

Christians and Culture

by

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Preface

According to the Barna Report, an annual survey of values and religious views in the United States, three out of every four Baby-Buster adults in the United States agree that there is no such thing as absolute truth. Rather, they believe that different people can define truth in conflicting ways and still be correct. There is some variation of percentages based on geography: the Bible belt (south) has the lowest concentration of such folks, while California and the Northeast have the greatest. Also, Baby-Busters and Baby-Boomers have much higher concentrations of this viewpoint than the elderly. Perhaps most unsettling is that the highest concentration of those who do not believe in absolute truth are to be found in mainline Protestant churches--higher than any other adult group in the nation!

Back in the days of the flower children and the Vietnam War protest, there was a slogan passed around with some regularity. *Nothing is worth dying for.* That sentiment is another way of saying that there is no such thing as absolute truth. The 1960s and 1970s were among the most disruptive periods in the fabric of American life and values. On the heels of the Vietnam War was Watergate. I find it fascinating that many teenagers today do not even know what Watergate was--and yet the moral and epistemological impact of Watergate has powerfully shaped their lives. Many people lost trust in their country and its institutions. While many Baby-Boomers say they believe in God, their belief is a strange mixture of doubts and affirmations.

Dr. Wade Clark Roof, whose recent book *A Generation of Seekers* surveys the spiritual styles of Baby-Boomers, says that even among those who claim to believe in God, they prefer to say that they "lean toward" believing. They are "sort of believers" but not belongers. They are not adverse to mixing elements of various religious traditions, including Judeo-Christian beliefs, astrology, reincarnation, feminism and popular psychology. While ninety-five percent of them grew up with religious parents, two-thirds of them have dropped out of the church of their teens. Sixty percent say that it is better to explore the various religions rather than stick to one particular faith. Seventy percent say you should attend worship--not from a sense of duty--but only if "it meets your needs." Eighty percent say you can be a Christian without attending a church.

With the entrance of the Clintons into the White House, the Baby-Boomer

generation signaled loud and clear that it was moving into positions of power and prominence. As a consequence, just about every area of American life is being transformed before our very eyes.

This ongoing sociological change has deepened the conflict between Christianity and culture. Each additional year demonstrates a sharper rift between the traditional values which our parents and grandparents drew from the Judeo-Christian faith and the current utilitarian values of what Harvey Cox of Harvard called the secular city. This series of studies is given against the background of such a conflict.

God, The World, Humans and Society

The basic problem of the Christians in this country in the last eighty years or so, in regard to society and in regard to government, is that they have seen things in bits and pieces instead of totals. A defective view of Christianity made a sharp division between the 'spiritual' and the 'material' world--giving little, or no, importance to the 'material' world. The totality of human existence was not afforded a proper place. In particular, it neglected the intellectual dimension of Christianity. Christianity and spirituality were shut up to a small, isolated part of life.

Francis Schaeffer

The Modern Problem

At least four things have contributed to the weakening of Christianity's influence on society in the past century. First, there has been a misunderstanding of the "spiritual." In many cases, Christians have separated spirituality from real life. They have made spirituality both mystical and anti-rational. In doing so, they have failed to see that spirituality is not so much an escape from life as it is a way to live life through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Second, Christians have frequently misunderstood the "world." Too often they have confused the "world" with the "worldly." They have, probably unconsciously, adopted a Greek metaphysical dualism which Paul fought so hard to dispel in his letters, that is, the notion that matter is the enemy of spirit (and therefore, matter is evil) and that the highest end of humans is to escape the body. In contrast, God's declaration about the world was that "it was very good" (Ge. 1:31)! Worldliness in the New Testament is not the idea that the physical world is bad, but that it cannot ultimately fulfill our human needs and that there is an evil presence in the world to be avoided and overcome.

The third misunderstanding is about humans and society. The first two misunderstandings have contributed to the third one, and it is the notion that humanness is evil (which is not the same thing as saying that humans are sinful). The Bible shows humans to be fallen, but their despair is not because they are human but

because they have rebelled against their Creator. To withdraw from humanness and society is to surrender to the forces of evil all the natural gifts that God has given to humans as humans. God's mandate is not to escape humanity and society, but to be a godly influence among humans within society (Mt. 5:13-16; Jn. 17:15; 2 Pe. 1:3-4).

Finally, Christians have ignored their cultural mandate. At the creation, God instructed the first humans to steward their own and nature's resources creatively and wisely (Ge. 1:27-28). Culture was ordained by God. Every part of the created order is sacred in the sense that humans were invited to explore and develop both themselves and the world in which God put them. When Christians separate life into the "secular" and the "spiritual," they often treat the cultural mandate as unworthy, because it is not "spiritual." They are only interested in saving souls, not whole people. By contrast, salvation in the Scriptures is holistic. Jesus came to give "life, and give it abundantly."

The Necessary Foundation of Creationism

Christians affirm that the world is the good creation of God. Christians also believe that this view is necessary if life is to have any purpose or value. Finally, Christians believe that their view is sensible and does not contradict any genuine discoveries of truth and fact, including science. The unity of truth means that all truth is God's truth, or put differently, all reality has its ground in the one ultimate reality, God, upon whom everything is contingent.

Tertullian, the ante-Nicene father, posed the question, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" His question was intended to point out the difference between the Roman world's heritage of Greek philosophy and the Judeo-Christian tradition based upon the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. In the larger sense, the question raises the issue of the relationship between reason and faith. In the modern world, one might ask what has scientific discovery to do with divine relation in the Bible. The Christian answer is that both have their proper place, because all truth is God's truth, wherever it is found. Truth is one. Scientific truth may not be theological, but it is not categorically different than biblical truth, since truth is that which conforms to reality. To be sure, some truths may be more apparent than others, and some truths are easily demonstrable while others are not. However, ease of demonstration is not the final criteria for truth as truth. Furthermore, Christians believe that scientific truth does not contradict the Scriptures, for truth is consistent with itself.

Christians do allow a role for presupposition. Every thinker, whether scientist, scholar or theologian, presupposes certain things when looking at the world. With regard to God, the barest essence of all world views eventually comes down to three, naturalism, pantheism or theism. In naturalism, the real world is the world of the senses, the world of nature. Naturalism presupposes that there is nothing beyond this

world. Reality is that which can be tested by the senses. Pantheism fuses the notion of God and the physical world so that the two are inseparable. Thus, Hindu sages do not recoil from saying at once that there is one god and many gods. God *is* the universe in its multi-faceted forms. Theism, on the other hand, holds that reality is composed of both the natural world and the spiritual world, but they are not the same thing. Theists presuppose that God is real, though he cannot be subjected to the same kind of tests as nature. There is both a Creator and a creation. God is outside of creation, and the universe is contingent upon him. He is eternal; the universe is temporal.

For Christians, the knowledge of reality comes both from observing the created world and from supernatural revelation (sometimes called general or natural revelation and special revelation). God makes himself known in both spheres. On the one hand, certain inferences can be made about God by observing the universe he made (cf. Ps. 19:1-6; Ro. 1:20). On the other, God reveals himself through unique historical events and the sacred interpretation of those events, such as, the exodus, the incarnation, and the inspiration of Scripture (cf. Ps. 19:7-11; He. 1:1-2; 2 Pe. 1:19-21). It is axiomatic that Christians believe both kinds of knowledge to be essential. While God gives common grace to all humans for life and its preservation, it is by special revelation that he gives the special grace which is redemptive. In fact, the gift of life is given precisely so that humans might seek after God (Ac. 17:25-27). His saving grace is free to all, though not all participate in it.

Because of this holistic view of the created universe under God, Christians believe that all God's gifts are worthy. When one understands that both the world that God made as well as the salvation he brings are the good gifts of a wise and loving Creator, then one understands that life is worthy to be lived and explored. The worlds of literature, philosophy, history, science and art become the rightful domain of the Christian. It is no accident that many, if not most, of the great minds of western civilization in music, the visual arts, science and literature have been Christians. It is when these areas are pursued apart from the framework of creationism that they become worldly and distorted from God's good purpose.

Finally, there is despair in rejecting creationism. If one rejects the biblical declaration that the universe is the good creation of God, then one is left with emptiness. If all reality is eternal but uncreated, then reality itself is causeless, purposeless and absurd. If the form which this uncreated reality takes is temporal, it is therefore accidental and equally absurd. Without an infinite, personal Creator, the whole notion of values is absurd. Reality and values are indistinguishable. Christians know that there is a difference between reality and values, fact and worth. They are not the same thing. Reality has to do with what is true or false, what exists or does not exist. Values have to do with what is good or bad, superior or inferior, better or worse. Only within the framework of an infinite, personal Creator are real values

possible. Outside this framework, any value system must be arbitrary and whimsical.

The Creation Account

It is not incidental that the biblical narratives begin with the majestic words, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." God is the subject of the first sentence in the Bible, and this statement sets the stage not only for the Book of Genesis, but for the entirety of Holy Scripture. First and foremost, the Bible is a book about him!

Scripture begins with an assumption, the assumption of God's existence. It does not speculate about God, but gives a divine declaration. This declaration immediately sets the Judeo-Christian world-view in opposition to all other world-views, such as, *atheism* (the denial of God's existence), *agnosticism* (the belief that God's existence is unknown or unknowable), *pantheism* (the belief that God is everything), and *materialism* (the belief that nothing exists which is not physical or that is not the result of material processes).

The theological implications of this creation story are profound. They inform us about God, history, the world, and humans in the world. Concerning God, the creation account tells us that he exists independently of the universe. He did not struggle against other forces in creation (as in Zoroastrianism), for he alone was the power and will behind the existence of everything. God created in freedom, for he was not compelled by any outside force. Thus, creation is the starting point for history. Unlike her neighbors, Israel's faith was grounded in history--the mighty acts of God as he interacted with his creation and creatures in time and space. By contrast, pagan ideas never bridged the gap between the world of the gods and goddesses and historical reality.

Because God created the world, history has purpose. The created world and history have a goal toward which they point. Furthermore, because God created the world, the world is good (cf. Ge. 1:31)! Humans are not alienated from the world God made. God created the world for humans (cf. Is. 45:18) and gave to them a mandate to steward, explore and live within it (Ge. 1:27-28).

The creative action by which God caused the universe to exist is described simply as his spoken word. There is in the biblical account a fundamental harmony between God's word and his work. The creative process consists of things which God said (i.e., "Let there be...") and things which God did (i.e., God "made," "separated," "set," "formed," and so forth). The creation of the universe is pictured as both *ex nihilo* (= out of nothing) and as a process, much as a potter might work with clay.

Science and the Creation Account

Since all truth is God's truth and there cannot be two truth bodies which

contradict each other and yet remain true, it remains for Christians to find the harmony which exists between the Bible, God's written word of truth, and creation, God's material world of truth. This attempt raises the question of science and the Bible.

A word must be said at the outset about the interpretational factor. If one discovers that his/her understanding of the Bible and his/her understanding of the Book of Nature are not compatible, either the data of Scripture or the data of nature has been interpreted wrongly. To profess belief in the divine inspiration of Genesis does not mean that a correct understanding is automatic. It should be remembered that the language of the Bible is descriptive, not scientific. Such a statement does not reduce to relativism the truth of Scripture, but it does mean that one must not attempt to find scientific abstractions in the language of the Bible (i.e., the atomic theory, the laws of motions, and so forth). The purpose of the Bible is redemptive, not for general information. It was not intended to be a source for botany, geology, zoology or astronomy. While Christians believe that what the Bible says about these and similar areas is true, they do not hold that the Bible intends to tell everything about them or even that its essential purpose is to describe them.

Scientists and Christians have long disagreed about the origins of the world. However, in many cases this disagreement has come because scientists over-interpret their physical data or Christians misinterpret the Bible. Christians do present a united front against atheistic evolution, since such an interpretation, by definition, does not leave room for God. Atheistic evolution holds that the universe is the result of spontaneous generation given the eternal element of matter plus time plus chance. Such a view not only contradicts the Bible, it leaves humans in hopeless despair. A human then becomes matter in motion, an accidental machine with no worth.

There are basically three ways in which Christians have responded to the claims of the atheistic evolutionists. *Young earth creationists* deny outright the claims that the earth is very old. Rather, they contend that while the earth appears to be old, it was created with the appearance of age. Furthermore, the geologic phenomena of Noah's flood has contributed considerably to the apparent age of the earth. *Progressive creationists*, on the other hand, accept the scientific evidence that the earth is very old. They believe that God truly created the world, but that he did so over long periods of time. The sudden appearance of new species is not the product of evolution, but divine action. *Theistic evolutionists* accept the theory of evolution, but modify it so that it fits within a theistic framework. In other words, they believe that God controlled the evolutionary process in creating the world. They deny that the universe is the product of time, matter, and chance.

In relating these three positions to the Genesis account of creation, Christians have offered several theories. The young earth proponents stoutly emphasize that the

"days" of creation were consecutive, twenty-four hour periods. Others have advocated the "long day" theory, that is, that each creative day was an undetermined time-span. Since the sun was not created until the fourth day (Ge. 1:14-19), conventional time constraints cannot apply. As such, how long it took God to create the world is completely unknown. Still others have suggested that the literary genre of Genesis 1-2 is intended to affirm the fact of creation, not a description of the process of creation. It says that God did it; it does not say how he did it. While such theories vary greatly, they are united on one fundamental issue: God created the heavens and the earth!

Humans, the Crown of Creation

God's final creative act was the creation of humans (Ge. 1:27). They were made as the climax of all God's creative excellence. The first statement about humans in Holy Scripture is that they are creatures. At the same time, they are the apex of all the creatures and have dominion over all (Ge. 1:28-30; 2:19-20). Humans are lower than heavenly beings but higher than animals, plants and non-living things (Ps. 8:3-8).

That humans were created in the image of God is plainly stated (Ge. 26-27). However, just what the phrase "image of God" may mean has engendered considerable discussion. In Semitic cultures, an "image" was a representation of the deity. As such, humans are God's representatives on the earth. Their dominion over creation is derived from him. At the same time, an "image" is on a lower plane than God. To seek to be like God is to forsake the role of the image of God (Ge. 3:4-5). The fact that humans are made in God's image implies the sanctity of human life. Manslaughter is an attack upon the image of God (Ge. 9:6).

Because humans have been made in God's image, they exist on a higher moral and intellectual plane than other creatures. This higher level involves many elements which make humans unique. They are *personal*. They have been created as male and female, and this relationship is germane to the image of God, who is personal. No human can be fulfilled completely in isolation. Humans are social creatures whose very existence depends upon cohabitation (cf. 1 Co. 11:11-12). Humans as male and female stand on equal footing before God, and each is incomplete without the other (Ge. 2:18-24). Humans have *finite freedom*. They are not simply matter in motion or predetermined robots. They confront choices, and within limits, they decide their own futures. They have *intelligence*. They think abstractly, reason and are conscious of themselves. They ponder their own existence. They express *values* and *creativity*. They feel *emotion*. They relate to people and things on levels higher than instinct. They feel love, anger, and compassion. They can *communicate*. They are able to transmit cognitive ideas. They may not communicate exhaustively, but they can communicate truly. They have a sense of *responsibility*. They maintain relationships, perform duties, and steward the resources of the earth (Ge. 2:15).

The basic social unit in the human order is the family (Ge. 1:27; 2:22-24). Maleness and femaleness are basic to humanity. Men and women alike participate in the divine image and are created for fellowship. Marriage is the most intimate form of this fellowship, though not the only form of it. As an institution of God, marriage is vastly more than simply a mechanism for procreation. It is primarily an institution for fellowship. The biblical ideal is obviously monogamous (Mt. 19:4-6). It is the normal state, while celibacy is the exception. Human sexuality is both recreational (cf. Dt. 24:5; Pro. 5:15-19) and procreational (Ge. 4:1-2; Ps. 127:3-5; 128:3). Humans as male and female have different roles determined by God, but not different values. They stand on equal footing before God (Ga. 3:28). They have both corporate and individual roles. The individual does not lose his/her identity in community, yet the community is more than just a bundle of individualists. The human person behaves as an individual within the larger community, freely choosing or rejecting community life and standards while experiencing the consequences of such choices.

As God's representatives in the world, created in his own image, humans were instructed to rule over the good world God had made (Ge. 1:28). For the Christian, the basis of all exploration and stewardship of the world is the fact that it is the good creation of God. Not only is it worthy to be examined, it is intended to be examined (Ps. 8:3-8). God sent the man and woman into the world, and he blessed them with a commission, "All is yours" (cf. 1 Co. 3:21-23; Ro. 14:14). Thus, from the very beginning humans have shown a marked capacity for curiosity and investigation. Adam identified the animals by naming them (Ge. 2:19-20). To be sure, human curiosity had divine limits (Ge. 2:15-16), but it was divinely given nevertheless. Of particular interest is the way the Old Testament wisdom literature documents this curiosity, awe and examination of the world God made. Wisdom in the Old Testament especially refers to deep reflection and contemplation about all areas of life, such as was conducted by Solomon (1 Kg. 5:12; 4:32-34). The observations about life by Agur are also noteworthy in this regard (Pr. 30:15-16, 18-19, 21-31). Wisdom herself is personified and described as God's first created thing (Pr. 8:22-31).

There is an important framework within which curiosity and creativity must work. Curiosity and the investigation of the world as ends in themselves are a perversion of God's order (Ecc. 1:2-18; 12:9-14). All exploration of life and the created world should be conducted in the reverent framework of God as the good Creator and Sustainer (Ecc. 3:12-13). If it is not done so, it becomes rebellion. Humans must not indiscriminately search after knowledge. Some forms of knowledge are evil (Ge. 3:2-5). Such a limitation must be clearly realized in the face of western culture's explosion of technology.

The work ethic is also part of God's intent for humans. Contrary to popular opinion, work and responsibility were not part of the curse following human

rebellion. They are part of the created order. The intellectual and creative skills given to humans presuppose this fact, and the Genesis record bears it out (Ge. 2:18, 15). The rest of Scripture confirms it (Pr. 6:6-9; Is. 28:23-29; 2 Th. 3:6-12; 1 Ti. 5:8). Thus, one of the primary targets for criticism in the Old Testament wisdom literature is slothfulness. A selective look at the sluggard's character from the Proverbs illustrates such a person's lifestyle to be a tragi-comedy combining laziness (Pr. 26:14) and excuses (Pr. 26:13; 22:13). The sluggard will not begin things (Pr. 6:9-10), he will not finish things (Pr. 12:27; 19:24; 26:15), and he will not face things (Pr. 26:16; 20:4). Consequently, he is dissatisfied (Pr. 13:4; 21:25-26), helpless (Pr. 15:19), and useless (Pr. 18:9; 10:26).

The destiny of humans is life. The purpose for which humans exist is to live. Long life is a basic desire (1 Kg. 1:31; Ps. 21:4; 34:12-13; 91:16; Ex. 20:12). The greatest tragedy is for life to be cut short (Ps. 55:23; Pr. 10:27; Is. 38:9-10). Although the Old Testament is vague about a resurrection of the dead (the clearest reference is late, cf. Da. 12:2), life as human destiny prepares the way and implicitly anticipates such an emphasis in the New Testament. Life, with its source in God, is the greatest gift and choice (Dt. 30:19).

The Human Dilemma

Every human person, whether Christian or not, intuitively recognizes that he/she is in dilemma. Humans are capable of great good, but they are also capable of terrifying evil. They are finite, but they wish to be infinite. They have freedom, but they often use this freedom to indulge in gross sensuality. Humans are equally capable of believing in God or disbelieving in him, and the implications of this choice are staggering.

There are, of course, a number of philosophical solutions to the human dilemma. As long as humans have been thinking, they have been wondering why they are like they are. Some suggest that the dilemma is inherited, since it is believed that humans are the product of biological evolution. Humans are the product of a series of accidents, so the human dilemma is an accident itself. Thus, the human problem is born, not made. Others see the human problem as primarily environmental. As such, the human is a child of his/her social environment. Human ills are the products of society. Social environment creates in humans all that is evil. Still others opt for the view that the human dilemma is an illusion. Since humans are an accident of matter, time and chance, and since God does not exist, any attempt to define the human dilemma is purely imaginative. There are no real categories of good or bad, best or worst, worthwhile or worthless, for who is to say which is which? Any definition would be wholly arbitrary. Humans are simply what they are—amoral and indifferent to values except those whimsical choices they make for themselves.

In all these attempts to explain humanness, men and women have never been able to rise above despair. Though some have asserted that they have no problems, and others assert that outside sources are at fault, these solutions are unsatisfying and unconvincing.

The Bible, also, offers a declaration about the human dilemma. The heart of the Bible's answer as to why humans are in despair is in the assertion that humans are not what they once were. Biological evolution says that humans have ascended. The Bible asserts that they have fallen. Jeremiah concludes that the human heart is "deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it" (Je. 17:9)? How did this fall happen?

Though humans were created in the image of God with freedom and responsibility, they deliberately chose to disregard God's instructions. Their fall was not just a minor stumble, but a headlong plunge which had lasting effects on human history. Adam and Eve's disobedience was the historical point of beginning for the human dilemma (Ge. 3:1-24). It was followed by murder (Ge. 4:3-10, 23) and male exploitation of women (Ge. 4:19). This chain of deviations from God' created order culminated in a total moral disaster (Ge. 6:5-6). If in Zen Buddhism the human enters the water and causes no ripples, in the biblical view the human causes ripples that never end.

There are several ways in which Christians have treated the account of the fall in Genesis 3. Traditionally, most Christians have taken the account as straightforward history. However, because of the poetic character of the account, some interpreters suggest that the story should be taken historically though not literally. As such, the Genesis account intends to give the fact of the fall though not necessarily the method of the fall. Finally, other interpreters see the Genesis account as merely symbolic of what happens to every human person. Adam and Eve are not so much historical persons as they are symbolisms of all persons. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the Christian position is that humans are not what they once were. They are fallen creatures. The story of the fall is at once the story of Adam and the story of every human (Ro. 3:23).

