Just Thinking is a teaching resource of Ravi Zacharias International Ministries and exists to engender thoughtful engagement with apologetics, Scripture, and the whole of life.

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During the 2017 Boston Marathon, first-time marathoner Jordan Hasay repeated to herself, “Good job, Paula, good job, Paula.” “Paula” is not her middle name but rather a reference to Paula Radcliffe, the women’s world record holder for the marathon—and the name Hasay’s mother affectionately called her before she died unexpectedly a few months ago. That epithet and the numbers 2:25 to 2:23, the window of time her legendary coach Alberto Salazar told her she was capable of running, spurred Hasay to a 2:23 finish. She shattered the fastest marathon debut by an American woman by almost three minutes and finished in third place, an amazing accomplishment for an athlete who had never competed at that long distance before.

Afterwards, Hasay told Runners World, “She always calls me Paula…. So I just kept telling myself, ‘Good job, Paula, good job, Paula.’ That helped me get through some of the tough times…. I felt really blessed to have her out there running every step with me.”

The sentences we speak to ourselves shape who we are and who we are becoming. Sports psychologists have long recognized the power of words and their effect on an athlete during training and particularly competition. Words form images in our minds, create the stories we tell ourselves, and even portend our future. “Paula” and “2:23 is possible” were writ large during Hasay’s training and race; as her comments so poignantly reveal, she even felt her mother beside her as she ran.

Throughout the Scriptures we discover this same metaphor of the transforming images words can create: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105) and “Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart” (Proverbs 3:3). “For the word of God is living and active,” says Hebrews 4:12, “sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of
the heart.” As such, the call to remember God’s words and his acts in history is a central theme throughout the Scriptures; the verb “remember” is found nearly 130 times in the Old Testament alone. The verb connotes not just “being mindful” of something or someone, namely God, but also “to trust” and “to hold onto.”

Not surprisingly, the verb often stands in the imperative: “Remember the LORD your God” (Deuteronomy 7:18). “Remember the day you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb” (Deut. 4:10). “Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome” (Nehemiah 4:14). In fact, in every instance in Deuteronomy, “remember” is found in the context of God’s covenant with his people. When they were in Egypt, they listened to another story—the tempting lies of their oppressors—and forgot God’s words. And so, when God gives Moses the Ten Commandments, He repeats this injunction, “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (see Deut. 5:6 and 15). These, of course, are the very words that Jewish people utter today when celebrating Passover.

Likewise, the articles in this issue encourage us to consider the story that shapes each of our lives. Is it, Vince Vitale and Ravi Zacharias ask, the assumption that all religions basically say the same thing? Is it, surmises Stuart McAllister, the shout of social media and the constant lure of new experiences over the whisper of wisdom? Is it perhaps, asks Jill Carattini, that we have not remembered God’s story or recognized the power of competing narratives? Or is it, rather, the felt sense of inadequacy and shame that cause us to question our story as God’s people? As our colleague Simon Wenham astutely observes, “Such insecurities are only natural in a world that puts so much emphasis on what we achieve, but the gospel message is radically different because it applies to everyone equally, irrespective of who we are or what we have done.”

We pray as you read through another 25th anniversary issue of Just Thinking that you may be spurred on by the transformative power of the gospel message and God’s every step beside you.

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Hebrews 4:12

Danielle DuRant
Editor
The Questions of Pluralism

By Vince Vitale

One of the deeply held assumptions of Western culture is that all religious paths are equally valid. But in answering such questions as “Am I loved?” and “What does the future hold?”, Christianity, Islam, and secular humanism—arguably the world’s three most influential worldviews—have radically different things to say about what we care about most.
I love sports. Always have. It is hard to find a sport I don’t like. But here is a sporting experience I would never want to have.

Imagine being thrown into a game without knowing when it started, when it will finish, what the objective of the game is, or what the rules are. What would you do? You’d probably ask the other players around you to answer those four questions for you.

What if they responded with many different answers? Or what if they simply carried on playing, uninterested in your questions and looking at you oddly for asking them?

Next, you would look to a coach for help, but what if the coach was standing there, looking at the chaos, and yelling, “Great job, guys! You’re all doing great! Keep going! We’ve got a first-place trophy waiting for all of you!”

Finally, you would turn to find the referee or umpire for definitive answers to your questions. But what if the players had gotten frustrated with the referee’s calls and sent him home?

And now imagine the conversations about the game on the drive home. They would be completely meaningless. It is our knowledge of the start, the finish, the objective, and the rules of a game that provide us with the freedom to play it and to enjoy it in a meaningful way.

Sadly, this is not just a game; this is a reality for many who are struggling to live a meaningful life in a pluralistic culture. As a society, we are losing the answers to these four crucial questions:

Origin—Where did I come from?
Meaning—Why am I here?
Morality—How should I live?
Destiny—Where am I headed?

Recently I was on a university campus in Chicago and had the privilege of engaging with a variety of students about life’s biggest questions. One day we set up a whiteboard on a main thoroughfare that read, “What is the meaning of life?” Columns across the top of the board offered a variety of choices—for example, personal success, to pass on one’s genes, there is no meaning, to love others, etc. My lasting memory is of students walking up to the board, taking the marker in hand, staring at the different options, and then standing there, paralyzed, sometimes for minutes on end.

Many of the students whom we spoke to, when asked why they were finding it so difficult, said that it was because they didn’t feel we should have to choose. “Why can’t I pick more than one?” was the constant refrain. These students weren’t saying there is no such thing as truth. Most of them realized that, as philosopher Roger Scruton puts it, “A writer who says that there are no truths... is asking you not to believe him. So don’t.” It also wasn’t that these students were relativists about truth, reducing truth to mere individual preference; rather, they were pluralists about truth. They believed in objective truth but wanted to say that we are all grasping at that truth in equally valid ways.
THREE BAD ASSUMPTIONS AND THREE GOOD DESIRES

Before we know how to respond to pluralism, or any approach to truth, we need to ask what motivates it, and we need not to assume that, just because two people are pluralists, they are pluralists for the same underlying reason. It is the deeper motivations that we need to identify and speak to if we are to address individuals rather than a theory.

Pluralism about truth can be motivated by at least three bad assumptions and three good desires. First, the questionable assumptions.

1. EQUAL CLAIMS

Some people adopt a pluralist approach to truth because they have the false assumption that all, or at least many of, the major ways of seeing the world are fundamentally in agreement. On the most important points, they are all saying basically the same thing.

I recently met a woman on the street in Chicago who told me, “I think religion is a good thing. I think all the religions are the same.” Some would want to revise her comment: “I think religion is a bad thing. I think all religions are the same.” Nonetheless, a lot of people are in agreement that the major religions, and even the major worldviews more generally, are fundamentally the same.

This is a common and also dangerous mistake. The more you study them, the clearer it becomes that while the major worldviews are sometimes superficially similar, they are fundamentally very different and often at odds.

Take Islam and Christianity. The very three things you need to believe in Christianity in order to be reconciled to God—that Jesus is God, that He died on the cross, and that He rose from the dead—Islam asserts are completely wrong to believe, and believing in Jesus’ deity will even send a person to hell.

But let’s boil our assessment of worldviews down even further, to what we care about most: love and the future. One of my favorite questions to ask people is, “What causes 80% of your stress in life?” The first time I asked that question of someone, without missing a beat they responded, “People like you asking me questions like that!” I then asked what causes the other 20%, and we had a great conversation.

So often when I ask about what causes stress and anxiety, the answers boil down to one of these two concerns: Am I loved? What does the future hold?

Christianity, Islam, and secular humanism, arguably the world’s three most influential worldviews, have radically different things to say about what we care about most.

How Are We Loved?

First, Islam. The Qur’an has extremely little to say of God’s love, and Al-Ghazali, arguably the most influential Muslim after Muhammad, pronounced that “[Allah] remains above the feeling of love.” In the few instances where God’s love is referenced in the Qur’an, it’s clear that any love Allah has for human persons is reserved only for those who have earned it. Allah loves those who “do good” (Sura 2:195; 3:134, 148; 5:93), the “just” (5:42; 60:8) and the “evenhanded” (49:9), those who are “mindful of him” (9:4, 7), those who “turn to him” and “keep themselves clean” (2:222), and those who “never knowingly persist in doing wrong” (3:135), and Allah “truly loves those who fight in solid lines for his cause” (61:4).

If those are the conditions for meriting Allah’s love, the list of those loved by Allah must be a short list.

In stark contrast to its minimal references to God’s love, the Qur’an emphasizes repeatedly that there are people
whom Allah does not love. We are told that Allah does not love evildoers (3:57, 140), corrupters (5:64; 28:77), or transgressors (2:190; 5:87; 7:55). He does not love the arrogant, the boastful (4:36; 31:18), the conceited, the miserly (57:24), or ungrateful sinners (2:276). He “does not love anyone given to treachery or sin” (4:107), and he does not love those who ignore his commands (3:32); he is “certainly the enemy” of disbelievers (2:98).

