

GOD IS LOVE

OBSERVATIONS OF AN ATHEIST

Daniel LaFavers



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Observations of an Atheist

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By Daniel LaFavers.

*This is dedicated to my mother,
who always let me ask*

What If?

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INTRODUCTION

God is an idea we have about ourselves. Religion gives that idea a voice, but when that voice argues with our other ideas it can become shrill and unconvincing. This creates a dissonance that seems to place our divine spirit in conflict with the stolid world of facts. These essays reveal my struggle and resolution of this conflict.

What I finally learned is that if you really want to know God you must look not toward religion, but beyond it. God is available to you directly, without any need for filters or rules.

One of my first writings on the subject attempted to reconcile God with the physical world. In blue ink on school notebook paper I wrote the following.

Thoughts

1. In the beginning, God created the formulas. Corollary: God created evolution.
2. The missing link could be the addition of a soul. Corollary: If it weren't for God, human kind could never have passed beyond the animal stage.

Notes:

(1) $E=MC^2$, $F=MA$, Newton's other laws, Galileo's formulas. All these tell how masses react with one another. Given enough mass in a universe, it will eventually, following these formulas, form into galaxies and stars. What is left over forms planets. Then, following certain laws of nature, this "star stuff" may, given proper conditions, form life.

(2) Where life starts, God starts watching, and when one branch of the evolutionary tree begins vast development, God starts passing out souls. The forms then become self-aware and start developing mentally.

3. One of the mind's greatest abilities is that of rationalizing its actions.

It took almost two decades for me to overcome the misguided beliefs that led to this conflict. First I had to find a way to move

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beyond the boundaries of the Christian faith, which insists on defining everything in terms of a particularly implausible doctrine. Then I could look back at Christianity and other faiths, and try to understand their underlying motivations.

I begin with a short story, "A Conversation With God." This expands on the idea above, that God passes out souls when evolution yields an advanced species. I'm quite pleased with this story, and somewhat in awe of how on the mark I was at the beginning of my search, especially the last two lines.

Next is a short essay titled "The Meaning Of Life." This represents my slap to the face of religion, challenging those ideas to a dual in the arena of intellect.

When I was twenty-two years old I felt as if I had reached a milestone, "The one when a fellow suddenly finds himself wondering, how did I get here? Who am I, really? And what, if any, is my place in the world going to be?" After several pages on which I reveal the tribulations of my nascent love life, I included my thoughts on religion and politics. "Religions And God" is the religion section of that notebook.

Some of the essays are more like diary entries than articles of persuasion. "The Abandoned Fellowship" is one of these. I was twenty six, still single, and I was beginning to realize that atheism was probably part of what was keeping me away from mingling and meeting nice young women, as one might in church. However, most of the essay is a rather whimsical look at the role and purpose of religion.

In 1992, I organized all that I had learned into what I expected to be the definitive explanation of religion and God. "The Crossroads," presented as a series of four lessons, includes much of the detail about what the spirit is, the purpose of religions, and how these are all shadows built within our minds. While it describes quite well the details of the religious experience understood in a secular perspective, it lacks a description of why and how it came to be. That would come later.

The next essay, "Alone," is another diary-like entry. This is a recap of "The Abandoned Fellowship," and serves to reaffirm my beliefs despite the difficulties that they brought.

I carried around a mental list of the more obvious contradictions that arise from a pure religious perspective. I finally pulled these together for the essay "The Hypocrisy Of Prayer." This essay, more

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than any other, demonstrates why I could never again be a traditional Christian.

I wrote the next four essays as part of a monthly web-zine called The Arrenkyle Papers. Each month I included a short story, an essay, a chapter from my first novel, and a recipe that would sometimes yield an edible meal (the tater tot and cheese whiz casserole being a notable exception.)

"Give Me That New Time Religion" is basically a recap of my religious thought up to that point, calling again for a reconciliation of science and religion.

"The New Meaning Of Life" goes beyond this to examine what a post-God religion might look like. It presents as a replacement to traditional theism the idea that humanity is approaching an epoch, and that we, as members of the organism of Humanity, have a role to play toward that end.

The next essay is "The Same Old Song And Dance." This is based on an email exchange from a reader who read the previous essay at my website and decided to share his feelings with me. This is an important discussion because here he asks many of the questions that some readers of this volume might consider. Here are my answers to direct questions about Christ, God, living, and an afterlife.

The fourth essay from the Arrenkyle Papers is "Church And State." I still remember where I was when I had the idea for this essay. I was taking a walk around the neighborhood pondering issues of politics when it occurred to me that the reaction people often have to Libertarian politics is similar to the reaction they have to atheism. For some people, taking government out of their lives is as awful as taking away God.

The final essay, "God Is Love," restates the ideas about our spirituality from "The Crossroads," but goes on to propose how our soul may have developed as a natural consequence of language and culture. The intent of this final essay is to tie together all my previous work into a kind of universal field theory of the soul as a secular, yet transcendent phenomenon.

A CONVERSATION WITH GOD

October 1984

Alex Anderson fluttered his eyes open to see, once again, his dry, impersonal hospital room. He wondered what time it was.

"Oh, what's the difference anyway?" he thought to himself. "I'm going to die whether I know what time it is or not."

His loving wife, Becky, was there. Oh sweet Becky. Alex despaired that he was unable to speak to her clearly, to let her know that not having her with him in these last few days would hurt a hundred times more than the horrid, burning pain he felt unendingly now throughout his entire body.

"Breathe evenly," he said to himself. "Try to sit up ... Not too fast!" He let a quiet, unintentional moan escape from his parched throat. Becky looked over from the window she had been absently staring at and saw her beloved's futile efforts to come out of his stupor.

She came to him and helped him sit up a bit.

"What is it? What do you want?"

Bless you, Becky. Alex looked over to the nightstand where there was a pitcher of water and did his best to motion toward it with his arm.

"Water? Would you like a drink?"

Bingo. What a gal.

Becky held his head as he sipped the lukewarm water. It helped a little, but not much.

Alex was now in one of his more aware moments. He treasured these increasingly rare opportunities when he could think rather clearly, as opposed to the lingering nightmare of being half-awake and half-asleep and the literal nightmares that accompanied those times. He treasured these moments because he could see his wife clearly, think of how much he loved her and how much he loved their adorable daughter, Elizabeth.

"Oh, Elizabeth! Baby, daddy doesn't want to go now. I love you very very much. Be a good girl."

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He reached out his hand to his wife; she took it and held it in her hands as though it were a priceless work of fragile glass.

"Well, Alex, say hello to oblivion. I guess you're about to find the Final Answer."

Alex Anderson was not only a respected Astrophysicist. He was a part time professor of Geology at the University. Having thus seen, intimately, the processes of "creation" through both the entire universe and of the earth itself, he found it very difficult to accept the Bible and religions which supported divine, abracadabra, creation of the earth as nothing but silly fantasy. In fact, he found it quite insulting. He didn't study for six years in college, then spend four years in graduate studies, along with countless hours of detailed, intense laboratory work, backed up by head splitting math, to be told he was a fool by some self-centered scripture reader who didn't know a stellar spectrum from a radiometric isotope and who was simply too stubborn to accept the universe on its own terms!

Nor was he about to let that same buffoon tell him that he should believe in God just because it was written down in some yellow paged piece of Latin that had been translated half a dozen times. Alex had been brought up a strict Catholic and throughout much of his early college years had faith that through his studies he would find evidence of the subtle hand of God. The more he studied, however, and the more he saw how the processes of the universe and the world worked, the more likely it seemed that those early hydrogen atoms, on their own, simply by following basic (and sometimes not very basic) laws of nature, would eventually turn into trees, flowers, puppy dogs, and children.

So, in the spirit of all men in his profession, he accepted the inevitable facts that the data represented and stopped worrying about it. Instead, he turned his attention to the pursuit of life and love: meaning the Pursuit of Rebecca Thompson.

Alex wasn't an atheist. He certainly had no argument or data to prove the non-existence of God. He also did not like the label "agnostic." Most of the world seemed to view those of his opinion as lost misdirected children. Infuriating!

And now he was dying.

He continued his thoughts. "Relax Alex. Either you'll die and that will be the end of it, or you'll talk to God. Either way there's not much you can do about it. You know we've been through this all before. Yes, but I've never been this close before. That's no excuse. You had better worry about comforting your wife. I'm sure she's

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much more upset than you are. Yet here she is right by my side sticking it out to the end. I know she's going to make it all right. She's quite a gal."

He held tightly onto her hand and, with some effort, managed to say quietly, "You're quite a girl, Rebecca."

"Shhhh. Don't talk. You'll wear yourself out. Conserve your strength." Then she began to cry for she knew that her instructions were worthless.

He shook his stiff neck and said, "None of that now. It's almost easy here at the end, you know." Her eyes, fixed on him, did not waver; she remained quiet. He smiled and as his voice wavered from its effort said, "Give my love to Elizabeth. Look me up in Heaven. I really really do lo..luf.." He took a deep breath, strained his face a small bit and closed his eyes as he seemed to grow faint as though the blood rushed from his head.

For some ten minutes, Becky Anderson held onto her dead husband's hand even as the warmth drained itself from the limb. Then she said, "I love you too, Alex."

Then she walked down the hall to get the nurse.

After Alex died, he wondered why he was still around. "Wouldn't it be horrible," he thought, "to mess up such an exit by living another couple of hours." He continued to lie there as Becky left and while the nurse came in and took his pulse. When she pulled the covers over his head, he finally realized that something was up.

"Hey, I'm dead. Well I'll be damned. I got my answer." Then he wondered if saying, "I'll be damned" was really a good thing to say now that it seemed there was an afterlife and he had spent his living years accepting the non-existence of God!

He waited. Then when it seemed that he wasn't being whisked away this minute he went to Becky, who was in the waiting room holding onto a stuffed animal.

If only he could contact her in some way.

"Becky," he called.

She didn't respond.

He called to her again then tried to reach out and touch her. Suddenly he realized this was an illusion. He was seeing her sure enough, but now he understood that he could see her only because somehow he knew that she was there, and the only reason he could see the room, that magazine there, that plant, was because, for some reason, he just knew every detail about the room. He wasn't here at all. He wondered where he was.

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"Well, it's probably better this way. Seeing me would only upset her more. I know she can cope. She'll just have to go through her mourning in her own way. Besides, she'll know the truth soon enough. Then you'll be with me, my love.

He could have watched her forever, but he knew -- somehow he knew -- that he had things to attend to.

He wondered what Elizabeth was doing, and then suddenly, in the same way the he "saw" Rebecca, he watched his cute little girl eating lunch at school. He knew what she was eating, knew what it tasted like, and knew that she was thinking of him.

He felt a warm glow and again would have liked to stay around, but again he knew he could not stay here. He was no longer a part of this world.

He pulled himself away from the living and tried to find out what he was expected to do next.

Judgment? He hoped that his actions in life would favor him now. He started to count all the good things he had done in his life, but that was out of his hands, at least so far as he knew.

"Hello," he called out. "Anybody home?"

"Yeah, hold on. I'll be right with you. Uh, just have a seat will you."

Oddly enough, there was a comfortable chair by him now so he sat down.

Shortly, a man came "in" and offered Alex his right hand introducing himself, "My name is God."

Alex stood and took the hand. "My name is Alex. Alex Andrew Anderson. Uh ... how do you do God?"

God smiled and answered, "Wonderful! And yourself?"

"Well, honestly, a bit confused right now."

"Don't worry. That will pass. Would you like to sit here or go somewhere else?"

"Huh?"

God put His hand on Alex's shoulder and began walking. "Just pick a place. A place where we can talk."

"How about Grissolm Park?"

"Fine." God smiled and patted Alex's shoulder reassuringly. He had a way about him that put Alex at ease.

Grissolm Park had always been the favorite place for Alex to be when he wanted to be alone, talk to his friends, or have a picnic. When he was young he loved to ride his bike through the trees. Later it was where he would go with his best friend, Mark, to play

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tennis or talk about girls. Grissolm Park was where he had proposed to Rebecca. (Years later he had made love to her in the park late at night in his sleeping bag.) The park had offered so much to him.

As he was losing himself in his happy memories, he suddenly remembered why he was here. He turned and there was God. "This is it," said Alex.

"Yes. Let's have a seat shall we?"

They strolled to one of the picnic tables and sat down facing each other.

Alex was somewhat worried. Was this where his fate was to be decided?

"What do we talk about? Are you going to judge me now?"

"What? Oh good heavens no. That's why we're here though, to answer all your questions. I know you've got a lot. We're here to just clear up a few things."

Alex said nothing, and so God continued, "Well, I'm God and Surprise, this is not oblivion." Then more seriously he went on. "When a soul is newly separated, there is always a period of disorientation and one needs to be helped along back to the natural state."

Alex wasn't picking this up and it apparently showed on his face.

God said, "Don't despair. Understanding will come; we have plenty of time."

"How are Becky and Liz?"

"They're doing fine. They love you very much. You are a very lucky man. And don't worry. They will hurt some, but they're a tough couple."

"I want to tell her I'm okay. I want to tell her that it's okay to die, and that I'm waiting for her, and..." Alex found it hard to continue through the emotion.

God came around to the other side of the table and put his arm around the upset man. "You can't," he said.

The kind touch made Alex feel much better and he no longer wanted to cry. He pulled himself together and asked, "Okay. Why not?"

"Because that would disrupt the whole meaning of the universe."

"Oh yeah? So what is the meaning of the universe?"

"Do you love Rebecca?"

"Yes, very much. Of course I do."

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"Do you enjoy the sound of birds in the morning and the taste of sizzling bacon with pancakes?"

"Yes."

"Does it make you feel good to be in love, to give your love to your family, to eat pancakes, and listen to the birds?"

"Well sure. Those things are all wonderful."

"That is the meaning of the universe."

"What do you mean? The universe exists so I can eat pancakes?"

"Yes. Exactly. And for you to feel love and feel happy and sometimes feel pain and sorrow. It exists for Elizabeth to hold and pet her dog Champs."

"The whole universe was created just so these things could happen on earth?"

"What do you think? Tell me, from what you know as an astronomer, what is the probability that other intelligent life exists in the universe?"

"Well, almost 100%. First, we know that the processes in the universe may, in fact, form life. This is obvious since the earth exists. These processes are happening all around us. In the short time of man's history, we've seen stars explode, stars being born, and we can at any time see a number of stars in any step in between. So, if the same processes exist everywhere that exist near the earth's star (and we have every reason to believe that they do) then it is possible for life to form out there as well. Even if the chance for intelligent life to form is one in a few billion, there are plenty of chances in our own neck of the Milky Way. Even if we are the only life that formed in this galaxy (which is very unlikely) then there are billions of other galaxies out there. So, sure, there almost has to be."

"Very good. The truth is that in the Milky Way Galaxy, there are almost three hundred million planets with intelligent life, about two hundred times that many with primitive forms of life that either have not yet evolved or have reached a dead end, and still many others where nothing more exciting than simple amino acids will form. The same is basically true for all the other galaxies. You see? It was created for all of them."

"All of them? Everything? The amino acids, the flies, the cockroaches? What about birds, dogs, monkeys?"

"No. Well also yes. The universe exists simply for life to be lived and, hopefully, enjoyed. If a soul wanted, for example, to live as a dog, he would be perfectly within his rights."

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"So it's all the opinion of a soul? What if there's a body that nobody wants to take? Are there bodies walking around without souls?" Goodness, though Alex, what if Rebecca or Elizabeth, or his mom or dad...

"Yes sometimes, but it is rare. That person usually is unable to appreciate life beyond basic instincts: survival, eating, reproduction. Many lower life forms have souls, on the other hand. Did you ever want to be a bird, Alex? An otter or a mountain lion?"

"I used to day dream about being a dolphin."

"Many dolphins have souls. Also birds. It's not a bad life. Fly around, build nests, eat worms, court a lady bird, go to the Bahamas for the winter. Remember, the universe exists simply for life to be lived and enjoyed in whatever aspect."

"What if I wanted to be a bee, or an ant?"

"Well, there is a limit to the size of the brain. The smaller a brain is the less able it is to hold the matrix of the soul."

Alex thought. He could understand why someone would want to be a bird or dolphin, but why would anyone wish to be born into a life of despair and starvation like the thousands born in India and Africa.

"Why is there so much suffering in the world? Hunger, starvation, murder, despair, suicide, ... disease?"

"Don't look at me."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I didn't create those things."

"Well who did? Just what did you create?"

"Mostly, human suffering is the result of the cruelty and injustice of other humans. There are then other factors to consider. Genetic defects, evolutionary faults. Face it, bacteria and viruses are as much a valid part of the evolutionary process as you are. But don't try to pin it all on me!

"Now, to answer your second question. I worked out the laws of the universe. The same laws that you and other scientists represent in your elegant mathematics. Then I added a bunch of primal matter and sat back to watch the show. How any one solar system, and its planets and eventually life, forms is up to the conditions and materials present. When life finally forms capable of supporting a soul, that life is available to be experienced."

"But that doesn't explain why thousands are born every day into a life of misery. I thought life was meant to be enjoyed, that one was supposed to be happy."

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God shrugged his shoulders. "Isn't pain part of life? What if all of your life had been `goody, goody it's the ice cream man?'"

"But they suffer all their lives and die terrible deaths!"

"Life exists to be lived. That is what I was trying to explain to you at the beginning. You've just had a wonderful life. Maybe next time you'll choose to suffer. Some of the most intense feelings and emotions come from suffering. I know it's hard to see this in this way being still as close as you are to your life. Remember I didn't create suffering any more than I created humans or puppy dogs or murder. It's interesting to see what type of life evolves and the type of relations that are created, the forms of government and religions that are invented, and the ways members of a species treat others of their species and others. We just take them as they come and try whatever sounds interesting."

"I don't think I want to suffer for a while."

"No. You have suffered quite a lot recently."

"I miss Rebecca."

"Well, there's no reason to go running off this minute. Wait for her. You can you know. Be a bird for a while; that's always fun. Or be a horse or a dolphin. Or you could just wait for her. People often share quite a number of lives together trading off as husband and wife or father and son or even siblings.

"I still do love her even though I'm here."

"And she loves you."

"I'll wait for her. I'll take a short brake for a while. That would make me very happy."

"I'm glad."

Alex stood up from the table. "How about a walk around the park?"

"I'm game."

The two walked casually toward the other end of the park where the playground was. School was letting out about now and some children were already coming into the park to play a bit on their way home. Alex was feeling much better now and he was beginning to catch vague memories. Much of what God had been saying felt oddly familiar now.

"Hey, God."

"Yes, Alex?"

"Just what is a soul anyway?"

They stopped by a large swing set and God leaned against one of the angular poles and said, "A soul is a unit that can experience

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life in the manner that I have been stating. Every soul is directly a part of me. In fact, hardly any of me exists that is not a soul."

"You mean I'm you?"

"Oh, no no. You're you. Think of yourself as a restaurant franchise."

"Huh?"

"You worked at American Drive Ins for some time, right?"

"Yeah, sure. In high school and a little through college."

"At ADI, home of the Hungry-man Hot Dog and the Cheery-Cherry milkshake, the manager could set his own hours, hire whomever he wanted, basically make all the decisions necessary to the running of the business. Yet his restaurant was part of the whole chain of restaurants from which it drew its support and income. But there was no large parent organization; the main office was nothing but a small building in Oklahoma."

"Right."

"It's similar with souls. You are a part of me, meaning you are a part of this huge group of souls, yet you are uniquely individual."

"Hmmm. And if I understand you, I've lived other lives?"

"Yes. Thousands."

"It feels like this is right, but I don't remember anything specific."

"You'll remember some things. Others you won't. Memories aren't as important as experiences; that's why we go on living."

Then God motioned across the park. Elizabeth was walking through the park to the street that would lead to her home.

Alex watched her walking alone with her empty Smurf lunch box and two schoolbooks. With a bowed head she walked, emptily kicking stones in front of her. By now Alex knew he couldn't communicate with her but he wanted to be close to her. He ran to her and fell in step along with her on her right. God came too and walked on her left.

Alex said, "She doesn't know yet does she?"

"No."

"She's so sad. I wish I could tell her all that I've learned. To tell her that I'm okay, I still love her, to tell her not to be sad." He thought how pretty she was, just like a little Rebecca. She would make some lucky man a lovely wife some day.

God was saying, "But sadness is as much a part of living as happiness. To tell her such things would take away her ability to fully enter into this life."

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"I guess," Alex began, not really sure of the reasoning, "it makes sense. Perhaps I'll see it."

They walked a little ways further in silence when God said, "I think we'd better go now."

Alex barely nodded his head.

"She'll be all right. Please, trust me."

Alex smiled and looked at God. "Okay."

Then they were no longer in Grissolm Park.

"This," God began lecturing, "is the universe."

And there it was right at their feet. Alex could see each star in its brilliance. He could see each planet and clearly see each detail of every part of each planet.

God continued, "All of the physical laws that you lived your life by and that all matter in the universe must always obey are there. The entire universe, from the tiniest atomic particle to the largest galactic cluster exists only as a subset of what really is.

"You see, all science is necessarily, therefore, completely subjective to that environment. There is no way to see the universe except from within it. You and your associates could never see the rest of what is there any more than a flat-earthier could see up."

That reminded Alex of something. "But a gravitational field will generate a sphere in which time literally is slower than away from that field. That is subjective to the viewer and yet we found this out in the first part of this century. We've even measured it and verified it!"

"True, but relativity is part of the natural laws of that subset. In fact, it's a very vital part of it. But this, the part of what-is that is not the universe, does not obey those laws."

"Does that have anything to do with why we were able to go to Grissolm Park?"

"Sure. In this True Realm exists total knowledge. Since I am but the total collection of all souls, and each soul is a part of me, anyone in this Realm obviously has access to the total Truth in the Whole-Of-What-There-Is. And since the universe that you just came from is a subset of this, we are able to "be" there, through our total knowledge of it, while being totally unattached. For though it is a subset of this Realm, we are in no way a part of it."

"I see. But that can't be totally true can it. I mean when we live, are the souls not a part of us then?"

"Oh, yes! The souls are very much a part of the body. I could point to the chromosome locations that hold the basic matrix of the

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soul. You see, when a soul is in a body, alive, it is very much different than, for instance, your form right now. It must, necessarily, obey the laws of that physical universe while it resides in the universe. So you could even find the soul matrix, even start to understand the soul itself, yet it would always answer to logical, normal laws of nature. You would find that the soul is, in the mind, a physical structure that resides in the brain that controls basic thinking patterns, unique to the individual. You would find the soul in obvious, yet subtle, recesses of the body itself. Each part of the soul would be seen as a valid part of the normal, physical properties found everywhere because they would have to, being, in fact, at that time, in the universe."

"And when someone dies...?"

"...the matrix no longer sustains itself and the soul, being a part of me, returns to me."

Alex let some of this sink in. He, as a scientist, could appreciate much of what he was being told."

"So, if everyone can know everything," he asked, "why do they even bother to go through the living process?"

"Well, do you remember when you took your first sky diving lesson?"

"Oh yeah, that was fun."

"Think of how you felt when you landed with that solid bump that put you safely back on gold ol' mother earth. At that time, you knew exactly how it felt to be falling. You then understood the terrible/wonderful feeling of free fall. But was knowing about it anything like actually doing it?"

"No, not at all."

"Of course not. If simply knowing had been enough, you would never have had to go back up for another fall. How many falls did you make?"

"A total of two hundred sixty three. Each one was a blast too."

"It's the same for living."

Alex changed the subject. "Hey, what was all that stuff in the Bible about "creation," miracles, the commandments and all that. Did you actually write the commandments?"

"No, no. Good heavens! Of course not. Men wrote them. Men wrote the Bible too. Remember I just created some physical properties and let the universe do whatever it wanted. I do find it to be a trend, however, that although the soul exists totally by natural laws, it is, on a very basic level, aware of its existence."

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"But I wasn't in any way aware of my soul. Not at all."

"That was your existence for this life. That was the way you were able to access the available data to you and the conclusion that you came to. Some people are very aware of their souls, or at least think that they are. I was simply trying to explain why religion might have started in the first place. Besides, religion is, I'm sure, a very nice thing to invent. Especially for primitive cultures like yours."

Primitive? thought Alex. He said, rather meekly, "I, uh, hope that you're not mad at me for not believing in you."

"Why should I be upset at that? I certainly never asked to be worshipped. Besides, what else could you do? No one ever told you the truth of the True World. You, and everyone else, were simply left to live whatever life you had at the time. Whether that meant believing or not believing, loving or not loving, or whatever."

God smiled real big and put his arm around Alex's shoulders.

"Remember Alex, the only reason life and this universe exists is so that life can be experienced. Life is what really matters. Afterlife is the boring part."

