, the religious, the non-religious, men, women, Jews, non-Jews, etc. The only class of people he criticized were self-righteous and hypocritical religious leaders who rejected him and who thought they had everything figured out. But we need to beware of unduly targeting the Pharisees of that day, as they are alive and well in the present. Their contemporary equivalent is the arrogant, the self-righteous, and the scoffers of today, such as many politicians and media personalities. Jesus message to them is as follows: "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and don't need anything.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." Revelation 3:17. Jesus largely ignored the powerful and well-connected, as well as those who rejected God – his ministry directed to those who understood that they needed his touch.

"For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." 1 Corinthians 1:22-29

Contrary to socialist interpretations, Jesus never attempted to make everyone equal or to forcibly redistribute wealth, and he never engaged in revolution, the creation of a different government, or trying to change the economic system. His message was instead directed at individuals, and to issues over which individuals had control, such as challenging everyone and especially people of means to give freely to others and not hoard wealth. ("Sell your possessions and give alms; provide yourselves with purses in heaven that do not grow old." Luke 12:33, "And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'" Matthew 25:40). Jesus ennobled the poor, but also demanded self-responsibility and never made poverty a virtue. After healing people Jesus often told them to "go and sin no more", i.e., to start living righteously and responsibly. In the same manner, he pointed out the addictive and potentially disastrous consequences of

pursuing wealth (“Take heed and beware of all covetousness; for a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” Luke 12:15 and “But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.” 1 Timothy 6:9-10).

Jesus’ incredible self-confidence meant that he was not overly concerned about being misunderstood, (“He was in the world, and the world was made through him, and the world did not know him. He came to his own, and those who were his own did not receive him.” John 1:10-11). Consequently, there are a number of “hard sayings” from him that can only be understood when balanced with other teachings (e.g., “If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you.” Matthew 5:29). Furthermore, Jesus’ self-confidence was such that he never engaged in self-promotion, marketing, or propaganda, like human leaders typically do; rather he often tried to stop people from exalting him, (“So perceiving that they were intending to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew to the mountain by himself alone.” John 6:15). His disciples followed this pattern and likewise despised mercenary attempts to buy the grace of God, (“But Peter said to him, ‘May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!’” Acts 8:20). I have always despised propaganda and politicians who used it, as well as feeling somewhat uncomfortable with marketing for this reason. It is interesting that the English word “cheapen” originally meant “to buy.”

Human religious leaders such as Muhammad, Joseph Smith, and L. Ron Hubbard, and secular leaders such as Castro, Chavez, Stalin, Hitler, and others typically exalt themselves and their own power because their life on earth is all they have to work with. But Jesus’ kingdom was “not of this world.” So he gave up his life and was killed at age thirty-three in the prime of life, because his kingdom is in heaven. Only Jesus could make statements such as: “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it.” Mark 8:35-37.

In keeping with God’s desire and plan to use people, Jesus never wrote anything about himself and entrusted that task to his disciples and followers. Furthermore, in doing all of this Jesus set the pattern for us as being incredibly valuable – children of the King, but at the same time devoting our life for the good of others. Have I done this consistently? No, but that is direction in which I want to move.

4. **Communication.** God encourages us to talk to him at any and all times. Furthermore, our communication is via thought, rather than words – it is called “prayer.” Humanists see prayer either as a waste of time, or as a means of quieting our minds and setting a mood, similar to meditation in eastern religion. Prayer in Islam is merely rote repetition of the same content, meant to bring a person into submission to God. But prayer for the Christian is communication with God about anything and everything in life, from the banal to the sublime. So it serves multiple purposes: to thank and worship God, to calm and steady us, to

express questions and doubts, and to ask for help, both for ourselves and for others.

5. **Guidance.** God guides us if we are willing to be guided by Him. This takes place in two ways: 1) The Bible is our guide for all of life, and God wants us to read it, absorb it, and live by its principles. Many choices that confront us are clearly moral and spelled out for us, (e.g., “Should I steal that candy bar?”, “Should I have an affair with my neighbor’s spouse?” etc.); 2) Other choices are less clear, (e.g., “What career or job should I pursue?”, “Who should I marry?”). In these cases the Bible provides principles to guide us, but we also have God’s Spirit available through prayer as our advisor, as well as others that we trust. I have often failed to seek God’s counsel, and sometimes went my own way even when I knew what God wanted me to do. Those are my problems to deal with, but they were not for a lack of available guidance.

At this point in life I am still to some extent struggling with what God wants me to do in retirement (a bad word), but am trying to be patient and wait for the answers. Sometimes the answers can take a long time.

6. **Abundant Life.** Jesus promises that we can have an abundant life (“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” John 10:10). This does not mean that life will be easy, that we will have a lot of money, or that we won’t have problems. Rather, it means that we will have a life of purpose, fulfillment, and satisfaction, knowing that we have spent our time well, have lived with integrity, and have invested for eternity by blessing others. Consider the following penetrating psychological statement from Jesus about the purpose of life:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Matthew 6:19-21.

The “health and wealth Gospel” is a lie, and Christians will have just as many struggles in life as anyone else. But it is also true that much human misery and suffering is lifestyle-related and self-inflicted, due to sins such as selfishness and betrayal. Thankfulness helps to reduce stress and high blood pressure, and many diseases and disorders are caused or exacerbated by guilt, which then leads to depression, anxiety, nervousness, fear, stress, and mental disorders.²¹ For some problems, it seems like the only way out is not to have gotten in at the beginning. Nevertheless, Jesus still invites us to come to Him and find a way through with the help of His Spirit:

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come into him and will dine with him, and he with Me. He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.” Revelation 3:20-21.