On the crucial question of love, Islam is not only different than Christianity, but in some key respects directly opposite to it. In Islam, if you love and obey Allah, he may love you back. In Christianity, Jesus explicitly objects to only loving those who love you first: “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them” (Luke 6:32). In Christianity, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). While we were everything that is unlovable, God loved us enough to give His life for us. In Christianity, “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:10–11). Christianity does not ask us to live good lives so that God might love us; it is because God loved us first that we are emboldened to live lives of goodness and love. On the question of love, Christianity and Islam are not just different, but the order of love is completely reversed.

One other person whom Allah does not like is the one who is “wasteful” (6:141; 7:31), sometimes translated as the one who is “prodigal.” Jesus has something very different to say about the prodigal. In one of the most famous stories every told, He depicts God as a loving father longing for his prodigal son to come home (Luke 15:11–32). The prodigal son has given his father every reason not to love him: demanding his inheritance early (which in that ancient culture was basically to wish his father dead), abandoning his family, wasting on wild, meaningless living what his father had worked his whole life to provide. The prodigal was proud, ungrateful, unjust, corrupt—an evildoer.

And yet at the mere sight of the prodigal son, when he is still far off in the distance, the father hikes up his long robe, exposes his legs, and takes off running (something deeply shameful for an ancient Middle Eastern man to do). He kisses his son (the text literally says that he falls on his son’s neck) and embraces him and welcomes him home with the best robe (probably the father’s own), a ring on his finger (probably a signet ring denoting the authority to act on behalf of the family), and sandals for his feet (a sign of freedom). What a picture of intimacy!

I have long wondered what the prodigal son was thinking when he saw his father sprinting toward him from afar. He knew he did not deserve his father’s love. He probably thought the father had been weighing his deeds and was running to give him what he deserved.

There will be a day when each of us sees God running toward us. I wonder what you picture when you picture that meeting. What emotion do you see on God’s face as He sprints toward you?

How are you loved? In Christianity, you are loved with the love of a running father. Not if you’ve been keeping yourself pure and clean, not if you look the way you’re supposed to look or get the job you’re supposed to get, not even if you’ve been serving Him and spending time with Him.

God’s love is no-ifs love. And that is why the Bible alone can claim this: “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the
present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39). Nothing can separate you from God's love, and nothing can diminish God's love for you. Nothing.

We are all prodigals in our own way, and Allah has no love for prodigal children. Why? Because he’s not a father. In the Qur’an, Allah is not once called “father.” In fact, the Qur’an says explicitly that “Allah does not beget” (112:3), thereby excluding fatherhood. In the New Testament alone, God is called “Father” over two hundred times.8

And this explains why Islam has to deny the three core beliefs of Christianity that we began with—Jesus’ divinity, death, and resurrection. Only a God who is also a loving parent would come to suffer alongside His children, would be willing to die for His children, and would battle death itself if it meant seeing His children again. Islam can’t understand Jesus’ suffering and death because it doesn’t understand God's love.

Islam only allows for the relationship of servitude toward Allah. Interestingly, being accepted as his father’s “hired servant” (Luke 15:19) is the best the prodigal son thought he could hope for. But Jesus says, “I no longer call you servants... Instead, I have called you friends” (John 15:15). God is not only our father but He is our friend, our brother (Hebrews 2:11), our lover (Song of Songs 5:2), our bridegroom (Isaiah 62:5), our spouse (Isaiah 54:5). He is our mother hen who longs to gather us under protective wings (Matthew 23:37). In Islam, to claim a relationship of intimacy with Allah is blasphemous, still today punishable in extreme ways in some parts of the world. The Bible is at pains to show through every possible metaphor that what God desires most of us is intimate, loving relationship.

I find it telling that when we think of God’s intellect, we quickly acknowledge that it must far surpass any human intellect. But when we think of God’s love, we rarely think of His love as stronger than that of a human parent. Why is that? Is it because deep down we doubt whether we are lovable? From the perspective of Christianity, as small as our minds are compared to the totality of everything that could be known, that is how small our conception of God’s love is compared to the reality of its extravagance.

**How Should We Love?**

How we believe ourselves to be loved is perhaps the single most important belief for any person, because how we are loved will determine how we love. Likewise, how we love will influence how those around us love, and how those around them love, meaning that the consequences of how we love will stretch far beyond our perception in both time and space. This is why it is absolutely critical whom your god says you should love.

Growing up, my friends and family came closest to playing the role of God in my life, and our attitude was, “If someone is good to you, be ten times as good to them; but if someone wrongs you, give them hell.” Seek to love those who love you, but deny love to those who oppose you.

Culturally, most of us were what I have heard called “Chreasters”—we felt the need to attend church on Christmas and Easter, but our understanding of the Christian faith was very thin. Unbeknownst to us, our approach to loving others was actually much closer to Islam than it was to Christianity. The Qur’an says that until people believe in Allah alone, “enmity and hatred” is a “good example” of the stance Muslims should take toward non-Muslims (60:4).

Muslims hold to a doctrine of abrogation, which claims that Muhammad’s
later and most developed teachings should be weighted more heavily than his earlier teachings. 9 Sura 9, which was written just a couple of years before Muhammad’s death, and hence among the Qur’an’s most developed views, enjoins Muslims to attack and assault people to bring them into submission to Allah: “…wherever you encounter the idolaters, kill them, seize them, besiege them, wait for them at every lookout post” (9:5); “Fight those of the People of the Book who do not [truly] believe in God and the Last Day, who do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden, who do not obey the rule of justice, until they pay the tax promptly and agree to submit” (9:29); “If you do not go out and fight, God will punish you severely and put others in your place” (9:39); “You who believe, fight the disbelievers near you and let them find you standing firm” (9:123). Muhammad modeled submission to these commands, fighting in or ordering at least twenty-five battles during the last ten years of his life. 10

Christianity’s most fully developed commands are the direct words of Jesus: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44); “Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:27–31).

The contrast could not be starker. It was precisely the fact that Jesus spent time with and showered love upon those who were not submitted to God that infuriated the religious leaders of His day (Luke 5:30; 7:34). From Jesus’ perspective, “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:32–36). All too often in Islam it is thought that people will be rewarded for killing enemies. In Christianity, it is putting your enemy’s life ahead of your own that is rewarded.

In his campaign for the Democratic nomination for president of the United States, Bernie Sanders described his views about God as such: “Everyone believes in the Golden Rule, and we call that god.” This is the pluralism I have been addressing, and it is completely unfounded. The Golden Rule: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” Most people don’t believe in this. The secular worldview of my cultural upbringing certainly didn’t. Islam certainly doesn’t. Still fewer live by it. The Golden Rule was radically distinctive when Jesus first spoke it, and it is radically distinctive today.

We all follow a god, whether supernatural or secular. How does your god feel about those who oppose him? Who does your god ask you to love? No two questions could be more critical for the human race.

**Where Are We Headed?**
Ultimate destiny tells us a huge amount about present reality.

You can tell a lot about someone by where they are headed. Take the trajectory of your life—the trajectory of your character, morals, choices, ideals, dreams, and relationships. Imagine extending an
honest assessment of that trajectory by ten, twenty, thirty years. Where are you headed? For better or for worse, the answer to that question says a lot about who we are today.

Likewise, you can tell a lot about the essence of a worldview by what it has to say about human destiny. This is why, as Ravi puts it, “When you start a train of thought, it’s important to check the ticket to see where it is going to let you off.”

Among the future-oriented refrains of my youth were, “You need to put a roof over your head and food on the table,” “You only live once,” “The world is your oyster,” “You can do whatever you put your mind to,” “You make your own destiny.”

Years later, I opened the Bible and was surprised at what I found: “The Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20), “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink” (Matthew 6:25), “Whoever lives by believing in me will never die” (John 11:26), “Our citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20), “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5), “Many are the plans in a person’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails” (Proverbs 19:21).

Once again, Christianity and the secular values of my youth were very different. And even once I became convinced that some sort of divine being existed, the major religions still had radically different things to say about where I was headed.

“All paths lead to God” is a tempting sentence. It has a certain positivity to it. But in actuality only Christianity even claims to lead to God. The Christian destination is an intimate, flourishing, life-giving relationship with God Himself: “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3); “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me” (Revelation 3:20). Primarily, for a Christian, heaven is not a place but a person; it is not a reward but a relationship.

The Christianization of Western culture has sometimes resulted in us projecting the destination of intimate friendship with God onto other religious worldviews. But in fact this is distinctively Christian. In Buddhism and some traditions of Hinduism, the destination of Nirvana is the cessation of self and the elimination of desire, two essential components of personal relationship. According to tradition, it was on the very night that his son was born that Gautama Buddha left to pursue his life of detachment from anything or anyone that could cause him suffering. Contrast this with Jesus Christ, who did everything He possibly could to attach Himself to our suffering in His pursuit of relationship with us.

Likewise, the destination of Islam is not relationship with Allah. The paradise spoken of in Islam is one in which Allah is almost entirely absent. Instead, paradise is depicted as a place of carnal pleasure: wine, sex, perpetual virgins, young boys who wait on men (55:56–57, 70–78; 56:34–40). Hasn’t this paradise already been tried and found wanting? How many who have reached the pinnacle of earthly pleasure have testified that it is anything but paradise, that ultimately our longing for authentic relationship cannot be satisfied by anything else?