As God said that, he and Alex were away from the grand, omniscient view of the universe and were back by the chair Alex had first sat in. Now there was another chair so he and God sat down.

"I guess this is the end of the tour?" asked Alex.

"Mostly, yes."

"So... what next?"

"You wait. And rest. As you become more separated you will begin to find, once again, your True Self. Then if you want, you will meet with Rebecca. But for now, just be."

"Where does it all end?"

"When this universe wearies and entropy takes its toll, I will once again bring all the souls together and I will be one. Then I guess I'll come up with something else to keep us amused." He smiled.

Alex was still rather close to his life and couldn't help but ask, "Am I really a part of you?"

God said, "Alex, I am you," and was gone.

So he rested

THE MEANING OF LIFE

August, 1984

I am.

I exist. I am mass and energy taking up space. I am made up of atoms and molecules, some of which also make up the very ground I sit upon or the pencil with which I write.

Yet, somehow, there is more. This mass which is me can move and think. I am self-aware; I know I exist. The fact that I can state that proves it to be so.

So I think and I move.

I go to school. What does this mean? It means that my mass, my atoms, climb into a structure which transports me to a location where through my senses I affect the organization of atoms in my brain so I can move my hand to create an abstract representation of that organization sometime later. Another human mass unit then fills in with a pencil a mark on a sheet of paper that is no bigger than a bug yet represents months of my moving my body from one place to another, organizing my brain and making my hand recreate that organization.

The size of a bug.

Family. Wife. Children.

I have emotions, sure. But they're no more substantial than anything else my brain creates. Heck, 90% of people's emotions are natural, built in instinct anyway. The other 10% (which comes from our "intellect", our "civilization") simply muddles and confuses the other 90. People meet, their masses interact and each uses data from the other to make some form of mental organization, feeling if you will, of the other.

But so what?

People "fall in love."

Yeah? Big deal.

Love is nothing but an old, built-in instinct which evolved to help protect and prolong the life of the species plus a little "civilization" which makes us think that it's worth more than that.

But think.

THE MEANING OF LIFE

What if I died? My mass would cease to convert matter into energy of motion; it would stop organizing it's brain; it would no longer prevent certain other parasite cells, bacteria, from disassembling its proper order and I would spoil, then rot. Also, other human units would feel "emotion;" they would move little atoms around in their brain in some sort of reaction to the data.

But think.

What if 10 million people died?

So? Sure there would have been units among those who would have affected matter in some way to affect other units -- through medicine, music, the making of weapons.

What if everyone died? And all the animals?

What if our sun blew up -- nova -- tomorrow?

Would that matter to all the other billions of stars in our galaxy?

Heck, what if our whole galaxy disappeared? Would that make any difference to the other billion galaxies in the universe?

What if the universe stopped existing and there was nothing? -- nothing? -- nothing?

Would it really matter?

So here people sit, on this little speck of dirt in vacuum thinking they're important -- thinking that their grade, their car, their family, their social status, anything and everything is important.

Why do they think so?

Religion.

The vast majority of the 4.5 billion members of this dirt ball think that there is something that transcends our planet, our galaxy, and even the universe.

But why do they think so? Because someone told them. Who told them? Other people.

Once upon a time, men thought the earth was flat. He also thought the earth was a strange place with strange, non-understandable laws. He thought that surly something had to control things. Gods were invented and prayed to. Sometimes when they prayed, it rained. Sometimes when they prayed, it did not.

Gods became an accepted solution to the mysteries of life, yet they still were the construct of someone's mind, the movement and organization of the atoms in his brain -- nothing more.

This trend continued and developed. When one people oppressed another, the oppressed would pray for relief. Their savior, their messiah, became that which gave them hope enough to

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function. But he too was nothing but the construct of people's imaginations that others took to be reality.

The church and state, in Rome, in early England, were very close and often one and the same. It was found that people were easily manipulated if they were told "God wants it this way."

People don't like to think of dying so they invented eternal heaven and other's believed it to be reality. They also invented hell for their enemies and to threaten others, to persuade them to do things the way the preachers wanted. But remember, the preachers believed it to be real also.

What is seen and heard in modern churches are variations of the same old theme. People believe in gods because they were told to, because it makes sense to them, and because it comforts them and gives them strength. But that belief, as well as the comfort and the strength, is only the organization of atoms in their brain.

So people go on living their lives placing value on life, love, money, and video games. Most people think that there is a meaning of life, some deep secret that has yet to be found. It is as though they see themselves in a valley, unable to see out to the real, True World. Some believe that one escapes the valley after death to confront the meaning. Some feel that their priests or philosophers see a little bit further out than they.

If I were to climb the rough sides to the top of that valley, which represents the simple movements of human biomass units proceeding from one motion, one thought to another, I would find a blank wall. I would look back down on the valley and there I would see the full extent of the meaning of life.

But what are my thoughts other than the fleeting form a bunch of atoms hold within a tiny bit of gray matter?

RELIGIONS AND GOD

May, 1987

I should have been born in Missouri. I understand it is known as the "show-me" state.

To say that I believe God does not exist is too strong a statement. Even if I firmly did or did not believe in God, how could I be so absolutely vain to judge something I know nothing about as "absolute truth" only because I believed in it?

What I do know is that I have never seen any evidence of God in my life. I have, as part of me, a very demanding skeptic. I hope I never lose this aspect of myself because it keeps me on my toes and will hopefully prevent me from jumping into something without giving it a lot of thought.

This is how I approach religion. I can not accept the existence of God simply because hundreds of thousands of others do. When people talk of "miracles" I must ask "Okay -- was it God, an angel or something like that, or was it 1) Random chance 2) The skill of a dedicated doctor, for example 3) an obvious conclusion of events 4) A hoax ... etc.

Truth, whatever it is, can not be found by looking at one alternative and ignoring other possibilities. Unless a fact or idea can withstand brutal questioning and testing from all angles, it does not deserve the status of being a truth. Reality, the true reality of the way things are, is the goal of our searching. If an assumed truth fails in providing an answer to a question, it must be discarded in favor of one that is more complete.

For example, it was once accepted as truth that the earth was the center of the universe. However, there was eventually a set of questions that simply would not fit within the boundaries of that truth. Eventually, that truth was discarded for a better truth that said the planets made circles around the sun. But this truth was unable to explain subtle astronomical observations and it was discarded for the "truth" that the path of planets and comets around a star is actually an ellipse.

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Scientists have accepted the challenge of looking toward nature, the earth and the universe itself to find reality.

If we want to understand the world, life or anything, we must look at it, test it, think about it, question it, and in the end accept what it has to show us. Thus I question religions and God. If they are in fact truths, then they will endure all questioning no matter how relentless.

If you say you felt God, fine -- maybe you did. Maybe you felt something and said, "That must have been God." I can not say which is correct. I can only say that it is absolutely not evidence of God for anyone who did not personally have such an experience, even if this feeling is apparently shared by millions.

If I felt some revelation inside my own mind, how would I know it truly emanated from God and not myself? How could I be sure other than throwing my hands up, closing my eyes and blindly accepting "that must have been God."

Such is the basis of faith. But faith, by its very nature, is a denial of any search for the absolute truth. Faith demands acceptance without explanation. Religious faith requires an acceptance that God is so powerful and different that no matter how hard we try, we can not understand him. Thus questioning circumstances of "miracles" or the existence of God himself stops and with it any hopes of finding the real truth, whatever it is.

If God is reality, then let him be questioned and tested for if he is real, he will endure all investigation. One thing that bothers me about religions in general is their inability to accept that they may be wrong about some things or even everything.

Religions accept ideas as "absolute truth" simply because they wish to believe in them. I see this selfish vanity as a weakness.

If there is an undeniable truth about this world it can not be found by systematic intolerance to other ways of thinking.

And yet I am not completely without hope of the existence of some entity like God. However, I can not let any such thoughts change the way I think. I can not believe in something just because it is convenient for me or because I simply want to believe in it. The truth was never found by someone closing his eyes and clinging to wishful thinking or by exerting his wishful thinking on others.

Basically, I see Christianity as wishful thinking. I must admit that I am not a scholar on religions, but from what I have seen, Christianity does not make sense.

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First, the very idea that one's position for eternity is determined by one lifetime seems obviously inconsistent with a loving and just god. It's a fine standard for folks who have the luxury of sitting in their church every week feeling lucky to be one of the few chosen for the pearly gates.

Not everyone has the opportunity to be so lucky. If there is one God, with the same set of rules for everybody, as I understand is the Christian belief, then what does one do with the soul of a nine year old girl who died of hunger never having heard of God, Jesus or salvation? Remember, this is for eternity with a big "E." What if she stole someone's blanket from the other side of the camp?

The final result of this girl's soul would no doubt be interpreted differently by different religions (some of which would want to know more about the specific case) and by different people in the same religion.

If God had the choice of making any planet with any physical properties and any form of life and civilizations to be used as the testing ground for one's position in eternity, then why didn't he do better than he did? If this life has such importance and if God really wants us to join him in heaven, why would he stack the deck so strongly against so many, especially since Jesus has already died for any sins committed or not yet even considered?

Apparently, one has only to accept Christ as savior. This says that all of the world's evil, hardships, crimes, war, disease, disasters and on and on exist only to test our ability to make one decision that decides the fate of our souls for eternity.

One set of rules for everyone. One chance, no matter what the circumstances, for eternity.

It is this that seems so strongly opposite to a God who truly loves everyone.

Some would say that if it weren't for God's opposite, Satan, things would be fine. Others would say that it's all Eve's fault. Well, that sounds real fair doesn't it? And as for Satan, either God is "all-powerful" or he isn't. If not, that tears apart half of what religious faith is based on. If he is all-powerful, this means that he condones and accepts all of what Satan does.

These are some of the more obvious inconsistencies that I run into when I begin to put religious "truths" to some strong questioning.

What makes more sense to me is that religions today serve exactly the same purpose that they have since the beginning of

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human thought: to explain the unexplainable and to produce comfort when events and circumstances are beyond our control.

We laugh at medicine men and sun worshipers, and then pray that God make Timmy's kidneys better.

We believe Satan has made our world horrible and unclean while practically ignoring the destruction and defilement of our earth and our people by humans themselves.

Which was it that made the tornado destroy your house and kill your son? Was it God? Satan? What did you do to deserve it? "I don't know. There must be a reason!"

Why don't others question their religion? Why do so many people flock to faith healers and religious con artists? Why do so many people go to church and accept the preacher's gospel word without a thought about whether it is truth or not?

The answer is that most people are afraid, unwilling, or too lazy to look for the truth themselves. They would rather have someone in a position of authority tell them what is right, wrong, truth, and reality. I can not.

Some would ask me why I believe so strongly in science and observation as a means to find reality. Isn't that similar to religious faith?

At first, that sounds like a good question.

I believe that most ministers, preachers, rabbis, et cetera, are honest true believers in what they say.

Similarly, I believe that scientists, in general, possess the same type of dedication and integrity.

But where religions are based on ancient philosophies, various interpretations, and faith, science is based on measurable, repeatable experimentation.

Today a minister reads from the same bible as a minister one, two, three, or seven hundred years ago. While he may interpret thoughts and intentions of the author in the context of modern day living, he is not able to change the basic text or suddenly write a new bible. Nor is he able to offer any evidence that what he says is actually true.

On the other hand, the heartbeat of science is research. It is the job of the scientist to probe, examine and question. If an unanswerable phenomenon exists, it is the job of the scientist to explain it or redefine his scientific discipline to more closely match the reality of his observations. If he can show that his contribution actually better describes the world than the previous interpretation,

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and his experiment can be repeated several times with the same result, then he will have brought us one step closer to the true reality.

First of all, I basically trust the ability of the scientific method rather than a religious doctrine to describe the world and reality. Secondly, we can actually see evidence that science and research is genuine when it is applied. How can so many people listen to the radio, use computers, take medicine, and watch satellite photos of our planet and still ignore the ability of science to explain the origins of stars, planets, and life when it is exactly the same scientific methodology that was used for all the above?

When Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Newton, and Einstein each successively offered an alternative definition of reality, we have moved closer and closer to whatever reality actually exists.

Science has not by far achieved full understanding of the universe. Science knows this and keeps searching. Religion has given up. With ultimate arrogance in the face of applied science and of the unknown, religion proclaims to have the answer to reality. As we grow in technology, we are able to make finer and more exact observations of the world and the universe.

Whether or not we accept that God was the motivation of creation, why should we ever shy away from examining the processes?

Finally, to answer the question of why I trust science over religion: I have been invited to study scientific laws and to test them with my own hands. In physics, chemistry, and biology classes, I have personally put science to the test and it has strongly endured. One day the teacher tells me that force equals mass times acceleration and the next day in the lab I can see it with my very own eyes. I can then from this conclude that if I continued to advance in a scientific field, such as physics or chemistry, I would continue to examine the validity of the field and would eventually challenge it and modify it myself to better describe reality.

Thus I trust science in general, and I have a kind of faith that science is moving toward the ultimate truth even when I am not observing and testing each step of the way.

Again, none of this proves the non-existence of God. But it does, I believe, demonstrate that science is better suited to describe the processes and nature of the physical world (and that creationists should leave that sort of thing to professionals.)

If God is reality, science, in its search for the truth, can not threaten Him in any way.

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I also reject the normal interpretation of God on a more emotional level. I have already mentioned how the accepted view of God seems to me cruel and inconsistent. Some of the eastern religions and philosophies I find much easier to accept. While the thought of reincarnation makes more sense to me than the one-shot Christianity deal, I am no more likely to become a Buddhist or Hindu any more than I am likely to become a Catholic. This is especially true after realizing that the concept of reincarnation is closely tied to the old eastern world's caste system that separated the population into different levels of society. The only hope of the poor souls at the bottom of the social ladder was that if they were good they would gather positive Karma that would allow them, in their next life, to obtain a higher spiritual and social position. Eastern religions are just as fundamentally flawed as any other.

There is a view of God and the meaning of life that I can feel comfortable with. I can not accept it as truth or really believe in it as far as God is concerned, but I can accept the philosophy as basically a good idea and let it guide me in certain situations.

I believe the story I wrote titled "A Conversation With God" describes it best.

In the story, Alex Anderson, a scientist in search of the truth dies with his wife at his side. God is waiting to talk to him and reorient Alex with his True Self, i.e. his soul self.

"The only reason life and this universe exists," says God, "is so life can be experienced. Life is what really matters. Afterlife is the boring part."

God tells Alex that Alex has lived several lives on several planets in very different forms.

According to this view, God exists as hardly more than the sum of all the souls in the universe, which hop from planet to planet experiencing life. Often souls bond closely and they share several lives together as husband/wife, father/son, little girl/pet dog, etc.

While the soul takes on physical characteristics during life. It can never be fully understood because it always exists partly outside the world of our physical laws and limitations.

Of course, I should emphasize again that I don't actually believe any of it for a minute.

What I can draw from this is the idea that the purpose of life is simply to live. Experience things completely. Don't take simple pleasures like the taste of fresh bacon for granted. Live your life and experience happiness, love, guilt, sorrow, jealousy, confusion,

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depression, fear, security, pride, confidence, anticipation, and more and treasure them all.

Hopefully, happiness and love will be a large part of life. All emotions and experiences are important, but it is ourselves who are ultimately responsible for our lives and our happiness. We may experience negative emotions but if we let them rule our lives, we can blame only ourselves individually.

Every action I perform and every word I speak are ultimately under my control. There is therefore no reason to do anything I don't want to do. Similarly, there is no reason not to do something that I really want. Since life is here to be experienced and, hopefully, enjoyed, why not reach for high goals and try new things?

When interacting with other people, I have ultimate control over what I say or do. Why be difficult or mean to the person when I could just as easily be kind and helpful?

There is never a reason to go out of your way to make someone else's day or life miserable.

If someone is trying to make my life miserable, I have the control to walk away if I want or say no to a demand if I choose. Even if I am in a position where I can not walk away or hang up, it is still my decision how I will emotionally handle the situation. If I let something stick in my mind and worry about it day and night, I am giving up my chance to forget it and go on being happy.

If for example, a good friend suddenly decides that I have betrayed him, or a girlfriend suddenly walks out of my life, I would be wasting my time worrying about it. They are on their own personal journey of life and have to make decisions that may or may not suit me. Personally I may feel they would have been better off with me as a friend but it's really none of my business. So why worry?

If, however I really want to be friends again or go chasing after a girl, I can do that too.

There are no firm rules. Just do your best, be friendly, stand up for you wants and desires but don't become devastated when you don't get them. Most importantly, realize that your life is your own to braid into whatever happiness and experiences you can find.

THE ABANDONED FELLOWSHIP

May, 1990

Living alone is a lonely business. There's no need to even pretend that it's not a distasteful and empty sort of existence filled with long hours of pacing, thinking, and watching television. No need to detail the increasing difficulty of family gatherings and watching my cousin's families develop only to go home and warm up a microwave TV dinner for my evening meal. I can't pretend that I lead the wild, free life without the "burdens" of family responsibilities. If I led the wild, free life I suppose a family would get in the way but I don't; my life is one of hiding within the shell of normality trying to move forward day to day by myself.

If this sounds a little too self-pitying you're right. If I were half of one of the couples of the world and ran into someone like myself, my impression would not be that of pity but of indifference. "If he want's to find someone and get married, he'll go find someone." Thus, while it would be easy for me to pity myself and moan about not having a family or even something to do, I can't help but realize that these things are my responsibility alone. No one else can make me happy just as no one else can make me sad. I have just never been the aggressively social type. I have good and close friends but they are out of the city, inaccessible other than by brief phone conversations a few times a year. College didn't offer any new lasting friendships -- it hardly offered a "so how's it been" acquaintance.

How different my life would have been had I not gone to IUPUI. I wonder whom I would be married to now if I had gone off to campus. But then, I could have been there just as I was at IUPUI, studious and aloof. But who knows. So here I am with no new acquaintances, no circle of guys to have over for games or play poker with. Work? Yeah, there are a few guys at work but they are either married or are getting married and it's not the same. Perhaps it could be if I would just open up and relax, but I don't see myself putting together parties and inviting the group over for poker or anything. Somehow I never learned how to be social.

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There is a group, however, that, would open its arms to me and let me into the "family" of new friends, a fellowship of community and support that is just waiting for me. It would offer things to do, people to meet and visit, perhaps even a wife, and regular sessions of indoctrination of philosophies and beliefs that I worked for years to abandon: the neighborhood Christian church.

I remember attending church and praying for all the lost souls who were pagan enough to avoid the house of God. I remember being very frightened about the day of revelations when the dead would walk upon the earth and all the living would be instantly judged and sent up or down. It was very real to me -- beyond question -- and it scared me silly, as it was intended to. That's the main concept: it was real -- beyond question.

Well, we stopped attending church because we moved to the other side of the city and my mother (it was always she who took us to church) didn't join any local churches. Then, I began learning of the world and universe from a non-judgmental, empirical point of view. I received the basic training in high school: Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Calculus to train my mind and at least expose me to some of the theory and tools that differentiates the scientific method from mere wishful thinking. I watched Nova on PBS, saw Carl Sagan's Cosmos, and began reading about Einstein's relativity. In college I studied Astronomy, Geology, and had two more semesters of physics. I was being trained in looking to the world itself for the answers and those answers always came back in concise, consistent, and verifiable packets. I began to see the processes that make the universe tick, the chemical composition of the interior of stars, the equation of angular momentum, and what happens to a stellar cloud as it begins to spin and collapse. In geology class, I was shown the methods used in carbon dating, and from my experience in chemistry where I read about the structure of atoms, the atomic chart, and chemical equations, I could at least sense the fundamental validity of the method. From that high school biology class and a rough understanding of the role of DNA in the process of cell duplication, plus the overwhelming evidence offered by sheer common sense, I was able to see how the process of evolution of species has been underway on this planet for millions of years.

And then I look back at the bible and read about God creating the heavens and the earth and man and the beasts of the forests. I see otherwise smart, intelligent people unable to accept the simple fact that humans are just another mammal which has evolved from other

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mammals. This is why I cringe so strongly when "scientific" creationists open their big mouths. Their use of the word scientific is an abomination. Truth is found by first saying "I don't know" and then going to find out from the world, the universe and accepting what it reveals and not from saying, "Here it is in the book," and picking up whatever scientific facts can be warped to an already predetermined goal.

But this is not only about evolution. Perhaps God created evolution. This is a nice compromise. After all, isn't it more beautiful and God-like to put something as complex and elegant into place than to simply wave some kind of magic wand and poof people into existence? Like I said, it's a nice compromise, but one I eventually abandoned.

The perspective one has outside a religion is very different than from within. For example, how could a real Christian say, "So if there's no God, why do people believe in him?" More likely the question would be, "How can some people not believe in God when I feel him so strongly in my heart?" The first question could be asked by a Christian, but I don't think it could be felt with the same impact.

I can easily ask, "So if the sky isn't blue, why does everyone think it is." But I know the sky is blue and I know why so the question is meaningless. But from the outside, the question, "Why do people believe," can be asked. The question also has a terribly simple answer: people believe in God because they are aware of their mortality. A second benefit is that God is the universal scapegoat. You don't have to know or understand; just go on with your life; God is your copilot so you have nothing to worry about and no reason to accept any of the responsibility yourself.

Here you are, a thinking, breathing human, aware of your surroundings and able to make a difference in the world. You suddenly realize, unlike your goldfish or cat, that you will die someday. Bummer. Then along comes a fellow with this book and says, "Yes, but didn't you know ... when you die, you don't really die. You go to this really neat place and get to have fun the rest of eternity."

"Wow, great," you say, "how do I sign up."

Then when the storm comes and wrecks your house and kills your children, along comes this fellow and says, "Hey look, pal, don't worry. You see God wanted your children to die. It was their time. There's nothing you could do so don't worry."

"But," you plead, "why?"

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The nice man puts his hand on your shoulder and says, "Well dude, like I said, that's what He wanted. We don't always know what Mr. Big is up to, but there's always some good that comes out of what he does. Remember that big harvest last year?"

"Yeah"

"Well there you go. Let's pray." He bows his head. "Hey Mr. Big, you need to kill the kids, go ahead -- kill the kids. We know that this is a good thing cause you did it and all so thanks, I guess, for thinking enough of our town to select our kids to help you out."

There is a third reason beyond God as eternal life-giver and universal scapegoat for religions, especially established religions, to blossom. Religions are a marvelous way to keep the peasants in line. Especially when you throw in good ol' Satan. Here's your basic keep 'em in line sermon:

"Okay dudes, check it out. There's this really nice old guy up on this throne. You know, just like our king only bigger and more powerful. (He's the one that chose our king to be king you know). This is the fellow that let's you party when you die up on those golden roads, remember? Good. Now, he is all-powerful. There's nothing he can't do. Now there's this other major dude only he's bad. Really really really really bad. You see, this bad guy mouthed off to Mr. Big and got tossed out on his ass and has to work and toil instead of party for eternity. Now, you know how Mr. Big will sometimes give us a really good harvest and sometimes not. Well, that's because Mr. Badass is messing with us trying to get us to blow our tops and mouth off to Mr. Big like he did. You see, here's the bottom line. If you mouth off to Mr. Big, or do something he doesn't like, then you don't get to party for eternity -- he'll send you to Mr. Badass who'll make you work and toil for ever. Oh yeah, he'll also rip your skin off and burn off your flesh over and over and over and over..."

Then someone stands up and asks, "Well, what is it that we're supposed to do?"

Grinning, the nice man in the robe responds, "Glad you asked that. You see, I just sent my brother in law, Stan, up to talk with Mr. Big. He's got this list here. Do this, don't do that, do this, don't do that, and for crying out loud don't ever do that, unless you like getting your flesh ripped off."

The I-just-talked-to-god-and-you'll-do-as-I-say-if-you-don't-want-to-burn ploy seems, from this outside perspective, so incredibly transparent. Of course the development of these forces

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has been molded for centuries by people who believe strongly in the validity of the basic morality play and who generally want to help people find their harmony with God. Prophets have been sending Stan to talk with God long before Christianity came along with its subtle variations.

What makes Christianity different (apart from Christ himself who is basically some kind of Mega-Stan) is that 1) The Roman civilization was moving well enough for there to be a printing industry, i.e. monks, who could write down the stories and 2) The Roman emperors got big heads and wanted to be gods themselves, causing the monks to get very self-righteous about the Real Mr. Big. A perfect situation for the martyr of a kind young carpenter named Jesus.

So that's my perspective. That Christianity is another flavor of the basic religious motivations seems to be obvious. Discovering that the fundamental foundation of religions is to take away the pain of the realization that we are mortal was probably the point of no return. Never again could I accept it other than the sugar coated illusion that it is.