The story of the fall has far-reaching implications. First, it shows that evil is not abstract. Although the Bible does not discuss the origin of evil *per se*, it does show that evil comes from personal rebellion against God. Evil is not an impersonal force, as in eastern pantheism. Furthermore, the human dilemma is a product of human choice. Humans are responsible for their sins. Traditionally, Christians describe fallen humans as depraved. They do not mean that humans have lost their humanness, that they cannot ever do anything good, that they cannot participate in the process of salvation, that there was a total loss of freedom, or that the image of God was cancelled. They do mean that humans are corrupt at the very center of their

being. Every part of the human has been infected and affected by the fall. Sinful humans are unable to do anything to save themselves or to initiate the process of salvation. Furthermore, the entire human race is infected by sin. So, sin was not a necessity. It involved, and it still involves, human volition. Every person has an inward bias as well as outward influences toward sin. Though the image of God may have been marred in the fall, it was not lost (Ge. 9:6).

Temptation is a combination of inward desires, outward coercion, and a rationalization and rejection of God's commands (cf. 1 Jn. 2:15-17; Ja. 1:14-15). The serpent told Eve that transgression was an attainment. He told her that she would know good and evil, but he did not tell her that she would be unable always to choose good over evil. In the end, the fall separated humans from God. This separation was not an irreconcilable estrangement, however. Though humans could not approach God, God was free to enter time and space to approach them.

The Antithesis Between the Christian World-View and Agnostic or Atheistic World-Views

At this point, the relationship between God, the world, humans and society has been explored in several ways. The Christian view is that the world God made is good. Humans whom God made are valuable. Culture is an institution from God. God, as the Creator, is the basis for all meaning in life. Humans in God's image are the crown of creation. Their dilemma is not simply inherited, environmental or illusory, but rather, it is the direct result of their rebellion against their Creator. In spite of their fall, humans are worth redeeming!

By contrast, modernism has rejected biblical faith in God. The atheist, by accepting the logical implications of saying the origin of the universe is matter plus time plus chance, has also accepted Nietzsche's conclusion that "God is dead." The agnostic, by relegating God (if there is one) to an unknowable category, has alienated him/herself from all meaning. In the midst of this despair, humans estranged from God have developed alternative world-views. They may adopt mechanism, in which humans see themselves as highly sophisticated machines which operate outside the categories of value. They may opt for Nihilism, where persons become self-destructive because they have no worth. Many turn to existentialism. Here, each seeks to create value by personal decision. However, all values are subjective, personal and relative. Of course, there is a general apathy as well. Tragically, the majority of modern humans seek to maintain some values of Christianity without the God of Christianity. They wish to condemn murder, thievery and rapine, but have dismissed their reasons for doing so. They live in self-contradiction and either do not realize it or do not care. The Christian should weep over the despair of modern culture and fully realize that in spite of its continual rebellion, God still wishes to redeem lost men and women.

The expressions of modern despair are to be found at the highest intellectual levels of society. Here are a few of them:

HAP

*If but some vengeful god would call to me
From up the sky, and laugh: "Thou suffering thing,
Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,
That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!"*

*Then would I bear it, clench myself, and die,
Steeled by the sense of ire unmerited;
Half-eased in that a Powerfuller than I
Had willed and meted me the tears I shed.*

*But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain,
And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?
--Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,
And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan....
These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown
Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.*

Thomas Hardy

Religious humanists regard the universe as self-existing and not created.

Humanism asserts that the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values.

from Humanist Manifesto I (1933)

As in 1933 humanists still believe that traditional theism, especially faith in the prayer-hearing God, assumed to love and care for persons, to hear and understand their prayers, and to be able to do something about them, is an unproved and outmoded faith. Salvationism, based on mere affirmation, still appears as harmful, diverting people with false hopes of heaven thereafter. Reasonable

minds look to other means for survival.

from Humanist Manifesto II (1973)

When we speak of forlornness....we mean only that God does not exist and that we have to face all the consequences of this.

from "Existentialism," Jean-Paul Sartre

Have you ever heard of the madman who on a bright morning lighted a lantern and ran to the market-place calling out unceasingly: 'I seek God! I seek God!' --As there were many people standing about who did not believe in God, he caused a great deal of amusement. Why! Is he lost? said one. Has he strayed away like a child? said another. Or does he keep himself hidden? Is he afraid of us? Has he taken a sea-voyage? Has he emigrated?--the people cried out laughingly, all in a hubbub. The insane man jumped into their midst and transfixed them with his glances. 'Where is God gone?' he called out. 'I mean to tell you! We have killed him, --you and I! We are all his murderers!'

It is further stated that the madman made his way into different churches on the same day, and there intoned his Requiem aeternam deo. When led out and called to account, he always gave this reply, 'What are these churches now, if they are not the tombs and monuments of God?'

from "God is Dead," F. Nietzsche

The God Who Speaks and Acts

The Judeo-Christian faith is built upon the belief that God reveals himself in history, or to borrow a phrase from Francis Schaeffer, "He (God) is there, and he is not silent." The Bible is the story of redemptive history. It details for us how God broke into time and space to speak and act in terms humans could understand.

The Old Testament demonstrates that God is the lord of history. History is not made up of events alone. Rather, it consists of facts and interpretation. Interpretation distinguishes between facts so that there is a priority of significance. The Old Testament passes over what to us may seem to be monumental facts (i.e., the golden age of Greece), but it raises to prominence much smaller events (i.e., the journeys of Abraham). This set of values concerning history aims at one thing--to show the self-revelation of God in history.

The faith of Israel hinged on such interpreted history. Unlike her neighbors, whose gods and goddesses were often seasonal, Israel's faith in Yahweh was grounded in his universalism, sovereignty and self-revelation in history. His

sovereignty enabled him to direct history (cf. La. 3:37-38; Is. 46:10-11). It was not the sovereignty of a puppeteer, however, but was administered so as to leave humans room for freedom of decision. Yahweh's universalism was not such that it always focused upon humans in general, but it moves from the particular to the general. His universalism is revealed in his election of a small people to become a light to the nations (Ex. 19:3-6). At the same time, Yahweh also directed the histories of nations other than Israel (cf. Am. 9:7).

Because of the historical nature of Israel's faith, the self-revelation of God embraces the past and the future as well as the present. Israel could look back to the covenant God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses as well as ahead to the Day of Yahweh, when God would establish his people at the culmination of history.

The hope of Israel for the future revolved around special figures introduced by the prophets, each of which are interpreted in the New Testament in messianic terms. These figures, such as the Davidic King and the Servant of Yahweh, would arise not only to redeem Israel, but people from among all the nations. Thus, the New Testament describes God in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. The life, death and exaltation of Jesus is the central event in history (He. 11:3). In the Christ event, God acted decisively and fully for the salvation of humans. The promises were fulfilled. In Jesus, the hope of the Old Testament culminates. He is the Davidic King and the suffering Servant of Yahweh. He is the Savior, Christ the Lord (Lk. 2:11; Ac. 2:36). The good news is the proclamation that God has so acted in Jesus, his only Son. The life, actions, words, death and resurrection of the Lord served as a reconciling power, bringing sinful men and women into intimate communion with God (2 Co. 5:17-21). There remains for them the blessed hope. The God who spoke and acted in Christ has given assurance that he will come again to consummate human history (Ac. 17:30-31). The second advent of Christ is the blessed hope for all who believe (Tit. 2:11-14).

Science and Christianity

Science and Christianity often find themselves at odds. The history of this conflict began in the Enlightenment with the discovery of information in astronomy and physics which conflicted with the teachings of the church (Copernican theory, etc.). Scientific discovery and information continued to be amassed and proven until, by the 19th century, many had come to advocate that science was the only method for establishing knowledge and truth. On the basis of Darwinian biology, Thomas Huxley averred that "there is no evidence of the existence of a being as the God of the theologians."¹ The conflict has sharpened, so that today it is popular to assume that

¹E. Burns et al., *World Civilizations: Their History and Their Culture*, 6th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982) 2.964-965.

science and Christianity cannot be reconciled. Christians often perceive science as the enemy; scientists often perceive Christians in the same light.

It will be necessary to carefully define the terms used in this conflict, for frequently the conflict is exacerbated by a lack of clarity on both sides.

Science: *Science is knowledge gained through experience. It is the observation, identification, description, experimental investigation and theoretical explanation of natural phenomena. It is the result of human interpretation of the data of the universe.*

Scientism: *Scientism is the theory that the methods used to investigate the natural sciences should be applied to all fields of inquiry. It assumes that the scientific method is the only way to obtain truth.*

The Bible: *The Bible is God's revelation to humans through the words of the biblical writers. It describes his mighty acts and narrates the history of salvation from the beginning of time to the conclusion of history, calling men and women to know God.*

Christianity: *Christianity is the religious faith that is based upon the Bible, the Old and New Testaments, and that has Jesus Christ as its focus. Christian orthodoxy is that form of Christianity which holds in common the tenets of faith about God, Christ, Scripture, humans and so forth from the first century to the present.*

Theology: *Theology is the human interpretation of the Bible. It rests upon the interpretive principles of history, grammar, literary method, and linguistics as they are used from within the framework of faith in God.*

Given these definitions, it should be seen that the interactions between science and Christianity are not necessarily in conflict. All that comes under the name of science may not be true science. Similarly, all that comes in the name of theology may not be clearly biblical. Christians affirm that God created the universe. They also are bound to affirm that the universe which he created cannot exist in conflict with the revelation he has given in the Bible. The "Book of Nature" and the "Book of Scripture" cannot co-exist in conflict, since they both have the same author--the one, true God. The real conflict, then, is between scientists and theologians, or between scientism and theology.² Failure to recognize these distinctions results in the call for a choice between science and the Bible. Christians sometimes present a false dilemma by setting science (which they perceive as fallible human speculation) against Holy Scripture (which they believe to be the infallible Word of God). Non-Christians do

²B. Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954) 15-44.

the same by advocating that science is the only rational approach to life, while relegating the Bible to the subjective speculations of an ancient people. Both of these paradigms are inadequate.³

Limitations

Both science and theology are limited by human fallibility. Scientists can make mistakes in interpreting their data; theologians can make mistakes in interpreting the Bible. The more each of them view their own respective systems as infallible, the more they are likely to remain in irreconcilable conflict.

Scientism, as a world view, is painfully inadequate. It has no way of proving its assumption that scientific method is the sole way to obtain knowledge or truth. It has an essentially impersonal orientation, so that it is unable to address the personal aspects of human life. It does not carry within it the power to deliver human beings from their problems. It is incapable of providing any ethical base which tells what *ought* to be done rather than simply describing what *is*.

Theology, likewise, is limited. The Bible never presents itself as a textbook on astronomy, geology, botany, physics and the like. Theologians tend toward dogmatism and the inability to look at things in more than one way. They are reluctant to admit the possibility of parallel descriptions coming from both Scripture and science--descriptions which need not be mutually exclusive, since they arise from asking different kinds of questions.

Integration of Science and Christianity

Science and Christianity need not be enemies so long as their respective limitations are recognized and certain perspectives are maintained. First, Christians must not relegate God to the "gaps," that is, they must not merely see God as the one who is active primarily in those aspects of reality for which they have no other explanation. The tendency to view God in this way has contributed to the conflict between science and Christianity. When God is primarily relegated to those areas which lack human explanation, and when scientific knowledge keeps narrowing the gaps of knowledge by offering plausible and demonstrable explanations, God's field of activity is inevitably squeezed into smaller and smaller categories. This "God of the gaps" mentality is completely inadequate. God must be viewed as the Lord of all creation, active in both those areas which we do not understand as well as in those areas which, scientifically, we understand in part. Only the naive and arrogant person contends that we completely understand everything. Science helps us to understand our universe in part, though it cannot offer a full explanation of reality. The Bible,

³R. Bube, *ISBE* (1988) IV.351.

also, helps us to understand reality in part, and it does so from a completely different vantage point than science. Even in Scripture there is the frank concession that, in comparison to God's omniscience, we only "know in part" (1 Co. 13:12). Both scientific and theological humility are in order.

Every event that happens can be considered in at least two ways. One is scientific, that is, "What is the description of this event in terms of natural cause and effect categories? What is the scientific description?" The other is theological, that is, "What is the meaning of this event? What is its purpose, and how does it relate to God and his purposes in the flow of history? What is the theological description?" Both of these descriptions are valid, even though they are not the same. The theological description is the more important in that it is the only one which gives ultimate meaning. On the other hand, the scientific description should be a helper, not a competitor, of Christian faith. It enables us to exercise our moral and ethical directives intelligently rather than foolishly.⁴ Science is possible precisely because God has endowed humans with his own image, enabling them to engage in creative enterprise, imagination, action and investigation. This is the attitude that avoids the idolatry of scientism yet values science as a worthy activity within the Christian world view.⁵

The Problem of Evil

Any defense of the Christian faith must address the problem of evil. This problem can be explained in different ways, of course. The more philosophical person might approach it as the seeming incompatibility of absolute love and sovereign power in the Christian definition of God, so long as this God permits evil and unjust suffering to exist. Either his love or his power must apparently be diminished. A more common sense approach simply asks the question, "Why does God allow innocent suffering?" The deaths of children, the starving masses in third world nations, the proliferation of uncontrolled disease, and the repeated blows that can occur in anyone's life beg an answer. If there is really a God in control of the universe, and if his character is like the Christian Bible declares it to be, how can he refuse to intervene when rampant evil and senseless suffering continue unchecked?

It is only fair to point out, of course, that the problem of evil exists whether or not one believes in God, or for that matter, whether or not one accepts the God of the Christian Scriptures even if it is granted that there is a supreme Being. If one chooses to reject the notion of God altogether (atheism), then logically one is driven either to reject the notion of evil, or at the very least, to reject any certainty that the dilemma

⁴Bube, 352.

⁵A. Holmes, *Contours of a World View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 208-209.

will ever change. If one accepts a definition for God other than the one in the Bible, the problem of evil has not vanished. One may say that evil is an illusion (Christian Science) or that it must be part of God's essential nature so that he is both good and evil (eastern mysticism) or that there are multiple deities, some good and some evil (paganism) or that God struggles with forces which are beyond his control (Confucianism, process philosophy). In short, the problem of evil is not a problem unique to Christianity, as though only Christians needed to worry about it. It can at least be said that the Christian world view gives hope and satisfactory meaning, while the rejection of the God of the Bible eliminates both. How then do Christians answer this problem?

The Questions in the Bible

It may first of all be informative to notice that the questions we are asking have all been asked before by biblical characters. The biblical record in no way ignores the fact that the problem of evil and suffering is profound. Again and again in the psalms, one meets these questions. "My soul is in anguish; how long, O Lord, how long?" (Ps. 6:3). "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (Ps. 10:1). "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" (Ps. 13:1-2). "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps. 22:1-2). "Why do you sleep? Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?" (Ps. 44:23-24). In other contexts, these same questions are found, such as, the question of Habakkuk to God, "Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?" (Ha. 1:2-3, 13). Jeremiah bluntly prayed to God, "I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease? Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?" (Je. 12:1; 15:18; 21:18). Most famous of all, of course, are the questions of Job. "Why did I not perish at birth and die as I came from the womb? Why is light given to those in misery and life to the bitter of soul, to those who long for death that does not come?" (Jb. 3:11, 16, 20-23; 10:18). Directly to God, Job questioned, "Why have you made me your target? Does it please you to oppress me? Why do you hide your face and consider me your enemy?" (7:17-21; 10:3; 13:24). From beneath heaven's altar, the martyrs pose the same question, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (Rv. 6:9-11).

The upshot of all these questions leads to the conclusion we may have suspected all along, that is, that life is not fair and that God often seems silent and hidden during human suffering. This is not the answer we want. We want to live in a world full of immediate justice, and we want a God who is immediately accessible to intervene in unmistakable ways. Since God has given us neither, we then ask,

"Why?"

Why?

The Bible, in fact, does not present a complete and systematic explanation of suffering and the problem of evil. It does, however, provide some important clues that shape our approach to the issue. Here are the most important ones:

God is sovereign, just and loving.

However difficult these attributes may seem to be in light of the existence of evil and unjust suffering in the world, the Bible's testimony is clear. God is able to do anything he wishes at any time he wishes to accomplish his own purposes (1 Chr. 29:11; Is. 40:22-23; Ps. 47:7-9; Da. 5:21; Ac. 17:24-25; Rv. 1:8). This means that if God permits evil to exist temporarily, he does so because it fits into the larger scheme of his loving and righteous purposes. The assertion of God's sovereignty is made, not only by individuals in neutral or favorable contexts, but by individuals who were experiencing great personal tragedy, such as, Job (42:2) and the sufferer in Psalm 22 (22:28).

At the same time, God is also truly just and truly loving (Ge. 18:25; Dt. 32:4; Da. 4:37; Rv. 15:3; Ps. 136; 1 Jn. 4:16; Ps. 103:8). Those who would sacrifice God's power to preserve his love, such as the process theologian-philosopher, cannot do so and remain faithful to Holy Scripture. Whatever the solution to the problem of evil, it cannot be reached by diminishing the character of God. One must not confuse life with God. Life is unfair, but God is still just. If evil exists in the world, its existence cannot be put down to a limitation in God's power or a deficiency in his love. Since he allows evil to exist, he must do so from the vantage point of a larger framework which takes into account both his love and his justice.

Injustice and human suffering are the products of a fallen world.

The distortion which we observe in the world has its roots in the abuse of freedom by angels who sinned (John 8:44; 2 Pe. 2:4; Jude 6) and by our human parents, Adam and Eve, who also sinned (Ge. 3). The curse of sin affected the entire cosmos (Ro. 8:20-22). Of course, one might ask why God granted his human creatures freedom in the first place, since in his omniscience, he surely knew that they could not be trusted with it. The answer is that God wished to have creatures who would praise him, not with the impersonal precision of an automaton, but out of a willing and joyful heart (Ep. 1:4-6). Freedom was necessary for this kind of response. The risk was high. Yet even before God created these free creatures, he purposed to redeem them from the consequences of their wrong choices (1 Pe. 1:18-20; Rv. 13:8).

Thus, the fact that evil exists in the world is directly attributable to humans

rather than God. Sin entered the world through the actions of the human family (Ro. 5:12).

Suffering is not necessarily penal.

The solution of Job's friends echoes the conventional wisdom which we all hear from time to time. It is the notion that human suffering is personally deserved. Job's friends exhausted themselves trying to prove to Job that he, in fact, deserved his plight (Jb. 4:7-9; 5:17, 27; 8:3-4, 20; 11:5-6; etc.). For them, all events in life were simply cause and effect. This same idea was still popular hundreds of years later, and it surfaced among Jesus' disciples when they questioned him about the sin which might have caused a man to be born blind (Jn. 9:1-2). In both of these cases, the response is the same. Suffering is not necessarily penal. Job held fast to his innocence (6:24-25; 31:5ff), and in the end, even God said that Job's friends were wrong (Jb. 42:7-8). Jesus explained to his disciples that blindness from birth was not attributable to some hidden sin, but rather, God allowed this suffering to occur so that in the end his glorious power might be displayed (Jn. 9:3). In this story, there is more than a hint to the solution to unjust suffering. If the undeserved suffering of a single blind man can be temporarily permitted by God in order to demonstrate his glory and grace, then the unjust suffering of the human race can also ultimately accrue to God's glory.

This is not to say, of course, that God does not dispense judgments in history. The prophets of the Old Testament are quite clear that at times the downfall of both people and nations are, in fact, the judgments of God (2 Chr. 21:18-19; Am. 1-2; Mic. 3:9-12; Zep. 1-2; etc.). Still, it is far too simplistic to simply say that all evil and suffering are direct judgments due to personal sin.

God's response to human suffering was not to immediately eliminate it, but rather, to come and share in it.

If as humans we were able to direct God in his ways, surely the common solution would be to eliminate evil. This approach, however, God did not take. Instead, he determined that he would suffer with us, and in fact, would suffer unjustly. He would take the role of the innocent servant who would share the full measure of injustice, even unto brutal death (Is. 53:3-12; Mt. 16:21; Phil. 2:5-8). God was not aloof. Through his sufferings in Christ, God has joined us as a participant in human pain, and by doing so, he extends to us the comfort of a fellow-sufferer (2 Co. 1:3-7).

There is an element of mystery in human suffering that waits to be explained.

In the finitude of our time-bound perspective, it is hard for us to realize that in allowing evil to exist temporarily, God has a greater good in view. This is why Job could conclude that, when he asked for a solution to the problem of suffering, he

spoke of "things too wonderful for me to know" (Jb. 42:3; cf. Ps. 131). The eternal purposes of God can only be glimpsed at the present time (1 Co. 13:12; 1 Jn. 3:2). However, we have the assurance that the troubles in our lives are only "light and momentary" in view of the eternal glory that far outweighs them all (2 Co. 4:16-18). The element of mystery in the problem of human suffering is the same as the element of mystery in the death and resurrection of Jesus. In our sufferings, we "carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed" (2 Co. 4:7-11). Just as the death of Jesus is a microcosm of all human suffering, the resurrection of Jesus is a microcosm of the final victory over all evil and suffering (Rv. 1:17-18).

During the present, while evil and suffering continue to exist, there is hope and faith in the God who gives life from the dead.

There are those, of course, who feel that their disappointment in God is too profound to allow them to believe in him any longer. The bitter truth is that in dispensing with him, they now must live with the same agonizing disappointment, only this time without hope. Paul's trilogy of faith, hope and love as the abiding graces of the person who trusts in Christ is profound. Immediately after explaining the fragmentary nature of our present knowledge, he speaks of these three graces (1 Co. 13:12-13). This is very much the same sort of faith that one finds in Abraham, when he took his son to the mountains of Moriah (Ge. 22). At Moriah, Abraham found that God gives life to the dead and calls those things that are not as though they were (Ro. 4:17). The resurrection of Jesus calls us toward the future. If this present life, as we know it, is all there is, we shall be miserable indeed (1 Co. 15:19). To do away with God is no solution to the problem of evil. If anything, the problem becomes more acute. Instead, we are called to faith, hope and love.