How Do We Get There?

Christianity is distinctive in its claim to lead to God. But, actually, there’s a twist. If we are being precise, even Christianity doesn’t claim to lead us to find God. In fact, it claims the opposite. It claims that God came to find us: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10).
Once more I am struck by the fact that the ideology of my cultural background was much closer to Islam than to Christianity. I accepted that “you can’t rely on anyone but yourself,” that “nothing is free in life,” and that “you get what you deserve.”

Islam affirms a similar inability to rely on anyone else for what is most important in life. If you fail to uphold the mandatory Pillars of Islam, no one can save you. In the words of the Qur’an, “We have bound each human being’s destiny to his neck” (17:13), and “that man will only have what he has worked toward” (53:38–39). “No soul will bear another’s burden” (17:15). In another place, “No burdened soul will bear the burden of another: even if a heavily laden soul should cry for help, none of its load would be carried, not even by a close relative” (35:18). Judgment day is “the Day when no soul will be able to do anything for another” (82:19).

Buddhism and Hinduism are in agreement in so far as it is only through the personal effort of pursuing the four noble truths or following the noble eightfold path or meriting good karma—in other words, it is only on the basis of what you do—that one attains the goal of enlightenment.

Here again, Jesus stands alone. He urges us, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28–30). Jesus explicitly offers to bear our burdens for us: “He Himself bore our sins in his body on the cross” (1 Peter 2:24). Salvation is therefore not something we earn but a “free gift” (Romans 6:23): “by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9). Contrary to every other major belief system, the Christian God “does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities” (Psalm 103:10). So great is His love.

Because where we are headed in Christianity is based on what God has already done and not on what we might do, we can be assured of our destiny in a way that is not possible in Islam. No one can know in Islam if he has done enough. Even if the scales tip in his favor on the last day, Allah’s sovereignty is such that he is not bound by the scales. For even those who obey Allah, “the punishment of their Lord is not something to feel safe from” (70:28). The Qur’an instructs even Muhammad to say, “I do not know what will be done with me or you” (46:9).

In Christianity, there is a promise of salvation for those who trust Jesus. Explaining his motivation for writing, one of the biblical authors says, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). Likewise, Paul says, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9). Many other verses could be cited in support. Jesus Christ’s starting point is everyone else’s finish line—the assurance of salvation!

We can have this assurance because in Christianity we are not asked to build the eternal roofs over our heads. When told by His disciples that they don’t know the way to their ultimate destiny, Jesus responded, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be
where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going” (John 14:1–4). They knew the way because they knew Jesus, and He is the way.

A Muslim taxi driver once told me, “I’m terrified of judgment. Any Muslim will tell you that.” After I explained that in Christianity we don’t need to fear judgment because Jesus bore our judgment, he responded, with heavy emotion on his face, “It’s a beautiful story. I wish it were true.”

In Christianity, Jesus conceived of our eternal home, He purchased it, He is preparing it, and one day He will move us into it. He is the architect, the buyer, the decorator, and the moving company. This could not be further from having to put a roof over our own heads. This is getting so much more than we have striven for or could ever deserve.

So to return to our question, do all paths lead to God? No. None do. Some claim to lead us to some sort of reward or enlightenment. Naturalistic worldviews must admit that ultimately we are headed nowhere—for personal death and species extinction. Even Christianity claims not that we are led to God but that God’s love led Him to us.

When it comes to what keeps us up at night—Am I loved? What does my future hold?—we are faced with a choice between two fundamentally very different ways of viewing the world. Must we fight to earn love or are we free to enjoy it? Must others fight to earn our love or will we share it freely? Is our future uncertain or is it secure? And will it include the relationship we long for most?

**2. Equally Rational Claims**

*Faith Is Blind*

A second reason that some are tempted by the thought that all or many worldviews are equally valid is because the various views are taken to be on equal intellectual footing.

Perhaps the most common reason for thinking this is an assumption that faith is opposed to reason, that faith is by definition blind. We can have evidence and facts about scientific and historical claims, but when it comes to big picture philosophical claims about God, meaning, morality, love, and destiny, it’s all just a blind leap in the dark and therefore equally valid or invalid.

I don’t have space here to share with you a lot of the evidence that was instrumental in my own journey to faith. However, I can encourage you that conceiving of faith as opposed to or in any way in tension with reason is not a Christian understanding of faith. Quite clearly, if you take the time to look, this is not how the Bible understands faith, nor is it how the earliest followers of Christianity understood faith.

As a Princeton undergraduate studying philosophy, when I first began investigating the Christian faith, evidence and reasoning were extremely important to me. I knew that if Christianity meant “pretending to know things you don’t know,”

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it was not for me. But when I finally opened the Bible, that is not at all what I found.

I found the Bible praising the people of Berea for their high intellectual standards and saying they were “of more noble character than those in Thessalonica” not due to blind faith but because they “examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11). I found that the one clause that Jesus added to the foremost Jewish commandment to love God with your heart, soul, and strength was to also love God “with all your mind” (Luke 10:27). I learned that, according to the Bible, the transformation that occurs in a person when they trust in Christ happens not by some sort of brain-dismissing self-delusion but by “the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2).
As I continued reading, I found that the “acts” that Jesus’ followers are described as performing in the biblical book *The Acts of the Apostles* include “reasoning,” “arguing,” “persuading,” “examining,” “debating,” “disputing,” “explaining,” “defending,” “refuting,” “convincing,” and even “proving.” All those concepts are used, and that’s just in that one book! On top of that, the most frequent description used in the New Testament to refer to someone’s conversion to Christianity is to say they were “persuaded.” If you commit to having a strong grasp of the intellectual case for Christianity, as the disciples did, I believe you will find what they found—that the case for Christianity is very strong.

Perhaps the most vital evidence for the Christian faith lies in the resurrection. The Bible says that God has given “proof” to “everyone” by “raising [Jesus] from the dead” (Acts 17:31). That is a big claim, and, what’s more, it is a highly falsifiable claim. Buddha said look to the wisdom of my teaching; that is a very subjective measurement. Muhammad said look to the beauty and eloquence of the Qur’an; again, tough to prove one way or another. But Jesus provided an objective standard for His authority: “After three days I will rise again” (Matthew 27:63). That’s a dangerous claim to make. If the authorities had simply produced Jesus’ dead body, the claim would have been falsified. But they never did.  

I have vivid memories of exploring Christianity for the first time during my studies at Princeton. I was absolutely floored by the strength of the evidence for the miraculous resurrection of Jesus. I had never even considered that there could be rational arguments for such a claim. It was beyond conceivable to me that one of the most respected and influential philosophers of the last half century—Professor Richard Swinburne of Oxford University, a scholar known especially for his aptitude in evaluating evidence—could argue in a book published by Oxford University Press that, based on the available historical evidence today, it is 97% likely that Jesus miraculously rose from the dead.  

With my head and heart spinning from this entirely new treasure of inquiry, I arranged to meet with the two top New Testament professors at the university. They were not Christians, and I thought surely, being experts in the field, they would be able to provide me with plausible theories that could explain the relevant data without appealing to a miraculous resurrection.

One of the professors glanced toward a mass hallucination theory without conviction. This is a theory that is riddled with problems, and as a result it has earned no credibility in the scholarly literature. The other professor told me that, as a historian, he was not interested in the question. The presumption seemed to be that as soon as we start talking about the miraculous, we are no longer talking about history. I have never been able to figure out why he thought this. I began to wonder whether G. K. Chesterton was right: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.”  

If you have not looked into the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, please do. There is nothing like this early, public, multiple-attested, eyewitness-based evidence in any other religion. Having now studied the evidence at Princeton and Oxford, I am only more astounded at how remarkable it is.

Many people have heard one or two pieces of supposed evidence against God and have jumped to a conclusion without ever bothering to make a thorough investigation. Too much is at stake here to cut inquiry short. How devastat-
ing it would be to stand before God one day and have nothing to say but “I never cared enough to look into You.” If God made us, He would ensure that a sincere intellectual search would point in His direction. That is exactly what I and countless others have found, and what many other sincere seekers continue to find every day.

3. EQUAL IMPACT
A third misconception that can lead to an “all paths are equally valid view” is the assumption that, at the end of the day, the practical payoff of all the major worldviews is pretty much the same.

Not long ago I had a debate with an atheist philosopher, and at one point we were asked to speak about how our differing worldviews allow us to deal practically with personal suffering. My interlocutor implied he didn’t think that Christianity offered a real advantage over atheism in this regard, citing the fact that, at the end of the day, whether it is a Christian funeral or an atheist funeral, everyone is devastated.

I disagreed. The last funeral I had been to happened to be a Christian funeral. It was a celebration of the life that had been and of the life that was to come, not just superficially but deeply and authentically. The brother of the deceased invited people to show their appreciation for his brother’s life with a round of applause, and, before we knew what was happening, all over this posh village church, people had climbed up onto the pews and were pumping their arms and hooting and hollering louder and more joyfully than any sporting match I have ever been to. The cheering carried on, as time reached out and embraced eternity; until every face was smiling—no, beaming—through tears, and every inch of the room was filled with hope. It was one of the great privileges of my life to have witnessed and participated in this true farewell.