But, of course, religions are more than that. They are bundled very tightly with the preservation of community and of the species. Many of the rules are designed specifically for this purpose: Don't kill people, don't take other people's stuff, don't talk back to your parents, you don't know anything yet. Religions can be the glue that keeps a society from crumbling by providing a complete worldview of who we are, why things are as they are, and how to live happily ever after.

Then came science to rip away half of the puzzle. Science, from my perspective, has removed God as the motivation of the universe. It seems perfectly natural to me that this -- the universe, life, love and puppy dogs -- is simply what happens given enough primal matter and a few billion years.

Even if we die dead forever, can accept random physical events for what they are, and don't need Mr. Badass to keep us in line, we still need to live together as a community and offer each other support, caring, and love without killing each other or taking other people's stuff.

But, alas, a church can't be expected to give just half of the recipe. The very nature of the church is to propagate its outdated, sugar coated, good vs. evil morality play and expect its members to live and breath it all as concrete fact. To use a church simply for

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social contacts while ignoring its religion is hypocritical and an insult to the members of the church for whom their religion is concrete fact.

"This Jesus character is a bunch of bologna, but who's that cute babe in the third pew?"

It just doesn't work. My beliefs are mine because of the life I have led, the things I have learned, and the questions I have asked. It doesn't mean I'm right, it simply means that I believe I'm right. And I do believe I am right.

So there it is, if anyone is interested, why I will probably never be a member of a church despite all its social benefits. But there's no room for pity. I made the bed and I'll sleep in it --- alone as usual.

THE CROSSROADS

March, 1992

Forward

It's all about a search for truth.

Truth, however, is a slippery, intangible ghost. Reality is what you make of it. Truth is as you see it.

This is really the point of the work I am about to undertake. After years of searching, it comes to this: We humans are forced to view reality through the lens of humanity. Everything we know and understand is colored by what we are and how our brains work. Thus the search for truth becomes a search for the proper metaphor through which we can find consistent answers to questions and emotions.

This work explains the paths I have taken that have led me to this understanding and tries to explain just what it is that I have found. It is my truth and my understanding. That is the only way it can be. The path was and is not easy. I have come to conclusions that strip away the mystery of the meaning of life. I stand looking at the rusty scaffolding that holds up the facade of other people's most cherished beliefs.

In the following pages you will find thoughts and feelings that I seldom talk about. There are several reasons that I have not openly discussed these things. The fear of persecution as an unbeliever in a Christian world is among them. I would rather say nothing than to have close friends and family think that I have fallen under the spell of their Satan and then have them try to force feed me their Jesus as a cure.

And what if I do reach someone and cause that person to have doubts about closely held beliefs? Would I have won some great victory by kicking the crutch of Christianity out from under someone? There are times that I wish I could simply close my eyes, relax, and believe in the sugarcoated morality play of Christianity. But I can't. Not any more. Like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, I have seen behind the illusion. I have peeled away the mask of religion

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and truth despite that awesome, booming voice ordering us all to, "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain." It's not easy. I don't have to like what I have found, but that is irrelevant.

All around me I see people happily going about their lives without this form of wisdom that I have come across. They are happy and contented without searching for an explanation. They simply accept what their parents, preacher, or analyst tells them, and they go about their business. But I have also found that there are others like me who want to know. This is also a story of what I have learned from them.

But the real question yet to be answered is what, if anything, I can do with this knowledge. It is like knowing all about swimming but never being in the water. Perhaps that will come in time. For now, here is some of what I have learned in my twenty-seven years of life.

Prologue

Ever since I have been able to ask questions, I have been looking for the Truth. This is a presentation of what I have found: Metareligion.

Religion is an understanding of the world and our place in it. Metareligion is an understanding of religion itself, why we humans seem to need it, and what it can do for us in our search for truth.

If what you want is a simple truth that can fulfill your day to day needs, the best thing you can do is just pick one. Any one will do as long as you believe. Christianity will do just fine. So will Judaism, Hinduism, Dianetics, Science, Buddhism, or pretty much, any other -ism.

But, if you want to know, for sure, then you may be in for a surprise. What if I told you that there is no such thing as knowing, that all we have is believing? There's more to it actually but it doesn't amount to any new truth, just an understanding of all the old ones.

I didn't start this path to understanding by deciding to abandon my Christian upbringing; that came later. I started with questions and then proceeded to find the answers. I analyzed, considered, and then accepted what I found instead of simply dismissing it because it was different than what I had been taught. In doing that I have been changed. By investigating the faults of religion I now understand the very point of religion in a way that the devout might never know.

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I have also found that the One Great Truth is not a new discovery but has been with us for thousands of years; however, it is usually overpowered by the passionate cacophony of the Many Little Truths.

The One Great Truth is that there are no Great Truths. Reality is what you make of it. Consider the following Zen koan.

Shuzan held out his short staff and said "If you call this a short staff, you oppose its reality. If you do not call it a short staff, you ignore the fact. Now, what do you wish to call this?"

(Hofstadter 251)

Is it a short staff? The answer is that the staff is exactly and only that which it is. Our human understanding of its form and function is governed by the way in which humans are capable of understanding. We must be able to separate the real existence of the world from our understanding of it.

Most religions are filled with simple but profound wisdoms on how to live together and be happy. The more anyone has of that the better. But there is an understanding that transcends the imagery of mythologies and religions. It has to do with being a mythical, spiritual human being in search of happiness and inner peace and knowing why and how that works in our minds and in our hearts.

That's what it's all about.

Lesson one -- The nature of truth

A fact is either true or false, but there are degrees of trueness to any statement. It seems to me that there are basically two types of truths: Objective and Subjective.

Subjective truths are those that arise out of feeling or opinion. For example, if I ask if a movie was any good someone might respond that it was exciting and fun. But there are other indications to determine whether it was good. One can measure the profits that it made, the length of time it ran at the theaters, the number of awards it received, or one can analyze it in terms of story elements that are accepted as good fiction.

All of those elements may seem to be objective observations, but they arise from collections of subjective interpretations. It did well at

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the box office because people liked it. It won awards because the people who give out awards liked it.

We end up with a general subjective agreement that it was a good movie. Yet still, there will be someone who didn't like it for one reason or another.

Time is also very subjective. What's early to some is late to others. Even with watches we can only approach an approximation of the actual time. If you say it is 9:27, someone else at that instant might have said 9:25 or 9:30. Someone in a different time zone would have given a different answer still.

The question is does there exist Real Time? According to my 1991 Information Please Almanac, "The second is defined as the duration of 9,192,631,770 cycles of the radiation associated with a specified transition of the cesium 133 atom."

But then Einstein muddied even this very specific definition when he explained that time itself actually moves slower for bodies in motion.

What about the color of the sky? It's not always blue. The color of the sky depends on the time of day and the weather conditions. Sometimes it is blue, but other times its orange or red or purple. Actually, the sky isn't any color. It simply has the property of diffracting light of various wavelengths at different times.

Can we think of any truth that is not in some way subjective?

What about the truth that the position of a free falling object can be computed as its initial height minus 4.9 meters times the number of seconds squared?

But again, it's not quite that simple. I rounded the numbers, ignored air resistance, and didn't take into account how far away from the earth the initial point is. Let's not even mention the gravitational effects of any other bodies in the area.

The point of these exercises is to show that, assuming there does exist a single Reality Of The Way Things Are, the only way we can understand that reality is to abstract it into something that our minds can better cope with, like physics, relativity, or vision, which all turn out to be subjective to some degree. What color would the sky be if we could see electromagnetic radiation at wavelengths used to broadcast radio and television signals?

Is there a heaven?

That is certainly subjective. Some people don't believe in heaven or hell. Of those that do, everyone seems to have his or her own idea about what it's like. It's not something you can test like dropping

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things off of buildings. The existence of heaven and God can not be verified by any means that we know of at this time. If they have an existence, but one outside our physical reality, then no experiment could detect them and no equation could describe them. Thus, whatever one's belief, it is extreme vanity to hold an absolute opinion on the matter.

However, there is a great deal about the world and ourselves to be learned by examining what we can see. Scientific experimentation is the best tool we have at approaching an objective truth about our world. Even though the units of measurement are arbitrary and the mathematics an abstraction, science offers a more consistent and verifiable interpretation of the truth.

We find truth by first declaring our ignorance. We must give up our image of what we want the world to be and accept what it is. Most of us are told what to believe from the time we are born. We let people in positions of authority tell us what is right, wrong, truth, and reality. However, if you want to see what is really there behind the images, you must wipe the slate clean and say, "I don't know."

Not-knowing is true knowledge. Presuming to know is a disease. First realize that you are sick; then you can move toward health. The Master is her own physician. She has healed herself of all knowing. Thus she is truly whole.

(TAO 71)

If you are looking for truth, you may not like what you find. You must be prepared for that possibility. If you want to hear only what you already think you know, repeated to you so you can relax and go on with your life, then go right ahead. That's your privilege. But it is not a search for truth.

Truth, whatever it is, can not be found by looking at one alternative and ignoring other possibilities. Unless a fact or idea can withstand brutal questioning and testing from all angles, it does not deserve the status of being a truth. If an assumed truth fails in providing an answer to a question, it must be discarded in favor of one that is more complete.

For example, it was once accepted as truth that the earth was the center of the universe. However, there was eventually a set of questions that simply could not fit within the boundaries of that truth. Eventually that truth was discarded for a better truth that said

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the planets made circles around the sun. But this truth was unable to explain subtle astronomical observations and it was discarded for the truth that the path of planets and comets around a star is actually an ellipse.

Scientists have accepted the challenge of looking towards nature, the earth and the universe itself to find the truth.

If we want to understand the world, life or anything, we must look at it, test it, think about it, question it and in the end, accept what it has to show us, whether we like it or not.

How can so many people listen to the radio, use computers, take medicine and watch satellite photos of our planet and still ignore the ability of science to explain the origins of stars, planets and life when is exactly the same scientific methodology that was used for all of the above?

When Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Newton, Einstein, and Feynman each successively offered an alternative definition of reality, we have moved closer and closer to whatever reality actually exists.

However, science isn't the only means of approaching truth. Biology and psychology may be able to describe the electro-chemical triggering mechanism of neurons, but when billions of these interconnected cells work in unison, the end result of a mind defies simple scientific analysis.

Emotions and feelings cannot be dealt with at the same level as ordinary scientific experiments. Even with all the subtle and subjective ways in which the physical world can be observed, it's child's play compared to studying the human mind. Truths that the mind deals with are less measurable and purely subjective, but they are still valid. The type of person that we are, how we interact with others, and whether we are nice or argumentative are as much a part of us as our pulse rate or shoe size.

It is unfortunate that so many issues can be cast in terms of science versus religion. The two are complimentary, not mutually exclusive, and they both have something to offer. Science brings us a better understanding of the world around us and religion brings us a better understanding of the world inside us.

But we can only understand truth and reality, no matter what aspect we are considering, in a way that humans are capable of understanding.

This is the nature of truth.

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Lesson two -- The religious fallacy

I would guess that most Christians don't believe in the literal seven-day creation of the earth. Some accept the story of the Garden of Eden as an allegory of the joining of man and woman in marriage. Others dismiss the story of Jonah and the whale as a fable. The story of Noah and the flood is seen by some as myth while others as an actual, historic fact.

The life of Jesus, on the other hand, is expected to be taken at face value. He did heal the blind, he was born of a virgin, he did die giving us salvation, and he did physically rise to heaven.

The religious fallacy is accepting the mythology of one's religion as absolute fact instead of as an extended metaphor of our struggles with life.

On this subject, Joseph Campbell says,

From the point of view of any orthodoxy, myth might be defined simply as "other people's religion," to which an equivalent definition of religion would be "misunderstood mythology," the misunderstanding consisting in the interpretation of mythic metaphors as references to hard fact: the Virgin Birth, for example, as a biological anomaly, or the Promised Land as a portion of the Near East to be claimed and settled by a people chosen of God, the term "God" here to be understood as denoting an actual, though invisible, masculine personality, who created the universe and is now resident in an invisible, though actual, heaven to which the "justified" will go when they die, there to be joined at the end of time by their resurrected bodies.

What, in the name of Reason or Truth, is a modern mind to make of such evident nonsense?

(Campbell 55)

Religions today serve exactly the same purpose that they have since the beginning of human thought: To explain the unexplainable and to provide comfort when events and circumstances are beyond our control.

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We laugh at primitive medicine men and sun worshipers and then pray that God make Timmy's kidneys better.

We believe Satan has made our world horrible and unclean while practically ignoring the destruction and defilement of our earth by humans themselves.

Which was it that made the tornado destroy your house and kill your son? Was it God? Satan? What did you do to deserve it? "I don't know, there must be a reason!"

But of course there's more to it than that. Religions also provide a place for mankind within the context of his environment; they give a beginning, a purpose.

Because they are unaware that Bible stories share many of the same mythological images with other religions, some Christians can be told that "this is the way it is." Or in other words, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it."

Some will go so far as to acknowledge that there are other viable religions in the world, but they comfort themselves with the fact that the others are simply worshipping God in their own way whether they call him God, Jehovah, Allah, or Buddha.

Of course! That's the whole point! They are worshipping God their way. And yet Christians seem unable to accept other cultures that worship God as female or as a collection of unnamed forces.

Instead of being content with expressing their own personal relationship with God, Christians, because they believe that their brand of mythology is fact, not metaphor, are intent to "save" the rest of the world. Missionaries cover the globe to preach their beliefs and end up replacing an indigenous mythology, which is appropriate for the lives of the local citizens, with one that has been drawn through the dark ages of Western European reasoning.

Of course the Missionaries don't see this because, to them, they're right and the others are wrong; life after death, heaven and hell, salvation and eternal damnation are as real as the sun, moon, trees, and oceans.

It all leads to a crippling fear of those with different viewpoints. If you are not with them, you are with Satan, or are somehow being controlled by him. "He who is not with Me is against Me and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad." (Matthew 12:30). If you do not accept, as they believe, that Jesus died for your sins, then you will suffer a literal hell and it's their job to bring you to salvation through witnessing their beliefs.

How incredibly frightening that must be.

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For some specific examples, let us turn again to Joseph Campbell, a man who studied the mythologies and religions across the world and through time. In discussing what we know now about the solar system and galaxies, he examines the ascent of Jesus after his resurrection.

It is believed that Jesus, having risen from the dead, ascended physically to heaven (Luke 24:51), to be followed shortly by his mother in her sleep... It is also written that some nine centuries earlier, Elijah, riding a chariot of fire, had been carried to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11).

Now, even ascending at the speed of light, which for a physical body is impossible, those three celestial voyagers would not yet be out of the galaxy. Dante in the year AD 1330 spent the Easter weekend in a visit to hell, purgatory, and heaven; but that voyage was in spirit alone, his body remaining on earth. Whereas, Jesus, Mary, and Elijah are declared to have ascended physically. What is to be made today of such mythological (hence, metaphorical) folk ideas?

Obviously, if anything of value is to be made of them at all (and I submit that the elementary original idea must have been something of this kind), where those bodies went was not into outer space, but into inner space. That is to say, what is connoted by such metaphorical voyages is the possibility of a return of the mind in spirit, while still incarnate, to full knowledge of that transcendent source of which the mystery of a given life arises into this field of time and back into which it in time dissolves. It is an old, old story in mythology of the Alpha and Omega that is the ground of all being, to be realized as the beginning and end of this life. The imagery is necessarily physical and thus apparently of outer space. The inherent connotation is always, however, psychological and metaphysical, which is to say, of inner space. When read as denoting merely specified events, therefore, the mirrored inward images lose their inherent spiritual force and, becoming overloaded with sentiment, only bind the will the more to temporality.

(Campbell 30,31)

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In other words, Jesus rising to heaven represents our ability to realize, while we are still alive, the capabilities of our spiritual mind. Accepting as fact that Jesus bodily rose was all well and good for a population that believed that heaven was literally in the sky somewhere. With our modern understanding of the earth and solar system, we must ask, "where did he go?" Did he rise up out of sight and then somehow physically leave this world in favor of the spiritual world? Such a compromise is necessary if we insist on thinking of the Gospel of Luke the same way that we think of a news report.

Campbell removes the story entirely and focuses on the idea behind the story.

"He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (Mark 4:9)

The point of the lesson of the religious fallacy is not to invalidate Christianity, but to simply reduce it from the definition of reality, as Christians see it, to simply the mythology of modern western civilization.

It's quite all right for Christians to believe that Christ did bodily rise from the dead and ascend to a real heaven. But it is also quite all right for the Buddhists to believe that Gotama Siddhartha, born a Prince in 563 BC, after feeling an overpowering urge to seek for a way to save mankind from being born into a world of suffering, left home and lived the life of a homeless beggar and, after deciding that giving up desires would end suffering, he meditated for six years before reaching Enlightenment.

No matter which religious dogma is adopted, mankind seems to have an innate need to understand its place in the fabric of the universe. This, it seems to me, is the basic theme that is the connecting thread through all religions. Christians recognize their place as being defined by God and assume that other monotheistic religions are promoting the same philosophy under a different banner; however, the various religions are not worshipping the same god so much as they are each finding a way to express the mystery of their place in the universe through some personal transformation which brings them above mere animal instincts to a higher level of consciousness.

This theme has been expressed throughout human civilization. Christianity is merely the latest and, thanks to domination of Europe by the Catholic Church for several hundred years and the current proliferation of western culture throughout the world, one of the most extensive.

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Some new age philosophies, which Christians fear so much to be the work of the devil, express this idea by encouraging that we all find our personal power within. This is frightening to Christians (who forget that in John 10:34, Jesus, after being accused of blasphemy by the Jews for declaring himself to be a god, said "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, "You are gods"?'") but seems quite natural for Buddhists who are taught to find the Buddha in all men.

In Luke 6:27,28, Jesus is quoted as saying, "Love your enemies, do good to those that hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you." Tao 49 suggests, "The Master has no mind of her own. She works with the mind of the people. She is good to people who are good. She is also good to people who aren't good. This is true goodness. She trusts people who are trustworthy. She also trusts people who aren't trustworthy. This is true trust. The Master's mind is like space. People don't understand her. They look at her and wait. She treats them like her own children."

In Matthew 18:3,4, Jesus said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Tao 55: "He who is in harmony with the Tao is like a newborn child. Its bones are soft, its muscles are weak, but its grip is powerful... The master's power is like this. He lets all things come and go effortlessly, without desire. He never expects results; thus he is never disappointed; thus his spirit never grows old."

Mark 10:24,25: "Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." Mark 10:42-44: "You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all." Tao 81: "True words aren't eloquent; eloquent words aren't true. Wise men don't need to prove their point; men who need to prove their point aren't wise. The Master has no possessions. The more he does for others, the happier he is. The more he gives to others, the wealthier he is. The Tao nourishes by not forcing. By not dominating, the Master leads."

What I am trying to show by pointing out similar passages from the Bible and the Tao Te Ching is that wisdom is not the exclusive

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property of any one religious point of view. Such a cursory comparison isn't meant to imply that the two ideologies are in any way directly related. On the contrary, if one examines them literally they are quite different. However, if you think of them as metaphorical, similarities arise.

In this sense, the kingdom of God and the Tao both represent a level of consciousness that is within the spiritual plane and not the material plane. In striving to be like the Tao or to enter the kingdom of heaven, we end up being better people. We are more patient and forgiving, we are in control of ourselves and our environment, and most importantly, we are able to find a peace with our existence. That peace is called the Tao, God our Father, Nirvana, Gaia, Slack, Magick, Allah the merciful, the Eagle's emanations. If I knew the names that this understanding took in other religions, I could keep going.

Religion should be about that search for inner peace, control, selfless love, and tolerance for others. Focusing on the literal aspects of Christianity or any other religion is confusing the medium with the message.

This is the religious fallacy.

Lesson three — The crossroads and personal transformation

We humans walk on two paths. The first path leads us to things of an animal nature, things of the body like eating, sex, anger, fear, pain, and ecstasy. The other takes us to things intellectual, things like art, love, science, truth, understanding, and wisdom. When those paths meet, and the intellectual tries to understand the animal, and tries to make sense out of desire and death, religion is born.

Why do we need to find a place for ourselves in this universe? Why religion? What is different about humans that makes us aware at this level?

For many, the answer is obvious it is the soul. Unfortunately, they might give that answer and then peacefully go on with their lives as if that actually explained something. If pressed further, they might say, "you know, the soul, the part of you that is part of God, the consciousness that transcends the physical world."

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The kingdom of heaven, the Tao, and Nirvana are metaphorical. They are not real; they simply represent the perceived spiritual context.

More so than most people would like to admit, a human's behavior is instinctive. Some of our strongest emotions thrust themselves up from the very root of our being only to be suppressed by our intellect. If something threatens our security or our loved ones, we want to strike out at it before it can hurt us, just as a faithful dog will bark and growl at a stranger who gets too close to his family. The tenderness we feel holding a child and the need to care for and protect it are not exclusive to humans but are shared by virtually all animals. The way we interact with each other can be seen mirrored in the group dynamics of other species.

The point of this is not to suggest that humans are simple creatures, but that our complexity rides upon a foundation of instinctive needs and drives. We are more than mere animals, but the animal is part of us.

There is another part of us that reasons and thinks things through, despite our first impulse, which separates us from our animal heritage. It is that part of our brain that we think of as our mind. Yet when we feel basic emotions we think of them as part of our mind as well.

Our brains are responsible for enabling thought at all levels. They control the beating of our hearts, our physical responses to emotions, the emotions themselves, memory, learning, the coordination of different brain functions during complex problem solving, and even our ability to think about being self-aware.

When someone says, "Our Father, who art in heaven," he is using his brain to express an idea that he is part of something beyond the physical world, even though that very thought is formed within his brain.

And yet, however it manifests physically, the spirit reaches out to find its place in eternity.

The spirit is that part of the continuum of human consciousness that we recognize as being separate from the instinctive types of animal behaviors and desires. Just as we are bound physically within the world -- we eat from it, breathe its air, walk upon it, and return to it when we die -- the spirit must also bind itself within a context from which it comes, draws strength, and to which it will return.

Because we are aware of our dual animal/intellectual nature, the spirit as something separate from our body seems natural and

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obvious, as if we could continue to think and exist even without the medium of chemically based neural activity.

The thought that our mind, this intangible, seemingly untethered collection of words and ideas, could ever not be is so absolutely abhorrent that the kingdom of heaven is perceived as real so that the mind, once severed from the body, may go on forever.

Modern religion has focused so strongly on this self serving ideal that it is easy to overlook everyday spiritual development, which is the nurturing of that part of our awareness which lifts us above our heritage to be better than the animals we are.

We don't need to aspire to enter an invisible happy land that awaits us when we die. The kingdom of heaven is in our hearts and in the whole world. It is in our eyes when we see art and not just things. It is in our ears when we hear music and not just sound. It is in the sunset when we recognize its beauty and the trees when we recognize their gift. It is in a mother when she is patient with an angry child. It is in you when you suffer with tolerance and understanding the idiocy and injustice of a mad world.

If you close your mind in judgements and traffic with desires, your heart will be troubled. If you keep your mind from judging and aren't led by the senses your heart will find peace. Seeing into darkness is clarity. Knowing how to yield is strength. Use your own light and return to the source of light. This is called practicing eternity.

(Tao 52)

It is a connection with the world and with other beings on a mental, as well as physical, level. Often these two levels are in conflict. The body wants one thing and the mind wants another. Sometimes it is appropriate to listen to the body; other times it is better to look beyond.

However, nurturing our spirit is not simple. It is often easier to be selfish or angry. We can recognize the goodness of caring about others and ourselves and of not allowing the instinctive patterns of thought related to dominance and territory to govern our behavior, but it's another thing to actually break out of our animal heritage.

Because we can reason and are aware of our mortality, we search for a spiritual context of the mind that parallels the physical context of the body. Where those two contexts meet is the crossroads. Often,

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the body wants to take the low road while the intellect wants to take the high road. To help resolve this conflict in favor of the mind, religions offer a tangible metaphor of transformation from being a creature of flesh to a creature of spirit.

In the gospel of John, chapter 3, Jesus explains baptism to Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. He says, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." (John 3:6).

This has become the central foundation for the modern Christian faith. The acceptance that Jesus Christ is the son of God is so key to Christianity that many have selected part of this chapter as its popular motto. John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

In other words,

Knowing others is intelligence; knowing
yourself is true wisdom. Mastering others is
strength; mastering yourself is true power. If
you realize that you have enough, you are
truly rich. If you stay in the center and
embrace death with your whole heart, you
will endure forever.

(Tao 33)

Staying in the center and mastering yourself is the Taoist equivalent of knowing Christ.