In the end, the problem of evil and suffering call us to God, not away from him. C. S. Lewis explained it well: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." What we have said here is not a complete answer to the problem of evil and human suffering. No complete answer can be given this side of God's conclusion to human history. We do know, however, that at the end he has promised to balance the scales. Perhaps Paul's analogy of child-birth may be helpful. No mother enjoys the searing pain and prolonged agony of the birthing process. However, after a healthy child has been born and the pain subsides, the hours in the labor room are viewed differently than during the painful delivery. Similarly, the entire cosmos now feels the birthing pains of labor (Ro. 8:22). When the sons of God are revealed at the end, however, our present suffering will not be worth comparing with the future glory of God's

children (Ro. 8:18-19).⁶

Christian Values Versus Society's Values

Christianity in the western world exists in fundamental conflict with a significant number of western values. To be sure, western values and Christian values have often been intertwined. Christianity has had a profound effect upon the development of western civilization. At the same time, western civilization now exists as a largely post-Christian society. Some of society's members may still live on the memories of the older, Christian value system, but those values are fading quickly. Axiology, aesthetics, ethics, values and moral behavior now are controlled by a consensus which is not specifically Christian. Values are shaped less by fixed principle, fixed authority or the notion of fixed law, which in turn means that the Bible cannot be appealed to as an authority in these matters. At one time, most Americans would have agreed that the values base of American and European culture was Judeo-Christian, even if many individuals in this culture were not Christian or simply chose to ignore them. This conclusion would have been justified, because there existed a Christian consensus in Europe and the United States. Now, however, the Christian consensus has been replaced by thoroughgoing pluralism. The older ideal of the protection of religion from the state has now become the newer ideal of the extrication of religion, Christianity in particular, from the state. The rise of the secular state along with the privatization of religion has created a paradoxical consensus of pluralism, that is, a society in which the primary world view held by most is that there is no single values base.

Christians in the late 20th century, therefore, have come full circle to the state of affairs encountered by the earliest Christians. Christianity and the prevailing culture are incompatible in fundamental ways. Here, we shall explore some of these incompatibilities, keeping in mind Paul's advice that we must not "let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold" (Ro. 12:2, Phillips). Instead, our highest allegiance is to the God of the Bible who transforms us by renewing our minds in accordance with his will!

Autonomy and Dependence

The Rise of Individualism

The heart of this conflict in values is the question of who or what is at the

⁶There are a great many works on the problem of evil and human suffering. Most apologetic sources have a chapter on the subject as do many books on philosophy and theology. To date, the best two that I have ever read are as follows: C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962) and Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988).

center of one's world view. In ancient Greek thought and culture, one finds the famous dictum of Protagoras of Athens, "Man is the measure of all things." By this, he meant that goodness, truth, justice and beauty are relative to the needs and interests of humans, or to put it another way, there are no absolute truths or eternal standards of right and justice. There can only be particular truths which are valid for a given time and place. Morality, likewise, varies considerably.⁷ Of course, these ideas were opposed by the famous trio of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, but the same notions have in our own generation become the standard line.

The road which has brought us back to this ancient position, at least as far as western culture is concerned, properly begins in the Renaissance with the rise of individualism. A stress on the "dignity of man," that is, a firm belief in human potential and nobility, led Renaissance thinkers to view humans as masters of their own fates. Humans were in themselves capable of living happily in the world. Eventually, by the 18th century, the ideas of economic individualism had taken root. Here, individuals were entitled to do what they wished with their own resources so long as they did not trespass upon the equal rights of others to do the same thing. The Romantics, with their stress on unique personal feeling and sense perception, as well as the Liberals, with their stress on individual rights, contributed to the growing world view that humans were the center of everything. Europe in the 19th century was impacted significantly by such individualism. Men and women were free to interpret life by their individual reactions to it apart from the restraints of traditional precepts, either political or metaphysical.

By the 20th century, this reverence for the individual had thoroughly permeated western civilization, especially in American culture, where it was blended with America's native pragmatism. Pragmatism, the belief that truth is to be defined by practical consequences, presently seems to drive most Americans. More to the point, their value system is that rightness is whatever works toward their own individual goals of happiness. Personal autonomy and personal happiness are the ultimate goals of life. The facilitator of these goals has become the state.

The most serious hindrances toward these goals are ill-health, old age and economic deprivation. Medical technology has become the antidote for the one, and the state welfare programs and personal retirement planning have become antidotes for the other. Of course, medical advancement and financial planning cannot be faulted in themselves. What is at fault is the level of trust which is placed in these structures. Women and men in the late 20th century ultimately place their highest trust in themselves. If they think of God at all, they think of him primarily as a Divine Facilitator who will enable them to achieve their own goals of autonomy and

⁷E. Burns et al., *World Civilizations*, 6th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982) I.189.

happiness. This is equally true of the person who only gives a token recognition to God because he/she is not sure God exists. It is equally true of the Christian who preaches a "prosperity gospel." Both are thoroughly imbued with the values churned out by the spirit of the age.

The Christian Value of Dependence

The Christian value system is quite different, even though Christians sometimes imbibe the popular ideas which are all around them. Christians take seriously the fact that God created the universe and that he continues to uphold its daily functions (Ge. 1:1; He. 11:3; Col. 1:16-17). They understand that he is the Lord of history, not only of general history, but also of their personal lives (Ps. 124). More than any other single thing, the Psalter of the Old Testament expresses the profound attitude of dependence which believers should have toward God (Ps. 62). People in the culture at large worry about the mundane things of life, because they recognize no resource beyond themselves to gain and control these things. Christians, on the other hand, know that regardless of advance planning, there are no guarantees in life (Lk. 12:13-21). Anxiety about survival must be surrendered to God, for all humans are dependent upon him (1 Pe. 5:7; Mt. 6:25-34; 1 Ti. 5:5). The future is in his hands (Ja. 4:13-15).

The Christian world-view emphasizes that the most important factor in the universe is God's will. A familiar Christian theological expression is the phrase "the sovereignty of God." When Christians speak of God's sovereignty, they refer to his lordship over the universe. His kingdom "rules over all" (Ps. 103:19), and he is the power above all other powers (1 Chr. 29:11; Ps. 22:28; 47:7-8). He rules over human affairs (Da. 5:21b; Ps. 75:7), and no force can successfully oppose him (Ps. 76:7; Job 42:2). He will accomplish all that he intends in history (Je. 30:24; Job 23:13; Ac. 2:23-24).

Since this is so, humans who claim full personal autonomy rather than dependence upon God are either ignorant or defiant (Ro. 1:21, 28-32). For Christians, the will of God in the world is affirmed and embraced (Mt. 6:10). They recognize his sovereignty in their personal lives (Ja. 4:13-16), just as did Jesus himself (Lk. 22:42; Jn. 19:11). God calls all women and men, therefore, to repent and to bow the knee of their hearts toward the one who will call them all to account (Ac. 17:30-31).

Closely related to God's will is the activity of Christian prayer. Christians pray because of their essential dependence upon God. Prayer is the ultimate denial of human autonomy and the affirmation of human dependence upon God.

Sometimes, of course, Christians are tempted to reshape prayer into a method for manipulating God. Here, prayer becomes a means of getting God to do something that he is not inclined to do or getting him to do something that he would not do

otherwise. When people pray in this way, they merely take a Christian practice and change it into a pagan one (Ja. 4:3; 1 Jn. 5:14-15). Pagan prayer, in virtually all ancient and modern pre-literary societies, is a method of moving the implacable gods and goddesses to one's own advantage. When Christians descend into this attitude, they are not truly praying as a Christian. In Luther's words, they are praying the Lord's prayer backwards, starting with the seventh clause ("deliver us from evil") and working toward the front. This is egocentric prayer, not theocentric prayer. Those who pray in this way, as Luther put it, "seek their own honor and glory." What they want is deliverance from misfortune so that they can be happy and please themselves. It is not, of course, that Christians should neglect prayers of petition. The Lord's prayer itself clearly contains petition. In fact, if one does not petition God for daily bread does not such an omission presume that he/she supposes themselves capable of managing their own affairs and meeting their own needs?⁸

Jesus said that men and women ought to pray always (Lk. 18:1). If even reluctant and unjust people could be cajoled into a response, how much more will God respond to the prayers of his people, since he loves them and wants to help them (Lk. 18:2-8; 11:5-10). The real question is not whether God will respond, but rather, whether there are faithful people who will seek him.

Ego and Relationship

The rise of individualism has gradually pushed the people of our culture toward personal autonomy and away from dependence upon God. If this trend has had profound spiritual implications, it has had equally profound sociological ones. At the heart of this problem is the dominance of narcissism over altruism or ego over relationship. According to the New Testament, narcissism is especially characteristic of the final period of the age (2 Ti. 3:2a). This self-absorption is expressed in greed, arrogance, abuse, disobedience, ungratefulness, grudges, brutality, treachery, conceit and hedonism (2 Ti. 3:2-5; cf. Ro. 1:29-31). The values of our society are captured in the familiar slogans, "You must take care of yourself," or "You must do what is right for you," or "What's in it for me?" or "You must watch out for Number One." If one accepts the general world-view that "man is the measure of all things," it is hard to avoid the next step of considering oneself to be the most valuable of all humans in the world. Those who descend into the worship of the creature rather than the Creator (Ro. 1:21-23) almost inevitably regard their personal goals, personal happiness, personal enrichment, and personal empowerment as of supreme importance. Such egocentrism wreaks havoc in all forms of interpersonal relationships, most notably in friendships, marriages, families and the community. All relationships are viewed from the standpoint of self-aggrandizement.

⁸P. Watson, *Let God Be God!* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1947) 39-41.

Christian values are very different from this narcissistic malaise. The fundamental reason for this difference rests upon the nature of God, who is love (1 Jn. 4:16). God is triune, and he eternally exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. From eternity, there was love between the Father and the Son (Jn. 17:24; cf. 3:35; 5:20; 15:9; Mt. 3:17//Mk. 1:11//Lk. 3:22). This love was not selfish love, but rather, it was love directed toward another. The Father did not love himself; rather, he loved the Son.⁹ Thus, the New Testament can ground the Christian value of relationship in the fact that God is himself love. The love which the Father has for the Son has also been bestowed upon us (1 Jn. 3:1). We, in turn, are compelled by God's love to show love to each other (1 Jn. 4:7-12, 19-21). In fact, the distinguishing mark between those who belong to God and those who do not is this essential characteristic of love for others (1 Jn. 3:10-11). It applies particularly to families and social relationships (1 Jn. 3:11-15). Such love is sacrificial (1 Jn. 3:16). It compels benevolence and altruism (1 Jn. 3:17-18).

Godly Families

The most critical factor in a godly family is sacrificial love. Such love begins with a husband and a wife, each of whom leave their parental home and cleave to the other (Ge. 2:24). This kind of love is expressed in loyalty and faithfulness (Mt. 19:3-6//Mk. 10:6-9; 1 Co. 7:27; Ep. 5:31-33). Just as important, it is expressed in mutual submission between husbands and wives (Ep. 5:21), the voluntary submission of the wife to the husband (Ep. 5:22-24), and the sacrificial, servant-leadership of the husband to the wife (Ep. 5:25-30). Unfortunately, a great many chauvinists have interpreted the headship of the husband over the wife (1 Co. 11:3; Ep. 5:23) to mean the dominance and authoritarianism of men over women. This can hardly be correct.¹⁰ In defiance of this distortion, many in the modern women's movement wish to abolish all distinctions between male and female roles. Both of these positions indulge in the will-to-power, and both are incompatible with the attitudes that Paul calls for in this critical passage. Mutual submission cannot be maintained in a domineering relationship where one or both partners are vying for power. While it is true that wives are to voluntarily submit to their husbands,¹¹ it is equally true that

⁹This, of course, is the reason why the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is so foundational. Unitarianism and/or modalism, both of which deny the Trinity, are left with a God whose love is essentially selfish and self-serving, cf. G. Boyd, *Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 183-187.

¹⁰In fact, there is good reason to doubt the traditional interpretation of headship as referring to authority. Rather, the meaning of source or origin is well-attested in the literature of the period, cf. F. Bruce, *I & II Corinthians [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 103, i.e., man is the head of woman because the woman was taken from the man, as in the Genesis account (Ge. 2:22).

¹¹The imperative, middle voice of the verb "be submitted" is an appeal for voluntary submission. It does not describe the obedience of a slave or an inferior, but rather, it describes a woman taking the initiative to give allegiance to and be supportive of her husband, cf. J. Bristow, *What Paul Really Said About Women* (San Francisco:

husbands are to give themselves up for their wives as an expression of sacrificial love, just as Christ gave himself up for the church. If it is true that the husband is to be a servant-leader, just as Christ is a servant leader to the church, it is also true that the husband is to love his wife as himself, defending and protecting her.

If sacrificial love is called for between spouses, it is no less important between parents and children. Children should honor their parents through obedience (Dt. 5:16; Ep. 6:2; Col. 3:20). Fathers, in particular, are singled out and commanded to avoid exasperating and embittering their children (Ep. 6:4; Col. 3:21). The metaphor of a parent's agonizing love for a wayward child is boldly described as God's love for his wayward people (Ho. 11:1-11).

It can be safely stated that the fundamental cause of the breakdown in the modern family, whether between husbands and wives or between parents and children, is the selfish elevation of oneself over others and the stubborn refusal to follow the way of sacrificial love. Jesus stated a piercing truth when he said that the underlying cause of divorce and family rupture was "the hardness of human hearts" (Mt. 19:7-8/Mk. 10:2-5).

Godly Friendships

Friendship, also, is a primary social expression of this biblical value of altruistic love. Central to the biblical concept of friendship is loyalty (Pro. 17:17; 18:24). Probably the classic example of friendship in the Bible is that of David and Jonathan (1 Sa. 18:1; 2 Sa. 1:26), whose loyalty to each other was even stronger than blood ties (cf. Pro. 27:10). The friendship between Naomi and Ruth, also, was a profound relationship of faithfulness that went much deeper than normal family connections (Ru. 1:6-17). Friendships of this kind are constructive (Pro. 27:6, 17; Ecc. 4:10), and they do not come often in life. The deepest pain is caused by the breaking of mutual trust in a friendship (Ps. 41:9; 55:12-14; cf. Mt. 26:47-50).

Community Concern

The Christian value of altruism over narcissism also extends to the community, both the community of believers as well as the larger, pluralistic community. Within the Christian community, this altruism clearly is called for in the many passages which use the vocabulary "one another" (Ro. 12:10, 16; 13:8; 14:13, 19; 15:5, 7, 14; 1 Co. 12:25; Ga. 5:13; 6:2; Ep. 4:1-2, 32; 5:18-21; Col. 3:9, 12-13, 16; 1 Th. 3:12; 4:18; He. 3:13; 10:23-25; Ja. 4:11; 5:9, 16; 1 Pe. 1:22; 4:9; 5:5, 14; 1 Jn. 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11-12; 2 Jn. 5). However, this kind of love is not merely for the community of faith. It should also extend to outsiders. It is expressed in non-retaliation (Mt. 5:38-41),

generosity (Mt. 5:42; Ga. 2:10; Ja. 1:27), kindness in the face of opposition (Mt. 5:43-47; Ro. 12:14; 1 Pe. 2:18-23; 3:8-9), forgiveness (Mt. 6:14-15), condescension to the less fortunate (Ro. 12:16; Ja. 2:1-5) and concern for community leaders (1 Ti. 2:1-2).

Power and Weakness

The ideal of power will forever be associated with the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), who in his "revaluation of all values" believed that the "will to power" was the fundamental drive in all humans. Flatly rejecting the Christian concept that sympathy and humility are the proper foundation for values, Nietzsche held that the inevitable implications of Darwinian biology drive the human race toward survival of the fittest. The best-fitted individuals are those who acquire power over others. The world is divided into two types of morality, the master morality and the slave morality. Members of the master morality class have become the rulers due to their naturally superior abilities, aggressive instincts and drives. They prize sex and power. They do not attempt to conceal their motives, but boldly express them in overt actions. The highest expression of the master morality is the superman, one who creates his own set of values and is "beyond good and evil," at least in the traditional sense. On the other hand, members of the slave morality (particularly those of the Judeo-Christian tradition) are the victims of their own inabilities. They repress all life-giving instincts, demeaning the sex instinct and teaching humility instead of respect for power.

While it would be too much to say that the modern Western world has now adopted Nietzsche's world-view *en toto*, it should also be recognized that his insight into the human psyche is not far off the mark. Humans do, indeed, seem to delight in the will to power. This desire for power is expressed in personal autonomy as opposed to dependance upon God and in narcissism as opposed to altruism, as we have seen. It is also expressed in the drive to dominate others and the rejection of humility.

The Biblical Perspective of the Human Will to Power

The Bible treats the human will to power as the fundamental expression of a fallen race. When sin entered the world, human depravity took the aggressive form of male dominance over the female (Ge. 3:16b; 4:19), unlimited personal vengeance (Ge. 4:23), and massive violence (Ge. 6:5, 11). Patriarchalism, slavery, class prejudice, nationalism and racism are all overt expressions of this aggression and desire to dominate others. Alongside this worldly culture there co-existed a counter-culture, which did not follow the way of dominance. One sees it in Abraham's generous offer to Lot of the choicest land in Canaan (Ge. 13). It is apparent in Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers (Ge. 45). While the invasion of Canaan was certainly a concerted war effort, it was not grounded in the will to power so much as it

was a divine judgment upon the evil ways of the Canaanites. Canaan was not won by the power of the Israelites, but by the power of God, since it was the divine grant of land promised to Abraham's family. Furthermore, this form of war was protected by the *harem*, that is, the ban on all booty from captured cities.

In the Psalms, the collision of values between the arrogant and those who trust in God is a recurring theme (Ps. 2:1-4; 5:4-6, 10; 7:1-2, 9, 14-16; 10:1-18, etc.). Isaiah's taunt song against the King of Babylon is typical of the various oracles of the prophets against the arrogant empire-builders of Mesopotamia (Is. 14:3-23). Isaiah's vision of hope looked ahead to the end of the oppressor and the establishment of a king of love (Is. 16:4b-5).

In the New Testament, this same assessment of the worldly way of power is to be found on the lips of Jesus and his apostles. The way of the pagan world is dominance over others (Mt. 20:25/Mk. 10:42). Worldly culture is filled with arrogance, insolence, boastfulness and ruthlessness (Ro. 2:30-31). Its consummate expression is in the Man of Lawlessness, who will seek to displace God himself in his lust for supreme power (2 Th. 2:3-7; Re. 13:2-8).

The Biblical Value of Humility and Weakness

The Christian value system gives high marks to humility and weakness, but it must immediately be pointed out that both of these categories have Christian definitions which are other than the popular notions associated with them. In the Christian point of view, humility actually proceeds out of a position of strength. What the Bible values as weakness is not the same as passivity, feebleness or inability. Rather, it is the active acceptance of difficulty and limitation while depending upon God for strength beyond oneself.

The model for humility is Christ, who came not to be served, but to serve (Mt. 20:26-28). Although he was by nature God, the position of ultimate sovereignty, he actively chose the role of servanthood through incarnation (Phil. 2:5-8). Humility, then, was not a condition that was forced upon Christ. Instead, it was a choice that he made for the sake of others. Christian humility follows in kind. It is something that the Christian chooses over against the way of power and dominance (Lk. 14:7-13; 18:14b; Ep. 4:2; Phil. 2:3; Tit. 3:2b; Ja. 4:1-12; 1 Pe. 5:5-6).

Weakness, similarly, is a choice by Christians to depend upon God's power rather than upon one's own power. It is not simply a condition of helplessness. When Paul says that God chose the "weak things of the world" (1 Co. 1:27), he refers to God's choice of the crucifixion of Jesus as the means for saving those who believe (1 Co. 1:22-25). In the viewpoint of the world, such an execution seemed pointless; in God's viewpoint, it was the reconciliation of the world to himself (2 Co. 5:16-19; 13:4). Weakness, like humility, can also be a choice to identify with those who are

powerless (1 Co. 9:22). At its heart, weakness is the arena of human limitation and active dependence upon God's strength (Ro. 8:26; 1 Co. 12:22; 2 Co. 11:29-30; 12:5, 7-10; He. 11:34).

Now and Then

Given the overriding values of autonomy, narcissism and dominance in our society, it is not surprising that alongside these values is a preoccupation with the present, earthly life. The assumption that God exists and that he shall call all humans to account is not central to the current world view. Some 38% of Americans claim never to have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ, and another 17% either believe no one knows what happens after death, there is no heaven, or if there is, God will take people there because they have tried to be good, have tried to keep the ten commandments, or simply because God is expected to save everyone, regardless.¹² It is apparent that the biblical concept of people facing God as the Great Judge at the close of time and the idea that they will be called to account personally for how they responded to Jesus Christ is very much a minority opinion.

It is true, of course, that various groups in our society are concerned with the future. Ecologists, sociologists and futurists are all concerned with the condition of the earth and its human population for coming generations. These concerns, however valid, are not at all the same thing as the biblical concern for the human creature's ultimate accountability to God.

Some members of the intelligentsia, such as the philosopher Bertrand Russell, would flatly deny that humans survive death. As an atheist, he believed that religion is harmful as well as untrue, and the vision of an afterlife is only an incentive toward further militarism, not to mention manipulation.¹³ Others, even from within Christendom, are more agnostic, such as, John Robinson, the Bishop of Woolwich, when he agrees with the consensus: "'Making a good death' no longer strikes people as an intelligent aim in life. It's what they do here that matters. After that the ball can bounce as it will."¹⁴

Biblical Christians, on the other hand, take seriously the idea of an afterlife and accountability. While the old saw is true, "some people are so heavenly minded they are no earthly good," the opposite is true as well. People can be so earthly minded that heaven is not a part of their working assumption. The Christian world view, which is oriented toward the future rather than the present only, is woven throughout the woof and warp of the Old and New Testaments.

¹²G. Barna, *What Americans Believe* (Ventura: Regal, 1991) 198-199.

¹³B. Russell, *Why I Am Not A Christian* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967) 88-93.

¹⁴J. Robinson, *But That I Can't Believe* (New York: New American Library, 1967) 65-68.

The Old Testament and the Future

While information about the after-life came only gradually in the Old Testament, the ideal of a future life with God after the present life certainly is part of the Old Testament world view. New Testament writers considered the righteous remnant of the Old Testament as looking forward to an existence with God after death (He. 11:9-10, 13-16). This hope was expressed more clearly in the later periods of the Old Testament (Job 19:26-27; Ps. 16:10; 49:15; 73:24; Is. 26:19; Da. 7:18, 27; 12:2-3).