This was a man who died in his thirties. I wish you could have been there. I can remember thinking to myself during the funeral service, If only that atheist philosopher could see this, he would have no choice but to retract his statement.

A college student recently said to me on the campus of Portland State University, “I think there is a universal human longing for peace, and I think that points to the reality of something that can fulfill that longing, sort of like how hunger points to the reality of food.” So far I was following. But then he concluded, “So I think it’s a good idea to believe in something, whatever that is.” He had this assumption that all big picture worldviews would meet this universal human need more or less equally well, that the practical payoff would be more or less the same.

But that is not true. Any old worldview will not do. Any old god will not do. The ancient Greek gods were fickle in their dealings with humankind, as likely to bring anxiety as to bring peace. Allah will not bring peace but rather a fear of judgment. The indifference of a deist god will not bring peace. Those who have most “successfully” worshipped sex and money testify that those gods will not bring peace. Many people have never said yes to God because they have never been presented with a God who can actually bring peace.

Last year a student of mine named Ariel was diagnosed with a cavernoma (cells in her brain that are prone to bleeding). She was told that they will bleed again, and that her options are either to undergo a surgery that will, at best, leave her severely disabled, or to do nothing and live with a life expectancy of less than five years. She is twenty-three years old.

The week after receiving this news, Ariel came to class to update her class-
mates, who had also become dear friends. She talked them through her medical condition with an incredible poise, comforting them along the way by smiling and cracking jokes.

Then she shared with us three insights that she had found comfort in as she had processed what is happening: First, she said, “God has good plans for my life, and I believe He won’t take me until His purposes for my life have been fulfilled.” She continued, “Jesus knew what it was to only have a few years left to make an impact on this earth, and yet He could say ‘my time has not yet fully come’ (John 7:8), and He could still see each day as a day to serve God and serve others.” And then her final encouragement: “You know, my condition has made me more aware of the fact that my body is going to grow weaker, and that I could die at any time. But actually that doesn’t make me any different from anyone else. That’s true of every one of us. I may be more aware of it, but every one of us has to ask the question of how we are going to live, given that today could be our final day.”

I had the privilege of interviewing Ariel about what she’s been through while she was still recovering from the concussion that prompted her diagnosis. With dark glasses on to protect her eyes, which had become painfully sensitive to light, she shared with me that there was a point at which she found herself looking in the mirror, testing the limited mobility she had on her right side. And she can remember thinking to herself, Is this the healthiest I am ever going to be? Is this the strongest I am ever going to be? Is this the prettiest I am ever going to be?

Then she told me of the peacefulessness that came over her as she remembered the answer to those questions: “No. Absolutely not.”

Ariel spoke about the joy of knowing that one day her body will be able to do far more than it ever has before. I know she loves to snowboard, so I asked her if she thought there would be snowboarding in the life to come, and I wish you could have heard how unhesitatingly and how confidently she responded, “Absolutely! And soccer, too!” And I wish you could have seen the radiant smile on her face as she said it.

The atheist philosopher I debated was wrong. Christianity is not just about believing some new ideas. It is a real, personal, life-giving relationship with the “Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6), and that is why it makes the most concrete and tangible difference to the strength and comfort we can have through even the worst that this life has to offer, as well as to the hope we can have that we are not headed for death but rather for greater and greater life.

THREE GOOD DESIRES

Often even more important than identifying what we need to deny in a worldview that we disagree with is identifying what we need to affirm.

Every way of seeing the world seeks to explain human desires and to explore whether reality will lead to their fulfillment. Often these desires are good, at least in their uncorrupted forms. Often the problem is not with the desires but rather that we settle for a merely partial fulfillment of them. As C. S. Lewis puts it, we are “like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.”

What this means is that even when an “ism” needs to be rejected, the motivation lying behind the “ism” may need to be endorsed and encouraged. As far as I can see, there are at least three good, God-given desires that find only a partial and distorted fulfillment in pluralism.
1. EQUAL VALUE

*The Danger of Disagreement*

First, many of us sense deep down, at least on our better days, that we must be committed to the equal value of every single person.

Shouldn’t we therefore shun claims that *our* truth is the right one? Doesn’t disagreeing lead to devaluing which leads to intolerance which ends in violence? This is a good worry. Indeed, this progression seems to be tested and proven nearly every day as we watch the news across the world and in our own country. And isn’t religion right at the root of this problem? Religion makes you believe things fiercely and disagree with others fiercely, and the result is the devaluation of other people.

There is a popular tradition that Gandhi once tried to go to church, but was turned away at the door with a racist slur. The words of the Indian philosopher Bara Dada, sometimes attributed to Gandhi himself, would have been an understandable reaction to such an experience: “Jesus is ideal and wonderful, but you Christians—you are not like Him.”

I have heard this story about Gandhi several times, and, whenever I do, my mind floods with all the things I have done that have probably kept people from the Christian faith, with all the times that I have failed to live up to the life of love and moral courage to which Jesus has called me. So, on the one hand, I am very sympathetic to and saddened by this objection.

Thankfully, many others I know, and myself too, have encountered Christian communities whose generous welcome and committed love have surpassed anything for which our hearts had dared to dream. These have been profoundly healing communities that you can describe as “family” and as “home” and really *mean* it.

If anything characterized the life that Jesus lived, the life right at the center of how we are to model our lives as Christians, it is that He valued, spent time with, and cared for those who were different and those on the margins of society: foreigners, women, adulterers, tax collectors, even those who murdered Him. He looked down from the Cross at those who were killing Him—those who could not be more starkly opposed to Him—and the words that came out of His mouth were “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34).

Right at the crux of Christianity is the claim that even when someone is most opposed to you, the Christian response—indeed, Christ’s response—is to value, to love, and to forgive. Religion has at times had violent consequences. Some religious leaders have had violent consequences. But Jesus Christ hasn’t. And what I follow first and foremost, what all authentic Christians follow first and foremost, is not a religion or an institution or a set of rules, but Jesus Himself.

The central gift of the Christian message has never been the claim that Christians will be morally perfect. The real gift at the center is the claim that Jesus of Nazareth willingly went to His death for our sakes and victoriously rose from the dead. And neither the actions of Christians in the tenth century nor the twenty-first can cast doubt on Christ’s actions in the first century.

*The Care of Authentic Christianity*

You can judge a tree by its fruit (Matthew 7:17). And when you judge authentic Christianity—Christianity that follows Jesus—by its fruit, you find a very good tree. It was precisely the fruit of authentic Christianity that caused it to spread exponentially in the first place. The early Church had an enormous role in poverty relief, so enormous that the fierce persecutor of
Christians, Emperor Julian the Apostate, while complaining in a letter that despite all his efforts he could not keep the Church from growing, exclaimed,

Why then do we...not observe how godlessness has been helped on, especially by their philanthropy to strangers, by the care which they take in the burial of the dead, and by the sobriety of living which they feign?... For it is disgraceful when no Jew is a beggar and the impious Galileans support our poor in addition to their own, that ours are seen to be in want of aid from us.... Do not, therefore, let us allow others to outvie us in good deeds, while we ourselves are disgraced by sloth.

Perhaps even more remarkable was the way Christians cared for the sick. Of those who survived the plagues of the first few centuries (e.g., the Antonine Plague (A.D. 165–180) and the Plague of Cyprian (250–270))—when diseased people were thrust out into the streets to die, physicians literally headed for the hills, and “No one did to another what he himself wished to experience”—so many of them had a Christian to thank for it. You were statistically more likely to survive if you knew a Christian because many Christians, following Christ, were among the only people willing to remain in the cities and risk their lives in order to unite themselves with those suffering. And this despite the facts that Christians were being blamed for the Cyprian Plague and that it began as Christians were being persecuted—forced, in the Decian Persecution, to either perform a sacrifice to the Roman gods and emperor or be killed.

Fast-forward eighteen hundred years and read the accounts of medical missionaries in West Africa, and this fruit of the Christian faith remains all but identical, as evidenced recently by Ebola medical missionaries being named *Time* magazine’s 2014 “Person of the Year.”

**The Vindication of Value**

Experience has taught us to fear that disagreement will lead to devaluing which will lead to intolerance which will lead to violence. We therefore worry, *Do we need to cut this off at the root?* If we adopt pluralism (no matter how incoherent), and thereby refuse to disagree, then this insidious trajectory will never get started.

But, of course, even our refusal to disagree is a disagreement with all of those who think we should not refuse to disagree. Try as we might, disagreement is not going away; it is inseparable from content-filled discussion, and therefore from free, meaningful society. The problem is not disagreement but rather that we have lost the ability to disagree well. If we are to reclaim that ability, we will need a worldview that is uncompromising in its refusal to let disagreement lead to the undervaluing of any person.

Christianity is that worldview. For all people to have equal value, there has to be something about each human person that is equally true and that cannot change. What is it?