It must be understood that it is not the water that cleanses one's spirit during baptism, but the acceptance of Jesus Christ, which is what John 3:16 is all about. Baptism is just a formal ritual through which one decides to transcend from the material, animal consciousness toward an intellectual, spiritual consciousness.

This is the story of the resurrection of Jesus, who was born of flesh and died to that life. When Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, he was reborn in spirit and carried up into heaven to sit at the right hand of God. Just as baptism is a metaphor of Christ's death and resurrection, so is the risen Christ a metaphor of our own personal transformation.

By accepting that Jesus is of God, or in other words, of the spiritual level, and by living a Christian life through following the teachings of Jesus, Christians nurture their spirit.

Personal transformation is a conscious effort to take control of the thoughts and beliefs that control us. It is a denial of our primitive

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side, which is coarse, undisciplined, and selfish. It encourages our spiritual side which, if properly nurtured, can control the beast within and offer us a means, through intelligent discipline, to obtain peace and contentment with our life and death. It is a process of identifying our concept of self with the part of us that is capable of such control.

It also provides us a spiritual context so that we may interact with the world at those higher evolved levels of thought and feel at peace with it.

And this is really the whole point: to find peace and contentment with our life and death and not, as the Christians believe, for some post-mortem reward. In other words, baptism and living a Christian life is not a means towards something beyond, but an end in itself.

Realizing this goal is the main purpose of religion.

For Buddhists, the term representing the kingdom of heaven is Nirvana or Enlightenment. For them, spiritual transformation is not achieved through baptism, but by conditioning one's mind toward the attributes of the spirit. This and other Buddhist concepts were presented to the western world in the 1940s by the Buddhist Society of London who summarized Buddhism into twelve basic principles which were then endorsed by most of the main Buddhist Sects.

7. The Eightfold path consists in Right (or perfect) Views or preliminary understanding, Right Aims or Motive, Right Speech, Right Acts, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Concentration or mind development, and, finally, Right samadhi, leading to full Enlightenment. As Buddhism is a way of living, not merely a theory of life, the treading of this Path is essential to self-deliverance. "Cease to do evil, learn to do good, cleanse your own heart" this is the Teaching of the Buddhas."

8. Reality is indescribable, and a God with attributes is not the final Reality. But the Buddha, a human being, became the All-Enlightened One, and the purpose of life is the attainment of Enlightenment. This state of Consciousness, Nirvana, the extinction of the limitations of self-hood, is attainable on earth. All men and all other forms of life contain the potentiality of Enlightenment,

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and the process therefore consists in becoming what you are. "Look within: thou art Buddha."

9. From potential to actual Enlightenment there lies the Middle Way, the Eightfold Path `from desire to peace', a process of self development between the 'opposites', avoiding all extremes...

(Humphres 75)

This goal is also represented in the philosophy of Central American Yaqui indians. Carlos Castaneda studied with a Yaqui "warrior" named don Juan Matus and offers this example of don Juan's teachings. (I wrote this before learning that the works of Carlos Castaneda were determined to be clever works of fiction.)

"Everything I've put you through," don Juan went on, "each of the things I've shown you was only a device to convince you that there's more to us than meets the eye. We don't need anyone to teach us sorcery, because there is really nothing to learn. What we need is a teacher to convince us that there is incalculable power at our fingertips. What a strange paradox! Every warrior on the path of knowledge thinks, at one time or another, that he's learning sorcery, but all he's doing is allowing himself to be convinced of the power hidden in his being, and that he can reach it."

(Castanada 10,11)

This again is another way of moving to a type of Enlightenment, being a man of knowledge through focusing ones attention on the spiritual side. Again, the goal is to control the part of yourself that is capable of controlling the rest of you. Don Juan's word for this is "intent."

The Tao Te Ching is a handbook of transformation. It doesn't offer a specific set of procedures to move you toward your spiritual nature; rather, it shows by example and describes what you will find once you get there. For example

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Empty your mind of all thoughts. Let your heart be at peace. Watch the turmoil of beings, but contemplate their return.

Each separate being in the universe returns to the common source. Returning to the source is serenity.

If you don't realize the source, you stumble in confusion and sorrow. When you realize where you come from, you naturally become tolerant, disinterested, amused, kindhearted as a grandmother, dignified as a king.

Immersed in the wonder of the Tao, you can deal with whatever life brings you, and when death comes, you are ready.

(TAO 16)

Each of these paths of personal transformation toward our spiritual nature is different in style, imagery, and theme. Yet what they all share, what all religions share, is that they each provide, through metaphors, rituals, and examples a means by which that part of us that is beyond basic animal instinct may come to understand its place in the world and control the beast within so that we may obtain peace and contentment with our lives and with our deaths.

We are more than the animals from which we evolved, but without a reminder, some state of mind called the kingdom of heaven, Nirvana, or the Tao, and a set of ritualistic behavior reinforcements, it is all too easy to allow the animal's desire, anger, fear, and selfishness to control our judgment. Thus we search for some method or philosophy that will help us nurture our spiritual awareness.

This is personal transformation.

Lesson four -- The reality lens

We are more than our names. We are every word we speak, every word we write, and every decision we make. We are reflections of everyone we have ever known, spoken to, or seen. We know only what we know and we don't know everything else. Thus we all are experts at some things and idiots at others. No one person

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can know everything, and so we must all be selective about the truths we pursue.

Through different experiences, different truths, different thoughts, and different actions, we each have a different focus on what is true.

Once we know that we are the sum of our experiences, actions, and knowledge, we can select those attributes with the purpose of molding our personalities. Once we understand the crossroad, we can select our beliefs with the purpose of molding our spirit.

Because they believe the matter of religious reality to be defined by the sages and priests as an absolute that they must study to learn, most people don't realize that they have a choice in the method of developing their spiritual side.

Even if one is not interested in changing one's world view or religion, understanding the reality lens can still be beneficial in every day life. Stress, anger and depression are all self-reinforcing. So are happiness, calm, and control. Keeping your sunny side up, rolling with the punches, and maintaining a stiff upper lip really do change how you will deal with crisis situations because they develop a pattern of behavior that focuses on the positive, self-supportive side. It really is as simple as seeing the glass half-empty or half-full. It's all in how you focus the reality lens.

Advertisers understand that what we perceive to be true is often more important than what is really true. If we think of their product as being associated with success or accepted style, we are more likely to buy. The advertisers use the fact that our perceptions of reality can be changed, and they do everything they can to change those perceptions in their favor. The smart consumer, however, disassociates his buying decisions from the emotional imagery provided by the advertisements.

It doesn't really matter which brand of potato chips or chewing gum I buy, and so there is no real harm in being manipulated to buy a pack of juicy fruit gum because I happen to remember the happy-go-lucky, good looking blonde that was chewing it on the commercial. However, just as attempts are made to influence our consumer buying behavior, we are also the targets of carefully packaged political and philosophical ideologies that are also tied to deep emotions within us.

If they understand that your view of reality can be altered through these ideological advertising techniques but you don't, then you are at a severe disadvantage. A good minister knows just what

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to say to strike the resonant chords of fear and insecurity within his parish to sway them to accept his sermon. We hope that when he does this he really does have their best interests in mind, but we can never forget the ways in which this power can be abused. We need only remember the power that Jim Jones held over his People's Temple followers which allowed him to convince over nine hundred people to follow him to Guyana and voluntarily commit suicide.

This is of course an extreme case, but it is not the only way in which religious or philosophical authority can be abused. It seems profoundly ironic to me that wars can be fought in the name of God. Joseph Campbell points out...

In the popular nightmare of history, where local mythic images are interpreted, not as metaphors, but as facts, there have been ferocious wars waged between the parties of such contrary manners of metaphoric representation. The Bible abounds in examples. And today, (1984-85), in the formerly charming little city of Beirut, the contending zealots of three differing inflections even of the same ideas of a single paternal "God" are unloading bombs on each other.

(Campbell 58)

Of course such wars have nothing to do with spiritual development. They are no different than any other war fought over territory or ideology. But to have a prominent leader invoke the name of God to justify the killing of others is a tried and true method of convincing brave men to die for someone else's cause. The old "Do as I say because I know God and God wants it this way" argument strikes right at the very heart of people's spiritual insecurities. Usually the argument is punctuated with "and if you don't do this, you will burn in eternal hellfire and damnation. You don't want that do you?"

When a group of people is told repeatedly to believe without understanding and to accept without explanation, such abuses of the purpose of religion become possible.

It is okay for any person to devote time and energy to any cause which the person feels is important, but when a church leader attempts to make his congregation feel less faithful unless they

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accept and help fight for a political principle, he is being manipulative and is abusing his position of spiritual leader.

Knowing the way in which your own view of reality can be manipulated gives you an advantage. Not only can you recognize when someone is trying to refocus your vision of the truth, you can consciously control these changes that take place in your own mind.

This is what so many self-help seminars are trying to teach. Focus on success. Tell yourself that you can succeed. Make a list of goals that you want to achieve and work every day toward them. Within the context of a properly applied religious metaphor, this focusing of intent, which changes one's self image and abilities, can be expressed in prayer. "God, give me strength to continue working toward my goals and let me proceed with clear vision and determination." One could just as easily have said, "I am strong and I can work toward my goals one day at a time with clear vision and determination."

Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea explain this strategy in an appendix to their *Illuminatus!* trilogy.

THE TACTICS OF MAGICK

The most important idea in the *Book of Sacred Magic* of Abra-Melin the Mage is the simple-looking formula "Invoke often."

The most successful form of treatment for so-called mental disorders, the Behavior Therapy of Pavlov, Skinner, Wolpe, et al., could well be summarized in two similar words "Reinforce often." ("Reinforcement," for all practical purposes, means the same as the layman's term "reward." The essence of Behavior Therapy is rewarding desired behavior; the behavior "as if by magic" begins to occur more and more often as the rewards continue.)

Advertising, as everybody knows, is based on the axiom "Repeat often."... [T]here is no essential difference between magick, Behavior Therapy, advertising and Christian Science. All of them can be condensed into Abra-Melin's simple "Invoke often." ...

The reader who seeks a deeper understanding of this argument can obtain it by putting these principles to the test. If you are afraid that you might, in this Christian environment, fall into taking the Christian Science mantra too seriously, try instead the

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following simple experiment. For forty days and forty nights, begin each day by invoking and praising the world in itself as an expression of the Egyptian deities. Recite at dawn

I bless Ra, the fierce sun burning bright I bless Isis-
Luna in the night I bless the air, the Horus-hawk I
bless the earth on which I walk

Repeat at moonrise. Continue for the full forty days and forty nights. We say without any reservation that, at the minimum, you will feel happier and more at home in this part of the galaxy (and will also understand better Uncle John Feather's attitude toward our planet); at a maximum, you may find rewards beyond your expectations, and will be converted to using this mantra for the rest of your life. (If the results are extremely good, you just might start believing in ancient Egyptian gods.)

(Wilson, Shea 768-771)

Such a mantra is very similar to the Christian mantras, "Now I lay me down to sleep", "God is great, God is good, thank you Lord for our food," and "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." Catholics chant "Hail Mary, mother of God, blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus Christ." The Buddhist repeats quietly to himself "Om Mani Padme Hum," which means "Hail to the Jewel in the Lotus."

Each of these sayings nurtures our spiritual identity by focusing our attention on the part of our intellect that is searching for control. If we constantly reinforce through ritual sayings, prayer, and belief that we are all children of a single paternal God, then this will become the context within which we face the world. However, if we earnestly pray to Tweety Bird, the three stooges, or the ocean, those too can be imprinted, through repetition, as our spiritual context. Yes, it is brainwashing, and so is Christianity. So is any religion. *That's the whole point!*

As long as you are choosing to wash your own brain, you are in control of your spiritual destiny. If you believe in the literal reality of any metaphoric representation, you risk becoming a pawn that can be led by fear, sentiment, and blind faith.

So accept whatever world view that you best identify with and which will help you gain the most control over your emotions, goals,

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and finances, but always realize that everyone's reality is subjective and this allows each of us to find the truth that is most appropriate for ourselves. Discovering that subjective truth and finding peace with it sets us at the beginning of the road to happiness.

This is the reality lens.

Epilog

My intent in this essay is not to undermine anyone else's religion. Hopefully, after reading the four lessons, the reader will understand that I believe religion, whatever form it takes, plays a very important and necessary role for us.

However, it should also be obvious that the concepts of life after death, Christian salvation, and a God are, for me, just concepts, albeit important ones. Although this allows Christians to brand me with the label "atheist," I am not without an understanding of their search for salvation. I simply call it the nurturing of spiritual development and recognize that its place is here and now, not in some promised, idyllic after life. It is only their misunderstanding of their own religion that may give some airs of self-righteous superiority.

On the other hand, if you can stand the thought that your most cherished and deep held religious beliefs may not be as solid as you once thought, welcome to your first steps on the path to Enlightenment.

I feel somewhat sorry for people who are so bound within the literal confines of their religion that for them the world is full of enemies and evil that they are duty bound to fight. Life's not that hard.

I have tried to present, in as simple and direct way as possible, the bare skeleton of what I believe religions really are behind all the emotions and imagery. Once one understands this wire frame model of spirituality, any denomination of any religion can be wrapped around the core to provide a link to our more evolved mental capabilities.

So go find your peace and may your god go with you.

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ALONE

May, 1992

I'm an atheist and I'm alone.

I wonder sometimes to what degree the latter is influenced by the former. The first is by choice; the second is a matter of circumstance.

I didn't choose to be an atheist; it simply happened when I opened my eyes and dared to look the world in the face and demand that it show me the truth. I can not and will not compromise my beliefs, no matter what the personal cost. I never have and, hopefully, I never will.

It's like having a really good secret to tell but not having anyone to tell it to. All of being alone is like that. I know I have my family and a few enduring friends, but I'm still alone.

I don't want pity. I don't want solutions. I just want someone to know that part of me is yet to be awakened and I fear that it might wither away within its cocoon before it can grow beautiful wings.

I'm cynical, often uncaring, self-centered, and selfish. This is my alone persona. I know there is never any excuse, but it's easier to face life alone if one has those attributes.

I have to be responsible for everything that happens in my life. If I want food, I must buy it. If I want clean clothes, I must wash them. If I want a place to stay, electricity, a phone, cable TV, car insurance, I must pay the bills. I must make the money. If I'm sad, I must deal with it. I balance the checkbook and keep track of credit and cash withdrawals. When I look at the world and try to make sense of love, wisdom, religion, science, politics; when I face the ultimate questions of life and death; when I look beyond the easy answers into the dark corners of human fears and hope, I do so alone.

I do so without even the security of fellowship offered by an organized religion.

I know I'm not the only atheist in the world. Many of my friends have also opened their eyes. I don't know how they came to realize the truth and I don't know what it means to them personally, if anything.

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But it means something to me. It means that I have climbed the difficult mountain of acceptance and have fought my way through the tangled underbrush of other people's perceptions and expectations of me. It means that I have found what I have been looking for.

Perhaps this is like so many other atheists.

But I'm not just an atheist. It's not enough for me to simply say I don't believe, without also saying what I do believe. What I believe is explained in my essay *Crossroads*. Essentially it is that, while there is no literal God in the common understanding, there is a part of human consciousness that recognizes the virtue of goodness and caring.

What Christians feel is real, but I can't share in their worship because they don't want to worship secular, abstract goodness. They would rather worship a martyr on a stick and feel superior about their divinity, even if it misses the point.

And yet, because of my appreciation of Taoism, The New Testament, and the parts of Buddhism that I have seen, I'm not opposed to what they're trying to grasp. I see it all to well, perhaps better than some legitimate Christians.

So I'm in the middle between a theistic person who has adopted a stationary metaphor and someone who is totally without appreciation of the intent and wisdom of the nurturing of the spirit that a properly balanced religion can offer.

The irony of the situation is that, by virtue of my reality lens, I see that whether I worship with them or not is irrelevant. All things are essentially irrelevant. There is no God. There is no purpose to life and the One Great Truth is that there are no great truths. Even my own truth. All I can do is accept my position of philosophical isolation as I accept my physical loneliness. This is my belief.

The Buddha teaches that suffering is caused by desire. The Tao teaches the simple lesson of "so be it." Life is a river in which we flow. We can move about within the boundaries of the channel, but we are always swept forward by time, forces external to ourselves, and by our own inertia. My belief isolates me and then tells me that it is okay.

And it is okay. To not accept that is to give up who I am and what I have learned by opening my eyes and mind. I know that to want to share this with someone is not only selfish, but is also pointless. It would be like giving everyone an empty box and telling them that it contains the secret of the universe. If they don't already

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get it, then they won't appreciate the gift. The gift is in telling them that to open the box, they must first be pure of mind and intent and free of selfishness, pride, and the arrogance of certainty. But how could they understand?

And yet, because I must face so many aspects of the world alone, I suffer from the afflictions of selfishness and pride. But I'm trying.

It always comes back to this. Whenever I think of being alone, my thoughts always turn to these metaphysical reflections. This is because I can't help but feel that, to some degree, my beliefs are what separate me from others while at the same time those very beliefs are urging me to accept my solitude.

I can't help it, sometimes I feel alone.

Maybe I'm not yet as enlightened as I think.

Like I said before I've made my bed and I'll have to sleep in it. Alone, as usual.

To paraphrase Winston Churchill, enlightened atheism is the worst philosophy, except for all the others.

THE HYPOCRISY OF PRAYER

May, 1994

Having an outsider's perspective of Christianity lets me see things that are difficult to perceive from within. One of these is the hypocrisy of the power of prayer.

Before I begin slandering completely this well practiced and cherished endeavor, I should distinguish between prayer for yourself and prayer for others. The first has a possibility of having an effect; the second is meaningless and, as I see from the outside looking in, introduces a contradiction that Christians are unaware of.

The first type, praying for yourself, can work because whenever we focus our attention on something, concentrating, internalizing it, and working it into our beliefs, that becomes a part of us and changes us. If I pray, "God give me the strength to endure this difficult trial," then I will find strength. Not because God granted strength, but because I was concentrating on an image of myself as receiving God's strength, and since I will see myself as being strong, that will become a self fulfilled reality.

This is no different than any other type of psychological conditioning. We're good at what we spend our time doing. We are what we spend our time thinking.

In the movie "Shadowlands," Anthony Hopkins says about prayer, "I pray to change myself, not to change God." But Christians pray to change God, and this introduces a contradiction.

On one hand, they proclaim, "God is All Knowing. He is All Powerful. We are pawns in His service. We don't understand His plans for us, but we trust ourselves in His holy care."

On the other hand, they then say, "This is a trying time, we ask that you all pray for Edna and her family."

They believe in the power of prayer. When we pray, they believe, God listens, and then changes reality to suit us.

"...and I asked God for one more chance, and then I felt the pain go away."

"...He heard my prayer and I haven't touched the bottle since."

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"...I asked the Lord to look out for our Cindy, and she came out of the coma."

And so on.

Some Christians pray not for favors, but for guidance and understanding to accept whatever happens. This is prayer of the first type and will almost certainly help someone through difficult times. Others, however, believe that if enough people pray for this or that, their prayers will be answered.

Thus churches often have prayer lists.

"Tommy's going into surgery. Can you put him on the prayer list this Sunday?"

From a secular point of view the prayer list can still have a positive effect on a congregation by strengthening the bonds of unity and community. If we pray for others then we invest time caring about their well being and their happiness, and we will be closer to them and be better able to share in their fellowship.

But I don't think this is how most Christians who pray look at the situation. They seem to be praying to change God instead of themselves.

On one hand there is the all knowing, all seeing, all-powerful, everywhere, master of the universe, the one the only, God our father.

On the other there's Aunt Edna, her swollen pancreas, and a church full of God's children asking for His intervention.

What would God think of this?

"Well, I'm God, I know everything. I made the world. I made Aunt Edna. I have her plan for life right here."

The prayers say, "Hey, God. Can you not do whatever you were going to do with Edna's pancreas and instead do what we want you to do, which is make it all better? Can you change Your Divine Plan to suit our wishes?"

"What? Pancreas?"

"Yes, her pancreas. It's all swollen and infected and we would like, Sir, if you would, for you to do something about it."

So God walks over and sits down in the church and says, "Okay, how many of you are praying?"

"Um, well, we have one hundred sixty members of this church and ..."

"Oh really, so why have I heard this prayer from only thirty, maybe thirty one people? Do you expect me to perform miracles with such a weak turnout?"

"We'll ask the people to pray really hard. We'll get more people."

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"Look you're missing the point. It doesn't matter how many people you get."

"It doesn't?"

"Of course not! I'm God! Remember? Do you think I sit up here in the clouds and say, 'Hmm, I know everything, from the position and the velocity of every electron, to the meaning of the universe itself, but I'm really stumped about Aunt Edna and her silly pancreas.' Come on now."

"Well, we just thought that if we asked nice you would do something."

"Hey. Look at me. Do I know what I'm doing? Do you want to do this? Are you God now? No, I didn't think so. Look, I love everyone, as you are so fond of pointing out. But now you want me to play favorites like some kind of cosmic, spiritual bribe. Right now there are one hundred forty eight -- just a moment -- one hundred forty seven people in your country suffering painful deaths all alone. They don't have anyone to pray for them. You think that just because you rally a bunch or your pals that I'm going stop what I'm doing and go through all the trouble of changing Reality as pay off to your prayer bribes? I brought Edna into this world and I can take her out. That's my job and I don't need you to tell me how to do it so just it knock it off!"

And thus the contradiction. Christians want to believe that God really is all knowing and he has a personal plan for each of us, but that he can be made to alter that plan just because we ask him. Better yet, if we get a whole bunch of people to ask him, maybe then he will listen. It's as if Christians feel that they're good friends with the mayor and they can get special dispensation because they drop by his house a lot.

But, in fairness to Christians, their beliefs are not quite that black and white.

They believe that it is God's plan that we make choices and that he react to those choices by blessing his followers.

The bible, especially the Old Testament, describes God as a selfish and vengeful God. There's even a commandment that forbids worshipping any other gods.

But this makes God out to be no better than a king who surrounds himself with a bunch of yes men and slaves as if God were to say, "I'm God, aren't I just absolutely wonderful? Look at how strong and powerful I am. Pray to me. You there, you're sick, will you pray to me? No? Then to hell with you. I know I created

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you and your mind, but if you don't use it only to honor Me and My eternal wonderful self, than who needs you? What's that? I hear many voices singing my name. Oh, they want me to heal this or fix that. Okay my children, because you adore only me and sing my name -- oh, I just love to hear my name sung -- I shall grant this, but only a little bit because you should have had more people begging. This is just wonderfully grand. Praise me, praise me, praise me."

This type of god certainly practices the sin of vanity. Maybe it's okay for God to be vain, because he is God, I suppose.

While Christians probably don't think of their god as being so vain and shallow, they do perceive themselves to be his chosen and they expect him to care for them and protect them personally in exchange for unyielding adoration and awe. But on the other hand, they also believe that God is Love and that he created all creatures and people on the earth.

I really don't understand how they can reconcile their concept of an all-loving god, creator of all life and mind, and still believe that he plays favorites just because they ask him to.

This is a fundamental hypocrisy of Christianity, only one of many hypocrisies that they practice. Another obvious hypocrisy is the act of partaking in all types of sinful behavior and thought and then going to church to purge the badness, or treating baptism as a license to sin because after one is saved, all sins are washed away.

There once was a fellow named Christ
Who paid the ultimate price
They punctured his skin
So you all could sin
And still meet in heaven, how nice

Another is the prayer of a soldier who asks that his life be spared before he goes out to kill other men.

The very thought of being special or chosen, as I see it, goes against the Christian ideal of love thy neighbor. "Love the sinner, hate the sin," they say. Many Christians feel that non-Christians, Buddhists, Taoists, Hindus, whatever, are either following or being manipulated by the Devil himself. I can hear them say, "Love the sinner, hate the sin," but how much love can there be amid so much fear and misunderstanding? Some Christians can love Hindus, but it's likely to be a superior, pious love, a love that says, "I know better than you and if you learn about the blood of Jesus Christ, you will understand how lost you are, you poor pitiful wretch."

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This places Christians into a mindset of pious superiority and because they feel they hold the key to the Ultimate Truth of Reality, they look down on others and pity them, or worse, fear them.

The anti-abortion movement is a concrete example where this superior, holier-than-thou attitude can get out of control. One man murdered a doctor, feeling that one death would prevent many other deaths of unborn babies. That any man could be led, or lead himself, to think of murder as God's work certainly strikes me as hypocrisy. No doubt most Christians would agree with that.