During the intertestamental period, the vision of an afterlife continued to be clarified. It included the hope for the righteous to live forever (2 Mac. 7:9) as well as eternal rewards symbolized by the bestowal of a glorious crown (Wis. 5:15-16). A sharp eschatological dualism developed which distinguished between the present age and the age to come (4 Ezra 7:50, 113; 2 Baruch 14:13; 15:8). By the time of Jesus, the concept of two ages--the present temporal age and the future eternal age--was firmly fixed.

The New Testament and the Future

Jesus used the vocabulary of both the Hebrew Bible and intertestamental literature to speak of the future, thus endorsing the concept of eternal life after death (Mt. 12:32; Lk. 18:30; Jn. 5:28-29). In particular, however, Jesus taught that in order to enjoy the blessings of the life hereafter, a person must follow him (Mk. 10:17-31\Mt. 19:16-30\Lk. 10:25-28; 16:8-9; Jn. 3:15-16, 36). The wicked would be consigned to eternal fire along with the devil and his angels (Mt. 25:41; 18:8; Re. 20:11-15). Later, Paul also used the vocabulary of "this age and the age to come" (Ep. 1:21). He spoke of eternal consequences, both of destruction and eternal life, which are based upon one's life in the present age (Ga. 6:7-9).

Christian Values and Ethics--Living in Light of the Future

Out of this firm conclusion about a coming judgment, when God shall call to account all humans in history, and because there is to be a future life after this life with rewards and punishment, New Testament values and ethics have strong eschatological underpinnings. Jesus warned his followers to work toward the rewards of the future life and to minimize the rewards of the present one (Mt. 6:4, 6, 14-15, 18-21; Jn. 12:25). He also warned them against a preoccupation with the present life, since their fundamental orientation was toward the future (Lk. 12:35-48; 21:34-36; Mt. 24:45--25:46). Paul and Peter, also, issue the same injunctions (1 Th. 5:2-8; 1 Pe. 5:1-10), as do other New Testament writers (Ja. 5:7-9; He. 9:27-28). The followers of Jesus should not exhibit anxiety about the stresses of the present age (Mt. 6:25, 31, 34; Lk. 12:22). The present age is passing away (1 Co. 7:31). It is temporary, while

the age to come is eternal (2 Co. 4:16--5:10).

Thus, there is a marked difference of lifestyle, values and ethics between one who lives for the present as opposed to one who lives for the future (1 Ti. 5:6). The dominant value in society at large is "now;" the dominant value of the Christian is "then" (1 Jn. 3:2-3).

The Eye of the Needle

Many of those who listened to Jesus teach in their synagogues and villages found his sayings "hard" (Jn. 6:60). He often said things that went contrary to well-entrenched presuppositions and traditional assumptions. One of the hardest of Jesus' sayings was his statement:

How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. (Mark 10:25)

When Jesus said this, Mark twice emphatically notes even his own disciples found the saying difficult. They were amazed at the first part of his statement, and at the second part, they were amazed even more. They began to question each other, "Who then can be saved?"

In our western culture, we have such a nuanced understanding of "riches" (10:23) that, if we are not careful, we will neutralize the saying and dilute its original potency. Very few among us would confess to having "riches," so the saying passes us by. However, the underlying Greek word *chremata* can equally be translated "wealth" or "property" or "money" or simply "means." Aristotle defined *chremata* as being all of those things which can be evaluated by a fixed price, that is, anything with a coinage value.¹⁵ Here, we must all confess that we are not exempt from this saying of the Lord.

Jesus' statement was a direct frontal attack upon materialism, and insofar as it addressed material riches, it is especially relevant to modern Christians in affluent circumstances. For us, too, it is a "hard saying," but we shall be the better for it if we hear what our Lord said.

Common Jewish Attitudes Toward Wealth in the Time of Jesus

The people of Jesus' culture held a rather common assumption which is equally popular today. It was this: wealth was a sign of excellence of character and tangible proof of God's favor. Prosperity was the sign of a good person. If a man or woman had means, it must indicate that God honored and blessed him/her, and if he did so, then that person must have deserved it. Of course, there was an abundance of

¹⁵W. Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark* rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) 246.

theological proof for this assumption. Had not God blessed Job abundantly because of his excellent character (Jb. 42:10-15)? Was not Abraham, the man of faith, a rich nomad? Did not God bless Jacob in the home of his father-in-law (Ge. 31:1-2)? Did not the first Psalm promise that whatever a righteous man did would prosper (Ps. 1:3)? Was not Solomon both the wisest man in the world and also the richest man in the world (1 Kg. 10:23-24)? The possession of adequate means meant that a person could devote him/herself to prayer, study, and good works. The ideal of the benevolent, pious rich person was greatly esteemed.

This common assumption was apparently held by the rich young man who came to Jesus with the question, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" His life, at least by his own testimony, had been exemplary, and Jesus did not contradict him (10:19-20). He had truly been a "son of the law."

Jesus' Hard Sayings About Material Possessions

Jesus' heart went out to the young man who confronted him, and he loved him (10:21a). His only requirement was that the man sell all his possessions and give them away to the poor so as to have treasure in heaven. Then he must turn and follow Jesus (10:21b). The young man was crestfallen, and sadly he turned away, for he had great wealth.

If Jesus' saying had been difficult for the rich young man, his next saying was yet more difficult for the disciples.

*How hard it is for the ones having means to enter into the kingdom of God. Children, how hard it is to enter God's kingdom! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of an awl than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.*¹⁶

Understandably, they were dumbfounded at Jesus' vehemence. The saying seemed to be an impossibility. Almost all people had means of one sort or another. Would none of them be saved? Yet, Jesus only said that, humanly speaking, it was impossible, yet with God all things were possible.

Attempts to Modify this Hard Saying

The difficulty of the saying is apparent in view of the attempts to modify its stinging attack upon materialism. Early on, some well-meaning scribe seems to have inserted into the text of 10:24 the reading, "Children, how hard it is *for those who trust in riches* to enter the kingdom of God." Thus, the reader might console himself with the thought, "I have riches, but I don't trust in them."¹⁷ A later attempt to soften

¹⁶My translation

¹⁷F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1983) 182. This expansion, found as early as the

the sharpness of the saying is to be found in the English New Testament entitled *The Book of Books* issued in 1938. Here, it is pointed out that the Greek word "camel" is similar to the word for "cable," and based upon the readings in a few minor manuscripts, the editors offer the rendering, "It is easier for a rope to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." This reading is almost certainly incorrect.

Along entirely different lines, it has been repeatedly pointed out to visitors of the old city of Jerusalem that the expression "eye of the needle" was an idiom for a small opening in the larger gate of a city through which a man might still dismount and, with some difficulty, get his camel through if the larger gate were closed. While this explanation is charming and probably somewhat comforting, it is of relatively late origin. To interpret Jesus' saying after this fashion is severely anachronistic. There is no biblical or historical evidence that such an expression existed in the time of Jesus. Scholars agree that this explanation does not arise from any hard evidence about ancient times. So, in the end, the saying must be left as it stands. No doubt it is a hyperbole, but it is a very potent one indeed!

The Saying in the Context of Jesus' Teaching

When one considers the saying in the larger body of Jesus' teachings about wealth and materialism, one must concede that the saying fits well. One of the great threats to receiving any of the teachings of Jesus is the "deceitfulness of wealth" (Mk. 4:7, 19). Even when the wealthy use their resources to make extravagant contributions to God's work, God reckons their gift, not by how much they give, but by how much they have left (Mk. 12:41-44). In the Magnificat of Mary, the prophetic ideal of God's kingdom includes the filling of the hungry with good things and the rejection of the rich (Lk. 1:53). Alongside the beatitudes, Jesus also pronounced woes, one of which is directed toward the wealthy (Lk. 6:24-25). The rich farmer who planned for his retirement was no more than a fool, for he had stored up for himself, but he had not been rich toward God (Lk. 12:13-21). In the parable of Lazarus and Dives, the rich man went to hell while the beggar went to heaven (Lk. 16:19-31).

The Biblical Perspective on Wealth

What kind of final picture do all these sayings produce? At the very least, they mean that Christians must not put their hope in material wealth, which is always uncertain, but they must put their hope in God (1 Ti. 6:17). Christians should seek to

5th century A.D., does not appear in the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament and must be regarded as an attempt to soften the saying, B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1975) 106.

be content with the basic necessities of life, since those who would be rich face extraordinary temptation (1 Ti. 6:7-10). James is even more strident in his condemnation of the rich who have exploited others (Ja. 2:6; 5:1-6). Wealth is temporary and fleeting (Ja. 1:10-11). In a culture such as ours, which is obsessed with materialism, the dangers of wealth are always present.

Homosexuality: The Biblical Question

Everyone who follows the media with any regularity is aware of the issue of Gay Rights. It forms an important plank in the platform of every political entity, and it is an issue which is difficult to face with neutrality. Furthermore, most people are aware that the mainline Protestant denominations in Christendom have addressed and are continuing to address this subject from a theological perspective, notably the Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church, and the Presbyterian Church USA. Within each of these denominations, there is a growing advocacy group which hopes to reverse the traditional opinion that homosexual behavior is sinful. In the past decade, a critical rereading of the biblical texts which address the question of homosexuality has resulted in a position that the Bible, far from condemning homosexuality, is largely silent on the issue. It is this question which we intend to entertain here.

Does the Bible Condemn Homosexuality?¹⁸

YES

Here are some of the common arguments made by people who believe the Bible teaches that homosexuality is sinful.

THE BIBLE is God's infallible guide for living. It's the most important authority for determining church teachings. It contains many different kinds of writing--laws, histories, letters and poetry--but the meaning of most Bible verses is clear. They should be obeyed as written.

EVERY REFERENCE to homosexual acts in the Bible describes them in a negative or sinful way.

HOMOSEXUALITY MUST be a deviation from God's ideal plan for the

¹⁸The following article appeared in the *Detroit Free Press* on April 11, 1992. It is a very good summary of the issue from both sides.

world, because many stories throughout the Bible show that normal families should be formed by men and women who marry and have children. From the beginning of the world, the Bible says, God created men and women as the perfect partners. Genesis 1:27-28 says: "He created them male and female, blessed them, and said, 'Have many children, so that your descendents will live all over the earth and bring it under control.'" Genesis 2:24 explains that God had planned the world so that "a man leaves his father and mother, is united with his wife, and they are one." There are no examples of families headed by gay couples in the Bible.

TWO VERSES in the Book of Leviticus (18:22 and 20:13) say that sexual relations between men are evil. The second verse says it's so evil that it deserves the death penalty: "If a man has sexual relations with another man, they have done a disgusting thing, and both shall be put to death." Leviticus ranks this sin with adultery and incest.

THE STORY of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 describes God's destruction of cities that were sinful centers of homosexuality. It's the story of two angels who took the form of men and came to visit Lot's house in Sodom. Men from the town surrounded Lot's house and called for him to send these two visitors outside. Genesis 19:4: "The men of Sodom wanted to have sex with them." The next day, the two angels told Lot: "The Lord has heard the terrible accusations against these people and has sent us to destroy Sodom." Lot escaped, and God destroyed both towns.

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, St. Paul says at least three times that sex between men is sinful. In Paul's letter, 1 Corinthians 6:9, he says bluntly: "Do not fool yourselves. People who are immoral or who worship idols or are adulterers or homosexuals or who steal or are greedy or are drunkards or who slander others or are thieves--none of these will possess God's Kingdom." In Romans 1:27, Paul says: "Men do shameful things with each other, and as a result they bring upon themselves the punishment they deserve for their wrongdoing."

BOTH THE GOSPELS of Mark and Matthew say that even Jesus referred back to God's plan in Genesis for men and women to be partners. In Mark 9:6, Jesus says: "In the beginning, at the time of

creation, 'God made them male and female,' as the scripture says."

**Bible quotations are from "Today's English Version" and "New International Version."*

NO

Here are some of the common arguments made by people who say the Bible is neutral on homosexuality.

THE BIBLE is a divinely inspired guide to God's plan for the world. But its many laws, histories, letters and poetry are complex and need to be interpreted in light of modern religious experience, human history and God's continuing revelations to church leaders.

THERE ARE less than a dozen verses that mention sexual acts between men among the 31,173 verses in the Bible. It's not a big concern of the Bible's authors.

THE BIBLE'S authors had no sense of homosexuality as a basic sexual orientation, and the Bible never clearly refers to lesbians. A proper understanding of God's gift of human sexuality is something the church is learning about in modern times. As Christians learn more, they interpret the Bible in different ways. There are hundreds of Bible passages about human relationships that have been widely reinterpreted. For instance, many Bible verses accept slavery as normal, a relationship now considered evil. Regarding marriage, Jesus said that divorced people must not remarry--although most churches now recognize divorce.

THE CODE of law in Leviticus was intended for the ancient Hebrews and doesn't apply today. Leviticus forbids the sin of sex between men but it also condemns as evil many things that are commonly accepted today, including: crossbreeding farm animals, planting two kinds of seeds in the same field, wearing clothing made of two kinds of material and trimming a man's beard.

THE DESTRUCTION of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 is a story of God's punishment, but the crime was not homosexuality. God was angry because the men of Sodom had tried to rape two angelic messengers he had sent to Lot's house. This was partly a violation of the code of hospitality, a very important set of social customs in ancient society that ensured the protection of visitors. It also was evil because men were trying to abuse angels sent by God. Almost nothing is said about Gomorrah in this story, except that it was situated in the same valley as Sodom. There is no record of God destroying anyone because of homosexuality.

ST. PAUL'S brief references in the New Testament to sex between men are confusing and have been twisted by Bible scholars who assume that all gay sex is sinful. It's incorrect to translate the Greek words of 1 Corinthians 6:9 or 1 Timothy 1:10 to condemn all "homosexuals." Paul probably was referring to the Greco-Roman practices of sex between men and boys or of male prostitution, both of which concerned Paul because they were casual or abusive. In Romans 1:24-27, Paul also is complaining about people who satisfy their sexual desires with casual sex.

JESUS NEVER TALKED about homosexuality. His main concerns were preaching about compassion, caring for neighbors, and God's love for all people. In Luke 6:37, Jesus says: "Do not judge others and God will not judge you; do not condemn others, and God will not condemn you."

The Traditional, Christian Interpretation

The traditional, Christian interpretation regarding human sexuality has generally embraced three norms: a) the sexuality of every person is meant to be woven into the whole character of that person and integrated into his/her quest for human values, b) the sexuality of every person is meant to be an urge toward and a means of expressing a deep, personal relationship with another person, and c) the sexuality of every person is meant to move him/her toward a heterosexual relationship of committed love within the framework of monogamous marriage.¹⁹ These norms follow from a variety of passages in the Bible.

Of first importance is the account of the creation of humans as male and female (Ge. 1:27). God created intimate companionship for the first humans through the

¹⁹D. Atkinson, *Homosexuals in the Christian Fellowship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 71.

male/female polarity. Adam surveyed all the animals, and his survey is bracketed by the double affirmation, "It is not good for the man to be alone" and "for the man no suitable helper was found" (Ge. 2:18, 20b). Of all the creatures, only the man was alone. Thus, God created a companion for him--very much like him, but very different as well (Ge. 2:21-23). The essential family unit, according to divine command, was to be one man and one woman, committed and united to each other sexually, which in turn expressed their union in all other facets of life (Ge. 2:24-25). That the creation account is to be taken as paradigmatic for all successive humans is clear in Jesus' teachings about marriage and divorce, drawn from the same passage (cf. Mk. 10:6-9; Mt. 19:3-6). If Jesus' norm of one man for one woman for life is the clear conclusion of the creation account, so also is the behavioral norm of heterosexuality.

While there are various kinds of laws in the Mosaic code, some applying to sedentary life in Palestine, others to cultic situations, and others to universal moral concepts, it has generally been understood that the sexual laws of Torah fall into this latter category of universal norms, given that they seem to follow the created order. The fundamental apodictic law is against adultery (Ex. 20:14; Dt. 5:18; cf. Lv. 18:20).

Accompanying this basic apodictic are various other apodictic and case laws relating to adultery (Lv. 19:20-22; 20:10; Dt. 22:22), seduction (Ex. 22:16-17; Dt. 22:23-24), incest (Lv. 18:6-16; 20:12, 17, 19-21), multiple marriages within the same family (Lv. 18:17-18; 20:14; Dt. 22:30), intercourse during a wife's menstrual cycle (Lv. 18:19; 20:18), homosexuality (Lv. 18:22; 20:13), bestiality (Lv. 18:23; 20:15), rape (Dt. 22:25-29), and prostitution (Lv. 19:29; Dt. 23:17-18; cf. 1 Kg. 14:24). In general, Christians have traditionally believed that all these behaviors were morally reprehensible.

Regarding homosexuality, there are two narratives in the Old Testament which reinforce the direction of these laws. One is the story of the judgment of Sodom, a city of which God said the moral outcry against them was so grievous that not even ten righteous persons could be found among the citizenry (Ge. 18:20-33). When angels appeared in the form of men as though they were traveling strangers to the city, Lot was so afraid of the potential consequences of leaving them unguarded that he prevented them from staying in the square at night (Ge. 19:1-3). Nevertheless, the men of Sodom, both old and young, surrounded Lot's house, demanding to have sex with the strangers (Ge. 19:4-9). It was only through their supernatural powers that the angels escaped (Ge. 19:10-11).²⁰ In the end, God obliterated this city with fire and burning sulfur (Ge. 19:24-25). Sodom, then, became a symbol of those who paraded

²⁰The Hebrew verb *la'ah* used in this passage means to become tired of doing something, hence the KJV rendering, "...they wearied themselves to find the door" (also NASB, RSV, ASV). This clause may indicate that even in their blindness, their obsession with the strangers was not immediately sated.

their depravity (Is. 3:9; Eze. 16:49-50).

The other story occurs during the period of the Tribal League. Once again, strangers passing through Gibeah of Benjamin were prevented from staying the night in the town square because of the inherent danger (Jg. 19:14-21). As in the earlier incident, a group of homosexuals surrounded the house, demanding to have sex with the male traveler (Jg. 19:22). Though unable to convince the man's host to deliver up his guest, the men raped the travelers' slave-wife, eventually killing her (Jg. 19:23-30). The other clans of Israel were so deeply disturbed by this incident that they nearly exterminated the clan of Benjamin (Jg. 20).

Paul cites homosexual behavior as a practice which reflects human depravity, particularly the human tendency to deliberately suppress the truth by wickedness, a behavior that merits the wrath of God (Ro. 1:18-20). It is akin to idolatry (Ro. 1:21-23, 25). Because humans refused to recognize God, he abandoned them to sexual perversion (Ro. 1:24), including lesbian behavior (Ro. 1:26) and male homosexual actions (Ro. 1:27). Of course, homosexual behavior is not the only demonstration of human depravity (cf. Ro. 1:29-32). It, along with the other sins in Paul's list, indicate the kinds of things which are human rebellions against God (Ro. 1:28).

Later, Paul asserts that those who live the homosexual lifestyle will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Co. 6:9-10; cf. 1 Ti. 1:10). Cult prostitution, adultery, male prostitution and homosexual behavior are categorized with other kinds of sins which are characteristic of those who are separated from God. Of course, all of these sins are forgivable, and in fact, some of the Corinthian Christians apparently had indulged in just these very sort of sins before they had come to know Christ (1 Co. 6:11). Now, however, they had been cleansed.

When Jude looks for ancient sins which parallel the sins of his own day, Sodom looms large due to its sexual perversions (Jude 7-8). Similarly, the Book of 2 Peter describes the behavior of the Sodomites as ungodly, filthy and lawless (2 Pe. 2:6-8).

The Case Against the Traditional Christian Interpretation

In the latter part of this century, a concerted effort has been made on the part of the homosexual community to legitimize its behavior. Politically, this has been approached under the rubric of civil rights. Theologically, an apologetic has been built which attempts to take the sting out of the biblical passages described earlier.²¹ In general, the creation account is ignored because it is apparently deemed to be too ambiguous. The other passages, however, are carefully scrutinized.

²¹Two of the most influential books to date on this subject are D. Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (Longmans, 1955) and J. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (University of Chicago, 1980).

In Leviticus 18 and 20, homosexual behavior, along with the other various descriptions of forbidden sexual activity, is described as *to'ebah* (= abominable, detestable). The apologetic from the homosexual community asserts that this word does not signify something intrinsically evil, but rather, something ritually unclean, more or less on the order of the kosher food laws. It is asserted that these laws were narrowly designed to maintain a rigid distinction between Israel and the Canaanites, and since they were symbols of Jewish distinctiveness, they were not morally absolute. Homosexual behavior might be forbidden to Jews as Jews, but in the Christian era the statute is irrelevant.

With respect to the events at Sodom and Gibeah, it is the idiomatic use of the verb *yada'* (= to know, to engage in sexual intercourse) which comes under reexamination. In ancient Hebrew, the verbal expressions used to describe sexual intercourse are invariably idiomatic.²² Since in the cases of Sodom and Gibeah the effort of the townspeople was "to know" the strangers, it is argued that there is no overtone of sexuality in their demand. Their demand may have been socially inappropriate, but it was not necessarily sexual. If the men of Sodom and Gibeah sinned, it was due to a breach of ancient Near Eastern hospitality customs, not homosexual desire.

When one comes to the New Testament, the homophile apologetic argues that the Greek words *malakos* (= effeminate, homosexual) and *arsenokoites* (= male homosexual, sodomite, pederast) do not, in fact, refer to homosexuals generally. Rather, they are restricted to definitions which are free from a general condemnation of homosexual behavior. It is asserted that the first word simply refers to an indulgent lack of self-control, and would be better translated as "unrestrained" or "wanton." In the case of the second word, while it is admitted that it refers to homosexual behavior, it is argued that the word only refers to homosexual prostitutes, not to homosexuals living in a committed, loving relationship. The passage in Romans, it is asserted, refers to heterosexuals who have left their heterosexual orientation in order to engage in homosexual behavior. Thus, homosexual behavior in itself is not wrong providing such behavior is the natural orientation of the person. It is only wrong if one goes against a natural heterosexual orientation. The inverse would be true as well. If one's natural inclination is homosexual, it would be wrong to go against this orientation by engaging in a heterosexual relationship. Thus, Boswell can say, "The New Testament takes no demonstrable position on homosexuality," and by implication, homosexual behavior is legitimate so long as it is carried out as an expression of caring and love.