Even if lifestyle problems are avoided, there are other potential issues, such as loss of jobs,

²¹ See, for example, S.I. McMillen, MD, *None of These Diseases*, Spire Books, NJ, 1977

discouragements, financial setbacks, divorce, disease, etc. But these problems are actually a necessary part of abundant living, because like physical exercise, they can educate us, can develop our character, and can make us more creative and resourceful *if* we treat them as opportunities rather than as enemies and understand that God is for us and with us.

“When my heart was embittered and I was pierced within, then I was senseless and ignorant; I was like a beast before You. Nevertheless I am continually with You. You have taken hold of my right hand, with Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory.” Psalms 73:21-24

Some see God and heaven only as “pie in the sky, by and by.” There will never be heaven on earth until Jesus returns, and the Bible tells us that in the meantime this world will get worse. But God intends that not only will we have an incredible future, but an abundant life here and now. Do I always see things this way? Unfortunately, not, but by God’s grace I am trying.

7. **Rewards.** God gives us incentives for serving him, caring for others, and doing the right thing. Some of the incentives are the natural product of right living, such as long-term marriage, loving relationships, freedom from addictions, freedom from guilt over stupid words and deeds, a good credit rating, etc. God never promises that we will be powerful or wealthy, but He does promise that our needs will be cared for.

“I have been young and now I am old, but I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his descendants begging bread. All day long he is gracious and lends, and his descendants are a blessing... Better is the little of the righteous than the abundance of many wicked.” Psalms 37:25-26, 16.

In addition to benefits in this life, God promises incredible rewards for the good works we have done in the next life. First of all, we will be given newly designed bodies:

“So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.” 1 Corinthians 15:42-44

“Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law, but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” 1 Corinthians 15:50-57

“And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is among

men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them. And He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away. He who sits on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.'" Revelation 21:3-4.

But beyond our new bodies some of us will be given crowns representing power and rulership, which is why training in faithfulness under fire in this life is preparation for the next. Those who think that heaven will be sitting on clouds and playing harps are completely mistaken. The major human problem all through the centuries has been unrighteous rulers and corrupt government; in heaven God will not allow anyone to rule on His behalf who is not worthy to do so.

“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.” Galatians 6:7-10.

Furthermore, our responsibilities and roles in heaven will be in accordance with our desires and capabilities, as well as according to our service. God will give us the responsibilities and the activities that we are made for. Therefore, it must not be thought that there will be equality in heaven – it will probably be more unequal than this life, with some barely making it into heaven and others possibly ruling over civilizations, planets, and perhaps even galaxies.

“Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.” 1 Corinthians 3:12-15

“Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” Revelation 22:12-13.

Many have speculated on the possibility of life elsewhere in the universe. There are uncounted billions of stars and planets, and our earth is merely a microscopic pimple on the humongous rump of the cosmos. With such an enormous universe there must surely be other intelligent life somewhere out there, or perhaps not? This speculation is largely driven by people with a Darwinian mindset – if life is just a cosmic accident, then there must be other planets similar to ours where intelligent life also evolved. Accordingly, Darwinists have indicated that our planet and the life on it is commonplace, and there are many other possibilities for life elsewhere.

Vast resources have therefore been devoted to space exploration, with the search for ETs being the main driving force. Other initiatives include sophisticated radio telescopes such as the Vatican telescope in Arizona used to search for and identify “exo-planets”, and SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence), which is an extensive series of large dish receivers pointing to all parts of the sky, in order to detect signals from other intelligent life. If such life could be discovered it would be a major coup and a selling point for Darwinian theory, but despite the enormous investment, nothing has been found. Detailed studies in astrophysics and astrobiology have revealed the opposite – there are thousands of factors that make life possible, and no other planet as yet detected is even close. Our planet seems to be unique in the cosmos.²²

The Bible is silent to the issue of extra-terrestrial life. It does indicate that there are other types of beings – angels and demons, and the latter may well have been the source for what is said to be the evidence for “ancient aliens”, as well as possibly being responsible for UFO activity. But the Bible does indicate that both God and Satan are deeply interested and involved in planet Earth, and that it has and will continue to be a cosmic battleground. This is the place where the passion of Jesus Christ, the creator of the universe was played out, which would seem to indicate that Earth is ground zero – the first and as yet the only world that has been brought into being. The notion that our physical world is unimportant is a Platonic and a Gnostic concept. Instead, the Bible indicates in many places that God is intimately involved with the physical world, that Jesus will rule on the “throne of David”, and that ultimately the world will be recreated – a “new heaven and a new earth.” So for the time being it seems that we are alone in the cosmos.

However, we are not alone because God is lacking in power.

“Lift up your eyes on high and see who has created these stars; the One who leads forth their host by number. He calls them all by name, and because of the greatness of His might and the strength of His power, not one of them is missing.” Isaiah 40:26

“He counts the number of the stars and He gives names to all of them.” Psalms 147:4.

Given the fact that God created all of the stars and knows each one by name, perhaps His eternal plan is to eventually populate the universe, and to use us in helping to run it. Future worlds and societies would have the example of our history, as well as the sacrifice of Christ for their benefit. Is our ultimate future somewhere in the stars? We can only imagine.

I can only imagine what it will be like when I walk by Your side.

I can only imagine what my eyes will see when Your face is before me.

I can only imagine.

Surrounded by Your glory, what will my heart feel?

Will I dance for You, Jesus, or in awe of You be still?

Will I stand in Your presence, or to my knees will I fall?

²² See, for example, Jay W. Richards and Guillermo Gonzalez, *The Privileged Planet*, Regnery Publishing, MD, 2004

Will I sing hallelujah? Will I be able to speak at all?
I can only imagine.
Mercy Me

“Eye has not seen, not has ear heard, nor has it entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him.” 1 Corinthians 2:9

“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star. The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.” Revelation 22:16-17.