While this belief very seldom leads to such drastic consequences, it does contribute to a wall of fear and persecution that Christians place between themselves and others. There's us, they feel, and then there's the rest of the world doing the Devil's work. And so they say, like their god, "Aren't we wonderful? Isn't it just grand to be the ones who really know what's going on? God loves us and he doesn't love you. Well, he may love you, but he will still send you to eternal hellfire damnation if you don't shut up and listen to us."

And how's that for hypocrisy? God, the loving father, creator of all, giver of life and soul, gives everyone one and only one chance and if they fail to fall prostate on his alter, He will simply banish and damn them to never ending torture and grief.

On one hand love.

On one hand torture.

What is the sound of these two hands clapping?

These ideas of God, his selfish need for adoration, the threat of hellfire, the role of prayer for an individual or group, makes sense in terms of mythic ritual, behavior modification, and the effect these have on the bindings of community. But because Christians insist on seeing these trappings as real and not metaphor, they introduce contradictions and hypocrisies such as praying to change God, using their salvation to get away with sins, fearing torture from a so-called loving God, holy wars, and believing that while everyone is a child of God they are special and above them.

Their faith in the medium as the message, the metaphor as reality, creates these contradictions and at the same time, hides the hypocrisy from their eyes and their devoted souls.

GIVE ME THAT NEW TIME RELIGION

November, 1995

Tired of the commercials for the Psychic Network? Blame Nicolaus Copernicus and Charles Darwin.

Where does one find a sense of spiritual self these days? Of what use are the images of heaven-in-the-sky and hell-in-the-ground when we know that it's the ozone layer and satellites in the sky and molten magma in the ground? In fact, what good are any of the old rituals, images, and brimstone after they wither away into the wispy shadows of mythology?

There will always be millions of devoted followers who are as sure of their religious convictions as they are about what they had for breakfast. However, a good many people, if they happen to think of it at all, consider religion and their culture's God to be some kind of invisible force of nature that is off in the distance, maybe waiting for them, perhaps to be sought after in time of crisis or extreme need. The words seem to come to us haltingly these days: "I don't know. I suppose I believe in God and all. I mean, it's kind of nice, you know, a kind force, love. I don't know what's really there, but I like to believe that it's something good."

There is no God, never has been, and never will be, other than that which we invent to explain the unexplainable and to provide a context that enables our complex human societies. It is quite obvious, it seems to me, that within the multitude of religions of the world, both present and historic, that there is a sense of common purpose independent of any of the images used to carry those ideas. Whether this idea takes the form of Jesus, Isis, God, Allah, Buddha, Gaia, Odin, Pan, Spirit Guides, or Zeus, God has always been with us in some form. However, these are not faces of the same eternal, supernatural man-like being, but faces of the same need that results from the manner in which human societies and mind evolved.

Religion and science were once the same thing. This is how it is supposed to be. Questions and mysteries about the world were once answered by mystics and priests; they lead us and explain the world

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to us, and we followed them because what they say made sense and we saw that they were wise.

However, once we lost heliocentricity and became just another floating ball of dirt in a big nothing, there has been a growing schism between science and religion. This didn't matter for a few hundred years because not many people actually knew that the Earth had been demoted from the shoulders of Atlas. With *The Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin placed a sturdy wedge between the two, and today we see science and religion, gods and atoms, suffering irreconcilable differences.

Until we can bring science and religion back into step with each other, we will continue to see the rationalization of religion and the mystification of science as people try to bring together in their mind what was torn apart by the Renaissance. We should not be surprised that the Catholic church has officially moved back the Creation to the Big Bang, or that mystical ideas like Crystallography, Astrology, and the Psychic Network are pounding away at our cultural subconscious, or that Creationism versus Evolution evokes such visceral emotion. The modern world tells us there can be only one god: Science or Allah -- choose one. We won't because we can't, and it's driving us crazy.

Unfortunately, all we're doing is playing with the labels, shifting around various masks and rose colored glasses. We know we have a soul, because we can feel it and it has a tangible force in our life, but science tells us we're just so many chemicals and genes that can be manipulated by drugs and psychotherapy. How can they both be true?

Creationism specifically grows out of this deeply felt need to reconcile these two worlds. It says, "I acknowledge your scientific data and embrace it as the work of God." It's a nice try, but doomed to failure because, very simply, it is wrong.

And yet this need to reawaken the spiritual nature of Man will not simply go away and let scientific reason rule. This void, this missing piece, makes us vulnerable to cults and pop- culture religion. We start believing in ghosts, planets, pyramids, or anything else that tries to offer a glimpse into this part of us that we seem to have forgotten.

It's obvious that our traditional religious dogmas are not fulfilling that need any more. All around us we see the devolution that occurs when we lose our soul. The deeply rooted survival behaviors that evolved for millions of years take over. Tribalism, turf

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wars, anger, fear, win out over love, understanding, reason, and forgiveness. When we loose our core, we forget that we live in a brotherhood of mankind, that all the people of the world are, like us, spiritual and connected, and that we should forgive other's that trespass against us and do unto them as we would like done upon ourselves. Whether this sentiment is part of a religious doctrine or social engineering does not change its fundamental essence and validity.

Traditional religious institutions no longer have the strength over us they once did. If we all could return to the flock, accept that we are washed by the blood of Jesus, or that we were chosen and led by Moses, or that there is only one God and Mohammed is his prophet, and if we lived our lives with genuine conviction according to those beliefs, we might be able to rekindle this lost soul of Mankind, that is, if we could stop killing and hating each other over the differences in the metaphors we choose.

Even those that do go to church and pray regularly must feel the tension between their religious faith and the ever-increasing rush of science to explain away all the mysteries. We all know that heaven isn't in the sky, otherwise we could ride the space shuttle up and wave to all our dead relatives. We have moved heaven back into the shadowy unknown, and in doing that have moved God and our souls farther away from us, leaving us to scramble to get them back with all sorts of hysteria and silliness, even if it costs us three dollars a minute.

It's time to rejoin science and religion.

We must say, yes, I have a soul, and yes, there is a God, and understand exactly what that means in a secular, scientific, and traditionally atheistic context. Our religion must be able to provide exactly the same answers to our questions that science does. Like astrology in its prime, science and religion need to be the same thing.

This means taking God off of his omnipotent pedestal and asking why have societies invented gods, what purpose has this image served, and which elements of that image can serve us well today? It seems to me that God exists in exactly the same way in which honor exists, not as something you can see, touch, or talk to, but as an idea we have about ourselves, in this case, an idea that we are bound together as a single species, and not only by our tribal, societal, or familial boundaries.

And what of our spirit, our soul? It's not imperative to think of the soul as being separate from the body, as if it could go on thinking

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after the neurons stop pumping chemicals. The soul is not merely the mind, for the mind also tells us to fight, kill, and be angry, the way a dog will protect his territory or pack. The soul, rather, is the part of the mind that recognizes that we, unlike our animal friends, can choose not to be driven by the primal instincts that got us through the first hundred million years. It's the part of us that is capable of forgiveness, language, music and even science. Also, our soul lives not so much in our own bodies or even our own minds, but in the minds of all those we touch. The mere death of my body does not diminish the part of my soul that lives in others.

Even as we learn the physical mechanisms of the mind, and the chemicals and treatments that can control it, we can still acknowledge the wisdom of caring and the truth that who and what we think we are is what defines us and creates our world. Mind is a product of our bodies, and soul is a product of our minds. They should not be perceived as being at war with each other, but existing together to form a complete human.

I don't see how we can merge the two and still hold onto the same old mythologies. The idea that the entire universe, with all its galaxies and billions of years in the making, was created so a man on earth could be nailed to a cross two thousand years ago will not be able to withstand reason forever. The belief that we are evil by nature, a soul at war with our body, or that we have original sin, is precisely what enables churches to have power over us, encouraging us to abdicate our responsibility and our mind in exchange for our soul. But today, when demons come not from the depths of hell, not from outside us, but from within us, from drug abuse, childhood violence, and brain pathology, we need something more than the same old fables that have been dragged through the dark ages of Western European reasoning. We need new metaphors, new images that grow out of logic, love, and science to compliment rather than contradict the realities that we see in the modern world.

In John, chapter 10 of the Christian Bible, Jesus says, "I and My Father are one... the Father is in Me, and I in Him." Christians prefer to believe that this is his way of telling us that he alone is a messenger from God, rather than recognizing that the image of God is in everyone -- mind and body, spirit and material, religion and science, bound together with an understanding about ourselves that unites rather than divides.

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As research in psychology, medicines, genetics, and anthropology advances, let us build our reason, our mind, our spirit upon them, rather than letting them throw our souls away along with the parables and mythologies which they contradict.

THE NEW MEANING OF LIFE

May, 1996

In 1882, Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed that God was dead. Since then we've had him stuffed so we can all pretend that he's still with us. If you're tired of pretending, and are looking for the new meaning of life, here it is.

History moves through us like waves through water, pulling us up and down, this way and that as the currents of time pass. Individually, we have little choice but to be a part of the world into which we are born, whether that means driving cars and using computers, or hunting with blow darts and building seasonal grass huts. We wear the culture of our world like a garment that is tossed away when we die, but collectively, there is a continuity of mankind that has an eternal life.

To what end is this eternal life of man?

Religions teach us to focus on our individual lives, and that the time spent between our birth and our death is but a trial for an eternal spiritual life, whether in heaven (if we choose salvation through Christ or purchase enough indulgences) or back on earth with a better life next time around (if we have accumulated enough positive Karma). What is to be done with these ideas in a world of science and reason, where God is not so much a literal being, but an ineffable ideal of goodness and caring? There is an afterlife, not for myself, of course -- I'll be busy turning myself back into dirt -- but in all those who come after me. Humanity is eternal, and we are its medium.

This is the fundamental difference between man and animals, and it is this sense of a world before and after that gives rise to the mystical human soul. Some prefer to think of the soul as something separate from ourselves, granted by an omnipotent god, stuffed into this meat so that we can endure a life that is essentially a hazing ritual for something more important.

Our soul, like our language, our culture, comes from the world that was forged by billions of nameless men, women, and children growing, thinking, believing, loving, and sometimes hating and

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hurting, year after year after faded year. There is little doubt that we feel the same sense of love, family, anger, fear, and pride as any other human from any other period in time. These are the things that grow from our body, the animal part of our soul. A mother's love for a new baby is not so much different than the feelings a mother dog, cat, or bird has for her young. The anger you feel at an injustice is not that different from any other threatened animal.

Thus the human experience is a combination of the now, the urgent, laid upon the deeper channels of our roots and our legacy, represented in religion as a struggle of mind over body, soul over sin, so to speak. In other words, we strive to move forward, away from the common, limited, animal perspective, and toward an ideal, be it the Tao, Christ, or some smart-ass with a pipe. As we individually move forward we carry the torch of knowledge, bringing humanity ever closer to some ultimate enlightenment.

Slowly, for the past several thousand years, we have been gaining increasingly more control over the world, separating us more and more from the mere animals from which we evolved. We move stone and steel into structures. We write laws and build complex societies. We have built ships, canals, steam engines, locomotives, and then planes and space shuttles. In the future we will no doubt continue to wrest more of our destiny out of the hands of nature and into our own. We will discover how genes make us what we are. We will then change our own bodies as we have changed the world.

This isn't the first time we have built great nations. Ancient Egypt, Greece, the Aztecs, Romans, and others before them have come and gone. Each time, something is left behind for others to build upon. Much of our world comes from the Roman Empire and its theater, law, and engineering, if not directly then by inspiration. Rome borrowed from the Greeks, who no doubt borrowed from others. There seems to be periods of accelerated growth, followed by times of dark ages and transition, a rhythmic heartbeat of our species growing up.

Are we overdue for a contraction phase, slipping back into centuries of fear and isolation, or will we be able to keep advancing? Maybe it's different this time. Once we focused on the technology of communication the technology of everything else grew as it never could before. Even a badly stocked grammar school library holds more knowledge of the world than the wisest of the ancient wise, but how much of this will we be able to pass on to the next great

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civilization if we tumble again into a period of darkness and superstition? Our books would crumble into dust and all our precious bits would fade to zero.

Does all this technology represent a rising sun or a setting sun on the next step in the enlightenment of the soul of mankind? Are we really ready for the knowledge that we are revealing, or will we collapse into a cultural coma from the nasty acid trip of technology?

Knowledge is power. What does it mean, for example, that anyone can walk into a library and within a few days of intensive reading and research be very proficient on almost any subject, from beetles to bombs? Our systems of government have always been top down because in any big empire, it has always been necessary to cluster the people with the knowledge into one place. This out-dated idea leads to such amusing things as lawyers and career politicians pretending to understand science and technology and then passing totally irrelevant out of touch laws.

We need new social structures, along with new governments and laws in accordance with them which recognize the simultaneous decentralization of power and the globalization of the individual. Recognizing this trend will go far to advance the journey that humans have been on for the past several thousand years, because it is an enabling paradigm which encourages discovery, competition, and cooperation, rather than on conformity and the least common denominator.

Most power should be held at the city or county level, with cities forming together as they desire with other cities to work out regional or global standards for such things as roads, postal delivery, and data exchange. The people of the world will soon have little tolerance for some global, or even national, power that, with cartoonish hubris, pretends to be able to write all laws for all of us.

However we manage it, the structure of the modern world supports us in so many ways, and most of us contribute, propping each other up a little higher as we go. Because I don't have to grow my own food, or build my own roads, or invent the telephone, airplane, or computer, I can spend time thinking about the eternal soul of mankind and sharing it with anyone in the world who has a web browser.

This leads to an irony, however. Instead of being freed by all this advanced technology that surrounds us, we are all able to do so much more and be more effective, and thus we end up busier than ever before. Could this world today spawn greatness such as

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Newton, Chopin, or Michaelangelo, or are we too busy watching CNN, driving our kids to ballet and tae kwan do classes, working forty hours a work, and trying to get in those critical twenty minutes of exercise? When was the last time you spent over 12 hours without hearing the radio, television, telephone, or some such clatter? When was the last time you took a walk under the stars and didn't have to look through the haze of the bright city? Can we even think, anymore, or must we always react, whine, and bounce our way through the world?

What is all this doing to the great journey? Have we come all this way to live lives of hurried clutter? If fast food and being bothered by bad news from Bosnia is where humanity is headed, maybe it wasn't such a good idea to build cities, much less kingdoms, in the first place.

It's just a phase. We'll get over it, but what I find potentially dangerous is that instead of growing spiritually and soulfully in accordance with this new world, we might become overwhelmed and then fall back on the tried and true animal skills of territory, tribalism fight, and flight. This is what seems to be happening all around us as decentralization and globalization are coming into conflict with the old hierarchical order of federalism and empire.

We will muddle through some how, through several more decades of stronger independence, more regionalism, idealism, and cataclysm. The Soviet Union may try some form of rebirth. The United Nations may try to become the World Government. China may try to maintain an iron grasp on her people, but where there are computers, fax machines, and tempers, there will be freedom. Where there is freedom, there will eventually be more freedom.

And what then? What legacy will form out of the memory of these days? There is greatness around us, but there's so much greatness that it gets lost in the constant background hum of the modern world. Is Mozart's music so much grander than, say, the sound track to Star Wars? Is Newton's physics that much more impressive than that of, say, Stephen Hawking or Richard Feynman? We may not see today such singular genius as we saw in the past because, more and more, our greatness is collaborative. Each of us becomes a specialized player in a complex dance out of which comes the fabric of a new world where, even amid all the clutter and noise, and perhaps because of it, we all have a chance to participate in the growth of the spirit of mankind.

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This is not an original idea certainly, but we can think of ourselves not only as individuals, or members of some family, city, race, or nation, but also as cells in the body human that grows, learns, and advances toward some far off destiny. This idea may seem overly mystical, but remember that it is allegory, poetry to express the sense of something bigger than, but encompassing ourselves, a sense explained for thousands of years by myths of gods and demons. We are spiritual beings, not because we carry some separate self that leaves us when we die, but because we have language, understanding, history, and because others care to remember us after we are gone. Without trickery, illusion, fable, or faith, we can look into the glaring light of reason and science, and find therein a truer, perhaps richer, understanding of our soul, so much the stronger because it need not be in conflict with new depths of understanding with which we view the world today.

The king is dead.

Long live the king

THE SAME OLD SONG AND DANCE

July, 1996

When the previous essay first appeared on my web site, I received an email from a young man -- let's name him Christian -- who didn't quite agree with it. An email exchange followed. The ideas in his messages are paraphrased and summarized. My replies are included as written.

First, he stated that God could not be dead because he represents life. If God were not alive, I would not be alive, either. He said Jesus was born to our world to bring abundant life, and that the devil exists to do the opposite in a variety of ways. God wishes me to acknowledge him and be redeemed so I may realize true everlasting life, not a facsimile. While I'm still here, he advised me, I have the option to follow Jesus and heaven or to follow the devil and eternal suffering of separation from God in hell. He exhorted me not to allow the devil to lure me from my loving heavenly Father, and he said he would be praying for me.

Dear Christian,

I want you to understand that I do appreciate your concern and your prayers. I meant no offense to you or to anyone of strong faith. Generally the tagline of my articles are intended to attract the casual browser into the article, not to belittle the issue.

However, for reasons that I need not delve into deeply here, I came to the conclusion several years ago that the stories and allegorical messages of the Bible provide something other than a definition of the true reality of the world. In other words, I am not a Christian, nor am I interested in being one.

I am also not interested in convincing any Christian that he or she is wrong. This was not the purpose of the article. My message is

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intended for the increasing number of people who are unable to ignore the disparity between the teachings of a religion that has been dragged through the dark ages of Western European interpretation and the increasingly sharp focus with which we can examine and understand the natural world. This article is a follow up to the earlier article, "Give Me That New Time Religion," which examined the growing sense of lost spirituality that we face in the modern world.

Pardon me if I ramble a bit, but I do wonder sometimes whether or not people of strong faith are curious about why I believe what I do and how I came to understand religion as I do. Because it is not my place to try to affect the spiritual growth of anyone else, I tend not to engage in the type of philosophical and religious debates that would allow me to share my thoughts, and so I am left being understood so often only from within the context of another's beliefs. Thus I have resigned myself as being perceived as lost, or under the influence of Satan, or driven by pride or anger.

It seems to me that because of the nature of the Christian faith, Christians are unable to truly and deeply attempt to understand the very difficult introspection and transformations of understanding that I have gone through. This leads me at times to view established religions with a bit of cynicism, and if that came through in my article, I do apologize for any offense it might have given you.

Your message was genuine and caring. Thank you for that. And thank you for taking the time to drop by the Arrenkyle Papers and to share your thoughts with me.

Be well.

In his reply, Christian said he regretted my resignation to unbelief, that he considered it a triumph for his enemy, the devil. He hoped that I was not so stubborn that I would refuse to consider Christ in the future. He declared my need for a savior, whether I accepted that fact or not. He thanked me for responding politely and claimed not be offended by what I'd written, but instead simply concerned about my lack of salvation. He said there are too many non-Christians in the world for him to reach, but that God didn't have human restrictions and would deal with each one eventually. He told me I'd remain in his prayers and that, should I decide to escape certain damnation and embrace the love of God, I should not hesitate to email him.

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I then received a subsequent email in which he asked me what I thought would happen to me when I die.

Dear Christian:

I will assume that your question is genuine, that you are actually interested in the answer, and that this is not the beginning of a dialog by which you will attempt to explain or justify your religion to me. Having grown up in the Christian faith, I am quite familiar with the details and beliefs of Christianity and would prefer to worry about my own salvation and let others worry about theirs.

Now that that's out of the way, let me go on to say that I don't mind discussing any of these details with anyone willing to engage in an attempt to expand genuine understanding. Too often, religious debates end up as a forum to challenge and bicker and often lead to such arguments as "if you believe that, then obviously (fill in the blank)". I say this because your question seems to be the type of foot-in-the-door, leading question one would ask to begin a series of persuasive arguments in the attempt to inflict one's own personal, sacred beliefs on another.

However, I don't know you or your motives, so I'll simply tell you what I think and why. Since you are interested, let me start by saying that I am atheist not out of ignorance or anger or pride, but simply because this is the position that is the most consistent with the world as it presents itself to me. I'm not anti-God or anti-religion. I have simply opened up my mind, invited the physical and spiritual world to demonstrate itself to me, and this is what I have found.

There is an implicit assumption in your question of what happens when we die. That assumption is that the mind is somehow separate from the physical mechanism of the brain. You might ask yourself why we perceive mind to be separate from our bodies. From the Christian perspective this makes perfect sense: the part of us that is able to reason, love, forgive, is something called the soul, an eternal part of God which enters our bodies, then leaves us to rejoin God after we die.

This is an obvious parallel to what happens with our bodies: we arise from the material of the world, live for a while, and then return as material back to the earth. If our bodies come from the earth and then return to the earth, from where does our mind come, and where does it return?

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The perception of mind as being separate from our bodies is easily reinforced by the act of dreaming, which seems to take us to places apart from our bodies. Dreaming seems to take us to another place, where we work, run, talk, sometimes even fly. Imagine early humans before they understood things like neurotransmitters, the hippocampus, and the distinction between different regions of the brain. With modern experiments, we now understand much better the mechanism of dreaming and what's going on in the brain. We're not having revealed visions, and we're not visiting some other land.

Long ago, as we began to develop language and a spiritual awareness, dreaming must have felt like touching another world, traveling to a sacred place. Consider things like vision quests of the Native Americans, ancient folklore of prophets and seers. The concept of the other world would certainly have been as deeply entrenched into the understanding of the world as was how to hunt and gather food.

In ancient religions, called mythology by today's standard, this other world became the realm of gods, spirits, and the dead. God as He is commonly understood today is a rather recent addition to the wealth of attempts to find a concrete connection to this other world. All ancient cultures had some form of explanation for where dreams, visions, and the mysterious forces of the world come from. One might argue that they were all trying to understand God in their own way, and that only now through the teachings of Christ do we understand what's really going on.

However, it is my belief that if one looks at this critically, and not through the veil of a dogmatic, insistent faith, it is clear that we continually redefine this mysterious and unknown other world that we visit every night and that the explanations naturally become a part of the moral code by which people live. For some cultures, it was just fine to kill virgins because that's what God wanted. Others found glory in death in Valhalla, where the spirits of valiant warriors dwell.

To be complete, a Truth must be consistent with all input, not only the input that is convenient. Christianity, therefore, must have within it some explanation for the differences between all the various religions of the world, and I don't mean a blanket statement that they're simply all wrong. This is a difficult task considering the Bible was written at a time when cultures like the Maya, the aborigines of Australia, the tribes of Africa, were not known to exist. This isn't to say that one can't find such an explanation somewhere

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in the Bible, but that the explanation will necessarily be forced into generalities and hand waving, because the Mayan religion, for example, is not mentioned explicitly in the Bible. It makes much more sense to me to view Christianity simply as the modern, prevalent mythology that is appropriate for this world, the same way that the Greek gods were appropriate for that world.

But I've strayed from the point. Through all known history, the concept of the mind as being separate from the body has been deeply entrenched within the religious view. Christianity is yet another interpretation of this. We call it the soul, and Jesus talks of this a great deal in the Gospels, saying things like, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." He also talks of the Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of the Father.

And so, in Christianity, as in all other religions in other times and other places, the spirit as separate from the body and connected to the other world and God is a central, seemingly self evident, assumption.

Thus your question: what happens when you die? In other words, what happens to your spirit when you die, which makes sense only with the assumption that mind and body are separate. The answer is simple. Whatever happens to worms, beetles, mice, cats, dogs, and elephants also happens to us. When we die, our brains become oxygen starved, we feel a sense of euphoria, hallucinate for a bit, get tunnel vision, and then whatever was special about us, our memories, our hopes, simply stop as the cells of the brain slowly shut down. One might just as well ask, where does the information go when it's erased?

The existence of the other world, the spirit world, makes all sorts of concepts plausible: angels, devils, ghosts, psychic ability, reincarnation, hell, heaven, God. This spirit world is so deeply a part of the religious, spiritual experience that it seems ridiculous to question it, because if that goes, what else is there? If there is no God, no heaven, what point is there to living?

This is the question that each of us must face and answer one way or the other. The fact that it's even possible to conceive of such an empty, godless, secular world must boggle the mind of some Christians. The fact that I claim to do this and yet still hold a reverence for a spiritual, yet secular, soul must seem doubly confusing, which would, of course, lead one to assume that I'm completely off base and totally confused.

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What works for me is a spiritual understanding that is consistent with all the facts, medical, historical, philosophical, and still is mystical and profound. I know this must seem contradictory and new-agey, but we are spiritual beings, and the soul, whether defined as the part of God that is part of us, or as an anomaly of evolution, is real and profound and plays an integral part in what humans are and how we live.