²²The two most common are the verbs *yada'* (= to know) and *shakav* (= to lay). Obviously, both of these verbs are also used in contexts other than sexual, but equally obvious, some contexts are specifically sexual (cf. Ge. 4:1; 19:32-36).

Responsible Biblical Interpretation

What about these new interpretations? Is the traditional Christian opinion invalid? Has new scholarly research thrown over the moral values of the past and rendered them obsolete? Several factors combine to show that the homophile apologetic is tendentious and dangerous. While it makes a show of scholarship which might be impressive to the lay person unfamiliar with ancient history or biblical languages, it is, in fact, a serious breach of scholarship.

In the first place, it is always suspect when a person or group adopts a certain behavior and only later tries to prove from the Bible that it is legitimate. If the "discovery" had been made first that the Bible permitted homosexual behavior, one might at least be inclined to pass over the issue of motives. However, when the behavior comes first and the biblical support for it is advanced only later, then one suspects that what is being offered is an interpretation of convenience. Furthermore, it is also quite correct to say that those who advance the reconstructed interpretation are hardly in the camp of those who ardently support the integrity and binding authority of the Bible.

While the creation account is often dismissed or ignored by the homophile reconstructionists, such a lapse is negligent at best. If the Lord Jesus found the creation account to hold the norms for marriage and divorce, it is surely appropriate for the norms of sexual behavior to be there as well, particularly since the role of sexual behavior is specifically addressed in the Genesis narrative. When Adam needed a companion corresponding to him for a life-long, committed relationship which was reflected in sexual union, God created a woman, not another man.

The explanation that the prohibitions in the Mosaic Code were ritual issues only, not moral ones, does not hold. The homophile correctly perceives that a key point in the case for or against homosexual behavior is the word *to'ebah*, but to dismiss this word as exclusively relegated to the cultic is a serious overstatement. The word also clearly refers to things morally offensive to God, as any survey of the 117 times it is used in the Hebrew Bible will indicate (i.e., Dt. 25:13-16; Pro. 6:16-19). To be sure, this word is used to refer to cultic uncleanness, but often enough, the cultic violation and the ethical violation coalesce.²³ In most cases, it is clear that behavior which is *to'ebah* is repugnant to God himself, and what is repugnant to God can hardly be a matter indifferent with respect to human behavior, regardless of the period of time under consideration.

The suggestion that the sin of the Sodomites and the Benjamites was only a case of bad manners has won little support among biblical scholars. Even apart from linguistics, it seems a bit farfetched to have God destroying a city for breach of

²³*TWOT* (1980) II.976-977.

etiquette. The contexts of the situations at Sodom and at Gibeah are both clearly sexual in nature, since in both cases women were offered for sexual intercourse as a way of protecting the male guests from violation. Other passages in the Old Testament which use the verb *yada'* with a sexual nuance seem to be directly parallel to these two instances as well (cf. Ge. 4:1, 17, 25; 24:16; 38:26; Nu. 31:17-18, 35; Jg. 11:39; 19:25; 1 Sa. 1:19). In both the stories of Sodom and Gibeah, it is especially relevant that the idiom *yada'* is used with a clear sexual nuance regarding the women (Ge. 19:8; Jg. 19:25). It seems extremely unlikely that the same idiom used in the same context regarding men means something altogether different (Ge. 19:5; Jg. 19:22).

The treatment of the words *malakos* and *arsenokoites* is equally specious in the homophile reconstruction. The majority of biblical scholars understand the two words to refer directly to the passive and dominant partners respectively in male homosexual relationships.²⁴ Quite literally, the word *arsenokoites* refers to a male bed-partner for a male in homosexual intercourse. To reduce this word to meaning a male homosexual prostitute and no more is blatant deception.

With respect to Romans 1, the argument that Paul is only condemning heterosexuals who leave their natural inclinations for a homosexual relationship is against any plain reading of the passage. Homosexual behavior is unnatural, to be sure, but not simply in the case of violating one's sexual orientation. It is unnatural because it violates the truth of God which has been changed into a lie, the truth which is implicit in the creation itself (Ro. 1:20, 25).

The Current Moral Drift

The current moral drift in the mainline Christian denominations over the question of homosexuality runs concurrently with their general drift away from the authority of the Bible. At one time, we thought of only two primary options regarding how the Bible was to be viewed. One was the Christian view of the Bible as the Word of God -- authoritative, unique and inspired or supervised in such a way that its truth was ultimately guaranteed by God. The other was the non-Christian view of the Bible, that is, that the Bible was a human composition by ancient Israel and the early Christian movement, not a unique revelation from God, and only one among a number of religious documents produced by the various religions of the world. Today in many of the mainline denominations, there has arisen a third option which accepts the name Christian but also believes in the human rather than divine composition of the Bible.²⁵ As such, then, the ethical and moral seriousness with

²⁴C. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (A. & C. Black, 1971) 140.

²⁵A short but insightful discussion of this merging of the two older views is to be found in the editorial by Marcus Borg in *BR* (August 1992) 7, 13.

which the Bible is approached has been considerably weakened. If the Bible is a human document only, then prohibitions and ethical commands are cultural expressions only. While a Christian may feel bound in loyalty to God, he/she is not necessarily bound in loyalty to the stipulations of the Bible. Furthermore, what were once considered to be serious moral issues are increasingly being viewed as cultural expressions which have outlived their usefulness and are to be superseded by our more advanced modern ethical sensitivity.

Related to the issue of Scripture is the issue of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. To say that Jesus Christ is Lord but that there is no way of knowing exactly what he said, or to say that God is to be obeyed but there is no way of knowing exactly what he wants becomes, in the end, a way of living with no moral imperative. The modern person wants grace, but he wants it without any clear recognition of the seriousness of sin. The law has been relegated to an ancient time, and it is considered to be irrelevant for the modern era. St. Paul, to the contrary, said that the law served a critical moral function. It was given so that "sin...might become exceeding sinful" (Ro. 7:13, KJV). It is in this sense that Paul says the law is "holy, righteous and good" (Ro. 7:12). As the church has lost contact with this holy function of the law, it has also lost the meaning of grace. Grace, in the modern definition, means little more than permissiveness. It is no longer the unmerited favor by which God forgives sin, but it has become the latitudinarianism by which the church tolerates moral laxity. This moral drift is seen nowhere more clearly than in the discussion of sexual ethics. Judgment must begin with the house of God (1 Pe. 4:17)!

Human Life Worthy to be Lived

The increasing trend in our culture toward self-love, personal empowerment and the denial of accountability to God has frightening repercussions with respect to the value of human life. A maze of ethical issues confront us, ranging from euthanasia to assisted suicide to fetal tissue research to abortion on demand to capital punishment. So long as humans perceive themselves to be accidents of time, space and chance, it will be hard to place any supreme value on human life. Instead, the supreme value will be upon personal happiness, personal power and personal freedom. Traditionally, the law held in check the threat to the supreme value of human life, but even the law is rapidly capitulating to the spirit of the age.

What life is worthy to be lived? Christians have always answered this question theologically. The Bible teaches that humans are the crown of God's creation, made in his image (Ge. 1:26-27; Ps. 8). Even the unborn are under God's providential care and concern (Ps. 139:13-16; Ge. 25:22-23). All human life is worthy to be lived. To willfully take life from another human being means the forfeit of one's own life, for only in this way can human life be given its full value (Ge. 9:5-6).

These biblical principles are currently under deliberate and formidable attack. Human life is increasingly being valued from a utilitarian perspective rather than a theological one. Humans are valuable because of what they can produce, not because they are made in God's image. The self is valuable, not because one has been given life from God, but because of self-love alone. When one faces the difficult ethical questions of life and death, the perspectives of narcissism, personal convenience, survival of the fittest, Darwinian biology and ethical relativism intrude upon biblical values, eventually cancelling them.

The Life of the Unborn

Since the United States Supreme Court Decision in 1973 (Roe vs. Wade), abortion on demand has ended the lives of millions of the unborn.²⁶ The standard lines of justification for abortion in our society include the following:

1. It is a woman's right to do what she wishes with her own body. (The assumption, of course, is that nascent life is a non-human appendage of the woman's body to do with as she chooses.)
2. To legislate against abortion is to legislate morality. (The assumption is that morality either cannot or ought not be legislated.)
3. Abortion is one among several acceptable methods of birth control and family planning. (The assumption is that as a method it is on the same moral level as any other method of birth control.)
4. Abortion must not be restricted, so that the rights of women can be protected in cases of rape and/or in cases where birth defects are possible or probable. (The assumption is that the mother's lifestyle should not be interrupted by events beyond her control.)
5. Every child has the right to be wanted. Abortion is necessary to prevent children being born into homes where they are not wanted, and where, therefore, they are likely to be abused. (The assumption is that the only reasonable alternative to having an unwanted child is death to the fetus.)

The Christian viewpoint is very different than the above secular viewpoint. For Christians, the unborn child is not merely an appendage of the woman's body, like hair and nails. Human life begins either at or very near conception, and therefore, it should be protected throughout the pregnancy. The Bible assumes that the whole complex of conception, pregnancy and birth are involved in the divine gift of life (1 Sa. 1:19-20; Ps. 139:13-16; Je. 1:5; Lk. 1:35-37). For Christians, the power of choice

²⁶The Alan Guttmacher Institute report of 1990 plus Unofficial Statistics from 1992 have put the toll in excess of 28 million abortions.

for the woman, providing she is not sexually forced, comes at the time of intercourse, not after conception.

It is true that the law cannot make people moral. However, to say that morality should not be legislated is to empty the law of its intrinsic definition, for law exists in the first place because certain actions are believed to be morally wrong (1 Ti. 1:9-11). The real issue is the moral base undergirding the law. For Christians, morality is based upon the holy nature of God and the moral guidance in the Scriptures he has given. For secular society, morality is based upon tradition and public consensus, each of which are constantly shifting.

To place all forms of birth control on the same level is morally naive. Some methods are contraceptive, that is, they aim at preventing the union of a sperm and an egg. Abortion, on the other hand, is the killing of a fetus. The RU486 pill (not yet approved in the USA by the FDA) is a method that usually is used to affect the fertilized ovum after conception,²⁷ either preventing its implantation in the uterine wall or depriving it of chemicals necessary to its survival. (It is usually effective some forty-two days after conception.) To say that preventing conception and killing a fetus are morally equivalent is about as accurate as saying it makes no difference whether one negotiates a treaty for peace or simply bombs the opposition into oblivion.

In cases where a woman has been sexually forced, it must be conceded that her powers of choice have been severely violated. Christians are then left with the ethical tension between the right of a woman to choose child-bearing and the right of the child to live. Christians do not all decide in the same way over this tension. Nevertheless, it still remains that the vast majority of abortions are not performed in circumstances of rape, but rather, in circumstances of sexual consent. Furthermore, to say that abortion on demand must remain legal in order to protect raped women from child-bearing is absurd.

Where there are potential or probable birth defects, the issue is again an ethical tension over the quality of human life. Upon what basis does one conclude that another human being has a life unworthy to be lived? Is God the God of the handicapped, also? Does he care for them less, because they are helpless? Sometimes Christians differ in their answer, but the fact remains, such abortions occur in a minority of cases and do not warrant abortion on demand. Furthermore, Christians must not forget that God has always demonstrated a special concern for the powerless and disadvantaged.

It is true that all humans want and deserve to be loved. However, if one permits the killing of a fetus because he/she is unwanted, the same logic can also be

²⁷RU486 also can be used, in lower dosages, as a contraceptive.

used to kill any other unwanted person who makes life inconvenient. Hitler's Third Reich used the same argumentation for the killing of the insane, the physically handicapped, and those who were racially different.

In the end, then, the value of nascent human life becomes a watershed for all human values. Related issues, such as fetal tissue research, open the door to the utilitarian assessment of human life. In utilitarianism, human life is valuable because of how it can be used for selfish benefit. The devaluation of human life brought about by abortion on demand desensitizes the public to the value of human life in general. This desensitization, in turn, affects a whole variety of other life issues, including the enlightened killing of the mentally infirm, the elderly, the terminally ill and the handicapped. Utilitarian ethics opens the door for the conception of children precisely so that they may be used as donors. Fetal tissue research is only one example. Another is the intentional creation of human life so as to provide compatible transplant material.²⁸ Infants can be conceived for the purpose of donating organs, and if a wrong tissue type is conceived, the fetus simply can be aborted. All of these procedures flow out of a utilitarian view of ethics, which is morality by consensus, and ultimately, morality defined by selfish need.

Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide

Euthanasia, or "good death," is usually divided into active and passive categories. Active euthanasia is a life-taking act. Passive euthanasia is allowing someone to die by withholding extraordinary medical means so as to avoid prolonging the process of death. While Christians are often open to passive euthanasia in cases of the terminally ill, they have resolutely stood against active euthanasia. Active euthanasia usually is directed toward the deformed, the insane, the retarded, the terminally ill, the aged, the infirm and the senile. The Third Reich of Hitler's Germany engineered a sophisticated scheme of propaganda to enlighten and convince the German public that such acts of life-taking were scientific, progressive, responsible, and virtually demanded by the evolutionary progress of the human race. At the end of World War II, these acts were tried as war crimes. Half a century later, the same acts are being advocated by the same countries who conducted the war crimes trials.

The first step in active euthanasia is the reclassification of unwanted persons into the status of nonpersons. Once it is established that such persons are not truly

²⁸An example is the birth of Marissa Ayala, who was conceived precisely so that she could provide bone marrow transplants to her leukemia-stricken older sister, cf. *The Detroit Free Press* June 5, 1991, 7A. Doctors and ethicists say that this is the first time a family has publicly admitted to conceiving a child to serve as a donor. However, a recent survey has shown that many other families are conceiving babies to serve as donors without publicly acknowledging that they are doing so.

human, the protection of law is taken from them. Then, without the protection of law, they can be disposed of at will. With burgeoning populations, the elderly and the disabled will be the first to be reclassified. As the proportion of the old and the weak to the young and the strong becomes abnormally large, the demand will be made for economic relief. Those who do not wish to "shuffle off" quickly will be made to feel that they are not contributing to society.

The implementation of active euthanasia in our society comes through a combination of elements. First, there is the enacting of arbitrary sociological laws by the courts and legislators. Old laws, including the foundational documents of our country, will be reinterpreted in light of contemporary values. Modern forms of literary criticism, which abandon the effort to interpret a document in terms of authorial intent and replace this traditional method with an emphasis on the mind of the reader alone, will accelerate such reconstructionism. New laws will be made in accord with the consensus of the population, which is ever shifting, since it rests upon no absolute moral base. Next, there will be changes in the attitude of the medical profession concerning the values of life and death. Since these people are considered to be experts, their evaluations will be accepted without great resistance. (We should always remember that it was the medical profession in Hitler's Germany which took the lead in the planning of abortion, euthanasia, experimentation and extermination.) Finally, the general public, with its apathy and narcissism, who in the name of "rights" grasps for a hedonistic life-style, will quickly fall into line with the new laws and the new body of experts.²⁹

The increasing openness of our society to suicide is closely related to the issue of euthanasia. "Right-to-die" proposals in various states and "how-to" books on suicide are becoming common fare. Since our culture regularly entertains the idea that there is some human life which is not worthy to be lived, then circumstances of unhappiness, economic deprivation, emotional instability, physical debilitation and unbearable pain all become legitimate reasons for advocating suicide by the charming title of Dignified Death. In the late 70s, Dr. Ragnar Toss of Sweden, writing in the *Swedish Medical Journal*, advocated opening suicide clinics to medically assist in the suicide of those Swedes who wished to kill themselves. The Hemlock Society and more recently the assisted suicides involving Dr. Jack Kevorkian of Michigan have again raised the issue.

Suicide is a specifically human action arising out of the gift of freedom. Unlike animals, humans are able to distinguish between themselves and the life of their bodies. In order to escape defeat, humans are free to commit this ultimate act of self-assertion and self-justification. Because suicide is final, the one who commits it

²⁹F. Schaeffer and C. Koop, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1979) 102-103.

triumphs with unanswerable self-assertion, even if it is self-assertion in the midst of despair. The one who commits suicide is beyond law and beyond criticism from the world. Such an act is a final expression of lack of faith in God.

While the Bible does not contain a theological discussion about suicide, the biblical narratives which describe suicides demonstrate that the act is often the consequence of very grave sin. Saul committed suicide after having intentionally violated God's covenant (1 Sa. 31:3-6). Ahithophel committed suicide after playing the traitor to his king (2 Sa. 17:23). Judas committed suicide after he betrayed Christ (Mt. 27:3-5). To advocate suicide, then, or to develop means for assisting people in suicides is to deny the biblical value that human life, even at its most despairing, is worthy to be lived. Dietrich Bonhoeffer offered some cogent remarks on the issue:

Such a man [the one who commits suicide] does not believe that God can again give a meaning and a right even to a ruined life, and indeed that it may be precisely through ruin that a life attains to its true fulfillment. Because he does not believe this, the termination of his life remains to him as the only possible means whereby he himself can impart a meaning and a right to his life, even though it be only at the moment of its destruction.³⁰

A distinction should be made, of course, between selfish suicide and the sacrifice of oneself for another. To offer the last position in a lifeboat to someone else, knowing full well that this will mean one's own death, is not a selfish or self-assertive act. It is, in fact, an act of love. No higher example of self-sacrifice can be given than the death of our Lord on the cross.

Capital Punishment

Given the Christian value of human life made in the image of God, how do Christians respond to the social-ethical issue of capital punishment? Is not capital punishment a violation of the supreme value of human life? While many Christians decry abortion, euthanasia, infanticide and suicide, many also support capital punishment. Oddly enough, the liberal agenda in our culture argues for just the opposite. It often endorses abortion, active euthanasia and assisted suicide yet stands against the death penalty. While capital punishment is currently legal in 38 states in the USA, in 1967 the Supreme Court issued a five-year moratorium on this form of judgment, declaring its administration grossly unfair. In 1972, the Supreme Court declared that capital punishment was a violation of the 8th and 14th Amendments (i.e., "cruel and unusual punishment"), though in 1976, the court reversed itself.

³⁰D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1955) 172.

No one denies that capital punishment was instituted by God in the Old Testament. It is part of the very first set of laws God issued for the human race in the time of Noah (Ge. 9:5-6). Later, the Mosaic code called for the death penalty for some eighteen different crimes, including murder, kidnap, rape, adultery, incest, homosexuality, bestiality, occultic practices, and the flagrant rebellion of children against their parents (Ex. 21:12, 15-17, 22-25, 28-30; 22:18; Lv. 20:10-16; 24:10-16; Dt. 13:1-11; 17:12; 19:16-21; 21:18-21; 22:13-21, 25-27). The issue for Christians, then, is not whether the Bible ever calls for capital punishment. Rather, it is whether or not punishment by death is still valid, if not for all these crimes, then at least for some.

Theologically, those opposed to capital punishment argue that these ancient codes are outdated. No one advocates capital punishment for all the capital crimes in the Mosaic code. Is not the selection of only some crimes purely arbitrary, or if not, upon what criteria does one make a selection? Furthermore, sentences of capital punishment are sometimes commuted, even in the Bible (i.e., David's adultery, Paul's murder of Christians, the woman taken in the act of adultery). Indeed, Jesus countermands the ancient code of "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (Mt. 5:38-39). Thus, while the Bible endorses capital punishment, it does not demand it. Most serious for Christians, the person executed for a capital crime has been deprived of the opportunity for repentance had he/she lived.

On utilitarian grounds, which are sometimes shared by Christians and non-Christians, it is argued that capital punishment is not an effective deterrent to crime. It is considered to be a cruel and unusual form of punishment. The death penalty is arbitrarily and unfairly administered, for it is racially and economically biased.

Theologically, those in favor of capital punishment, in addition to citing the Old Testament texts, point out that the New Testament, also, endorses the right of the state to execute certain offenders (Ro. 13:1-4). Paul seemed willing enough to submit to capital punishment if he was proved guilty (Ac. 25:11). While the legislations in the law of Moses were specified for ancient Israel in a theocracy, the law of capital punishment issued to Noah was for all humans everywhere, though it was only for the crime of wilful murder. Thus, while one need not try to implement the entire Mosaic code regarding capital punishment, one should still be faithful to the general principle of Genesis 9:5-6. Capital punishment for wilful murder is a punishment which fits the crime.

Utilitarian arguments, again shared by some Christians with non-Christians, concede that the judicial system, as it is presently administered, is rife with injustice. However, they contend that this is not sufficient cause for abolishing capital punishment *per se*. Rather, it is cause for cleaning up the judicial system. Racial and economic prejudice as well as the extreme delay between sentencing and execution

strip capital punishment of any deterring effect it might have. Finally, there is an economic factor, since a life-time incarceration will cost considerably more than an execution without undue delay.

C. S. Lewis argues against the humanitarian theory of punishment in a more abstract way. The humanitarian theory holds that capital punishment is immoral because it is barbarous and vengeful. Instead, the theory contends that the purpose of criminal punishment should be deterrence and rehabilitation, while capital punishment accomplishes neither. Against this, Lewis says that abolishing the death penalty does two things. It treats the criminal as one psychologically sick, and it deprives the criminal of his/her human rights of responsibility. Above all, humans have the right to be responsible; it is what distinguishes them from all other creatures. By removing from them punishment and the concept of just deserts, criminals are now simply judged to be sick and subjected to forced healing by incarceration. This, in turn, dehumanizes them, for it deprives them of accepting proper guilt and punishment.³¹

In summary, Christians must guard against two equally wrong attitudes in society. One is the advocacy of criminal punishment which is little more than the desire for revenge. Christians may support the use of capital punishment for the sake of justice and human responsibility, but not for revenge. The other is the current tendency to be lenient toward serious offenders because of a general desensitization toward evil. Treating criminal acts as merely diseases blurs the line between good and evil. In a society where that line is already constantly shifting, the definitions of good and evil are increasingly ambiguous.

Christians and the Traditions Surrounding Death

Probably the classic statement in the New Testament concerning Christians and their perspective on death is given by St. Paul, when he said:

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.