Any naturalistic answer to this question will not do, because our natural endowments are distributed along a spectrum. Some are less intelligent than others, less healthy, less useful for society, less good looking, less wealthy, less capable of passing on their genes, less moral.

Even if currently you measure up well by some of these standards, one day you won’t. We will age, we will weaken, and our financial worth will fluctuate. Morally, we will lack consistency. Physically, every atom in our bodies may be different seven years from now. Who are we if every single thing about us is only temporary and changeable? By any naturalistic standard, human value is fleeting and graduated, with some coming out less valuable than others.
What is it about a human person that is equally true of every other human person and can never be lost, and therefore can justify the equal value of every person and the universality and inalienability of human rights? Only the love of God. God’s love is the one and only thing that is equal for every single person. God’s love is the one and only thing that will never change and cannot be lost. Here we circle back to the significance of the Christian God being a father—a parent—because a good parent loves his children equally, unwaveringly, and no matter what.

You are not valuable because you can pass on genes; you are valuable because before your genes ever came together you were loved by God and chosen by Him. God does not value only those who survive as the fittest; He gave His life for the unfittest. The measure of human value is not biological, intellectual, financial, moral, or aesthetic; it is personal—measured by the value-conferring love of a personal God.

As much as we worry about the dangers of disagreement, disagreement is inevitable. It is part of living a meaningful life where people have freedom of speech. What we need is not the end to disagreement but the reality of a love big enough to inspire us to disagree without devaluing.

Here I know of only one option, the same option endorsed by atheist philosopher Jürgen Habermas:

Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. 24

2. EQUAL OPPORTUNITY
A second motivation for pluralism that is worth affirming is a desire for people to have equal access to the truth or equal opportunity to come to know the truth. At its core, this is a desire for fairness. But in a pluralistic age, with so many competing truth claims and with people exposed to such differing truth claims, it is tempting to think that the one way to be fair to everyone is to accept all views as equally valid.

This motivates a rejection of the exclusive claims of Christianity, in particular Jesus’ declaration: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

How can Christianity claim “There is no other name...by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12) when so many have never even heard Jesus’ name? “Surely,” the objection goes, “you just believe that because of when and where you were born.”

However, in one sense pluralism is actually among the most unfair of all truth claims, because so few people throughout time and across the globe have been exposed to or are even psychologically capable of believing in pluralism. To believe in pluralism, you would very likely have to have been born in a wealthy country in the last century—an extremely narrow slice of time and space.

This leads to what could be called the exclusivism or perhaps the ethnocentricity of pluralism, and for that matter of atheism and agnosticism as well. Christians are sometimes charged with exclusivism or ethnocentricity based on the fact that they are claiming to have a privileged knowledge of an objective, universal truth, while (supposedly) ignoring the fact that many people disagree with them.
But it is incredibly ironic for any atheist, agnostic, or pluralist to level this sort of objection, because they are all much worse off with respect to the very same point. Those who say “every view is valid” in an attempt to be all-inclusive are in that very sentence excluding the vast majority of the world’s population who insist that many views are deeply flawed. It turns out that inclusivism is a highly exclusive claim and that Christianity is more inclusive than inclusivism. Otherwise put, so-called inclusivists exclude many more than so-called exclusivists!

Access to pluralism, atheism, and agnosticism may be unfairly distributed, but that doesn’t yet show that access to Christianity is not also unfair. Is unfair access to the truth a warranted criticism of Christianity?

The starting point for a Christian response to this question is belief in an all-powerful, all-loving God who desires for every person to come to know and embrace the truth. The Bible is explicit about this: God “wants all people to be saved” (1 Timothy 2:4) and does not want “anyone to perish” (2 Peter 3:9). Israel was specially chosen, but the reason they were chosen was not to be favorites but to bring God’s message to the rest of the world. As Abraham was told, “through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed” (Genesis 22:18).

Next, we can zero in on the life of Jesus. His life begins with His identity being supernaturally revealed to magi (foreign astrologer-magicians who would have worshipped foreign gods). God took what they knew—the stars—and He took what they had—elements of magic (gold, frankincense, and myrrh)—and in His grace He used that to lead them to the truth. Then Jesus’ life ends with His plea to His disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). These are the bookends of Jesus’ life—both an introduction and a conclusion that specify God’s commitment to those outside the bounds of who would naturally hear about Him. As with any good book, the introduction and the conclusion reveal the core of everything in between—in this case, the life of Jesus, which consistently surprised both His friends and His enemies by never dismissing anyone as too foreign, stupid, disabled, or immoral to be worth God’s time.

Even when I don’t know exactly how God makes sure that everyone is given fair access to the truth, the bookends of Jesus’ life and the story between them assure me that He is committed to reaching out to every single person.

Blaise Pascal, the brilliant mathematician, physicist, inventor, and philosopher, suggested that a God who was after relationship would be “willing to appear openly to those who seek Him with all their heart, and to be hidden from those who flee from Him with all their heart.” Therefore, Pascal thinks, we should not be surprised if “There is enough light for those who only desire to see, and enough obscurity for those who have a contrary disposition.”

God would desire to reveal Himself clearly to those who desire Him, but not forcibly to those who don’t. He wants us to follow Him not because He is overpowering, but because we trust Him.

Could it possibly be that “what may be known about God is plain to [people], because God has made it plain to them”? Do we not have access to the truth, or do we “suppress the truth” (Romans 1:18–19)?
God makes a promise: “If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me” (Jeremiah 29:13). God’s timing will not always be our timing, and God’s timing may not always seem fair. But fairness is only perceivable retrospectively. If all you saw was one day in the life of my family, depending on the specific day and the specific situation, you could easily conclude that my parents favored me or my brother over the other. Imagine if the only day you witnessed was my birthday. But if you have known my family for years, you could only conclude that my parents love my brother and me equally and have been fair in their treatment of us. In the same way, the Bible says that, when we look back over our entire lives from the perspective of eternity, anyone who does not accept God will be “without excuse” (Romans 1:20). We don’t know everything about how God reveals Himself, but we can say this: All who want Him will find Him.

The greatest test of whether or not someone is committed to fairness is whether they make an exception for themselves. Jesus did not. He did not exempt Himself from suffering, from death, or even from the experience of feeling far from God. He chose to accept what He did not deserve so that we could trust that He came to serve. We know He will be fair to everyone because He was willing to be unfair to Himself.

Just believing something because of when and where you were born might be true of atheism; it might be truth of pluralism. But it is not true of Christianity. Jesus is a God loving enough and big enough to break in everywhere. Either we have a God who is committed to and capable of reaching people everywhere or we have a secular god that indeed people only believe in because of where they are born. Faced with that choice, my belief in God is part and parcel of my commitment to fairness for every single person.

**3. Equally United**

A final admirable motivation that can lead to an attraction to pluralism is a longing for unity with other people, a longing for community. That is a good longing; unity and community are indeed what we were created for. We long to see things the same way, to be in agreement, to be working with one another and not against one another. We’re sick of tension and insecure about what others think of us. We long for a community full of friends who are absolutely loyal and whom you can be absolutely yourself around without judgment or controversy. However, merely avoiding disagreement and refusing to acknowledge difference, rather than working through these things, can lead only to a facade of the community we actually desire.

A commitment to worldview pluralism can be a yearning for the community we haven’t yet formed. Acting as if there is a depth of relational unity, when that unity has not been hard won, is promiscuity. We want the benefit of communion without the hard work, sacrifice, and service of others that it takes to get there. But the semblance of relational unity when it does not reflect the depth of the actual relationships will bring no more satisfaction than sexual union when it does not reflect a true giving of oneself. In both cases, the facade of union will bring no more satisfaction than sexual union when it does not reflect a true giving of oneself. In both cases, the facade of union can only be maintained by not sticking around long enough, whether in conversation or in each other’s presence, for reality to set in.

In what might be called belief promiscuity, we jump from belief to belief depending on whom we are with. We are willing to temporarily unite ourselves with many different truth claims so long as they keep relationships easy and fun.

Though it rears its head differently in each age, this temptation is ancient. In Old Testament times, it was the temptation to worship idols — to have, rather
than one God, a collection of gods that would suit each whim and need and that would give the allusion of unity with neighboring tribes. Pluralism trades physical idols for ideological ones, but at its core is very similar. It remains a promiscuous position, affirming many gods but accountable to none. It is the ideological equivalent of the person who is never ready to commit to a relationship and so keeps playing the field, picking and choosing as they like.

Perhaps sometimes it is okay to treat objects that way—it’s okay for me to trade in my surfboard for a different one that I like more. But it’s never okay to treat people that way. The question, therefore, is whether truth is a person. Christianity claims that it is; Jesus says “I am the truth” (John 14:6).

We must not endorse a promiscuous approach to relationships, no more in our approach to truth than in our approach to sex. If relating to the truth is relating to a person, then relating to the truth will require the same loyalty, commitment, and consistency necessary for any strong relationship. Then it is no wonder that the belief promiscuity underlying pluralism ultimately leaves us feeling intellectually empty.