I hope this helps you understand a little more about why I wrote the article as I did. If you still have more questions, please ask, but if your aim is to convince me, or save me, please understand that my beliefs are as sacred and as fulfilling to me as yours are for you. Also, at the risk of offending, I must ask that you please understand that I find the practice of trying to force one's culturally biased mythology on other people to be one of the most repugnant ideas that has ever come out of the practice of religion.

Accordingly, my aim has been to explain, not to convince. I know I tend to be rather verbose in my explanations. Thank you for indulging me to the end.

In his next response, Christian admitted he would like for me to agree with him and join the Christian religion, but he claimed to understand my point of view, to an extent. He said he did not want our conversation to become a debate, and he appreciated the thought I have invested in my beliefs. He said he had put many hours into asking his own questions and searching for the truth. Many people, he said, just accept what they're told without question, and he was glad that I'd considered evidence before drawing my conclusions.

He had another question, the purpose of which was to more clearly understand my stance. Who and what did I think Jesus was?

He also assured me that "foot in the door" questions were not his way, and that, again, though he wanted me to become a Christian, he was curious about how I arrived at my current position regarding religion and gods.

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Hello again, Christian.

I've been thinking about our communications. It seems that there might be many other people interested in this sort of exchange, and I would invite you to consider the possibility of my incorporating our exchanges into a future edition of *The Arrenkyle Papers*.

There were two questions in your last request. First, who (and what) is Jesus Christ? You also mentioned an interest in how I came to be where I am. I'll begin with the second, because that will set the context for the first. I'm afraid this may be rather long and autobiographical, but I think it will be the best way to explain.

There were some specific stages through which I went to attain the understanding I now have.

At stage one, I was going to church with my family rather regularly. The church we attended was on the other side of town, the same church my mother had attended as a child and had been married in. I remember that as time went by, mother and I attended while my brother and father often did not. I remember expending some of the prayer time trying to put in a good word for my brother. Over time, even our attendance waned as my brother and I entered high school. I was not baptized, either at birth or later.

In high school, particularly science class, I began to learn about the world, about how science is done, why a scientific methodology is an important tool for trying to discover the truth, and why so much credibility could be granted to the scientific explanations of the world at large. During this time I also began reading a lot of science fiction, particularly of Robert Heinlein. In his worlds, intelligence, truth, analytical abilities, and applied science were always held in high regard. Thus, with my young inquisitive mind, at age 16, I wrote in one of my first journals, "I feel that I have a vague understanding of the universe." I went on to discuss the two alternatives of an infinite universe, or a finite universe. This was about the time I read a translation of an explanation of the special and general theories of relativity written by Albert Einstein.

During this time I still felt, as did Einstein, that "God doesn't play dice with the universe." He was referring, of course, to some of the conclusions of quantum mechanics by men such as Erwin Shrodinger and Werner Heisenberg. I just thought he meant that it couldn't have happened by accident.

Thus the next stage, which might be called the reconciliation, wherein I tried to find an understanding that was consistent with

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both the truth of God that made intrinsic sense to me. and with the world as revealed through consistently repeatable experimentation. A couple years later, I wrote, "In the beginning, God created the formulas. Corollary: God created evolution. The missing link could be the addition of a soul. Corollary: if it weren't for God, human kind could never have passed beyond the animal stage."

It seemed to me in this stage that the truths we could uncover about the natural world need not discount completely God, his powers, heaven, or salvation. To create the world need not mean, as once understood, building things the way we do, but might mean a subtler, more profound means, such as devising the formulas by which worlds make themselves.

This is the view that I expect most modern, rationally minded Christians hold. We are gaining an understanding of the world and becoming acquainted with things like planetary orbits, heliocentricity, cells, genes, chemicals, radioactivity, electricity. If anything, that such things are even possible seems to validate, rather than disprove the existence of a grand architect. After all, if we make things, who or what made the things from which we make things?

It was about this time that I wrote a short piece of fiction titled "A Conversation With God," which explains the soul as a part of God. "A soul is a unit which can experience life in the manner that I have been explaining. Every soul is directly a part of me. In fact, hardly any of me exists that is not a soul." "You mean, I'm you?" "Oh, no no. You're you... You are part of me, meaning you are a part of this huge group of souls, yet you are uniquely individual." Much of the story dealt with explaining how the physical world was only a subset of the entire reality, and so, of course, all the physical laws made sense within that context. We could understand the soul's true nature no more than "a flat-earthier could see up."

However, as time went on, and the prevalent Christian perspective continued to deny, rather than accept, things such as evolution, the age of the earth, and its means of creation, I entered a stage that might be called science versus religion.

Thus my first serious essay on the subject, titled "Religion And God," written at age 23, examined the validity of the two alternative means by which we attempt to understand the world. I wrote, "I cannot accept the existence of God simply because hundreds of thousands of others do. ... If you say you felt God, fine. Maybe you did. Maybe you felt something and said, 'That must have been God.' I cannot say which is correct. I can only say that it is absolutely not

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evidence of God for anyone who did not personally have such an experience, even if this feeling is apparently shared by millions."

Remember, I was analyzing these issues critically, not from a pre-conceived bias. I was trying to understand how and why people could ignore science and accept religion in its place, rather than seeking a whole, unbroken understanding that could encompass both the physical world as it reveals itself to us, and the less tangible, spiritual side of us. Again, from the essay, "If God is reality, then let him be questioned and tested, for if He is real, he will endure all investigation. ... But where religions are based on ancient philosophies, various interpretations, and faith, science is based on measurable, repeatable, experimentation... How can so many people listen to the radio, use computers, take medicine and watch satellite photos of our planet and still ignore the ability of science to explain the origins of stars, planets and life when it is exactly the same scientific methodology that was used for all the above?" In short, when it comes to accepting either science or religion as the means to the greatest understanding of the world, science clearly won.

And yet, there was a missing piece. Trying to understand that piece led to the next stage. The missing piece is: If there is no God, why does everyone feel Him so strongly? If there is no God, then what is it they are feeling? Again, I continued to look for a holistic understanding, one which could accept the fact that we are both animals, in the evolution sense, and spirit, in the sense that we also are apart from animals in more than physical ways.

I began an even deeper investigation into religions from around the world. I read the Tao Te Ching, a bit of Buddhism, and read more of the Bible than I ever had before. I wasn't looking for "The Truth" in any one of these works. Rather, I was trying to understand the various ways that the soul, whatever it is that separates us from animals, has been interpreted and understood through time. I found a constant thread running through all ideas of enlightenment and the religious experience, and I couldn't help but wonder why, instead of acknowledging other religions as the various faces of God, Christians seem to view Buddhism, Taoism, and other religions as the works of the devil to stray souls from salvation through Christ.

At age 27, I applied what I had gathered and wrote the beginnings of a holistic approach to understanding the soul of man, one that made room for both the obvious science of the world and the profound experience that is God. This essay was titled "Crossroads" meaning the intersection between science and religion.

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In a sense, I was trying again to reunite science and religion. However, there was a critical difference this time. Rather than trying to understand religion as understood by the religious and reconcile that world view with science (a difficult task because of the inherent contradictions between them), I instead focused on an understanding of religion from a historical, sociological perspective, and attempted to present a philosophy that could grant a perspective of the profound, personal importance of God in our lives without being in conflict with the scientific world.

This began a stage that might be called secular spiritualism, or as I called it, Metareligion. From *Crossroads*: "Religion is an understanding of the world and our place in it. Metareligion is an understanding of religion itself, why we humans seem to need it, and what it can do for us in our search for truth."

The crossroads is presented as a series of four lessons: The nature of truth examines how, because of the physical nature of how the brain is wired, humans are constrained to viewing the world in a limited way, and the truths which guide our lives are a combination of external teachings and internal processing. Thus, cultures grow and various truths unfold over the years. The validity of any particular cultural, or even personal, truth can only be examined within the context of one's own understanding. Because of the limitations of both our physical senses and the way that our brains work, we have a perception of the world and label that Truth.

The second lesson was called the religious fallacy, which describes this difference between these two realities, those being the grand, unattainable mega-truth, and the piece of it each human is able to perceive. (By this I mean nothing particularly profound. My reality is lacking in the subtleties of Chinese culture, just as a young Chinese man's understanding of America will be different than mine. Or, even more plainly, your reality is different than mine, simply because you don't know what my basement looks like.) The religious fallacy, specifically, is mistaking the mythical images of a religion as actual fact, rather than as metaphor. In this chapter, I describe the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ as a powerful, mythic idea. It seems no more strange to me that Christians believe Christ was killed, resurrected, and then ascended to heaven, than that the ancient Greeks believed that Zeus really did live on Mount Olympus. The only difference is time, place, and culture.

The third lesson was the crossroads and personal transformation. Here I describe specifically how the mythic image of

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Christ on the Cross, or Buddha under the lotus tree, and even such modern ideas as Scientology, are all focused to give us the ability to control our lives in such a way as to enable civilization. There seems to be an eternal struggle between good and bad, and in all religions, this manifests itself one way or another as a struggle between the animal body and the spiritual mind. In Christianity, we are born out of a life of flesh and sin and into a life of soul through the ritual of baptism, which is a metaphor for the physical death of Christ and his ascension in spirit.

The fourth lesson was called the reality lens. This explains that, not only is one's perception of reality limited by experience and reflection, it can also be changed by others and by ourselves. This is done by repeated, concentrated focus. With enough reinforcement, we, literally, can believe anything. In basic training, the drill sergeant is re-imprinted as the mother image through excessive physical and emotional strain. In prayer, we attach deep emotional channels with the image of God, and thus God becomes more and more real to us. With enough focus, and I'm not kidding, one could believe that the ocean itself is the one and only God. In other words, be careful what you wish for.

Which, finally, brings me to where I am today, at 31, of asking: now that we know this, what can be done with it? One might simply go on believing that the blood of Jesus Christ washes away sin, that other people who think differently are victories for the devil, and that God said it, I believe it, that settles it. Christianity does have deeply strong, mythical images, and has been honed over hundreds of years to be not only an explanation of the unknown, but an effective foundation for a large, civilized culture. It would probably be just fine if we could all relax and have faith. However, because of the disparity between religion as mythology and religion as fact, and the insistence of many Christians to focus so strongly on the latter, many people are left with a dwindling faith in the Church but with no alternative explanations. Last month's essay was in response to the question: can we find a way to acknowledge the soulfulness of man, without having to drag along the trappings of a belief that seems as relevant as stories of the Greek and Roman gods of yesteryear.

And now I can answer (finally :-)) your first question, who is Jesus Christ?

It seems to me that there are two Christs, just as there are two Caesars, or two George Washingtons, or two of any historical figure.

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There no doubt was a man (whose name in all likelihood was not Jesus Christ, which is more a title than name) who traveled, spoke, taught, and baptized people. From what I have read (and this is without reading as deeply as I would like on the matter as of yet) he and John the Baptist, and some other of his contemporaries, were from a brotherhood, a monastery of some kind. There was a particular and specific point to his teachings. It seems to me that when he said, "I and the Father are one," he was not professing to be the one God, come to earth as man, but meant it in the same way he might have said, "You and the Father are one."

One thing I find particularly ironic about the gospels of Jesus are the parables and how they are commonly understood today. In Matthew 13:24, for example, Jesus says, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field..." It appears that parables told by Jesus are understood to be stories, yet parables told about Jesus are expected to be taken factually, rather than metaphorically. For example, in John, Chapter 9, Jesus puts clay on the eyes of a blind man, and then that man sees. In verse 39, Jesus says "For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind."

To me, this is so obviously a parable about Christ, and not a description of factual events. At what point did the writings that became the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament change from being factual, historical descriptions, and switch into fables about the teacher himself? This goes deeply into trying to understand the minds of the scribes and prophets who recorded the tales. In fact, the distinction between historical accounts and fables may be a distinction invented rather recently by our modern mind. Back then, stories about people traveled by mouth mostly. It may have been very soon after the time of Jesus that the second, mythical Jesus emerged through the telling and retelling of the stories about Jesus.

It is very likely that a man was tortured and put on the cross, but imagine how the story of that event would travel through those ancient times. Knowing what we know today about how urban legends spread, and understanding that they didn't have nearly as many people who could read and write, and knowing that their world was still filled with mystery and the inspiring, magical things that Jesus was teaching, it's easy to understand how, when writing about Christ in the gospels, the stories told by Jesus, and the stories told about Jesus, naturally grew into the writings that became the New Testament.

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But the modern understanding of Jesus comes not so much from Jesus himself, or even the stories about Jesus, but from centuries of interpretation and redefinition of Christianity through the Roman Catholic church, which much later added concepts such as the Trinity, hell as fire, Christmas as the time of the birth of Jesus, and Easter as the time of his ascension. In the latter two examples, the winter solstice and the vernal equinox were celebrated by the pagan religions of druids and such, which is why we still decorate Easter eggs and put up evergreen trees. It must feel to many that these secular trappings of the holidays seem always to encroach upon the religious times, when exactly the opposite is true.

To close on the explanation of my humble perspective on Christ, I must explain how this beautiful and profound image of aspiring to rise to a soulful life seems to have been twisted into the sublimely ridiculous.

It has to do with the perspective that there is one God, there is one Savior, there is one purpose for our lives, and this tiny planet is the one critical point in the universe upon which all of creation and meaning rests. Granted, I may be misunderstanding the mind of the average Christian, but it seems to be a common belief that when God created the heavens and the earth, he happened to create the other hundreds of billions of galaxies only as a backdrop so that two thousand years ago on the third planet from one of the hundreds of billion stars in this particular galaxy, a man could be murdered so that the fate of all the souls of forever could be decided.

One must either ignore the other stars and galaxies, and see them only as lights in the firmament that mean nothing, or one must expand the understanding of God, his plans and the meaning of souls to allow for such things as other saviors in other times on other planets. But such an understanding, by definition, is not Christianity, which teaches that at some time in the future, based on the struggles between good and evil played out on this tiny planet, time will come to an end.

Therefore for me, salvation through Jesus is not a tangible, measurable thing with profound supernatural consequences, but a lesson to be learned about living and loving and being.

I would rather think that, "heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field."

You have been more than patient and kind to allow me to share my mind with you like this. I hope you find in here something like what you're looking for.

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If you feel compelled, I would like to hear about your travels through the spirit world, so to speak. What does it mean to you that Jesus is your savior? What questions did you have to ask and answer to find yourself where you are? I think the juxtaposition of the two would make an interesting offering for other readers, that is if you feel comfortable with the idea of sharing your personal thoughts with the world.

Be well.

In the next response from Christian, he claimed to have plowed through levels of thought which resulted in his current understanding. He hadn't been raised in a Christian environment, though belief in God had been part of his childhood. His family stopped attending church when he was four years old, and there was little talk of Jesus or religion for the next seven years or so. At the age of eight or nine, he did wonder whether or not he would be admitted to heaven when he died, but he didn't have an answer to that question, so he abandoned it.

Then, after fifth grade, he was sent to a Christian school and bought his own Bible. On the first day, he wasn't sure what to expect. He made a few quick friends and was still seeking the way to heaven. It was in the sixth grade that he felt called by God to convert to Christianity by dumping all of his sin on Jesus and asking forgiveness for it. Believing that Jesus was God and that the crucifixion provided redemption for sin, he was "set for life." He prayed the standard Christian prayer that night and knew that angels were rejoicing in heaven. He asserted that nobody actually lured him to this supposed revelation or even clearly laid out the specifics of "salvation," but that he came to it himself with only the assistance of God.

Next, he explained that he was new enough to the faith that he was unaware for about a year how much his belief in evolution opposed the Bible and his Christian doctrine. Holding both evolution and the bible as true is not impossible, he said, calling the intersection of the two "theistic evolution," but he saw it as silly, a waste of time.

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One should accept all of the bible or none of it, but trying to incorporate the word of God into scientific "belief" cripples faith. About a year after he had converted to Christianity, a creation-biased teacher presented cases for both evolution and creation, and when he weighed the evidence for both, in the light of his new-found religion, he decided Creation was worthy of embracing. He attended seminars, watched videos, and read books by both Christian and secular scientists supporting his view of how the world began.

He took issue with my assertion that science is the means to the greatest understanding of the world, saying that he has never discovered any fact of science that did not mesh with Christianity. He called it a matter of interpretation, though not always that, either, and he asked me to cite examples of the measurable, repeatable experimentation I'd mentioned which contradict the Christian worldview.

He took me to task for my suggestion that if God is real, he ought to be questioned and tested. He said that at certain times of his life, he had questioned the validity of God's existence. He had seen scientific evidence challenge God and seen that evidence refuted. He quoted a passage of the bible that explicitly forbids putting God to the test, and he explained that it means man must either accept or deny God's existence, not set up a circular testing environment involving "if you exist, make this happen" demands. God requires that humankind believe in him or suffer eternal damnation. God cannot be justified to human beings; only his work in the human heart can accomplish that.

He asserted that he no longer needs to question the existence of God because of all the evidence he's seen, the personal experience of things God has done in his life. He couldn't convey examples because it would not be possible to share peace and joy that the "assurance of salvation" has afforded him.

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He asked about my hopes for salvation or life. He asked what my purpose for living was and what keeps me from despair.

Creationism as the modern faith

I'm sorry to have given the impression that I'm still searching for a type of salvation. That was not my intent. Rather, I am concerned with how we as a society can answer the question: now that there's no God, what do we do now? Which seems to me a quite different thing.

Anyway, on the topic of scientific evidence for or against God and Creationism, we begin to enter into the typical God/no-God dialog, which after all these years tends to bore me to tears.

You say you have thought about this a great deal and that you have gone through stages, but it seems to me that you began not with a question mark or an open mind, but with an already deep acceptance of the existence of God. Your search begins with the assumption that there is a God and that he will send you to hell, and so you scrambled to figure out how to placate Him, which is exactly what that image is supposed to trigger you to do, of course.

With all due respect, until you are able to throw God out with the bath water, you will always be seeing the world pretty much as you did when you were eight years old. You suggest that the idea of salvation came to you without direct human communication, but do you really think that if you were born in a small tribal village in the heart of Africa that the same image would have come to you, or that you would have been so worried about being cast into hell in the first place?

But these are questions I'm sure you have asked yourself.

The dance between science and religion is a convenient mask. It allows us all to encamp behind evolution or creationism, as if we were part of some cosmic beer commercial. It's not that simple. It's not this or that, right or wrong, up or down. The world is a fuzzy, ugly, chaotic mess, and we try to impose some sort of order on top of this and call it reality, whether that order takes the form of God or the Atom. It's all a level of indirection. It's very much like blind men arguing over the parts of the elephant. Science isn't the answer, nor is anything else really, so to debate it as if the outcome can be decided this way or that is pointless. What we can do is try to

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understand why people believe as they do, why something like creationism exists, and what does it mean that it is in conflict with other views.

Let me ask this: How many angels can dance on the head of a pin? This has no more or less significance or meaning than asking "was it seven 24 hour days, or were the days millions of years long?" Both indicate that there is some value in trying to juxtapose science and religion and try to make any sense of them together, which is a mistake right out of the box.

Creationism is angels dancing on pins.

Refusing to accept the origins of man will some day be as silly as insisting that the world is flat, the sun is really Apollo's chariot, or that dunking witches tells you something you didn't already want to know.

Creationism was born as a backlash against the learnings of the world that reduced man from the divine image of God to just another animal. No one started by looking at the Grand Canyon and saying, it must have happened in a few hours, or the strata of sedimentary rock and declaring that it just happened to have been made that way. Maybe the cave men did, but we can excuse that; they didn't know any better.

Science begins with a declaration of ignorance. Creationism begins with God. Until the creation advocates are willing to put God on the line and say, "Hmmm, maybe God didn't make it," then they are all just like that little boy trying to dodge hell. In other words, if you're looking for an answer, the first step is not to declare the result. I might as well declare that $3+3$ is 11, than figure out how to invent base 5 and pretend that I'm still using both hands.

Here are the facts that are usually in conflict with the Christian point of view.

The world is billions of years old.

Life began in the oceans and has been in a constant state of change ever since.

Man is an animal.

That's basically it. Others are derivative from these basic ones. In fact, all disputes grow from the final one, man is an animal.

Notice that there's no argument over the techniques to create a thermonuclear reaction, or to create buckeyballs, or to build airplanes and heart lung machines. There's no Christian attempt to find alternate, biblical explanations for how to launch satellites into orbit, how to create an encoding scheme for high definition

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television, or how to synthesize artificial insulin. You won't find any discussion on alt.religion about trying to discredit the invention of the x-ray machine, the MRI scanner, or techniques of gene therapy in favor of ones that are more in line with teachings of the Bible. No one seems to have trouble reading the chemical composition of distant stars using a stellar spectrogram or measuring the speed of light, or computing planetary orbital trajectories. We look high and low at every aspect of the world, and this one point, to the almost complete exclusion of all the others, has dictated the entire spectrum of this debate for the past one hundred and thirty years.

The problem isn't even a scientific one. The old monk and his peas, dog breeders, and then Crick and Watson, have all well established the mechanisms of genetics. The fact that we are building on our understanding of DNA today to fix broken genes and replace missing ones demonstrates that it works.

The problem comes not from accepting that natural selection, which is like selective breeding but takes longer, can shape a species through time. After all, how else can you start with a wolf and end up with a basset hound? The problem today is the same as it was when "The Descent of Man" was first published: man is no longer divine, but just another beast.

It is because of this notion, unacceptable to Christians, that all of the alternative explanations have to be invented. Creationism, as it is understood today, is an infant science whose roots go back somewhere into the last century. All other science has quite a head start, forming an almost unbroken chain of discovery and refinement for the past thousand years, and a somewhat disjointed chain back several thousand years, starting with the mastery of man-made fire.

All that history and invention and discovery did not have as its goal to lie to us about God. It happened because this is what you see when you look at the world.

Creationism is based on reaction, finding alternate explanations to the ones already discovered through trial and error and experimentation. Those alternate explanations would not be at all necessary if they did not impact on the mythical image of man as the image of God. It has its foundations in faith, not in science, and that is why it must be examined very carefully. The percentage of non-Christian creationists is no doubt quite low.

Eventually, whining about the inaccuracies of carbon radioactive dating, or twisting the interpretation of the second law of thermodynamics will give way to an increasing acceptance of

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genetics, especially when we're all eating manually evolved carrots and living manually evolved, disease free lives, and genetic therapy is as common as surgery.

If one's goal is to know the world, he must begin by declaring ignorance, wiping the slate clean, and seeing the whole world. If one's goal is simply to dodge hell, then pick a religion, any will do, and believe as hard as you can, but those are not the same things.

None of this, by the way, really has much to say about the proof or disproof of God. It does, however, demonstrate that science should be a pursuit to understand the world around us, while religion helps us understand the world inside us, and that a sloppy mixing of the two only causes more trouble than it solves.

And where do I find meaning and purpose to keep me from despair? The world isn't here to make me feel better. The truth is the truth, whether it makes me happy or not. I find joy in the same things you do, in family, friends, and knowing that after I'm gone, some part of me will remain, even if it's only these silly words in AltaVista's inverted index files.

Thank you for allowing me to post our conversation as an article on the web. I will prepare them for the July issue. If you have some final closing words for the world, let me know.

Good luck and happiness. I wish you peace with your God, a long happy life, sunny days when you're golfing and rainy days to keep them green.

In his final reply, he asserted again that he had on occasion doubted God, though he had always believed in God's existence. He asserted again that he had considered evidence for and against God, including his personal experience in the "for" category. He claimed that while he was young when going through the phase of questioning God, he still had an analytical mind, that his decision to accept God was born out of a real consideration of all options. In a chiding tone, he asked me to keep in mind that our differences in opinion did not render him wrong, and he said that he would respect the process I followed in drawing my conclusions.

He admitted that his first inclination when reading my last email was to be offended, but he quickly corrected that impulse by recognizing my ignorance and reminding himself

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that I had not been privy to the information he had. He criticized me for accepting evolution without considering "scientific" evidence that supports God's existence and creation of our world, throwing in an Asimov quote about the universe winding down to prove his point. He also accused me of having a preconceived bias, as I'd suggested of him, and he admitted that he was biased but did not see fault in that.

He continued to insist upon "vast" volumes of scientific evidence supporting creationism. He hadn't encountered any evidence for evolution that couldn't be shown as misinterpreting creation evidence. He denied that the earth is billions of years old and that species began in the ocean. He agreed that his "testimony" was not a good example of the scientific method at work, then presented the case of an atheist who embarked on a journey to disprove the bible, only to discover how irrefutable its contents were. This, he said, was an example of God working against the bias of a human mind. He bemoaned the fact that true evidence (of God's existence) remains ignored because of its inconvenience to the established agenda of science.