1 Th. 4:13

It is apparent that Paul did not think that Christians should look upon death in the same way as the culture at large. This difference stands in bold relief in the epitaphs of deceased persons in the early period of Christianity from about 165 A.D.

³¹C. S. Lewis, "The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment," *God in the Dock*, ed. W. Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 287ff.

Live for the present hour, since we are sure of nothing else (pagan)

*N F F N S N C (pagan)*³²

Victorious in peace and in Christ (Christian)

Death is the final arena of faith for Christians. The Christian approach to death is not without grief, for even Christians sorrow at the loss of loved ones. Paul, for instance, when he contemplated the near death of his friend Epaphroditus, wrote to the Philippians that God's mercy in restoring Epaphroditus spared him "sorrow upon sorrow" (Phil. 2:25-27). So, it is not that Christians do not grieve over death; rather, it is that Christians have a hope and assurance that is stronger than death.

Pagan Death in the Early Christian Period³³

Two basic notions gave rise to ancient funeral rituals: 1) death brought pollution and called for acts of purification; 2) the act of leaving a corpse unburied was believed to have unpleasant repercussions on the departed soul. Death was generally understood to be the separation of the body and the soul, though there was not a consensus as to the location of the soul after death. One view was that the deceased continued to live in the tomb, and offerings of food and drink were placed there while the interior was decorated like a home. Another view was that all the deceased congregated in a large cavity under the earth, where they lived a shadowy existence in somewhat the same circumstances they had during their earthly life. The Greeks, as is well known, believed that the deceased would be led by Hermes to the depths of the earth where they would be ferried across the River Styx to stand before a court which would decide their eternal lot. The guilty went to Tartarus and the pious to the Elysian Fields.

Corpses were prepared and buried on the death date. They were washed, anointed, clothed and crowned with flowers. Physical demonstrations of lament were common, such as, pulling one's hair, beating one's breast, and wailing loudly. The most important ritual was throwing a bit of dirt on the corpse, and even in the case of cremations, a small part of the body was cut off for burial. Graves were equipped with pipes or holes through which food and drink could be poured down directly upon the deceased. Various goods were often buried with the deceased in order to make them feel at home in the afterlife. Funeral meals were held for the mourners after the burial, and later, on the birthday of the deceased and each year thereafter.

³²This abbreviation, which stands for the Latin *non fue, fue, non sum, non curo* (= I was not, I was, I am not, I care not) was extremely common.

³³E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 191-197.

Cremation was the normal practice in the Roman world, though by the third century, burial had come to gradually replace it. Graves ranged in type from holes in the ground to coffins of wood, clay, stone, lead and marble. The ashes and bones of cremations were placed in receptacles and set up in tombs or buried in the ground. Wealthy persons might construct mausoleums, either above ground or underground.

Jewish Ideas of Death³⁴

There was no uniform Jewish doctrine of the afterlife. All persons were believed to enter the underworld (*Sheol*), and many believed that they lived there in a shadowy existence with neither reward nor punishment. Others believed in annihilation for the wicked and immortality for the righteous. Some sects, such as the Pharisees, believed in a resurrection of the dead at the end of the age. Others, like the Sadducees, denied this possibility. Some literature in the Pseudepigrapha of the intertestamental period describes torment for the ungodly and blessing for the godly during the period between death and the judgment at the last day. The blessing of the godly would consist of feasting, sexual enjoyment, and the like. Fire was the punishment of Gehenna.

Jewish funeral customs were not unlike those of their pagan contemporaries. Corpses were washed, anointed, and wrapped in winding shrouds. Burial was before dark, usually on the death date. Professional pipers and mourners were employed to wail, and after the burial, there was a ceremony of consolation for the bereaved. Mourning customs decreased in intensity for marked periods of time, seven days, thirty days, and a year. In many cases, the remaining bones of the deceased, after decomposition, were collected and reburied in ossuaries (clay or limestone chests).

Christian and Western Traditions³⁵

Until the 6th or 7th centuries, Christian burial customs remained similar to the culture at large. Funerary meals were staged by churches. Christians met on the anniversary of the person's death, rather than the birth date, and the funeral meal became a love-feast or eucharist.³⁶ Burial sites were forbidden within cities, so Christians generally buried their dead in pagan cemeteries. With the development of the notion that martyrs held special powers after death, however, Christians wished to be buried near them, and this in turn gave rise to burial within church grounds. By the 9th century or so, Christian burials were generally taking place in churchyards. Eventually, charnel houses were erected, that is, long galleries housing the remains of the deceased, arcades which ran the length of the churchyard. These houses were

³⁴Ferguson, 439-440.

³⁵L. DeSpelder and A. Strickland, *The Last Dance*, 3rd ed. (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1992) 78.

³⁶Ferguson, 192.

public places, and it was not uncommon to find shops and merchants, dances, and parties in them. Burials were largely anonymous. The church was understood to be the guardian of the remains until the resurrection.

By the 12th and 13th century, there was a growing tendency to preserve the identity of the deceased at the place of burial, and by the 17th century, it had become prevalent to mark graves with a personalized marker. This personalization of death seems to have paralleled the rise of individualism in the renaissance and post-renaissance periods. By the 18th and 19th centuries, the memorialization of the dead included elaborate rituals, ornate tombstones, and a variety of other mourning paraphernalia. In the early 1800s, the simple and largely untended graveyards of earlier times were replaced with lush, well-kept, park-like cemeteries, with elaborate monuments. The acceptance of death as universal and inevitable was gradually replaced with the desire to mute its harshness and blunt its finality.

In the 20th century, death became even more remote from the living. Care for the sick and dying was increasingly relegated to professionals, and care of the dying came to be dominated by efforts to delay death by all possible means. By our own era, death, in the view of the culture at large, has become synonymous with extinction. The prevalent secularism with its attendant assumption of the meaninglessness of life has replaced the older Christian ideals of the joys of heaven (or the torments of hell). Consequently, sociologists now speak of "silent death," that is, death which is largely unobserved and remote from the living.³⁷

The American Funeral

The American funeral primarily focuses on the welfare of the survivor. Socially, it provides a way for the bereaved family to make a public statement concerning the loss of a member. Psychologically, it provides a framework within which the survivors confront the fact of their loss.

The American funeral has developed considerably since the last century. A hundred years ago, death usually took place in the home, with all family members present, even the youngest child. After death, the family washed and prepared the body for burial. A local carpenter, or perhaps even a family member, built a wooden coffin which was then set up in the parlor of the home for the night, where adults and children kept vigil. Family members and friends paid their respects before the deceased was taken to a church or to the gravesite. Either at the church or at the graveside or both, a few appropriate verses from the Bible would be read by the local

³⁷In response to this remoteness of death, there are now several important works which seek to bridge this gap, such as, J. Bayly, *The Last Thing We Talk About* (Elgin, IL: David C. Cook, 1973); D. Hubbard, *Why Do I Have to Die?* (Glendale, CA: Regal, 1978); E. Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969). The former two are specifically Christian in orientation, while the latter one is more psycho-analytical and religiously general.

parson (if the deceased was Protestant), the coffin would be lowered into the grave, and the family members and/or friends would fill in the grave. Of course, the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches followed established funeral liturgies.

In the last century, these rituals have become increasingly elaborate and ornate, yet at the same time, bringing more distance between the living and the deceased. Death usually occurs in a hospital, often with no family members present. Preparation of the corpse is consigned to professionals. The wooden coffin has been replaced by an elaborate casket. The deceased will have been "restored" by the mortician's art, so that it is commonplace to hear the words, "He/she looks so natural." Children are often "spared" the funeral service, so that in many families, it is not uncommon to have teenagers who have never actually seen a dead person. Private homes are no longer used, and increasingly, neither are churches, both of them having been replaced by the modern funeral home. Many cemeteries also provide for the family the option of avoiding a visit to the actual gravesite, conducting any last rites in a mausoleum. The final burial is relegated to paid professionals. In all, our contact with the process of death is increasingly remote and minimal. By the mid-1960s, the American funeral had become so elaborate that two major critical works were written specifically to alert the public to the manipulation of their grief by professional tradespeople and to call for reform.³⁸

Cults and World Religions

Religion can be studied in quite a variety of ways. One may study the history of religion, a descriptive process which investigates and compares the religious element in various cultures and eras. One may study the psychology of religion, which aims at elucidating the religious experience(s) of oneself and/or others. One may study the philosophy of religion, which attempts to critically evaluate the claims of a religious system in the effort to determine its possible truth and value.³⁹ This study shall touch upon elements in all three of the above approaches, particularly with respect to some of the semi-Christian and non-Christian religions. We shall approach our subject from the standpoint of those who stand squarely within the historic Christian faith. This study will necessarily be selective, limiting itself to a few of the major streams of thought. Nevertheless, enough coverage will be given to assist the learner in attaining a broader understanding, both of Christian thought and non-Christian thought. This broader understanding is important if one is to be able to share the good news about Jesus Christ in an effective way.

³⁸These were J. Mitford, *The American Way of Death* and R. Harmer, *The High Cost of Dying*.

³⁹W. Young, *A Christian Approach to Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954) 160-161.

Definitions and Distinctions

It is essential to begin by establishing some working definitions for three terms which we shall use, religion, cult and world religion. *Religion* is any belief in and reverence for a supernatural power accepted as the creator and/or governor of the universe.

The basic definition of the word *cult* is a system of religious worship and ritual. As such, then, Christianity itself is a cult. However, at a popular level the term cult has come to refer to any religious sect which has deviated from the historic Christian faith and/or which is generally regarded as bogus or extremist. Also at a popular level, the term cult is often used to refer to religious systems which are semi-dependent upon Christianity, that is, they deviate from the historic Christian faith in a major way, but they still retain some elements of Christianity. It is this latter definition which we shall use here. The cults we shall look at in this study are Mormonism and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

A *world religion* is any religion which embraces a major portion of the world's population. In this sense, Christianity is itself a world religion. However, within Christian circles, the term world religion is frequently used to refer to religions other than Christianity, and in particular, those religions which are more or less independent of the Christian faith. In this definition, the Mormon church is not a world religion because it is strictly dependent upon historic Christianity (though it has deviated from it in significant ways). Hinduism, on the other hand, is a world religion, for it came into existence prior to Christianity and continues to exist without any dependence upon Christian thinking. The world religions we shall look at in this study are Neo-Paganism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism.

The Western Openness to Alternative World-Views and Cults

Since the Enlightenment, that 18th century philosophical movement which critically examined the previously accepted doctrines and institutions of the Western world from the viewpoint of rationalism, Christianity has increasingly been under fire. The intangibles of the Christian world-view, such as, God, faith, hope, love, ethics, art, freedom, meaning, beauty and values, were increasingly displaced by the tangibles of biology, physics, social sciences, survival, and the other scientific disciplines.⁴⁰ The traditional view that reality was based upon God, particularly the Judeo-Christian view of God, was challenged again and again. Darwinian biology, behaviorism, existentialism, naturalism, socialism, materialism and various other systems contended in the marketplace of truth claims over against Christianity. Two world wars changed the face of the global community, opening the way for a broader

⁴⁰At a popular level, the effects of the Enlightenment upon Christianity and the Western world can be traced in F. Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1968).

exchange of ideas and a reassessment of the traditional systems and values of the west. The general attitude of western women and men increasingly came to reflect what the existentialists called *angst*, a German word expressing the forlornness and anguish of a society bereft of its theological moorings.⁴¹

By the mid-to-late 20th century, there was a wholesale loss of life's meaningfulness for many in the western world. The fateful words of Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov* became frighteningly real, "If God didn't exist, everything would be possible." This loss of meaning, particularly with respect to the intangibles in life, created a climate of openness toward alternative world views and religions apart from Christianity, systems which claimed to provide the meaningfulness of life which had been lost.

For the average western person, intellectual or not, Christianity had been largely discredited during the past two or three centuries of concerted attacks upon it. Thus, while sensing a need for something to fill the vacuum left by the loss of traditional meaning as defined by Christianity, western men and women became increasingly open to eastern mysticism, semi-Christian cults which are at odds with mainstream Christianity, and various other alternative world views and religions which appealed to felt needs of the culture.

So, why do people join cults and alternative world religions? Are they brainwashed, do they make free moral choices, are they coerced? What? While many Christians assume that people join cults on primarily rational grounds, that is, that they make a theological and intellectual decision to join a particular group, they often overlook the sociological dimension which is just as significant as the theological one, if not more so. Christians who make this assumption, therefore, develop apologetics aimed at such groups based on historical and theological criticism.⁴²

While such works are quite valuable so far as they go, they often do not provide specific insights into why people find alternative world views and cult membership attractive. The fact remains, people do not join cults for intellectual reasons alone. In many cases, the intellectual case seems almost secondary. There are psychological, sociological and emotional reasons that must be considered as well.⁴³ Sartre was certainly correct when he said that for the modern person, "In the end, feeling is what counts. I ought to choose whichever pushes me in one direction,"

⁴¹J. Sartre, "Existentialism," *Basic Problems of Philosophy*, eds. Bronstein, Krikorian and Wiener, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972) 618-619.

⁴²The works of Walter Martin are particularly representative of this approach, and his most well-known work is *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1977).

⁴³I. Hexham & K. Poewe, *Understanding Cults and New Religions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 4-6.

and, "The only thing left for us is to trust our instincts."⁴⁴

Thus, in this study of world religions and cults, we wish to pay attention to historical and theological truth claims, but we also want to pay attention to the sociological dynamics of the various religions and cults we will treat.

Mormonism

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS), a religious group more popularly known as the Mormons,⁴⁵ is a highly structured religion. Along with the church's unique doctrines, there is a great emphasis on the home and the upbringing of children. When one sees the television commercials which the Mormons produce, commercials which seem to be Christ-centered and family centered, it would be easy to assume that the ads were for an evangelical church, except for the closing portion which calls attention to the Mormon church and the Book of Mormon. The Mormon Tabernacle Choir is internationally famous, and they perform many of the traditional hymns of Christendom.⁴⁶

Mormons claim to be Christians, though the denominations in the historic Christian faith do not accept them as such. By their own admission, they are neither Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, nor Roman Catholic, but rather, they form an entity apart from the historic Christian faith and reject much, if not all, of the validity of historic Christianity. Nevertheless, they accept many of the tenets of the historic Christian faith, including the virgin birth of Jesus, the atoning sacrifice of the cross, and the hope that Christ will return again and reign on the earth. They practice baptism and communion.⁴⁷ So then, just who are these people called Mormons?

*Historical Origins*⁴⁸

Mormonism has two historical-theological foci, one before the creation of the world and the other in the early 1800s in America. They believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ was proclaimed in heaven before the creation, but in various eras of human time, it had to be "restored" due to its human distortions. Thus, Adam, Noah,

⁴⁴Sartre, "Existentialism," 621.

⁴⁵Strictly speaking, the term "Mormon" is a nickname for a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, cf. R. Evans, *Religions in America*, ed. L. Rosten (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963) 132.

⁴⁶It should be observed that the LDS people of Salt Lake City are not the only denomination of Mormons. Another branch, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (headquartered in Independence, MO), was developed by Joseph Smith's son who rejected the leadership of Brigham Young. There is also the Church of Christ, Temple Lot as well as the Cutlerites, Bickertonites, and Strangites, each group of which holds varying views about organization, procedures and the use of temples. By far the largest group, however, is the group headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah.

⁴⁷Evans, 131-141.

⁴⁸The following synopsis of Mormon origins can be found in almost any source which treats the group.

Abraham, and Moses all served in this restoration ministry in their own times.

The latest restoration is believed to be through the prophet Joseph Smith in Palmyra, New York, beginning in the 1820s. At the tender age of fifteen, Joseph Smith witnessed an appearance of "two Personages," one of which spoke and pointed to the other, saying, "This is my Beloved Son. Hear Him!"⁴⁹ Through a number of subsequent visions and visits by an angel named Moroni, and particularly through the discovery of golden plates written in "reformed Egyptian hieroglyphics",⁵⁰ which Smith translated by peering through a peepstone called Urim and Thummim, Smith rediscovered or "restored" the gospel of Jesus Christ.

From New York, persecution drove the newly founded church into Ohio, Illinois and Missouri. They eventually built a city in Illinois named Nauvoo (a name which Smith said meant "The Beautiful"). Eventually, the anti-Mormon sentiment in Nauvoo led to the publication of some of the more sensitive alleged Mormon practices (i.e., polygamy), and Smith led a Mormon raid on the newspaper presses to destroy them, for which he and some of his followers were arrested. On June 27, 1844, a mob stormed the jail in Carthage, MO, where Smith was incarcerated, and murdered him.

For a short time, the Mormon church floundered for lack of clear leadership. Brigham Young, one of Smith's trusted lieutenants, rallied the main body and challenged them to follow him on the "Great Trek Westward." Their famous march ended in the Salt Lake basin in what is now the State of Utah. On land considered uninhabitable, they staked out a city, planted crops, built an irrigation system, and began building their famous temple. Since then, they have been aggressively evangelistic, and today they number several million adherents.

Essential Theology

As mentioned earlier, Mormons hold some beliefs in common with historic Christians. However, what might seem to be common ground turns out to be otherwise, for while Mormons may use some religious expressions and terminology which are similar to those of historic Christianity, they often define these terms and explain them in very different ways. Here, we shall concentrate on major areas which are distinctive and unique to the Mormon church.

Mormons use the Bible, and in particular, they use the KJV insofar as they believe it has been correctly translated. At the same time, unlike historic Christians, they do not accept the Bible as the sole source of final appeal. Their canon of holy scriptures also includes several other works, notably, the Book of Mormon, the

⁴⁹From Joseph Smith's Testimony.

⁵⁰This language is admittedly unknown to modern linguists.

Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price.

The Book of Mormon, translated by Joseph Smith from the golden plates, purports to be a record of God's dealings with the ancient inhabitants of America. According to the Book of Mormon, two great civilizations migrated to the Americas. One, the Jaredites, came from the ancient Tower of Babel by way of Europe and settled in Central America. The other group was composed of Israelites from Jerusalem, and in about 600 B.C., they crossed the Pacific Ocean and landed in Peru. This latter group divided into two nations, the Nephites and the Lamanites. Jesus Christ himself visited the American continent and revealed himself to the Nephites. He instituted baptism, communion, a priesthood and various other mystical ceremonies. The Nephites were annihilated by the Lamanites, but a record of all these events was hidden in New York on the golden plates. Eventually, all these ancient peoples were destroyed except the Lamanites, who were the ancestors of the American Indians. The crowning event in the Book of Mormon is the personal ministry of Jesus Christ among the ancient Nephites soon after his resurrection. In this record is believed to be the true gospel which needed to be "restored."

In the books *Doctrines and Covenants* and the *Pearl of Great Price*, which are a collection of prophetic utterances given by Joseph Smith, most of the major doctrines of Mormonism are detailed.

Mormon belief structure contains several unique ideas which are in conflict with historic Christianity.⁵¹ Central to Mormon thinking is the belief that all humans preexisted as spirit creatures in a world prior to the present one. They willingly allowed themselves to be born into this world as flesh and blood and to undergo a period of probation for the life to come, though they also sacrificed their memory of the former world. In the life to come, Mormons have the potential to become gods. Thus, Mormons strive to reach the highest level of attainment in this life so that the progress of this life is carried over into the next life. In the next life, this progression can culminate in godhood.

In fact, Mormons believe that God himself was once a man and that he also progressed into godhood. Possibly the most famous aphorism in Mormonism is the statement, "As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may become."

The next life has three levels of glory, the celestial (highest), the terrestrial (intermediate) and the telestial (lowest). Everyone will ultimately be saved, but only

⁵¹Various exposes of Mormon belief systems are available. Possibly the most devastating is E. Decker & D. Hunt, *The God Makers* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1984), which also has a companion film by the same name. In reading such material, it is probably wise to check the actual references to Mormon theology in the *Book of Mormon* and the *Doctrine and Covenants* and *Pearl of Great Price*.

those who are good Mormons and who have the approval of Joseph Smith can attain godhood. As potential father and mother gods, Mormons ultimately will have their own planets to populate, and thus, marriages solemnized in the Mormon temple are eternal. Non-Mormon Christians and non-Christians are all considered to be "Gentiles," and in the afterlife, they will inhabit the lower two levels of glory.

Jesus Christ, like all other humans, was once a spirit creature in the former world. He was the firstborn of God's spirit children, so although he is literally the brother and sister of humans, he holds preeminence by primogeniture.

Mormons are very adamant that prophetic revelation, such as was given to the biblical apostles and prophets, has in no way ceased. The President of the Mormon church is considered to be the prophetic successor to Joseph Smith. Next comes the President's two advisors or High Priests. Then comes the Twelve Apostles (living men who stand in the office of the original Twelve) followed by a presiding quorum of the 70 and then the local bishops.

Conflict with the Historic Christian Faith

In brief, the Mormon belief system conflicts violently with the historic Christian faith. Mormons, while they may have many admirable traits, embrace the concept of polytheism, they do not recognize Jesus Christ to be uniquely the Son of God, they do not recognize the sufficiency of the cross nor salvation by grace through faith, and they reject the exclusive authority of the Christian canon of Scripture. The events described in the Book of Mormon have no historical or archaeological verification. The notion that the American Indians are ethnically related to the Hebrews is scientifically impossible on the basis of genetics and anthropology. Certainly the notion that humans attain godhood is diametrically opposed to the eschatological hope of the New Testament as preached by Jesus Christ and his apostles.

Jehovah's Witnesses

Like the Mormons, the Jehovah's Witnesses claim to be Christian. Though not much more than a century old, they have grown to several million adherents. They believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, the miraculous birth of Jesus, his ransom sacrifice on the cross, and the hope of heaven. They practice water baptism. They live in a highly structured religious community, and their "Kingdom Halls" are familiar meeting places in most cities and towns in America and elsewhere.