Once again, we find that the underlying desire motivating pluralism is not too strong but too weak. We are called not to a facade of unity, but to a deep communion for all eternity. Paul says, “I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1–3). True community cannot be superficial. It takes patience; it takes bearing with one another; it takes effort.

But it is so worth it. My own experience is that, at its best, God’s Spirit provides a vision for and the empowering to live in an incredible richness of community. We often wish we could see a miracle. I have seen so many miracles in Christian community. I’ve seen people who could not sleep from anxiety sleeping long and peacefully; people who would never admit that they were wrong falling in love with asking for and receiving forgiveness; formerly selfish, unkind people in humility valuing others above themselves (Philippians 2:3); formerly angry, resentful people expressing genuine love for those who have wronged them.

Why is it that we only count physical transformations among the miraculous? If by next year I were running as fast as Usain Bolt, I would call that a flat-out miracle. But time and again in the context of Christian community, I have seen psychological and emotional transformations even more unlikely than that. When God is at the center of it, the community that is possible is miraculous and unparalleled. We can find the unity we long for, not by bypassing disagreement but by finding a love big enough to disagree well and by finding a truth big enough to unite us.

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2 The ideology of pluralism about truth, or being a pluralist about truth, is not to be confused with the reality of a pluralistic society (that is, a society that includes people of diverse beliefs).

3 Compare Romans 10:9: “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in
your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."
4 Sura 4:157 denies that Jesus was crucified or killed; Sura 3:59, 4:171, 43:59, and 9:30 deny the divinity of Jesus. Sura 9:30 adds, “May God thwart them! How far astray they have been led!”
5 This is because believing that Jesus is God violates the Islamic concept of the unity of God, resulting in *shirk*, Islam’s unforgiveable sin. See Sura 5:72.
7 Allah also does not like “those who do wrong” (Sura 42:40) or “those who reject the truth” (Sura 30:45).
9 Sura 2:106 is the foundational text for this doctrine.
10 See Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, translated by A. Guillaume (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). This is the earliest available biography of Muhammad and documents his conquests.
11 I am indebted to my colleagues Andy Bannister and Tanya Walker, whom I first heard make this point. For Tanya’s discussion of it, see her chapter “But…What About Other Religions?” in *A New Kind of Apologist*, edited by Sean McDowell (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2016). For Andy’s discussion, see Chapter 3 of his *The Atheist Who Didn’t Exist* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2015).
12 In Islam, the most one can hope for in paradise is to look at Allah (Sura 75:22–23), but even this falls far short of a relationship. Indeed, wouldn’t it leave a person longing for relationship?
23 I am grateful to Joshua Fountain and Michael Lloyd for insightful discussion on this point.
The Unstoppable Story

By Jill Carattini

Living in the kingdom of God means recognizing the power of God’s story beside every competing narrative—not necessarily shutting each one out, but interpreting every other story through the Story.
“You can’t stop stories being told,” Dr. Parnassus tells his relentless foe with religious assurance in *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*. The world of belief-systems and worldviews is indeed a complicated playground of stories, storytellers, passions, and allegiances—and this is one film which certainly attests to that complicated dance. What makes the interplay of story most complicated is our inability often to name or even perceive these interacting powers in the first place. That which permeates our surroundings, subconsciously molds our understanding, and continuously informs our vision of reality is not always easy to articulate. The dominant culture shapes our world in ways we seldom realize—and often in ways we cannot even perceive—until something outside of our culture comes along and the scales fall from our eyes.

Further complicating this is the fact that we often do not recognize certain systems for the metanarratives that they are or else we grossly underestimate the story’s power on our own. Whatever versions of the story we utilize to understand human history—atheism, capitalism, pluralism, consumerism—their roots run very deep in the human soul. This is why Bishop Kenneth Carder can refer to the global market economy as a “dominant god,” or consumerism, economism, and nationalism as *religions*.1 These deeply rooted ideologies are challenged only when a different ideology or imagination comes knocking, when a different faith-system comes along and upsets the imagination that powerfully orders our world.

This is perhaps one reason that the biblical imagination presented in the Scriptures calls again and again to remember the story, to tell of the acts of God in history, and to bear in mind the One who is near. For into this world of belief-systems, God tells the story of creation and the pursuit of its redemption, and then Christ comes in our own flesh and proclaims a kingdom entirely *other*. The narrative imagination we discover in scripture introduces us not only to a new world but also to a world that jarringly shows us our own.

The signs and scenes leading to the Incarnation alone challenge many of our cultural norms, turning upside down ideas of authority, power, and glory, presenting us a kingdom that reverses everything we know. What kind of a king crouches down to his subjects to feed the masses or wash their feet? What kind of a leader tells those under him that the way to the top requires a dedication to the bottom? What kind of God comes as a child and leaves on a cross? What kind of meal lifts us to another kingdom where we are brought into the presence of the host and asked to taste him? Yet these are the stories he told and Christians tell; this is the imagination he gives us to see him, the world, ourselves, and neighbors: “And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me’” (Luke 22:19). Not long after their meal, his physical body was broken too.

The story of the Christian is one that remembers the very first and the
very last moments of a rabbi and his disciples—a child born, a teacher present, a meal shared, a lamb revealed, feet washed by one who claimed to be both king and servant. It is a story that invites its hearers into a kingdom entirely different than the many stories before them, connecting them with a God who somehow reigns within a realm that is here and now and also approaching. In the Lord’s Supper, Christians are literally “taking in” this biblical imagination, which unites followers with Christ in such a way that helps us to live as he lived in a world of stories.

When the apostle Paul called early followers of Christ not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of their minds so that they might discern what is the will of God—“what is good and acceptable and perfect”—he was reminding them that there are overlapping and contradicting stories all around them, but that it is the story of God that earns the role of orienting narrative. In other words, Christ does not leave his followers with the option of living unaware of all the subconscious ways in which we are formed by the world of stories. Living in the kingdom of God means recognizing the power of God’s story beside every competing narrative—not necessarily shutting each one out, but interpreting every other story through the Story. Living further into the biblical imagination presented in scripture, the Christian’s very life, like that of Christ’s, shows the world the subversive power of an imagination that moves far beyond the systems of postmodernism, consumerism, and nationalism.

Whether Christian, atheist, or Hindu, no one can avoid being in the world. We cannot escape the world’s formative stories, nor should we want to escape the particular place where we have been planted. Jesus himself prayed, “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world, but I ask that you protect them from the evil one” (John 17:15). Yet, we do not want this place to become so much our home that we cannot see all the dust on the windows or feel the draft of a roofless shelter. For the Christian, the more we find ourselves living into the imagination of this different kingdom, a world breathed by the Father, proclaimed by Christ, and revealed by the Spirit, the unchallenged, unseen storylines of our worlds come sharply into focus. And the more we taste and see of the goodness of God, the more we taste and see of Christ in the land of the living. Like Paul, at times something like scales fall from our eyes and the Spirit compels us to get up and re-experience our baptisms, going further into the biblical imagination, where our voices regain strength in telling and retelling the unstoppable story.

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2 “And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength” (Acts 9:18-19).
SOAR ON TO NEW HEIGHTS

In addition to the printed magazine, the award-winning *Just Thinking* is available for download to your iPad from Apple iTunes®.
Wisdom for a Complex Age

By Stuart McAllister

We live in an age in which the abundance of things and increase in opportunities in almost all areas of life fill our minds and hearts rather than the hunger for wisdom. Yet this saturated life, in which volume and speed seem to define everything for us, comes at a cost.

The value of wisdom and a wisdom-guided life is a keynote of ancient and Jewish thought, and yet, it is a much neglected theme in life today. When we think of wisdom, we tend to mean someone who is intellectually smart or who is somewhat of a sage, but as it often seems, this “wisdom thing” is a bit impractical to us. We are more focused on data, goals, and outcomes. We attend to very daily real-world concerns. We are the “Flash Boys” or the “Fast and Furious”: we seek to live life to the max and suck the marrow out of existence. We love speed, variety, choice, options, fun, and abundance.

Nonetheless, the Book of Proverbs commends the ways of wisdom to us. Proverbs 3 is a very insightful text, enjoining its hearers,

Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her ... and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her.

This ancient book presents wisdom as the ultimate lifelong pursuit and the key to lasting joy and true wealth. And yet, we live in an age in which the abundance of things, the increase in opportunities, and the growing amount of options in almost all areas of life fill our minds and hearts rather than the hunger for wisdom. There is so much to do, to try, to taste, to experience. Will we ever have time?