He demanded sources for some of my assertions, then cited the bible, specifically the "divine inspiration" of Moses in writing the book of Genesis, as further evidence of creation, particularly because it was written so long before evolutionary theory was established. He missed my point regarding the technological advances and why Christians do not seek alternative explanations for those science-based discoveries the same way they uphold creation as an alternative to the scientific explanation of our origins. He said it was reasonable to expect Christians to approach life logically, but then declared that God is not bound by the constraints of this world, referring to his example of an illogical concept of his religion, the resurrection of Christ.

For his grand finale, he fired off a parade of questions regarding morality and purpose, concluding with "why not live just for you?" He asked me not to take offense, then

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insisted that the only thing that propels a non-believer to be good or kind or joyful, or even alive, is "God's conviction."

Final word

And so it goes on. I want to thank Christian for not only allowing me to share my beliefs with him, but also for allowing me to share his with you. Even though I don't think we really covered any new ground here, and no doubt everything either of us said has been said before and will be said again countless times, I hope someone has gained by our exchange.

A few final words to the readers.

The often-quoted second law of thermodynamics does not simply state that everything is tending toward disorder. It is a specific statement about energy transfer in particular situations. It deals with determining which processes in nature are reversible and which are irreversible. For example, if you set a glass of cold water next to a glass of hot water, their temperatures will approach each other and not get farther apart. My college physics textbook describes the second law as follows: "When an isolated system undergoes a change, the disorder in the system increases." If entropy always increased everywhere, no chemical reactions of any kind could ever take place. Chemical reactions occur when an external force such as a catalyst or energy is applied. Cooking food, for example. In other words, if you dissolve salt in water, you can't get the salt out just by sitting around and waiting — that's the irreversible process — but if you apply heat, you can boil the water away and get the salt back. If the Creationist interpretation were true, the salt would be forever gone.

The earth is also not an isolated system. The energy from the Sun is the ultimate fuel that drives the chemical reactions that enable life. You can also consider the solar system to be an isolated system. In that context, the entropy of the solar system is increasing because the nuclear reactions of the sun are also irreversible processes, meaning the sun will eventually use up its fuel, nova, and go dark and not get brighter and brighter. Yet the sun isn't an isolated system. It was born out of gravitational energy as a bunch of gas and carbon atoms smashed into each other, fueled by the death of other stars and, ultimately, the big gravity well in the center of the galaxy. The universe, as a whole, as one really big isolated system, will indeed see a net increase in entropy. Now, if you can trace that all the way

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back to the beginning, there's a Nobel Prize and a place in history waiting for you. In other words, entropy as it is generally understood relates only to isolated systems, not everything everywhere. When you shake the pan, all kinds of neat things can happen.

Still, I believe we will benefit from the skepticism and challenges from Creationists because, if nothing else, they force us to fill up all the holes.

And why don't I kill what I hate, take what I like, and live without morals? One could just as easily ask why don't Christians kill, hate, and sin, knowing that they're already saved, and that question would be just as pointless as the first. If we can't do better than to imagine those with opinions different than ours to be inches away from murder and rage, then we have no business even attempting a dialog. It's simply that I don't want to kill or hurt. I would be more afraid of a man who says, "Gee, I'd really like to kill and hurt you, but God will punish me."

These issues are deeply rooted within all of us, and as these messages indicate, they define our perception of who we are. When one's very soul is threatened by a changing world, and all the modern world can do is leave us with, as Karen Armstrong puts it, a "God Shaped Hole" in our lives, then we are left with few choices. We can ignore or refute the world as it presents itself to us, revise our religious beliefs to incorporate the new data, such as defining the Big Bang as the moment of divine creation, or find something completely new like crystals, pyramid power, or the Psychic Friends network. Or we can try to discover a new way of thinking about why we invented God in the first place.

Thus, I forward Christian's final question to all of you. This is the core of the spiritual challenge that so many are facing today: if not God, then what? Or, as it sounds to my ears, how can we live without our fairy tales and bedtime stories? If living without this particular white bearded, angry old man, who Christians insist made the whole universe just for them, means that we're all going to take to the streets and strangle one another, then please, go believe. Just don't burn me at the stake for heresy. We've had enough of that. I think Christian called it killing what you hate.

The irony is that, once you've asked that question, there's no hope of ever finding a decent answer because it is based on the mistaken belief that there must actually be some explanation to all of

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this. There is no explanation, and until you get that, you're just counting angels on pinheads.

Go ahead and count them, if you must, but if we're going to invent a myth to give us some kind of cultural framework, let us at least pick one that doesn't run screaming from the revelations of the modern world.

CHURCH AND STATE

December, 1996

The reason Bill Clinton was re-elected is that government has become the post-modern God.

I don't mean this in a literal sense. We don't actually see people praying to the President or lighting prayer candles for the State, but the relationship that people have with their government is more like faith than like a partnership. It's not a logical connection, but a deep, sub-conscious association. Without God there is hell. Without taxes, there is chaos.

At a level beyond words or debate, we rely on government to provide our society with its soul, to care for people, to give us order and answers. This seems like simple common sense. After all, it is the very essence of government to set rules, provide a framework for society, and defend and protect us. What I'm seeing, however, goes deeper than this. Government seems to have taken on the appearance of a force of nature, something beyond us and not a part of us, a mysterious caretaker that provides, punishes, and gives our world its structure and purpose.

It is only because we have this notion of a separated church and state that this is even apparent to us. There has always been a strong, perhaps inseparable, bond between these two institutions, from the divine right of the King to "one nation under God." Although this is a bit of a simplification, we have always looked to God for guidance, moral leadership, and meaning for the social order while looking to government to pick up the trash and keep records of property rights.

Today, as we learn more of the mysteries of life, and as God becomes more mythical and poetic, there has been a transference away from the Church and God as the wards of social order. Today we are looking for all kinds of alternatives from crystals to psychics to Scientology. However, for the majority of modern, rational Americans who are searching for something else, the role of moral leader is now granted to government, and with that has been born a new faith that could be called the Religion of Liberalism.

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I am quite familiar with the sense of overwhelming disbelief that affects some people who learn that I don't believe in their God. They usually think that I'm angry at Him, or have been seduced by their devil-man, and in the end they simply cannot understand why I don't kill, hurt, and steal. Their belief is so deeply ingrained that they quite literally are unable to even imagine a different morality other than the one given to mankind by their Holy God. I see exactly the same reaction from people when I suggest reducing the power of government. It is as if they are quite literally unable to even imagine a different moral code other than the one given to us by politicians.

What interests me isn't that people can think up reasons that a society of free individuals won't work. What I find fascinating is that most people simply accept that the very idea is unthinkable and that there must be something wrong with us for selecting Evil over Good. They say, "What do you do about the poor family that can't afford school or even food." That question is exactly like the Christian asking, "Why don't you kill what you hate, take what you like, and live for yourself without morals." In other words, both are asking the question: "What kind of evil is in you to think such a thing?"

The question is based on fear, faith, and feelings, and not on reason. Reason tells us that much of the causes of modern poverty come from the government in its awkward attempts to fulfill its new moral role, a role for which it is not designed and is ill-equipped. Reason reveals how welfare rewards broken families, how having too many good ideas creates a bureaucracy that inhibits rather than helps kids learn, how the black market of drugs encourages and even ensures serious crime, how big money and campaigns and lobbies have turned the government into a distorted caricature of its former self.

And yet the faith remains, transcending reason and the obvious flaws of the President himself. If faith can cause Christians to discount the entire field of genetics, faith certainly can cause others to discount a few FBI files.

The reason this phenomenon is primarily a liberal one is because these are the people, the majority of the nation, who are finding it increasingly difficult to reconcile the traditional religious perspective with the new world. They are pulling the nation toward more personal freedom and liberties such as a woman's right to choose, Affirmative Action, access to education, and a decent chance for all people.

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We're moving with stuttering steps toward a new vision of what is right, what works, and the way things ought to be. What's happening is nothing less than a neo-reformation.

The Protestant Reformation in the early 1500s brought about many changes in the perception of man's relationship with God. As Karen Armstrong puts it on page 276 of the hard cover edition of *A History Of God*, "Instead of expressing their faith in external, collective ways, the people of Europe were beginning to explore the more interior consequences of religion. All these factors contributed to the painful and frequently violent changes that propelled the West toward modernity."

The Calvinists especially assisted a transformation from a world of indulgences and unquestionable fealty to God and King toward one of personal salvation and personal rights. This ushered in a worldview that eventually became the Age of Enlightenment and led to the replacing of Monarchies with republics and democracies.

We are in the early stages of the next great ideological shift. We have begun the transition from the image of God as the ultimate King and toward God as an archetype for our own personal spiritual growth. Technology may be replacing God, but we are still bound within a God-centric paradigm, and so the need for a larger good falls upon the government, especially one that promotes harmony, compassion, brotherhood, and Peace on Earth.

The change in ideology must happen first, followed by the change in government. As much as I would like to wake up in a world of rational freedom tomorrow, I fear that we may be seeing only the beginning of a three or four century trend that may eventually, someday, if we're lucky, lead us to a more mature spiritual perspective that will enable the type of society that the Libertarians envision today.

The irony is that the very people advancing the cause of individual rights and liberty believe, with their displaced religious fervor, that Big Brother will grant this to all mankind because He is wise and good. Thus the ones who seem to favor liberty are actually making it harder by increasing the power of government over us all, while the other side, the ones that want to reduce the size and influence of government, want to tell us how to live and when to pray.

What is a Libertarian to make of this?

We know that government doesn't work, not because the people in it are bad or have bad intentions, but that its very design makes it

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ineffective to perform the tasks that have been thrust upon it. For example, the military is designed to win wars through the effective use of violence, which makes it the wrong type of tool to feed children, police a refugee camp, or help build nations. Likewise, a government designed as a minimalist tool of a free people makes a poor social welfare dictator.

I wish I could find some way to point out the fact that, not only does government do poorly at so much of what it tries, but that other solutions can be so much more effective. Why should any of us put up with neighborhoods overrun with drugs, schools that starve for money while cities build stadiums, families that are locked into poverty and dependency, and a federal spending habit that cannot be cured? It's not that people like these things; they're just afraid that the alternative might be worse. So often I find that when I suggest the heresy that alternatives do indeed exist, most people scurry back to the choke hold of a pretentious, self-serving government and then wonder what evil is in me.

I wonder if there will ever be a time when the majority of the people of this nation are governed by reason and intellect rather than the superstition and reaction that passes for thought so easily. It may be as pointless to tell men that they can live free as it is to tell a Christian that he will never see heaven. What if we're not ready to be free? There may in fact be something built into the very deepest corner of our brains that demands that we be members of a social order ruled by an alpha-male with a firm handshake and a handful of platitudes.

As long as people demand to be penned in someone else's cage, then keeping them locked under heavy taxes and extensive laws may be just what they need. "Tax me before I sin again," they seem to be saying. If faith in God or the State really were the only restraint keeping most people from looting and killing, then forcing them into a libertarian world would be disastrous for everyone.

Actually, I don't think that's anywhere close to reality. I don't think for a second that most people are wild savages ready to run amok and only by the good graces of the government do we have any social order. On the contrary, most people just want to live and let live. Some would point to the wanton looting and fighting that occurs during times of disaster as evidence that society is not old enough to know better. It looks different to me. The reason people steal and vandalize property at such times comes from a disconnect they feel between themselves and their community. It's not like

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they're doing anything against their neighbors; they're just stealing from the Man, some faceless force of Nature to be dealt with. Well, if the Man weren't in their face all the time, telling them what to do and how to act and where to live and what they can have and how they can work, then they might feel more in control and not feel the need to strike back when his back is turned.

What's the cause and what's the effect? It's like withholding information and responsibility from young adults and then justifying that on the basis that they are ignorant and irresponsible. How will they learn? How will we learn if all we do is wait for government to try to solve social cancers like bigotry, hatred, and fear?

The new reformation is underway, and though many would like to sew patches on the emperor's invisible clothes, the naked ineffectiveness of government is beginning to show through. Most people are at least aware that something is wrong, just as most people feel a growing uneasiness with the realities of the world that intrude upon their religion.

The time has never been better than it is today to set this nation upon a course of liberty. It is clear that people need something grand to believe in, so much so that they will accept government with all its dangers. What we need to do as Libertarians is to throw truth down upon the golden calf of government, and to replace the empty hole they will feel with something better: Freedom, Liberty, Excellence, Opportunity, Honor, Knowledge, Dignity, Strength.

Therefore, I offer the following suggestions to Libertarians everywhere. This movement needs leaders.

When you are discussing politics with friends and neighbors, remember that you are treading on emotions that run very deep within them. Remember that to their ears your suggestions are by definition evil and unthinkable. Because of this, you must be extra patient, kind, and good.

Give them solutions, not ideology. Nobody gives a wet slap about Rand or Objectivism. They want to know how poor people will eat. It does more harm than good to point out that neither they nor the government has the moral right to force you to feed them, or that a factory has no moral duty to stay open and provide expensive benefits. Remember, they are looking for someone to let them off the emotional hook for feeling bad about taking away the welfare gravy train. Remind your friend that he cares about the poor, you care about the poor, and that caring isn't the exclusive domain of the

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government. (You might also mention that if your friend isn't willing to put up his own money to help after the income tax is abolished that he doesn't really care about the poor so why bring up that question.) When your friend wants to know how poor kids will get an education, remind them that education doesn't have to be expensive -- it was made that way by government -- that with less restriction and more freedom, there will be plenty of inexpensive alternatives and more opportunities for things like community scholarships, church schools, day school at the YMCA, education benefits from employers, and better support for home schooling. (Again you can ask if your friend would be willing to donate to a free community school if he didn't have to pay any income taxes.)

Remind them that government is not God. Keep beating the drumbeat that was Harry Browne's tag line: Government doesn't work. Again, remember you're treading on Holy Ground. Just tell them things they already know about government, but forgot to wince at the first time. When they demand that the government is there to protect the little guy, by all means don't go into the lecture on the evils of Robin Hood or the moral bankruptcy of socialism. Instead, agree that closing factories and moving jobs overseas is rotten, but remind them that big companies don't act alone. Taxation, lawsuits that come from employment regulation, environmental mandates, price controls, and intrusive regulations from top to bottom all conspire to make running a large business in America very expensive and unreliable.

Promote the wisdom and compassion of local communities over the federal government. This is a critical point. Most people think that Libertarians are anarchists, that we want to just open the doors and let the wild beast of greedy big companies squash little guys. Tell them that the goal is not a lack of government, but more effective government. Why send money on a round trip only to pay for the journey through the hands of the bureaucrats of Washington DC?

Avoid the phrase "Less Government." Say safer neighborhoods, stronger local businesses, better schools, less corruption. You and I know it's the same thing, but it sounds better to everyone else. Also, avoid the term libertarian if you can get away with it. It usually conveys zero information and besides, most people feel a strong party affiliation so the label just gets in the way. Labels don't matter all that much as long as they're thinking.

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Use the right carrot with the right person. If you're speaking with a Republican, emphasize religious freedom and gun ownership. If you're speaking with a Democrat, talk about liberal rights such as gay marriages or the legalization of drugs. Remember that Libertarians are not at odds with either of the two parties. In fact, both of them hold a big piece of the puzzle. They just need us to fit the pieces together.

Make sure you're prepared, patient, and polite, and if it's not going well, just nod and tell them they have a good point. Hey, it's not so important that you've got to piss people off. They care about America too.

GOD IS LOVE

September, 2000

Walking without God

I am an atheist.

That label, however, does not accurately describe what I know. For me it is not as simple as deciding not to believe in one particular religion's God, but rather having an understanding of God as being a part of us instead of something external. I want to share my thoughts on this for two reasons. First, I want people who do believe in God in a traditional way to understand that all sorts of religions in all sorts of cultures, and even atheism in some cases, are all celebrating the same core spirit that resides in us all. Second, I want to encourage other atheists to consider that there are truths that are not answered by a simple dismissal of religion and God.

Of course, simple dismissal of traditional dogma was where I started. I was in my late teens when I knew something wasn't quite right with religion's explanation of the world. At the time, I saw it as a contest between science and religion. It was rather easy, in the arrogance of youth, to think of stories about miracles and magical salvation as just so much folklore, but there was always a question that could not be so easily ignored:

If there is no God, why do so many people think that there is?

The answer to that question has brought me back to God, in a way. I'm still an atheist by any reasonable definition, but that's only a part of it. I can't help that the word atheist is both accurate and incomplete. I can't help that the image this word evokes is not who I am.

By daring to ask that question and looking for its answer, I have been able to see beyond the cultural, historic image of God, and find -- at least to my satisfaction -- what it's all about.

We are all born into a society, and we learn the ways and beliefs of the people around us. Through centuries and across the planet, cultures and beliefs emerge, evolve, and fade away. As different as we are from place to place and time to time, we all carry within us

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the torch of humanity, a divine spark that separates us from other animals. With different faces and forms, God has always been a part of us.

Each culture has its own mirror through which it sees God, and it's somewhat amusing to listen to people discuss which mirror is the more correct. Is God a faceless force of nature, a distant creator, a personal savior, an animal, a thunderbolt? What does God want? What rules should we follow, and why?

All of those are just fun house reflections of something else, something deeper, something that is a part of what makes us human.

What is it? What is this intrinsic spirit that becomes entwined time and again in a culture's ethics and laws? Is there a God beyond the God of Abraham, beyond Jesus, beyond the quite knowing of the Buddha?

That something deeper is what I want to present to you. This is my own personal perspective. It is not a treatise on comparative religion, nor is it a dictum of new thought. Mostly, this is an explanation of why I am an atheist, what that means to me, and why that word is so lacking as a label for what I have come to know.

If there is one central idea of this work, it is that there is there need be no rift between the world we know through science and the world we know through God. Evolution, the Big Bang, genetic engineering, and the strange world of quarks have left the traditional image of God struggling for a foothold against modern reason. Are we animals, or divine? Did God create the world, or was it formed from left over star matter billions of years ago -- or are those the same thing?

There is no conflict between God and the world. How could there be? The conflict is between a religion that tells us one thing and our senses, reason, and measurements that tell us another. This is because religion, which is supposed to reveal God to us, can hide God behind cultural dogma. This isn't to say that religion is wrong, but that its purpose is not singular. Religions define God within the context of a particular society. It provides the rules, the rituals, and shared beliefs that bind a people together.

Religions, though they are transient and specious, give a voice to the innate spirit within us. They allow us to overcome the flesh and instinct of the animal so that society as we know it can exist. Humans could do quite well living like other primates, hunting, gathering, and living quite lives in nature. But could we build cities, explore the atom, or reach for the stars without something that pulls

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us beyond the innate autopilot that has been formed by millions of years of Evolution?

What is this spirit that dwells deep inside us that needs such a voice? Certainly it distinguishes us from other animals, and its existence can not be denied. Is it, as people of faith would say, a connection with an almighty deity? Or is it a natural consequence of language, history, and purpose -- or are those the same thing?

When all the myths, ritual, and other trappings are swept aside, we must face the fundamental question of whether this divine spirit is a connection to a supernatural world or a secular phenomenon. What I intend to demonstrate is that this question is mostly irrelevant. A perception of God as magical and supernatural is fundamentally no different than a perception of God as an abstraction of civilization and psychology. Both secular and supernatural images are abstractions held within our minds.

Yet some of these visions of God place us in conflict with other things that we know, and we end up choosing between faith and fact. This is wrong. There is no conflict. We should feel free to rejoice in the entire world of which we are a part, without compromise, and without denial.

Think of this as an invitation to look over your shoulder, away from the reflection of God as defined by your religion in this particular place and time, and to peer into the very heart of God.

The Blind Spot

There is a fundamental and important difference between the fabric of spirituality and a religion that casts that spirit into a particular form. Religions give us images and rituals that draw the spirit to the fore of our mind where it becomes a part of who and what we are. Stories and prayers amplify and focus the spirit, but they are not the same thing.

For example, Christians believe that God came to earth as a man to teach us new laws, that he was murdered by crucifixion, and that his sacrifice grants a place in heaven for anyone who believes that his sacrifice grants a place in heaven for those who believe. Further, they believe that after being dead for three days, he came back to life, told everyone preach his gospel, and then rose into Heaven to sit next to God, who was himself, of course. They celebrate this with a ceremony of ritual cannibalism, in which they eat crackers that become transformed into the body of Christ, and drink grape juice or

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wine that becomes transformed into blood. To enter heaven, however, they must first have had water sprinkled on their forehead or have been dunked under water.

Without the spirit to give these images meaning, Christianity would, in fact, be as silly as this description makes it sound. But it would be a mistake to reject Christianity, or any religion, because its tenets are superficially implausible. I think most Christians understand that communion wafers don't actually transubstantiate into flesh, yet the taking of communion is still a powerful and touching connection with their God.

Even salvation granted through the death and resurrection of Christ, belief in which is a cornerstone of that faith, is also best understood not as a literal historic fact, but as a means of giving form, purpose, and even a name to the spiritual power that is within us. The power of that connection is evident in the popularity and durability of the faith. It endures because the image of Christ on the cross, and the many rituals that surround it, relate to our own lives in very deep and meaningful ways. I'll get back to that in the next section.

The important point here is to recognize that if one believes in such things as the virgin birth, oil lamps that burn for seven days, Eden, Nirvana, or salvation through murder as literal truths, the very messages that these images are supposed to reveal can become lost. More importantly, believing in the trappings of faith at face value allows one's mind to shut out other knowledge.

Creationism, the belief that the earth was created a relatively short time ago through direct manipulation by God, is the result of faith applied well beyond reason. I understand the sense of loss that makes this belief necessary. Genetics, astronomy, geology, chemistry, all peel back the mystery of God's world, and in so doing push God deeper into the atom and farther away from our sky. The monster that ate God must be tamed, and so some people use bits and pieces of science to reinforce their spiritual beliefs. This becomes necessary when science seems to say that we are nothing but mundane animals.

If we are mere animals, then where is our soul? It is a reasonable concern that if we believe we are descended from unenlightened, brutish animals rather than from God, we may eventually lose God altogether and devolve back into chest beating, wild-eyed primates. The debate of evolution versus intelligent design is not about which

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of two sciences is more valid. Creationism is no more a science than it is a cheese sandwich; it is an angry cry that affirms we are spirit.

But what has that to do with stellar spectrometry or genetic fingerprinting? The world is what it is, and we should rejoice in learning about its every detail. Religion should never come between us and the world of which we are a part. Thus, holding on too strongly to the form, rather than the substance, of religion separates us from our own world and makes it a frightening and evil place.

Worse yet, it can lead to prejudice and anger. A Wiccan priestess casting a spell over a candle, for example, or a tribal shaman dancing in body paint, evoke great emotion in people who place religion above spirit and see these not as other peoples prayers to God, but as evil things. It can lead people to ban books, ignore science, and even do harm to others, as when parents deny their children medical attention.

If the stories of religion are seen as fact, then the stories from all other religions must necessarily be seen as false, and the people who believe in those other stories must be thought of as lost and disconnected from God. And so missionaries go out into the world to correct people of this mistake. They will translate their bible into other people's languages, teach them how to live and think, and do whatever they can to eliminate the scourge of someone else's God. Entire lives are devoted to an endeavor that would not exist but for the blind spot that fails to recognize that primitive cultures are just as spiritual and alive in God as the missionaries themselves, and in some cases probably more so. Yet in they come to perform the very hostile act of killing someone else's god. At least it's not the autodafé when they were content to simply kill the people.

And how's that for a blind spot? How could any religion, the purpose of which is to nurture our soul and spread kindness and understanding, lead to such tragedy? I'm not just talking about the Spanish Inquisition hundreds of years ago. Religion is a very powerful force that, in the wrong hands, can lead to cults, jihads, child neglect, murder, and mass suicide. This alone should be enough to warrant moderation, if not skepticism. The fact that religion can be used as a wedge between us and the beautiful, intricate world that cradles and fees us, belies its insufficiency as a complete answer.

Religion is not an end, but a means to an end. Understanding this is perhaps the greatest gift of atheism. Another is knowing that we don't have to choose between a religion and everything else that

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comes into conflict with it. Religion is a moment in time. The spirit endures because it is a part of us.

Flesh and spirit

It's troubling sometimes the extent to which our everyday reality is driven by inescapable mandates from the physical and chemical panorama that surrounds us. We declare "I am" or "I wish," yet the inertia of evolution molds our brains and warps our intent, dragging us with its subtle slight of hand to the shallow and sordid now.

Is our divine soul to be found by flowing within or swimming against this torrent of instinct? We are all born with a built-in life trail, and within the vagaries of our cultures, we define ourselves in relation to this default, casting the players of our lives into the coarse, simple roles ground by millions of years: father, mother, hunter, lover.