However, by their own admission, they believe that they alone possess the only true faith. The vast majority of people, including other Christians, do not meet the strict requirements of true faith. Thus, they believe that they alone are the special minority who are right and who will be permitted to go to heaven. If the way unto

life is narrow and only a few find it, they believe that they are the few who do.⁵²

Historical Origins

Officially known as the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, the religious movement known as Jehovah's Witnesses was formed under the leadership of Charles Taze Russell in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1884. In 1908 it moved to Brooklyn, New York. The name Jehovah's Witnesses, adopted in 1931, was taken from Is. 43:10, "You are my witnesses..." There are some indications that Russell was strongly influenced by the theology of the Seventh Day Adventists and that his religious thought is to some degree a series of modifications of Seventh Day Adventist theology.⁵³

When Russell died, leadership of the movement passed to Judge J. F. Rutherford in 1916, a Missouri lawyer who was the legal counsel for the group.⁵⁴ His voluminous writings were widely distributed up until the time of his death in 1942. Since that time, leadership has passed to others less conspicuous. Today, the Witnesses are uncomfortable with their origins under Russell. They repudiate the charge of "Russellism," though of course, he was the formative thinker behind the system.⁵⁵ Their primary publication, *The Watchtower*, has a circulation of over 64 million worldwide.

In 1981, there was a major rift within the Jehovah's Witnesses movement resulting in a number of adherents leaving the organization. Apparently it began as a reform movement from within, aiming toward moving the group back toward justification by faith and more objective Bible study. However, all participants and sympathizers with this cause were expelled.⁵⁶

Essential Theology

There are two driving forces in the theology of the Jehovah's Witnesses. One is the belief that they alone of all Christians have truly done justice to the authority of the Bible. They believe the Bible to be infallible and themselves to be its infallible interpreters. Consequently, the organization of the Witnesses is utterly authoritarian. Critical thinking and objective self-criticism are simply not tolerated at any level.

⁵²M. Henschel, "Who Are Jehovah's Witnesses?" *Religions in America*, ed. L. Rosten (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963) 102.

⁵³J. Gerstner, *The Theology of the Major Sects* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960) 29-30; I. Hexham, *EDT* (1984) 577-578.

⁵⁴There is a splinter group which did not follow Rutherford known as the Dawn Bible Student's Association. It currently publishes *Dawn* magazine.

⁵⁵Martin, *Kingdom*, 43-46.

⁵⁶Hexham, 577.

Any defectors from the party line are liquidated from the membership.

The second driving force is their intense concern to vindicate Jehovah, that is, to rectify the rebellion against God which began in Eden and has challenged Jehovah's supreme sovereignty ever since. The earth, where humans have been put, serves as a testing ground to see if they will maintain integrity before God. The coming of Jesus into the world, as described in the gospels, was in order to lay the foundation for God's new order. Jehovah's nature is not to tolerate wickedness indefinitely, and in 1914, Christ cast Satan out of heaven, an act which initiated a time of great trouble on the earth. At that same time in 1914, Christ returned to the earth (albeit invisibly), and he still remains on the earth in what is termed his "second presence," actively working to overthrow Satan's worldly organization. Still to come is Armageddon, when Satan and his system will be completely destroyed so that all who breathe may praise Jehovah.⁵⁷

Jehovah's Witnesses have a unique stance concerning the canon and scripture. Denominational versions are rare, and possibly the most biased one of all is *The New World Translation* of the Jehovah's Witnesses (1950 with later revisions). While the group does not admit any authority other than the Bible, it also is reluctant to admit any other English translation except its own. Other Bibles, as described in the Foreword of their own version, have been affected by "the misleading influence of religious traditions which have their roots in paganism." Thus, *The New World Translation* attempts to set right the "human traditionalism" in the other versions.

Unfortunately, while the Witnesses claim that their version is a genuine translation, they have yet to name the translators or to prove their credentials as competent scholars. In fact, there is substantial reason to believe that whoever were the responsible persons, they were very incompetent indeed.⁵⁸ In addition to their distinctive views on Scripture, the Jehovah's Witnesses adhere to some special doctrines. The Christology of the Jehovah's Witnesses is strangely similar to Arianism, a heresy of the 4th century. Both Witnesses and Arians believe that Jesus was not eternally divine, but rather, was the first created being. Thus, for the Witnesses, Jesus was not "God," but "a god."⁵⁹ He existed before his earthly life as a spirit-creature named Michael. His birth on earth was not the incarnation of God into

⁵⁷Gerstner, 35-36; Henschel, 96; W. Martin, *Jehovah's Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1957) 16-32.

⁵⁸Fred Franz, a Witnesses' representative for translation, was cross-examined in 1954. Though he asserted his ability in Hebrew and Greek, he was unable to translate Ge. 2:4 when presented with the text in Hebrew (a comparatively easy sentence which any first year student in Hebrew should have been able to handle), cf. Martin, *Kingdom*, 64. For more specific information on mistranslations, tendentious renderings, insertions, and outright blunders, see S. Kubo and W. Specht, *So Many Versions?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) 88-105.

⁵⁹This doctrine is enforced by their *NWT* version, where the translations of Jn. 1:1; Col. 1:15-17; Phil. 2:6; Tit. 2:13; 2 Pe. 1:1; Rv. 3:14; Pr. 8:22 have been deliberately altered to reflect the Witnesses' theology, B. Metzger, "The Jehovah's Witnesses and Jesus Christ," *Theology Today*, 10 (April 1953) 70.

the world, but rather, Jesus became a perfect human being equal to Adam before his fall. When he died, the human nature of Jesus was annihilated, and he was raised to life as a spirit-creature.⁶⁰

When it comes to the death of Jesus,⁶¹ the Witnesses understand his death to have been a ransom paid to Jehovah God by Jesus, an act which both removed the effects of Adam's sin and laid a new foundation for righteousness so that humans could save themselves by their good works. Similarly, when humans die they will either sleep in unconsciousness until resurrected, or if they have been evil, will be annihilated. Accordingly, Witnesses do not believe in a place of punishment for the wicked dead, and hence, any mention of hell in the Bible is treated exclusively as referring to the grave. The next great event in God's agenda is the Battle of Armageddon, where Jehovah shall lead his forces against evil in the most extensive carnage in human history. In the end, only 144,000 Witnesses will be allowed to go into heaven. All other people who are not annihilated will live forever on the new earth.⁶²

Other peculiar teachings of the Witnesses are that saluting a country's flag is idolatry and blood transfusions are severely sinful. Because much of the Witnesses' theology is eschatological, they have given great attention to the subject of the end of the world. In fact, Witnesses have prophesied the end of the world for 1914, 1918, 1920, 1925, 1941 and 1975. Though these predictions have all failed, Witnesses still believe that Armageddon will be waged prior to the death of those who make up the 144,000 "anointed class" from 1914. Presently, there are less than 10,000 of them left.⁶³

Sociological Isolation

In addition to the theological deviations of the Witnesses from the historic Christian faith, there is also a severe sociological isolationism within the group which welds its members into a rigid sub-culture. Witnesses avoid contact with outsiders on any level other than perfunctory ones. Family members who are not Witnesses are rejected and ostracized.

⁶⁰J. Sire, *Scripture Twisting: 20 Ways the Cults Misread the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1980) 139-140, 161-163.

⁶¹For Witnesses, the death of Jesus was by impalement on a stake rather than by crucifixion on a cross, and they have emended the appropriate passages in the *NWT* to conform to their beliefs, cf. Kubo and Sprecht, 94-95.

⁶²For a further listing of passages critical to the theology of the Witnesses, see J. McDowell and D. Stewart, *Handbook of Today's Religions* (San Bernadino, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1983) 44-63.

⁶³B. Larson, *Larson's New Book of Cults*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1989) 271-272.

Hinduism: The East Moves West

Christianity has always been identified with western thought. In more modern times, however, eastern mysticism has been rapidly moving westward. The vague pantheism in Goethe and Wagner began opening doors to eastern thought, such as Hinduism and Buddhism. With Aldous and Julian Huxley and the drug culture, eastern thought made tremendous inroads into the western university level with its hope of finding meaning and values in the categories of eastern non-reason.⁶⁴ In the confusing world of the technological west, eastern mysticism, with its anti-rationalism, syncretism, quietism, and uncomplicated lifestyle, attracts many.⁶⁵

Most westerners who have frequented major air terminals are familiar by sight with the devotees to the Ramakrishna Mission, a primary Hindu missionary movement in the West. Various religious cults also embrace Hindu ideas. The Theosophical Society is a western form of Hinduism and Buddhism. The Bahai Faith embraces Hindu and Buddhist thought. The Unity Church is heavily influenced by eastern mystical thought. The latest in this series of movements from east to west is the New Age Movement, and in fact, it seeks to combine many of the others under a single system.⁶⁶

*Source of Authority*⁶⁷

The sources of authority upon which the Hindu world view is based are the Hindu scriptures, the *Vedas* ("wisdom verses") and the *Upanishads* ("teachings"). The former explores the Hindu views of existence, and the latter the Hindu views of liberating knowledge. The final Hindu scripture, frequently called an *Upanishad* and considered to contain the essence of both the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* collectively, is the *Bhagavad Gita* ("Song of the Lord").

Hindu World View of Ultimate Reality

The single, central idea fundamental to Hindu thought that supersedes all others is the belief in undivided wholeness. Hindus view ultimate reality as non-dual and unconditioned. All possibilities co-exist without excluding each other. Ultimate reality is a monism. There is no such thing as heresy, only different perspectives.

⁶⁴F. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1976) 170-171.

⁶⁵J. Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 130-131).

⁶⁶For a full treatment of the New Age Movement, see D. Groothuis, *Unmasking the New Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1986).

⁶⁷The primary sources for the following discussion of Hinduism are: J. Koller, *The Indian Way* (New York: Macmillan, 1982); *The Upanishads*, trans. J. Mascaro (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1965); B. Nicolls, "Hinduism," *The World's Religions*, ed. N. Anderson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 136-168; E. Parrinder, ed. *World Religions: From Ancient History to the Present* (New York: Facts on File, 1971); S. Welles, ed., *The World's Great Religions* (New York: Time Incorporated, 1957).

This concept of monism is clearly captured in Hindu scriptures. Following are some Hindu expressions of ultimate reality.

*One only is the fire, burning in many forms.
One only is the sun, illuminating the whole
universe.
One only is the dawn, lighting up all things.
Truly, the One has become this whole world.*

Rg Veda 2:58.2

*In the beginning there was neither existence nor
non-existence;
Neither the world nor the sky beyond.
What was covered over? Where? Who gave it
protection?
Was there water, deep and unfathomable?*

*Who really knows? Who here can say?
When it was born and from where it came--this
creation?
The gods are later than this world's creation--
Therefore who knows from where it came?*

*That out of which creation came,
Whether it held it together or did not,
He who sees it in the highest heaven,
Only He knows--or perhaps even He does not know!*

Rg Veda 10:129

*The Spirit, without moving, is swifter than the mind; the senses cannot reach him:
He is ever beyond them. Standing still, he overtakes those who run. To the ocean of his
being, the spirit of life leads the streams of action.*

*He moves, and he moves not. He is far, and he is near. He is within all, and he is
outside all.*

He sees all beings in his own Self, and his own Self in all beings, loses all fear.

*When a sage sees this great Unity and his Self has become all beings, what
delusion and what sorrow can ever be near him?*

from the Isa Upanishad

*Believe me, my son, an invisible and subtle essence is the Spirit of the whole universe. That
is Reality. That is Atman. THOU ARE THAT.*

An invisible and subtle essence is the Spirit of the whole universe. That is Reality. That is Truth. THOU ARE THAT.

from the Chandogya Upanishad

When one sees Eternity in things that pass away and Infinity in finite things, then one has pure knowledge.

But if one merely sees the diversity of things, with their divisions and limitations, then one has impure knowledge.

And if one selfishly sees a thing as if it were everything, independent of the ONE and the many, then one is in the darkness of ignorance.

from the Bhagavad Gita

Central Ideas

Following are several central ideas that characterize the Hindu world view, ideas that sharply conflict with the Judeo-Christian teachings in the Bible.

Hindus believe in profound levels of reality ranging from:

1. non-existence;
2. consciousness limited by space/time;
3. consciousness limited only by awareness; and
4. unlimited consciousness.

Most humans are believed to live at the second level, but by certain techniques they can transcend to the third level, and through reincarnation and eventual liberation from karmic bondage, they can transcend to the fourth level.

Hindus believe that gods and goddesses are symbols of power and divine functions, not necessarily personal beings. A Hindu can say that there are millions of gods, only one god, or no god at all with equal assurance. Since everything is part of the one undifferentiated whole, the ultimate reality is both good and evil.

Hindus believe in intuitive insight leading to transformation. By meditation and concentration, the most profound levels of reality become accessible to the consciousness.

Through different techniques, a person may transcend to these levels--through techniques such as:

1. asceticism (= burning off the physical and mental bonds of existence)
2. yoga (= self-discipline and self-control)
3. devotion (= ritual, ecstatic songs and poems, chanting the holy name of god)

Hinduism is characterized by syncretism and tolerance. All religious perspectives give a partial glimpse of reality, according to Hindu thinkers. It is in this sense that Gandhi could speak so favorably of Jesus Christ yet remain a Hindu. There is no concept of heresy, and tolerance is unlimited in terms of belief (though tolerance tends to be very limited in terms of action, particularly with the Indian caste system).

*Even those who are devotees of other Gods,
And, full of faith, worship them,
They worship only Me, O Arjuna,
Though not according to the prescribed rules.*

Bhagavad Gita 9:23

Hindus also believe in *Karma* and *Rta*. *Karma* (= action) is a kind of restriction which prevents one from experiencing the deepest levels of reality. It is a determinism, conditioned by previous actions, which keeps one in the cycle of reincarnation and prevents one from transcending to the most profound level of reality. *Rta* is the belief that there is a rhythm and fundamental energy in the universe (as in the "force" in Star Wars). One must strive to live in harmony with this fundamental energy. Efforts toward such harmony is the basis of ethics.

Christian Doctrine

The character of Christian doctrine and faith is diametrically opposed to the central ideas of Hinduism. In the first place, Christianity is an exclusive religion. Jesus clearly says, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," (Jn. 14:6). Whereas Hindus look forward to transcendence into the highest level of consciousness after shedding the karmic bondage of reincarnation, Christians look forward to the coming of Jesus Christ at the end of the age when they will be resurrected and transformed (1 Co. 15:42-58; 2 Co. 5:1-10). Hindus believe they will ultimately be absorbed into *Brahman* (= godhead). Christians believe they will live forever with Christ, but there is no hint that they will be absorbed into the being of God (1 Th. 4:13-17).

The Judeo-Christian revelation is that there is one God only; he is not identical with the world, and he is personal (or more specifically, a tri-personal being in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit), not merely a force (1 Co. 8:5-6; 2 Co. 13:14; 1 Pe. 1:2; Mt. 28:19). God is truly holy, and evil is not part of God's character (1 Jn. 1:5-6). Instead, evil exists as the abuse of freedom which God granted to his creatures (Jn. 8:44). It had a beginning, and it shall have an ending (1 Co. 15:24-28).

Whereas in Hinduism, the devotee finds God, in Christianity God finds us (Lk. 19:10; Ga. 4:9). For Hindus, the primary means of salvation is knowledge; for

Christians it is grace and faith (Ep. 2:8-9). Since the Hindu conception of God is in the context of monism, the Hindu search for God is inward and introspective. For Christians, no one can come to God unless he/she is drawn by God first (Jn. 6:44; 12:32). God takes the initiative in redemption, and God cannot be discovered in the depths of the human soul. God is a "Thou," not an "I."

That humans are in bondage, Christians do not deny, but it is not karmic bondage. Rather, it is the bondage of the will that has come under the power of sin (Ro. 7:8-11). The basis of ethics for Christians is not a subliminal energy in the universe with which they attempt to harmonize their actions; it is the character of God who makes moral demands of his creatures (1 Pe. 1:15-16).

Islam: Submission to the Will of God⁶⁸

Some 900 million people in the world are Muslims. For the most part, they live in North Africa, the Middle East, Southern Russia, Malaysia and Indonesia, though there are Muslim communities also to be found in the western world. The name Islam is the infinitive form of the Arabic verb "to submit," and a Muslim is "one who submits" (i.e., to the will of God). The spread of the religion of Islam is truly remarkable. Within a century of the death of its founder, the Muslim Empire stretched from Southern France through Spain, North Africa, the Levant and Central Asia to the confines of China. The towers and domes of Muslim mosques have become famous throughout the world, and they can be found from the steppes of Russia to Jerusalem to Toledo, Ohio.

Historical Origins

The religion of Islam originated with Muhammad, considered by adherents to be the greatest of the prophets (c. 570--632 A.D.). Little is known of his early life other than that he grew up as an orphan. In early adult life, he demonstrated a marked religious disposition, withdrawing to caves for fasting, seclusion and meditation. Profoundly dissatisfied with the polytheism and superstition in his native Mecca, he became convinced that there was only one true God. It is likely that his early adoption of monotheism can be traced to the influences of Judaism and eastern Christianity. At about the age of 40, Muhammad began to experience divine revelations, some by voices and others by the angel Gabriel. Eventually, these revelations or *Suras*, 114 in all, were collected into the Muslim Scripture, called the Koran, and they are believed to contain the exact voice of God.

⁶⁸Sources for the religion of Islam are H. Ahmad, *Introduction to the Study of the Holy Quran* (London: The London Mosque, 1985); H. Smith, *The Religions of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958); N. Anderson, ed., *The World's Religions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976); E. Thompson, ed., *The World's Great Religions* (New York: Time Inc., 1957).

The initial response to Muhammad's revelations was not impressive, and in 622 A.D., he withdrew with his followers (only about 200 at that time) to al-Madina. This withdrawal, called the Hijra, proved the turning point in Muhammad's career. In Mecca, he had been rejected, but in al-Madina, he soon became a statesman, legislator and judge. Though at first he expected support from the Jews, since he claimed to be in the successive line of prophets from Abraham, the patriarchs and the Old Testament prophets, the Jews ridiculed his accounts of Old Testament events which were at variance with the Hebrew Bible. Eventually, he turned against the Jews, giving them over to banishment and massacre. Returning to Mecca, Muhammad conquered it, imposing Islam upon the greater part of the Arabian peninsula by the time of his death.

Muhammad died without naming a successor. As the last and greatest of the prophets, he could not be replaced, of course, but it was clearly necessary that someone succeed him, since the Islamic community was a theocracy. A tremendous struggle for power ensued. Without detailing this struggle, which caused considerable bloodshed and lasted for several generations, the end result was the emergence of two principle schools of Islam, the Sunni branch (majority) and the Shiite branch (largest minority branch, located mostly in Iran). Though both branches fully accept the Koran, there remain theological and traditional differences between them.

Essential Theology

At the simplest level, the theology of Islam revolves around the belief that there is only one God, Allah. His greatest and final prophet is Muhammad.

The Koran is the single sacred scripture of Islam. It is composed of 114 chapters (called *suras*) which have been arranged according to length rather than chronology, the longer ones appearing near the front. In total length, it is approximately four-fifths as long as the New Testament. Muslims believe that it contains the *ipsissima verba* (verbatim words) of God, given to Muhammad by direct revelation and recited to his followers, who recorded the oracles. All but one of the 114 *suras* begin with the phrase, "In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful!" In addition to its unique content, the Koran contains stories to be found in the Hebrew Bible and Jewish tradition, and most scholars believe these areas to be dependent upon the Jewish Talmud.

The first *sura* is an invocation which has been described as the essence of Islam. It reads as follows:

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful! Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds, the Beneficent, the Merciful. Owner of the Day of Judgment, Thee (alone) we worship; Thee (alone) we ask for help. Show us the straight path, the path of those whom Thou hast

avored; not (the path) of those who earn Thine anger nor of those who go astray.

In addition to the Koran, Islam has collected the Traditions of what Muhammad said or did and uses them as rules of behavior. They are not considered to be inspired in the sense of the Koran, but they are believed to be the uninspired record of inspired words and actions. Different collections of the Traditions are today accepted as authoritative by the different sects into which Islam is divided. Alongside the Koran, the Traditions are the primary source of Muslim theology, law and practice.

The devout Muslim is called upon to believe "in God, his Angels, his Books, his Messengers, in the Last Day, and....in the Decree both of good and evil" (Tradition of the Prophet). According to Islam, there is an order of created beings. The highest order consists of the four archangels, Gabriel (messenger of revelation), Michael (guardian of the Jews), Israfil (summoner to resurrection) and Izra'il (messenger of death). Next, there are an indefinite number of ordinary angels. Two recording angels attend every human person, registering his/her good deeds and sins. Next in the order are creatures called *jinn*, beings of smokeless flame who procreate and are capable of either belief or unbelief. They sometimes appear as animals, sometimes in human form. They can possess humans as well as be expelled by exorcism. The devil is normally perceived to be a *jinn*. Last in the order of created beings are humans.

Muslims believe in three kinds of salvation: a) perfect, b) imperfect, and c) deferred. Perfect salvation is a kind that is achieved in this life. Imperfect salvation is a kind also achieved in this life, but it will gradually progress toward perfect salvation after death. Deferred salvation is attained only after a period of suffering in Hell. Thus, every human being will ultimately be saved, but some only after severe reformatory treatment by torture after death.

Life after death consists of a new universe, called Paradise, in which a person receives a new body. This new body is a spiritual one peculiarly adapted to the new state. Perfect souls will immediately enter Paradise upon death. Those who have imperfectly developed in this life will temporarily go to Hell, where they will be healed of their spiritual ills. Afterwards, they may enter Paradise. Eventually, the state of Hell will be altogether terminated.

There are five ritual observances, called the Five Pillars of Islam, that form the foundation of Islamic religious practice. They are as follows:

Recitation of the Creed: "There is no God but Allah; Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah."

Prayer: Prayer is to be performed five times daily at stated hours, in Arabic,

and with particular postures and words, wherever one might be, facing Mecca. On Fridays, congregational prayer is prescribed to be in the mosque at noon.

Almsgiving: The giving of money to the poor is an act of piety regulated by percentages.

Fast of Ramadan: The ninth month of the Muslim year, the anniversary of Muhammad's first revelations, is designated as a time of fasting which "puts the devil in chains." No food or drink is consumed between dawn and darkness, and no sexual act is allowed. The exact time of dawn and darkness is announced by the firing of cannons.

Pilgrimage to Mecca: At least once in his lifetime, every Muslim is called upon to make a *hadj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca, where three sacred rituals are to be performed. The first is a sevenfold circumambulation of the Kaaba, the holiest shrine of Islam. Second comes the Lesser Pilgrimage, in which the pilgrims trot seven times across the valley between the hills of Safa and Marwa in honor of Hagar's frantic search for water. Finally, there is the Great Pilgrimage to the Mount of Mercy in the Plain of Arafat (25 miles east of Mecca), where the pilgrims "stand before God."