Thomas Friedman, in his book Thank You for Being Late, speaks of the age of accelerations — of the dizzying tectonic shifts we are experiencing, whether through technology or globalization. We know and feel the time crunch. It is not just time but our space that is increasingly occupied, filled with demand or under siege, so it seems. Years earlier Kenneth Gergen described this condition as “The Saturated Self,” which was also the title of his seminal book. It is a new phenomenon whereby the sheer influx of data, images, and demand overwhelms us so that we begin to experience what he calls “multiphrenia” — a life in perpetual flux.
This saturated life, in which volume and speed seem to define everything for us, comes at a cost, however. In an earlier context, Blaise Pascal surveyed the sheer lack of concern people had for their souls in his then sophisticated French scene. Diversions and distractions were the order of the day. There were so many enjoyable conversations to have, so much exotic food to taste, so many grand performances at the theater to see and so many stimulating books to read, there was simply no time for deeper or eternal concerns. Immersed in the immediate, modern men and women could live their lives content with abundance but with nary a thought to their spiritual condition or their ultimate destiny. They were —and we are— “amusing ourselves to death,” as the late Neil Postman put it.2

THE SATURATED SELF
What is this notion of the saturated self and why does it matter? Kenneth Gergen explains:

At a social level, we have become embedded in a multiplicity of relationships. We are aware of the needs of more people, empathize with a greater number of tribulations, join more causes, confront more potential threats and enemies, sustain more social obligations, experience more longings and disappointments, and are tempted by more varied and tantalizing possibilities than ever before.3

The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology summarizes Gergen’s thesis: “The result is a loss of enduring emotional intensity and commitment. With Social Saturation, a major shift is also invited in the conception of the self. With increased immersion in, and dependence on, relationships.”4

Furthermore, there are three aspects of multiphrenia —what Gergen describes as our sense of being pulled in many directions—that are of relevance here.3 One is the vertigo of the valued, whereby the multiplication factor in so many realms and demands of life actually reduces our liberties and freedom. Two is the expansion of inadequacy, in which we increasingly feel insecure or incompetent in understanding or fulfilling expectations of us. We may feel lost, overwhelmed, and struggle to cope. Three is rationality in recession: our own perceived reasoning is put into perpetual doubt or uncertainty by all the other “experts” claiming authority and truth. So we ask ourselves, “Does what I think matter or count?”

If we live what Socrates called “the unexamined life,” then we find ourselves struggling with rampant external pressures and an increasingly panicked internal conversation. Fear or dread or just good old-fashioned angst may grip us as a constant condition whereby we may seek escape, medication, or some way to assuage the bad feelings life seems to generate. Christians are not immune to this, as we often add pressures, demands, meetings, and other expectations that can compound our challenges rather than relieve them.

Gergen writes,

At the most subtle level, these changes in social patterns bring about a profound shift in our conception of ourselves and others. Our traditional belief in ourselves as singular, autonomous individuals gives way. Where in the interior lies the bedrock self? Are not all the fragments of identity the residues of relationships, and aren’t we undergoing continuous transformation as we move from one relation-
ship to another? Indeed, in postmodern times, the reality of the single individual, possessing his/her own values, emotions, reasoning capacities, intentions and the like, becomes implausible. The individual as the center of cultural concern is slowly being replaced by a consciousness of connection. We find our existence not separately from our relationships, but within them.  

If we are to live an examined life in such a context we must stop, reflect, and take time to seek God. If wisdom is what truly brings life, we must pursue it and search for alternatives to the rushing, pushing, insisting, and frenetic pull of our time. This is manifested by choosing a way of life that is truly livable, in which flourishing, rather than merely surviving, is the goal. It means we live by greater attention to God’s words and by greater intention to heed them and obey.  

But this assumes a level of focus, commitment, and intent that for many is lacking and not on their radar. This is not a mere question of values, or of preferences, or of lifestyle options. The deeper question for many of us is in terms of true discipleship.  

What is discipleship? What does it look like in these conditions and circumstances? How should we then live?  

Since the time of what was called the Enlightenment, a new vision of life took shape beginning in the West and increasingly dominated what became the modern and then the postmodern world. Promethean men and women came to believe there was no God, there was no heaven, there was no salvation or need of it. But in the rush to erase, remove, deconstruct, and redefine reality, the needs and concerns of life that were once defined by God and his word and answered by his provision for us have now been redefined as purely natural and relocated into everyday life and experience for their fulfillment. We pursue heaven on earth and immediate satisfaction with no view or concern for any so-called eternal dimension. Immanence, immediacy, and experience take on heightened dimensions and roles.

Since the advent of what Paul Johnson called “Modern Times,” we have constructed more and more powerful tools and techniques to help us pursue our dreams and our desire for market abundance. Modern management, as one of our central guiding concerns for business and successful living, adds to our immersion in our own abilities and confidence that we are in control of our own destinies—and we might add, our hopes, wants, and wishes as well. We are promised order and control leading to increasing comfort and convenience by embracing more and more power and techniques or technologies. However, the Promethean bargain, as the ancients found out, came at a price; Pandora’s Box was a picture of the unexpected consequences of our decisions and choices.

THE WAY TO HAPPINESS

I once read an article speaking to what one writer called the “suffocation of transcendence.” Of course, transcendence may be denied in principle by some, but it sneaks back into life in so many ways that it is one of those things in life we cannot truly escape. If we combine the two notions of the “saturated self” with the concept of “suffocation of transcendence” by the myriad offerings of our pluralistic world, we get somewhat of a picture, perhaps a feel, of what many struggle with in our time. We look for more toys, more techniques, newer technology, faster means, but they all too often bring more weariness, emptiness, and despair rather than real liberation or hope.

Now some may still question any need for or interest in transcendence as
the daily abundance keeps them occupied. At stake, however, are real questions about the kind of world we are living in and the best way to live, function, and flourish. Aristotle taught that the pursuit of happiness was the central occupying question of life. Older wisdom believed that the way to happiness was found by seeking the good and conforming the soul to reality. Virtue was a way of life cultivated in the pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty. As Epictetus said, “It is the nature of the wise to resist pleasures, but the foolish to be a slave to them.”

By contrast, modern culture encourages the pursuit of unrestricted pleasure as we seek to mold reality to our desires or wishes. Writer Isaac Asimov observed, “The saddest aspect of life right now is that science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom.” Self-centered pursuits may offer temporary relief and seeming gains, but they lack a long-term, robust quality to life and ignore any eternal or transcendent dimension.

I remember once giving a talk in New York City to an audience of wealthy business people in a downtown hotel. The focus of my message was on the meaning of life and the necessity of considering the existence of God. Having finished my talk, I got in the elevator accompanied by one very confident man who was at the event. As we conversed a bit, he said rather condescendingly as he reached out and put a hand on my shoulder, “What if God does not exist?” I wondered to myself for a second if he really thought that was the first time I had ever considered this question. My whole life had been turned around after growing up as an atheist by an encounter with the living God—which is why I do what I do now. As we arrived at his floor and he was about to step out, I reached out my hand, placed it on his shoulder, and asked him, “What if he does?” He turned and looked at me; then the door closed.

I was not trying to be flippant then and I am not trying to be so now. This is a huge question. In addition, death is the great leveler and we all need to consider our life in light of the whole picture and not just in terms of the accumulation of moments or experiences. I was provoked to reflection recently by these words that Alfred Nobel chose for his eulogy, “Silent you stand before the altar of death! Life here and life after constitute an eternal conundrum; but its expiring spark awakens us to the holy devotion and quiets every other voice except that of religion. Eternity has the floor.” It is vital that we consider the nature of existence as so much is at stake. This is true for the Christian and the skeptic as all of us have much to gain or lose depending on whether we live in the light of eternity or ignore it.

In the midst of great trials and difficulties, the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). Of course, Paul was rooted in a vision of life and a way of being that was not dabbling in religion or treating it as a part-time hobby; rather, God was the central concern of his life. Knowing God, his word, his will, and his way are foundational pursuits that must define our direction and actions.

If we are to thrive in the world of “multiphrenia,” where identity issues and purpose are of vital importance, then we need to sharpen our focus, build significant firewalls, and ensure we have vital fellowship. Speaking to the nature of our focus, Dallas Willard reminds us of a core truth, “Christian spiritual formation is focused entirely on Jesus. Its goal is
conformity to Christ, a process that arises out of purposeful interaction with the grace of God in Christ. Obedience is an essential outcome (see John 13:34-35; 14:21).” The antidote to endless distraction and diversions in our lives is a clear and intentional focus. “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things” (Colossians 3:2) and in so doing, the eternal regulates the temporal.

In addition to our focus we must work on our firewalls. Again, Willard is helpful here: “Life must be organized by the heart if it is to be organized at all. It can be pulled together only from the inside. That is the function of the heart, spirit, or will: to organize our life as a whole, and, indeed, to organize it around God. A great part of the disaster of contemporary life lies in the fact that it is organized around our human feelings, not around God.” As long as our appetites and our love of comfort and convenience are our primary concerns, then little can be done to resist the allures of our moment. However, a dedicated commitment to worship and the pursuit of God will be definitive to resisting the idols of our time.

Lastly is the role of true fellowship. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote one of his most famous books, Life Together, for Christians facing the reality of Nazi Germany. Serious community provides for accountability, for prayer, for encouragement and support, and for a reminder of our deepest commitments and their importance. In an age of the “saturated self,” the isolated, autonomous, and self-centered individual is believed to be all in all but is in fact unsustainable. This belief is rooted in ideas and a vision that are diametrically opposed to God’s creational goods and norms. As a result, it is life-corrupting rather than life-enhancing.