Can there be a reality that is not, in some way, a reflection of the carnal creatures that we are? I think it's not so much a contest between the physical versus the ideal, but finding a balance of the ideal within the boundaries of the carnal imperative. We should, therefore, give some of our deepest love and care to the simple things of the body -- eating, sex, walking among the trees. We have to make peace with the animal.

To become master of the hungry beast, we introduce religion and social rules. These give us a context of thought in which we can examine our desires, negotiate with our primal heritage, and forego actions that would harm us or our communities.

Most religions spend a great deal of time managing this dialog between animal and mind, flesh and spirit. Some of the deepest images deal with this most important aspect of life. Taming the animal is a necessary part of living in a complex society. We need to constantly nurture calming attributes, such as patience, forgiveness, and tolerance, without which we would be in constant battle with anyone outside our own small group.

Religion allows us to extend our perception of the family to include strangers that would otherwise seem threatening to us. Religions and their canons extrapolate our natural, primate social structures and write them into law. In other words, God is the ultimate alpha-male.

There are some things that work in society and some things that don't work. For example, humans have a strong pair-bonding

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instinct that attracts us to our mate during childbearing years. If someone attempts to come between two people in love the result is hurt feelings, anger, and a strong desire to break things and hit people. We have a strong sense of ownership, apparent in the behavior of any two-year-old. Taking other people's stuff makes them very angry. It wouldn't take much adultery, stealing, murder, and such to leave us all in a perpetual state of arguing, hitting, and killing. This would make it very difficult to come together to build boats, pyramids, and transatlantic jets.

We need a mechanism to restrain the fear, jealousy, impatience, and other desires that arise in our everyday lives. We need role models and a sense of purpose. We need some mechanism to overcome, or at least manage, our natural instinctive urges.

All religions, to some extent, encourage acting in a way that enriches the community. Buddhists have the eight-fold path of right thoughts, right actions, etc. Taoism recognizes the forces of nature and seeks harmony with them. Hindus pursue karma through moral behavior that will determine their position in the next life. Moslems surrender their will to Allah. Christians have Christ.

On the cross, Christ died in the flesh, and then later rose again as spirit. His death and resurrection is a story of transformation from being a creature of flesh to being a creature of spirit. Thus it is when Christians are baptized. They go through a ceremonial death by being immersed in water, and then they rise again, as a reflection of Jesus, as a holy being of spirit. Baptism is a powerful ritual that has deep relevance to this everyday struggle between mind and body. The image of Christ on the cross, going through his transformation, mirrors the suffering that we all go through, and his resurrection mirrors the rewards of peace and happiness that comes from managing those struggles in a way that transcends the instinctive impulses of the animal.

In its many forms, religion gives us the rules for living in a culture. These rules, understood as morals and laws, are whatever lead to the stability and durability of a society. If cutting the heart out of virgins pleases some culture's image of God, then many a poor virgin will be killed for the good of everyone else. It was once accepted that people who break the laws of society should be stoned to death. This was moral behavior that helped keep the peace in its day. Even our modern world sometimes requires a blood sacrifice from those who break the most serious of society's laws.

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The laws of religion inevitably moved into the secular world, and government has mostly taken over the definition of laws and the administration of punishment. In some ways, government has become a sort of post-modern God in which people place their faith and look to as a redeemer, punisher, and shepherd. This explains how people can distrust politicians yet maintain an abiding faith in government.

Whatever the motivation, the ability to act in ways contrary to our coarse instinct is what enables our advanced cultures. One way to think of God is as the part of us that allows us to quiet the animal's call to action. Instead of arguing, we negotiate. Instead of hitting, we talk. We sometimes fail at this, but if fighting and fleeing were the way we handled all conflicts, as animals do, then civilization as we know it could not exist.

When we lose God we lose our humanity. We are very robust and resilient animals. When rules and civilization are stripped away, we can still survive in the animal state by stealing, killing, and banding together in small groups. It takes cooperation, temperance, forgiveness, and other traits that are of God to live together in great cities and build great things.

Had we never discovered God, humans would have evolved as just another primate species, and a pretty weak one at that. How we happened to find God is the subject of the next chapter.

Language

What would other animals say to us if they could talk? Is there any doubt that the household cat would tell us very familiar things about being hungry, afraid, or lonely? When a mother dog gives birth, would she not express sentiments about her pups that we would recognize as a mother's love?

Apes taught to use sign language can tell us when they are excited or sad. They tell us what they want to eat and when they want to be tickled or left alone. Dogs come and get us when the crying baby needs attention. Cats have ways of telling us we're not paying enough attention to them.

But no matter how intelligent a dog is he can't tell you that his father was poor but honest. Apes can't use sign language to discuss ethics or history beyond their immediate experience. We are animals, and so we understand communication about feelings and needs, and so we can communicate with other animals on that level. Imagine

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what other animals might tell us if they had been developing their language for fifty thousand years?

Language is the key to unlocking our discovery of God. Complex language gives us history, continuity, and a sense of self that extends through time and far beyond our physical bodies.

Through language, we learn the stories of our people. We learn about relatives who have long since passed on. We hear tales of great heroes, of nations born, of wars fought. As part of a nation, or a movement, or an extended family, we gain strength, purpose, and direction.

All of this is made possible because we can talk about who we are and what that means to us. Without language there would be no forefathers, no foreign lands, no nation under God, no Jesus, no Buddha, no Mohammed. There would be food, fighting, children, and today, but very little else.

Language shapes our thoughts. When we consider various ideas about the world, we organize them based on the words we use for them. Eskimos have many words for different kinds of snow, and so their perception of different types of snow will be more precise than yours or mine. Different disciplines of science and business have many words, or distinctions of words, that make sense only in that trade's vernacular. In computer programming, for example, the capabilities of a particular programming language will shape how a programmer visualizes data or the flow of an algorithm.

The world, of course, is much more complex and intricate than the words we have, and so we use language in creative ways. We speak of groups having a purpose, or nature having a balance. These are shortcuts that describe something more complex. Of course a group has no consciousness itself, and can no more have a purpose than it can have a shoe size. Nature is what it is, and our perception of it as balanced, beautiful, or full of nasty, biting bugs is something we construct in our minds.

A doe eating leaves in North Dakota has no perception of having traveled to a different nation when she crosses into Canada to get a drink of water. Would there even be a North Dakota without language to discuss territory, ownership, or maps?

Language tells us who we are, what the world is, and what our place in the world can be. Through language we have history. Through history we have a perception of being part of a chain of brethren stretching from the faded pasts and into the emerging future. This continuity is what enables cities and cultures to survive

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beyond the lifetime of a single individual. Without history, you have just a bunch of stones discovered anew by each generation. With history, you have Rome.

History moves through us as waves move through water. We bear our heritage and pass it along to our children. Because of language, our relationship with the world and with each other changes in profound ways. This is the genesis of our spiritual self, and is perhaps the most important distinction between humans and other animals.

Words pull us beyond the ever present Now into the realm of abstraction. We can ask, "Why?" and then ponder the answers over long periods of time because our words anchor thoughts that would otherwise fade quickly from memory. Words are shortcuts to vast, complex ideas, and they extend the capabilities of our mind to visualize and process information.

From this ability comes a different kind of self-awareness. We become abstractions ourselves, and this imaginary image of ourselves, within history, with purpose, is our soul. It is the vision of ourselves reflected in our own minds within the context of our society.

We suddenly have two worlds. We have the world of matter, of energy, of our bodies, and then we have a parallel world built of words, concepts, and ideas about the first world. When we talk with other people we compare our ideas, and this inevitably leads to a set of shared concepts that define a culture. This can be something as simple as knowing when to bow or shake hands or as complex as religion.

When you add to this our natural curiosity, and our brain's advanced pattern recognition abilities, we can't help but create a realm of the mind that parallels the realm of our body. If our bodies emerge from the womb and return to the ground, then what is the sources of mind, of spirit, and what happens to this when we die?

Thus the human condition of language, history, purpose, mind, curiosity, and culture gives us a sense of ourselves as spiritual beings. The spiritual person recognizes this, and nurtures this self-image toward peace and good in their lives and the lives of others. The enlightened spirit understands that this self-image is pliable. Who we are, the confines of our culture, the limits and demands upon our soul, are all imaginary.

The only inflexible reality is our flesh. Where we take that flesh, why, and to what end, is an illusion entirely of our own making.

The other world

Many religions assume the existence of a realm that is beyond the space and time of this universe. Is there something beyond the matter and energy that makes up the whole of this measurable universe? Is all that we can know merely a subset of something more? This something more would be the domain of such things as heaven, God, angels, psychic ability, and the dwelling of a soul after being released from the body.

How can we, bound as we are within the fabric of the material universe, interact with this other world?

Imagine some type of crossover between this world and the other world. Whatever the phenomenon, let's measure it in terms of the familiar things such as matter, energy, and force. At the crossover point, where energy or matter is manipulated, we would measure some change. With enough experimentation (assuming we have a cooperative ghost) we should be able to discover some effect that has no material cause. Of course if we can identify a cause we remain comfortably within the boundaries and expectations of the known world.

Many things in the subatomic world seem odd and unexpected with our current state of scientific knowledge, and measurements almost always affect what happens. Until our scientific ability advances deeper into the quantum world, we may be left the possibility that the other world can somehow generate causeless effects at the quantum level that lead to large scale effects, such as pushing pictures off walls or manipulating the brain activity of a psychic.

My expectation, however, is that as we continue to advance in our scientific exploration, more mysteries will fall to the mighty hand of experimentation. What is mystery today will be in science textbooks tomorrow. Even if we were to discover this elusive quantum causeless effect, we would no doubt observe it, measure it, classify its limits, catalog its behavior, and give it a name, thus making it just another part of this world.

So let us put aside any hubris that makes us believe we are capable of either proving or disproving the ultimate existence of the other world. One can literally imagine anything and declare that it must exist somewhere. If I choose to believe in the existence of Leprechauns, can you prove me wrong?

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If we can think of the soul as the mental abstraction of ourselves, then perhaps the other world is the image we hold in our minds of circumstances and expectations that seem to transcend the material world. Consider that when you see someone, light falls on your retina and causes brain activity that causes you to be aware of shapes and shades that correlate with what your other senses tell you. But your perception of someone is not limited to the physical senses. You carry in your mind a reflection of that person. This includes memories of times shared with that person and expectations that come from observing past appearance and manner.

If the images of ourselves in our own mind can be thought of as our spirit, then our reflection in the minds of others can also be considered to be part of us. Let's say that on the way home from visiting with you, a friend dies. Your memory of this person, however, does not go away. All the thoughts, expectations, memories, and beliefs that you have of this person are still as valid as when you were together. In your mind, as far as you know, that person is still alive. You may even make plans to talk with your friend the next day.

In the same way that you can hold an image of your friend in your mind even after your friend is gone, we can hold in our mind a vision of the other world. To us, it is very real. Our mental map of what the other world is and means can be just as real to us as the image in our mind that corresponds to other parts of our world. Everything we interact with in the world must be understood and processed by the faculties of our brain. Whether we are interacting with a rock, a friend, or God, we are ultimately dealing with abstractions that are creations of our brains.

The function of our brain defines the parameters by which we experience and understand the world. One of the brain's most useful activities is pattern recognition. We look at clouds and see faces and animals. If we miss part of a conversation we can fill in the blanks with our own experiences. The brain's ability to recognize patterns, in everything from shapes to situations, helps us navigate our way through the world. When we encounter something we don't know or understand we become uncomfortable until we can match it with something that is already familiar to us. Then, like an optical illusion that suddenly changes from meaningless lines into a familiar image, the mysterious becomes known.

When we dream we seem to do things and go places while our bodies remain motionless. It's natural that we would conclude that

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these activities and places are going on in some other place that our spirit visits. When we use language to discuss these odd nocturnal journeys it's understandable that dreaming and the other world would become part of the culture.

The form, purpose, and expectations of the other world become shared through language and taught as part of a culture. The shared image of the other world becomes the dwelling of societal laws, just as the village is the dwelling of our bodies. Religion is the combination of a shared other world vision and the laws.

Because we must filter everything through a localized fabrication in our own mind, the distinction between reality and mere perception is fuzzy, and in some cases indistinguishable. Thus the other world, heaven, God, angels, can all be as real to us as any of the other complex parts of the world that we only understand through rough approximations. Whether the other world is, in fact, a reality that has a tangible existence beyond this physical world is irrelevant. The belief itself becomes a tangible reality.

Believing Is Seeing

There are many things that we perceive to exist which have no physical attribute. Whether they are models of something real or are contrived fictions, they help us relate to our world and to each other.

In economics, we create models that describe the countless actions of people buying, selling, working, and saving. Any average or sum of these transactions is an artificial creation, a shortcut to help us think about what's going on in a very complex, chaotic system. Aggregate demand, for example, is a lens through which we view certain economic behavior, but it is not the same as the buying itself.

Such a model, though imprecise, is bound ultimately to material actions. Something more abstract, such as the purpose of mankind, is similar in function though different in kind. While it can be thought of as being tied to the mundane actions of individuals, each performing a variety of good or evil actions, the purpose of humanity is not so much a model that measures or predicts behavior, but attempts to direct it.

Belief is a framework, a set of predictions and expectations that explain and anticipate the world. We are all constantly swimming in a set of beliefs about ourselves, our families, our government, and

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how the world works. Even when we delve into science, all we are doing is building increasingly refined models of the world.

We find ourselves using all sorts of strange but convenient cultural fabrications, such as destiny, civic duty, justice, national borders, casual Fridays, and the wisdom of politicians. God, as with all of these other things, is as real as the effects felt in one's life. Each day, people open their hearts to God and experience a genuine transformation. Belief in God not only exists but is a very powerful force in many people's lives.

To hold on to that force, people of faith will build additional supports in their mental arsenal to reinforce their beliefs. All kinds of circumstances can be attributed to God, angles, or other spiritual powers. But if you peel back the layers of belief to discover the genesis of that faith, you will ultimately find that people believe in God because they want to believe. They find positive benefits from perceiving themselves to have a personal savior, an omnipotent mind who has a personal plan for them and looks out for them.

Once you believe that God exists, God does in fact exist, and is at least as palpable as economics, family, and citizenship. Once you recognize that the United States of America exists only as a collection of ideas about our relationships to each other, the land, and our history, you can see how tenuous that image really is. If we desire to be bound together as one people, we must continually reinforce the idea of nationality and teach it to our children. If we all stopped believing in the existence of our nation, then it would quite literally cease to exist. We would still have the trees, the people, the rivers, buildings, and cars, but the sense of purpose and context would be replaced with something else.

In much the same way, if we all forgot about God, then there would be no God as far as we are concerned. Just as there can be no sound without a medium, there can be no God without us.

Much of what people of faith perceive as God is the power of a shared vision that reinforces behaviors which enrich society. Notice that this says nothing about the ultimate existence of an omnipotent spirit residing in some supernatural other world. Unless there is a dramatic revelation, the only God we can know is the God in our mind as taught to us by our culture and religion.

This force, the God in the society, need not be tied to a traditional religion. As the literal image of the Christian God becomes less palatable to some, this force of goodness, protection, and purpose has become attached to Government. Government, of

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course, does not exist as anything but the collective actions of people with political power. Yet Government has become a new medium for the spirit of God. Government becomes the lawgiver, the protector, the mysterious force of good that defines and manages the world.

If we perceive this to be so, then regardless of the actual benefit or goodness of Government, we will perceive it to be purposeful and wise. Government gives and Government takes away. Government helps he who helps himself, but the devil is in the detail, particularly IRS forms.

There is no measurable reality beyond our individual actions. All else is lenses and mirrors. The important thing to remember is that our actions are what count. God, whether perceived as a paternal creator, the way of nature, or anything else, is valuable only so far as that image assists our doing the right thing.

When the image of God is pursued as the message rather than the medium, the purpose of the medium can become lost in dogma. Something that should unite us all becomes a point of argument or fear. My God is better than your God. My God is better than your science. If you don't bow before my God you are evil and are going to hell. What a frightening world some people build for themselves.

Because of how our brains work, perception is reality. In fact, because everything we know and touch is filtered through our senses and our brain, perception is the only reality. Every fact we know is part of the fabric of our mind. If we perceive ourselves to be part of a nation, then duty to our country can become more important than our own lives. If we perceive ourselves to be children of God, then we will act in ways pleasing to God.

All of this happens regardless of the ultimate existence of a super natural God. As the preachers keep trying to tell us, what really matters is faith. If you have faith, then you have God.

The Golden Calf

Cultures across the land and through time have created specific, tangible definitions of God. God is creator, father, savior, force, guide. We are asked to select one and only one, and then consider that to be the final Truth while all others are false. You shall have no other gods before me.

We can condition our minds to perceive the soul as being connected to a real, supernatural reality. Going to church regularly makes angels and ghosts seem very real. Some people even switch

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religions and trade one set of beliefs for another. With enough focused attention and prayer, one could come to believe in ancient Egyptian gods. Sometimes when people encounter a strong personality who seems to provide answers to the mysteries of life, they can be convinced to believe in all kinds of things. Mass suicides led by charismatic leaders are not unheard of.

If you do not understand the difference between actual reality and the ideas we have about reality, it is possible to mistake these ideas as something genuine. Once you see this distinction and understand that belief in God is a conscious choice to condition our mind to a greater purpose, it becomes all but impossible to then actually step under any particular dogma and wear it as if it were the one and only Truth.

Actual reality is chaotic, mundane, and meaningless. Through the mechanism of our mind, we impose form and reason on top of this, creating a kind of mental lens through which we understand the world. This lens, however is not the same as the world itself.

By whatever mechanism, we all have an innate understanding of our soul. It is as real as we are, and we must all choose what it all really means. One can imagine us all to be separate, disconnected beings, each locked within a static, stoic mind, but that's simply not true. I write, you read. You speak, I hear. We are part of communities, families, and history. When you put our many ideas together into a community you move to yet another level, and the interplay and synergy of multiple communities contribute to building layers upon layers of complex civilization. This is a very real, very powerful force that is both invisible and outside of us. We can choose to give this no significance at all. We can choose to understand it as an abstract, secular phenomenon. Or, we can believe that it is somehow attached to a larger context, and then call that larger context God.

It is difficult to both believe in God and recognize the artifice of God at the same time. If someone makes a conscious choice to believe only for the sake of believing, there's no way to ever fully forget that God is just a made-up pretense. It is as artificial as making and then praying to a golden idol. So what idea can we select that empowers, motivates, and nourishes this complex intermingling of souls? What will increase comfort, community, civilization? We are alive, and so we value life. We know the difference between comfort and pain, and so we value comfort. Such

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things as love, patience, understanding, compassion, are tools with which we can experience and share more life, more comfort.

Not surprisingly, you find religion after religion, culture after culture, rediscovering the same thing. Compassion, understanding, patience, forgiveness.

Without some type of metaphor or system of belief that encourages these stabilizing trends, we may never have been able to experience any type of meaningful culture. Religion, or some form of deeper, affirming perspective, is as necessary to our civilization as food is to our bodies. Without it you end up with war, bigotry, fear, and other cancers of a healthy people.

Organized religions provide a stabilizing system of belief, but instead of approaching it in the abstract, they tend to express these ideas in concrete stories and examples. Even if the parables of a religion seem outdated and irrelevant in today's world they are no less profound in what they're trying to explain.

We have grown beyond the simple parables of the past. It's hard to believe that heaven is really in the sky, because we've been there in planes and space shuttles. It's hard to believe that our entire universe exists so that a man two thousand years ago could be killed to forgive everyone's sins. Still, we can find value in the underlying stories that tell us we can move beyond fear, hate, and the limits of the flesh into a new life of love, community, and the unbounded history and tomorrow of the soul.

This is why, even with the storybook tales of Eden and floods there is still so much power in religion. It is far too easy to focus on the veneer of a religion. The rituals and stories aren't nearly as important as the truths to which they ultimately lead us. But just as it is a mistake to label any particular belief in God as the one and only truth, it is also a mistake, and perhaps a more dangerous mistake, to reject all of spirituality because the dogma of a particular religion no longer makes sense in our modern world.

The battle between religions, or between the religious and secular aspects of our lives, is really a struggle to define the lens through which we perceive God. I expect traditional religions will find it increasingly difficult to insist that their ancient stories be accepted as fact. Sadly, their most valiant efforts to hold onto the trappings of their faith may actually encourage people to dismiss their spiritual nature altogether.

We should be able to acknowledge the connections and mystery of life without descending into supernatural mythologies.

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Somewhere between science and fantasy lies a God that neither overpowers the world nor is diminished by it. This way of thinking about God may still be a construction of our minds, but no more or less so than many other shared fallacies such as nationality, honor, race, and justice that stitch together the fabric of our societies.

The Other Other World

What is the weight of an idea? How can you measure the force of hope, or of despair?

Even if we could observe consciousness at work, and watch the neurons fire as understanding and insight take place, this would be no substitute for the experience of being alive and aware.

Somewhere between the chemicals and matter of the brain lies an aware being, capable of creativity, kindness, and curiosity.

We write music, stories, and epic novels. We draw pictures, paint, and sculpt. We have hopes and dreams. Before we take pencil to paper we have an image in our mind, and through practice we gain the ability to create more precise and complex art. The supernatural other world is not necessary to explain this, and yet these mental images which precede the physical art, the decisions that precede our actions, seem to nestle somewhere in between the atoms.

Deep down there may be a rational, scientific explanation for it all, but this has little to do with our perception. Our thoughts and ideas seem to float through us, rather than rise from some chaotic churning of brain juice. This phenomenon, this secular other world, can be both grounded in reason, yet beyond understanding. Moments of intuition, or that second when a complex problem suddenly transforms into the clarity of a solution, seem miraculous to us.

The way we think about our mind is not that much different than the way we think about everything else. That is, we make mental models and connect them together. We create in our minds such things as nations, marriages, and responsibilities. On the physical level, these things have no existence. There are only people, comprised of so much water and chemicals, moving about.

We create meaning with the mechanism of imagination, and then, through language, we compare and share our fantasies with each other. This invisible world of ideas is every bit as important to us as the physical aspects of our lives. However, as important as all

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of these things are, they are quite arbitrary. We could, as a society, choose to build very different models with different relationships and expectations.

Religion is a model, so are politics, science, and property. All of these ideas and models swim around in our heads and manifest our reality. We are born with clear minds. Parents and society tell us what is expected of us and what is right and wrong. Slowly our models emerge and we participate in the shared illusion that is our culture.

As an atheist I recognize that God is merely another morsel in this expansive cultural soup of the mind. But if we acknowledge the validity of citizenship, debt, honor, next week, forgiveness, and all the other illusions that give substance and meaning to our lives, then we can also accept that God can be a very real part of our lives.

But this is not the God of religion, which proclaims that there is an actual force external to us, and which is part of some supernatural domain. This God is as much a part of us as our names.

On one level, this kind of personal God is less satisfactory than an external power that can punish and assist us. On another level, this is so much more fulfilling, because we no longer have to pretend that science is trying to lie to us, or that heaven has gates made of pearl. We can have a more complete, consistent understanding of this great force in our lives, and finally be whole and at peace.

We should aspire toward holding in our minds those images that promote happiness, health, and well being of our communities and ourselves. We should work to rid our minds of the negative, limiting images that can cause anger, fear, addiction, or conflict.

Of all the ideas that might end up in our head, of all the vast array of models and images of the world that we might build, there is one optimal set of brain patterns that will maximize joy within our life and the lives of everyone we touch. We can give a name to this set of carefully selected beliefs and images of the world. Our Higher Self. This is the best person we could be. It is, of course, just another mental model. Thinking of our Higher Self as an attainable and desirable goal gives us a pathway to selecting and controlling all the other ideas about the world that we might have. It's the bootstrap idea that opens the spirit to limitless possibilities.

If you believe in your Higher Self, you will see yourself as capable of moving ever closer to that ideal. Through meditation, prayer, or just quiet moments by yourself, you can imagine what your Higher Self would do. You could, if you choose, engage in a

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silent dialog, asking for guidance. However you structure this vision of your Higher Self, as infinite spirit temporarily assigned to a physical body, as a soul that is part of God, or as an abstract set of enabling mental models, let it guide you. Know that salvation is only a moment away if you open your heart and allow your spirit to lead you on the right path.

As powerful as the image of our Higher Self is, there is one that is even greater. I don't think it can be said any more clearly.

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Not as a metaphor, but as a definition. All of our gods, through so many ages and lands have been reflections of this simple truth. There doesn't have to be a heaven to know that love and peace are better than hate and war. There doesn't have to be a God for God to be with us. We share with each other a connection to that which separates us from animals. We live as part of a great chain of history and culture, granted to us by language, purpose, and our intellect. We are the keepers of knowledge and the vessel of God.

Verily, so be it.