Neo-Paganism: The Ancient Becomes Modern

The term pagan generally refers to either someone who is not a Christian, Muslim or Jew, or someone who has no religion at all. In this study, however, the coinage neo-paganism is more focused. Neo-paganism refers to the revival of ancient tribal, animistic and occultic religions long supposed to be virtually dead or at least confined to pre-literary societies.⁶⁹ These thought forms have been forcefully revived during the past two or three decades. Through books written at the popular level, through endorsements by celebrity figures, and through the entertainment industry, the ideas of neo-paganism have been widely disseminated in the modern western world.

⁶⁹We know, of course, that such religious thought pervades tribal cultures in Africa, Australia and South America, cf. E. Newing, "Religions of pre-literary societies," *The World's Religions*, ed. N. Anderson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 11-48. Christian missionaries frequently encounter such various forms of paganism in non-western cultures. At the same time, while many countries are ostensibly dominated by one of the major world religions, deeper examination often demonstrates that a majority of the people have limited knowledge of the "great" religions. For instance, the majority of Filipinos are Roman Catholics, but in their everyday lives, they are more closely to be identified with the ancient animistic world views, cf. R. Henry, *Filipino Spirit World* (Manila: OMF Publishers, 1986) 1-3.

*World View*⁷⁰

Neo-paganism, like all religions, attempts to explain the meaning and mystery of the universe. It defines the relationship of humans to nature as well as to other humans. It attempts to recount the pre-history of the human race as well as the afterlife.

Animism is the essential world view of neo-paganism. It is the belief that the universe is inhabited by countless spiritual beings, usually conceived as existing in a rough hierarchy. The cosmos is a continuum of spirit and matter, and animals may become the ancestors of people or vice versa. The elements in nature, such as trees and mountains, possess souls. The power of these spirits can be manipulated through formulas, rituals, and music. Thus, the universe has a personal dimension. The spirits range in temperament from vicious to vengeful to comic to beneficent. The world view of the neo-pagan is interlaced with mythologies, magic, taboos, mysticism and superstition. While neo-pagans do not usually have traditional creeds or bodies of literature in the form of Scripture, they do have certain assumptions by which they organize the universe. In order to subsist in life, the evil spirits must be placated while the good ones wooed. Shamans, sorcerers, and witches are respected as the professionals who have learned to control the spirit world.

Western Openness to Neo-Paganism

While the character of neo-paganism may seem to belong to primitive or past civilizations, the western mind is increasingly open to such a world view. Part of this openness is due to the spiritual emptiness of western rationalism. Since the Enlightenment, western intellectualism has increasingly debunked the traditional Christian ideas of spiritual reality. As a consequence, western society has become meaningless. The traditional meaning grounded in the Judeo-Christian faith has so thoroughly been discredited that it is no longer a viable option. In order to find spiritual meaning and value, many westerners are prepared to take the leap into mysticism and the nonrational.⁷¹

To this mix of negativity toward Christianity and openness toward mysticism has been added various elements which make the nonrational seem plausible. Among these are the ideas of holism, that is, a new ideology which attempts to promote human well-being and physical health through visualization, PMA (Positive Mental Attitude), self-help techniques, eastern disciplines, and earth medicines. Films, such

⁷⁰R. Henry, 5-9; J. Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1976) 159-161; I. Hexham and K. Poewe, *Understanding Cults and New Religions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 28-59.

⁷¹This is the force of Francis Schaeffer's argument in *Escape from Reason* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1968). While Schaeffer has been criticized for his alleged limited understanding of philosophies, trends and thinkers, his essential thesis rings very true indeed.

as, *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Exorcist* and *The Omen*, have heightened the public's interest in the world of satanism. Science fiction series, such as, the Star Trek serial, the Indiana Jones films, the Star Wars series, and the movie *ET* have made the extraterrestrial commonplace and attractive. Technological myths, such as *Chariots of the Gods*, and fantasy stories, such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, have created imaginative worlds about alternative universes and space-time physics. The end result is a public fascination with the world of paganism which in turn invites openness toward its assumptions.

Of course, it should be pointed out that all fantasies are not necessarily part of some conspiracy to subvert the world. Fiction is not necessarily evil. However, some of the modern fictions may very well have an agenda beyond merely entertainment, particularly when they attempt to reinforce the plausibility of a neo-pagan world view.

Finally, a major form of neo-paganism is the occult. This includes witchcraft, astrology, satanism, clairvoyancy, necromancy, fortune-telling and the like. The ancient religions of the Druids, the Celts and the American Indians are all in various states of revival.

Christian Structures Most Susceptible to Neo-Paganism

One of the amazing things about those people who accept neo-paganism is that many of them have some sort of Christian background. There seem to be some groups within the broad umbrella of Christianity which are particularly susceptible to the ideas and ideals of neo-paganism. These include Christian feminism, Christian liberalism, the charismatic movement, and other such groups which emphasize mysticism and sensate experience.

Feminism is the movement which aims at equalizing the roles of males and females in society. Christian feminism has the same aim within a Christian context. There is undoubtedly a serious need for the church to conscientiously address the roles of men and women within church life. However, there is also a danger in that elements of neo-paganism are attractive to religious feminists precisely because the female role in paganism looms much larger than it does in traditional Christian structures. The debate over gender language, especially when connected with the person of God, can easily merge with the pagan mythologies of male and female deities. The exalted role of the priestess within paganism has led some idealists to merge Christian and pagan rituals in the name of equality.

Christian liberalism, because of its weak view of the authority of the Bible and its enchantment with the idea that all religion, even Christianity, is essentially evolutionary, is especially susceptible to the new paganism. Operating out of a perspective of eclecticism, theological liberals attempt to draw upon the truth claims

of other religions and philosophies. In seeking to be "fair," they refuse to follow any one system exclusively. As such, they often exhibit a latitudinarianism which invites interaction and dialogue with paganism. Since the faith of Israel, and ultimately of Christianity, is often understood to be an evolution of religious ideas drawn from the matrix of other ancient Near Eastern religions, there is no reason why paganism must be categorically rejected in the modern world.

The charismatic movement is also susceptible to elements of neo-paganism because of its emphasis on experiential religion. Religious enthusiasm dominates the movement as a quest for the direct or immediate experience of God. To be sure, within biblical Christianity there are undoubtedly genuine and deeply spiritual experiences. Still, when/if such exhilaration becomes the criteria for faith, then the distance between Christian mystical experience and paganism is not very far. Because charismatic Christianity has a softer theological center, it is more susceptible to embracing neo-pagan elements, such as, visualization, PMA, the attempt to manipulate the Holy Spirit through rituals and incantations, and the exaltation of emotional experience as the final criteria of religious truth.⁷²

How Can I Know that Christianity is the One, True Faith?

Without doubt, there are many religious truth claims in the world. Some religions, such as Hinduism, are eclectic by nature. They view all religious thought as valid. The Indian guru says that all religions are looking at the same mountain, only from different sides. Other religions are exclusive, and Christianity is one of those. The biblical claim is that God has revealed himself fully and decisively in Jesus Christ alone (Mt. 11:27//Lk. 10:22; Jn. 1:18; He. 1:1-3). Jesus Christ alone is the way to the Father; he alone is the revealer of religious truth and the source of all spiritual life (Jn. 14:6). He is the only "gate" for the sheep, and all others are thieves and robbers (Jn. 10:1, 7-10). The one who preaches a different gospel preaches no gospel at all and is under God's curse (Ga. 1:6-9). The one who proclaims a "different Jesus" is only "deceived by the serpent's cunning" (2 Co. 11:2-4).

These sorts of statements in the Bible, and there are many of them, converge to form what has been called the scandal of particularity. The claim to exclusive truth in Christ alone is folly to Greeks and a scandal to Jews (1 Co. 1:21-25). It was anticipated in the Old Testament community's confrontation with the Canaanite religions (Dt. 13; 1 Kg. 18:21-24), and it is incorporated in the preaching of the gospel by the apostles (Ac. 4:12). Having said this, then, the question remains as to whether or not this exclusive claim by Christians is right. Is Christianity the only true religion? Is the Bible the only true source for spiritual truth? Is the God of the Bible

⁷²D. Bloesch, *Faith & Its Counterfeits* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1981) 61-72.

the only true God? Why do Christians think so? Such questions are particularly pertinent in an American culture of which the majority, a whopping 72% among Baby Busters and 66% of adults in general, believe that there is no such thing as absolute truth.⁷³

Christian Apologetical Systems

There is quite a range of systems which aim at defending the truthfulness of Christianity's religious claims. Some argue on the grounds of observable evidence that, in view of the empirical data about Christianity and the Bible, it is overwhelmingly probable that Christianity is the true and right religion.⁷⁴ Others argue that the inherent principles of logic and the consistency of systematic thought lead to the conclusion that Christianity is true and right.⁷⁵ Still others treat the truth claims of Christianity as hypotheses which must be tested and verified.⁷⁶ Since Christian assertions cohere in terms of logical consistency, factual adequacy, psychological need, satisfying values, and moral accountability, it is overwhelmingly probable that they are true.⁷⁷ Still others assert that Christian truth is first of all subjective and comes by revelation from God, though it may be objectively examined after one comes to faith.⁷⁸ Finally, there are those who, like Soren Kierkegaard, have altogether thrown objective certainty to the winds, asserting that not only is objective proof impossible, one must believe the Christian message in the face of its very absurdity by taking a subjective leap of faith beyond the realm of logic.⁷⁹

Of course, all religions are faced with the same challenge of substantiating their claims to religious truth. Eclectic religions tend to view faith as a category of aesthetics rather than epistemology. Thus, they champion relativism and believe that there can be "truth for you and truth for me." Biblical Christianity, on the other hand, understands faith as epistemological, and it is a question of either truth or error, not "truth for you and truth for me."

⁷³G. Barna, *What Americans Believe* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1991) 83.

⁷⁴Josh McDowell's popular work, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Campus Crusade for Christ, Inc., 1972), and other works like it attempt to pile up statistical and empirical data sufficient to prove the truth claims of Christianity beyond a reasonable doubt.

⁷⁵This approach is typical of the apologetics of Francis Schaeffer in *The God Who is There* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1968) and *He is There and He is Not Silent* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1972). Among classical apologists who follow this methodology, Thomas Aquinas is probably the most important.

⁷⁶This is the approach of E. Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948).

⁷⁷Various Christian apologists who use the above systems or variations of them can be compared and explored in G. Lewis, *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims* (Chicago: Moody, 1976).

⁷⁸This approach was typical of Augustine and John Calvin, cf. B. Ramm, *Varieties of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962) 147-195.

⁷⁹An excellent little introduction to Kierkegaard's thought may be found in R. van de Weyer, *Selected Readings from Kierkegaard* (United Kingdom: Hunt & Thorpe, 1991).

The Problem of Proof

Our contemporary world is very proof-oriented. Everyone from the makers of breakfast cereal to the purveyors of scientific theories bombard us with proof that their assertions are true. We are quite accustomed to hearing the compiled results of statistics and surveys. We see testing conducted with experimental groups and control groups. Yet, in spite of all this "proof," our society becomes more and more skeptical about all truths claims at all levels, religious or otherwise. Cynicism pervades our culture, both within religion and outside of it. Quantum physics has even thrown open the "established fact" that matter is solid.

As such, it is hardly likely that anyone is going to be able to offer proof of the truthfulness of Christianity to the satisfaction of the skeptic. If the truth of Christianity were capable of proof beyond all reasonable doubt, then all reasonable people would become Christians. Obviously, this is not the case. At the same time, the Christian faith is a reasonable faith. There are substantial reasons to believe in the truth of Christianity, and there are Christian evidences to be assessed. In terms of material fact, one can examine history and the Hebrew-Christian documents.⁸⁰ In terms of supernatural evidences, one may examine such things as fulfilled prophecy and miracles,⁸¹ particularly the miracle of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.⁸²

The Discoverer and the Seeker

Jesus gave two parables which illustrate different ways by which people come to accept the validity of the gospel (Mt. 13:44-46). The first is the parable of the discoverer. He stumbles across the Christian faith. He was not looking for it particularly. He had not been plagued with philosophical doubts, and he had not been desperately unhappy. Nevertheless, as soon as he discovered the good news, he was willing to sacrifice everything in order to hold on to the truth that he had found. The second parable describes a seeker who was intentionally looking for fine pearls. As a thinker about faith, he is like the person who reads and questions. When at last he sees what the gospel is all about, he, too, is ready to make any sacrifice in order to enjoy the beauty and wonder of what he has found in Christ.⁸³

Similar examples are to be found in the early church. When Paul was at Thessalonica, his listeners heard him reason from the Hebrew Bible concerning the

⁸⁰A concise but insightful approach to historical and biblical investigation can be found in F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents, Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960).

⁸¹For thorough treatments of the supernatural evidences of prophecy and miracles as well as objections to them, see B. Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago: Moody, 1953).

⁸²For a thorough examination of the resurrection narratives and possible objections, see G. Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

⁸³C. Chapman, *The Case for Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 296-297.

death, resurrection and messiahship of Jesus (Ac. 17:1-4). Some were persuaded, and others were not. Those who believed received the gospel as the very words of God (1 Th. 2:13). At Berea, the hearers conducted Scriptural research on their own so as to examine Paul's message (Ac. 17:11-12). In the end, however, it is God who enables a person to believe that the Christian message is true (Phil. 1:29). The gospel carries its own conviction through the power of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 16:8-11; Ro. 1:16; 1 Th. 1:5). Logic, reason, intellectual investigation, history, material fact, inward passion, and above all conviction by the Holy Spirit, all figure in convincing a woman or man that the gospel is true. For some people, this conviction about Christian truth comes in a crisis experience. For others, it is a process, a gradual awakening and realization.

Psychological certainty is not at all the same thing as scientific certainty. If one wants scientific certainty of the truth of Christianity, that is, if he/she wants empirical proof beyond reasonable doubt, then faith is eliminated altogether. No one needs faith to believe in the law of gravity--it is a fact beyond dispute. The truth of Christianity, however, is not simply an impersonal fact beyond dispute. It is as personal as the very essence of one's being, for it concerns the very meaning of life itself. The truth claims of Christianity call for faith. This call need not eliminate reason, but at the same time, faith is not the same thing as reason. There is certainty in Christian faith, but such certainty is the gift of God. While such faith may very well be strongly supported on intellectual grounds, it is not itself the product of human intellectualism.

Christianity and Its Relationship to Cults and World Religions

How ought Christians to relate to those of other faiths, or for that matter, how should they relate to those who accept some elements of historic Christianity but have serious deviations as well? How critical are these theological differences, and how should these differences shape social relationships? What spiritual responsibilities should a Christian accept with respect to these other people?

The Theological Challenge

There are three highly significant challenges in the theology of cults and alternative world religions. They are the challenge of spiritual authority, the challenge of Christology, and the challenge of salvation.⁸⁴

All cults and other world religions reject the Christian claim that the Bible is the sole authority for faith and practice. Semi-Christian cults may accept the Bible at some level, but they also accept as equally valid other sources. The Mormons view the writings of Joseph Smith as authoritative, and in fact, they understand the Book of

⁸⁴Of course, there are other marks of cultism than the three mentioned here, cf. D. Breese, *Know the Marks of Cults* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1975). However, these three seem to be the most significant.

Mormon to be "another testament of Jesus Christ." The Jehovah's Witnesses follow the writings, ideas and interpretations of Charles Russell and J. F. Rutherford. The Worldwide Church of God follows Herbert W. Armstrong, and The Way International follows Victor Paul Wierwille.

Islam, as a world faith, rejects the Bible altogether and follows the Koran. Hindus rely upon the Vedas and the Upanishads. The branches of Judaism accept the authority of the Hebrew Bible in varying degrees, but reject the New Testament. Neo-pagans, though they do not have a scripture *per se*, embrace the ancient pagan mythologies as normative for their world view.

Christians, on the other hand, believe that God has fully and decisively disclosed himself through Jesus Christ as revealed in the Bible (He. 1:1-3). The Bible is sufficient and needs no supplement. The character of revelation is that the people of faith in the community of Old Testament Israel looked for the coming of Messiah, and the people of faith in the New Testament Church look for his return. There is no New Testament anticipation whatsoever for any intermediate revelation, but every indication is that Jesus Christ, as described by the apostles, is the full and final revelation which God intends to give.

Particularly within the semi-Christian cults, the deviation from biblical christology emerges abruptly. If Paul warns against preaching "another Jesus" (2 Co. 11:4), the cults have much for which to answer. The Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as quite a number of other cults, reject the uniqueness of Jesus' deity and sonship. Though not generally categorized with the cults, liberal Christianity runs precisely the same risk. It often views the orthodox understanding of Jesus (God incarnate) as mythological, and to a large degree, the invention of the early church.⁸⁵

Biblical Christians, on the other hand, affirm the deity and lordship of Jesus Christ. Though there are different conceptions of God in the world and different loyalties to various lords, Christians understand that there is only one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ (1 Co. 8:6). Jesus of Nazareth was fully human, to be sure. The incarnation was real. The Word became flesh and lived for awhile among us (Jn. 1:1-2, 14). At the same time, Jesus is also the Creator of the universe (Col. 1:15-17; Jn. 1:10), and he is fully God (Jn. 1:1, 18; 20:28; 1 Jn. 5:20; Ro. 9:5; 14:10; 2 Co. 5:10; Tit. 2:13; Ac. 20:28; Col. 1:19; 2:9; Phil. 2:6, 9; He. 1:1-3, 8-9; 2 Pe. 1:1). To worship as God any so-called deity other than the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is false worship and a mistake.

Finally, salvation is understood in radically different ways among cults and

⁸⁵For an examination of these views from the vantage point of Christian orthodoxy, see G. Carey, *God Incarnate: Meeting the Contemporary Challenges to a Classic Christian Doctrine* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1977).

world religions. For Hindus, salvation is the effort to break the chain of reincarnation and to escape the bonds of karma. For Muslims, salvation is entry into Paradise, a foregone conclusion for all humans, though some will only achieve it after passing through the tortures of hell. For Mormons, salvation consists of becoming a demigod, complete with personal jurisdiction over a future planet with its own civilization. For Jehovah's Witnesses, salvation is a human attainment by which one escapes the annihilation coming upon all those who do not follow Witness teachings.⁸⁶

Christians, on the other hand, know that salvation is reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ (2 Co. 5:18--6:2). While there are many biblical metaphors which describe this salvation, the metaphor of the lawcourt (justification), the metaphor of the family quarrel (reconciliation), the metaphor of the slave market (redemption, ransom), the metaphor of full acceptance into the intimate family (adoption), all these metaphors point toward one essential reality--that men and women are saved through their faith in the death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection from the tomb. This salvation results in resurrection to eternal life with God in the hereafter.

*The Sociological Factor*⁸⁷

Though sometimes they give lip service to it, most traditional Christians have failed to adequately consider the sociological factor which leads people to turn toward alternative religions. Traditional Christians have grown up assuming that sensible and intelligent people believe things because they have been proved to be true, and they assume that the world operates through reason. Thus, they deem the answer to the cults to be in the intellectual thrust and parry of apologetics.

Not to dismiss the intellectual side of the problem, it must still be recognized that the sociological dimension is just as significant, if not more significant. In a modern culture which is increasingly mechanized, categorized, statistically analyzed, fragmented, and biochemically processed, men and women crave holism. Their attraction to the cults and other world religions is far more than just the dogmatic acceptance of a few bizarre doctrines. Rather, they embrace a system which somehow gives meaning to them as whole persons and makes spiritual sense of a confusing world. Underneath the factor of intellect there lies the real human need for social acceptance, self-acceptance, self-actualization, integration, and spiritual experience and well-being. In the end, they adopt new world views and new religious viewpoints because in doing so they feel whole.⁸⁸ Particularly, when people are

⁸⁶Other models for salvation differing from Christian orthodoxy are to be found within the modern theologies of Christendom as well, cf. D. Wells, *The Search for Salvation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1978).

⁸⁷Hexham and Poewe, *Understanding Cults*.

⁸⁸Such sociological and psychological factors seem particularly prominent in cults like The Peoples' Temple sect,

uncomfortable with their present circumstances or even their past experiences in life, they begin a long search for a religious community in which they feel at home.

Because this is so, the effort by many Christians to extricate cult members from their sects or to convert adherents to other world religions from their allegiances through theological and/or philosophical argumentation falls considerably short. In some cases, it may even drive the adherents further away from Christianity, because the evangelistic efforts on the part of Christians tend to create added tension and fragmentation, the very things from which they were fleeing when they joined the sect or religion.

Christians must realize that Christianity is more than a set of doctrines, however important Christian doctrine may be. Christianity is also a community, and for many outsiders, it is the impact of the community that will become the avenue by which they will ultimately accept the Christian message. Christians who are unloving, who foster conflict with outsiders or with each other, or who demonstrate sociological fragmentation are not going to be very effective in convincing the outsider that he or she should become a Christian.

The Evangelistic Implications

The mandate of the great commission is clear. Christians are to carry the message of Jesus Christ to all the nations (Mt. 24:19-20; Lk. 24:45-48; Jn. 20:21). When the apostles preached, they did not hesitate to share the message of Jesus with those of other religious faiths, calling upon them to give up their loyalties to alternative religions (Ac. 13:6-11; 14:11-18; 16:16-18; 17:16-31; 19:17-20, 23-27; 1 Th. 1:9; 1 Pe. 4:3).

The Bible is equally clear that those who have rejected Jesus Christ stand under God's judgment (Ep. 2:3; 2 Th. 1:6-10). Every man and woman is a sinner (Ro. 3:9, 23), and they shall all be accountable to God (Ro. 3:19). Those who do not believe in Christ are perishing, and they have been blinded by Satan, the god of this world, so that they cannot see the glory of God in Christ (2 Co. 4:3-4; Jn. 3:18-19; 1 Jn. 5:19). Thus, the mission of the church is to preach the gospel to everyone. God makes his appeal to sinners through Christians on behalf of Christ that they be reconciled to God (2 Co. 5:20)!