The apostle Paul was well aware of the fragility of life and of the many challenges to be faced; likewise, he understood that trials and hardships had there temporal limits. He looked up and he looked ahead for the certainty and assurance of a lasting hope (see 2 Corinthians 5:1-5). He did not look to this world to define him. He did not expect it to fully satisfy him, and he did not bank on it providing for his every need or wish.

As Joseph Barber Lightfoot said, “Eternal truth, eternal righteousness, eternal love; these only can triumph, for these only can endure.” If we have never truly considered our standing before eternity or if perhaps we have gotten sidetracked and distracted by the immanence of our times, there is an alternative. In a time of multiplying trinkets, toys and trivia, may we seek a higher wisdom and a better way.

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1 See Proverbs 3:13-18.
10 Ibid, 29.
Winston Churchill was responsible for some of the most striking and memorable speeches ever delivered. The strong rhetoric he often deployed during the Second World War was of course partly out of necessity; his country desperately needed inspiration at times when the conflict was very much in the balance. One of the most famous messages he ever gave was when he sought to prepare the British citizens for the looming Battle of Britain. In his speech before The House of Commons on June 18, 1940, he implored, “Let each man search his conscience.” He closed his
speech by declaring ominously that the very future of Christian civilization was at stake; thus, they needed to be ready to face the “fury and might” of an enemy that wanted to sink the world into the “abyss of a new Dark Age.” Whether or not they would succeed was uncertain, but he reiterated that if they succeeded they would be judged by history with these words: “This was their finest hour.”

The power of the message lay not only in the evocative and inspirational tone but in the strong moral language that connected the listener to a higher cause. In other words, it specifically challenged people on a personal level, like the famous war-time “Your Country Needs You” posters.

What is interesting from a Christian perspective is that Churchill’s speech communicates something similar to what the gospel message communicates, albeit in a different way. In scripture, the power doesn't come from inspirational or moral language; rather, it comes from connecting us to the highest cause: God Himself.

Yet, if we are brutally honest, many of us feel a sense of inadequacy when it comes to living up to this higher calling. We have personal failings that continually let us (and others) down. Our lives don’t seem to be as successful as those around us; we feel ashamed by things in our past, and we harbor guilt for not doing more to help others. Such insecurities are only natural in a world that puts so much emphasis on what we achieve, but the gospel message is radically different because it applies to everyone equally, irrespective of who we are or what we have done. In fact, Christ’s unconditional love for us was so great that he even took the punishment we deserved for our wrong doing, so that we could be in a relationship with him. It’s very easy to forget just how profound this is, but he is offering us a new life. Scripture proclaims,

And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:15-17).

Furthermore, Jesus doesn’t just leave us to fend for ourselves unaided, but he offers us assistance, through his spirit, so that we can be changed. As Titus 3:5 says, “He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal through the Holy Spirit.” This doesn’t necessarily mean that we will all have a sudden transformation in our lives — although this certainly does happen to some—or that we will never do wrong again and things will be easy thereafter, but it makes all the difference to have God walking beside us through thick and thin as well as to know that we can be secure in our identity in Him.

Moreover, God is able to do amazing things through us, if we are open to Him. Even if we don't think we have much to offer, we are reminded that God’s grace is not only sufficient for us, but that his power is made perfect in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). What a promise and a hope!

In a sense, you could say that the gospel message is the ultimate challenge. It is not only much more inspirational and important than the most eloquent of political speeches, but it really does open up the prospect of us truly achieving our “finest hour.”

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A Kaleidoscope of Colors

When our son was only four years old and we moved to a different city, he raised a question that brought rounds of laughter from the whole family, and even prompted a wistful thought. Driving in the car one day, right out of the blue he turned to my wife (who is from Canada) and said, “Mummy, when do we turn black?” Caught completely off guard she said, “I don’t know what you mean.” “Well,” sounded the pensive, albeit innocent, childish voice, “You are white, we are beige, and Daddy is brown—when do we turn black?”

How nice it would be if life did provide such a sequence of colors! In his young mind, magnificently untainted by years of biases and indoctrinations, he saw life as a time-released kaleidoscope of colors and apparently envisioned the possibility of each of us experiencing the joys and hurts of all. How much more understanding of each other we would be if each of us could live for a time within another’s world and be subsumed in someone else’s life story?

The multiplicity of ethnicities offers many delights—how intriguing are the various cuisines, traditions, art, accents and literature of our world. In the West, globalization has brought the riches of pluralism to our neighborhoods and iPhones. As one speaker I heard once quipped, where else but in Los Angeles (or I might add, Toronto or London) would you find a fast food stand where a Korean is selling kosher tacos?

Yet with pluralism has come pluralization, the phenomenon or process by which all ideas and worldviews have become accepted as equally valid and true. Naturalism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam: choose whatever you wish as all narratives lead to the same conclusion and essentially teach the same things. That’s what is implied. But do they?

I was recently asked by a student from Nepal studying in an American university, “Why Christianity?” With the numerous religions in the world, what’s so distinct about Christianity? I have been asked this question countless times around the globe—and I am fascinated by the fact that the Christian faith is the only one that’s ever raised.

Answering a question such as that demands a serious sensitivity. You see, religious pluralism is a belief system that sounds good but does disservice to all religions. All religions are exclusive. That is a fact. If they weren’t, they would not be making any truth claims. Indeed, it is the very nature of truth that presents us with this reality. Truth by definition is exclusive. Every proposition and assertion in contradictory worldviews cannot be true. If every assertion and claim were true, then there would really be no distinctive claim, in effect making all religions equally true or false. Truth has two edges to its claims. One cannot claim mutually exclusive beliefs.

The reality is that even those who deny truth’s exclusivity, in effect, exclude those who do not deny it. The truth quickly emerges. The law of non-contradiction does apply to reality: Two contradictory statements cannot both be true in the same sense. Thus, to deny the law of non-contradiction is to affirm it at the same time. You may as well talk about a one-ended stick as talk about truth being all-inclusive.

Furthermore, every religion has its starting points and its deductions, and those starting points exclude counter-perspectives. For example, Hinduism has two non-negotiable beliefs: karma and reincarnation. No Hindu will trade these away. In Buddhism, there is the denial of the essential notion of the self. Buddhists believe that the self as we understand it does not exist, and our ceasing to desire will result in the end of all suffering. If we
deny these premises, we devein Buddhism. Islam believes that Mohammad is the last and final prophet, and the Quran is the perfect revelation. If we deny those two premises, we have denied Islam. Even naturalism, which poses as irreligion, is exclusive. Naturalism teaches that anything supernatural or metaphysical is outside the realm of evidence and purely an opinion, not a matter of fact.

In the Christian faith, we believe Jesus is the consummate expression of God in the person of his Son and is the Savior and Redeemer of the world. We cannot deny these premises and continue to be Christians.

All religions are not the same. All religions do not point to God. All religions do not say that all religions are the same. At the heart of every religion is an uncompromising commitment to a particular way of defining who God is or is not and accordingly, of defining life’s purpose.

And so, the question is not, “Which of these religions is all encompassing?” Rather, “Which one of these will we deny as being reasonable and consistent?” “Which one of these will we be able to sustain by argument and by evidence?”

We can have pluralism in cuisine, clothing styles, accents, and a kaleidoscope of other things. But if pluralism means ideational relativism and the destruction of the law of non-contradiction, it is incoherent and ultimately unlivable.

I think, for instance, of one of my closest Hindu friends who struggled for years with whether the teachings of his religion were truly livable, particularly the doctrine of karma. He was sitting in my living room when he spoke out aloud. He asked himself: “If every birth is a rebirth, and every birth is the consequence of previous karmic practices, what was I paying for in my first birth? I cannot have an infinite series of rebirths or I would not be in this birth. Therefore I must have had a first birth. What was I paying for then?”

I just stared at him and said, “You have to answer that question.”

He said it simply did not make sense. He had to have a first birth and ever since then was in karmic deficit. He said, “If I go to the bank, every bank manager will tell me what my indebtedness is and how long I have to pay it off. What sort of system is life itself where I have no clue about what I owe and how many births it will take for me to pay it back?”

Those unanswerable questions sent him on his pursuit of truth and finally finding grace and forgiveness in Jesus.

Likewise, part of my response to the Nepalese student who asked me about Christianity was to share with him that only in Jesus do you find the answers to the deepest questions of the soul, answers that correspond to reality and in totality are systemically coherent. Indeed, only Jesus describes our condition, provides for our malady, explains suffering, offers his life as an atoning sacrifice, and rose again from the dead to give eternal life to all who would believe. The gospel is the only story where grace and forgiveness are central and unearned—and that is good news to all people everywhere, whatever color or ethnicity.

That’s why Jesus made the astounding statement, “They that are on the side of truth listen to me” (John 18:37). All religions may have hints of truth and aspects of goodness. But only in Jesus Christ do we see the consummate expression of the true, the good, and the beautiful. In him was the embodiment of grace and truth. The disciples rightly said to him, “To whom shall we go? For you have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

He tasted death for all of us whatever our race or creed. He is the giver of life to all who come to Him. Heaven is the ultimate equalizer and the place of perpetual novelty.

Warm Regards,

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