

Introduction to the World Religions Series

A CHRISTIAN INTRODUCTION TO GOD AND UNIVERSE

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HAS THE UNIVERSE ALWAYS EXISTED?

Several sound philosophical arguments have been presented over the centuries for the existence of a Creator. Perhaps the simplest establishes itself in a single observation; the universe is winding down. Matter and energy do not spontaneously organize. That same observation has led some to postulate that our universe began with Big Bang, which begs the questions; what caused the Bang? Either the universe has always existed, or it has not. If it has not, we are ignorant of the processes by which that could happen. But that should not prevent us from postulating it. The conclusions of science have not been able to prove or disprove either position. Some religious circles ridicule those who will not espouse Creationism. Some pseudo-intellectuals ridicule those who will not espouse materialism. Both positions are ethically dishonest because they use derision to substitute for facts. We can, however, state confidently that, according to what we know of science, creation fits the evidence at hand, materialism does not. The Second Law of Thermodynamics summarizes the observation that, over time and without the introduction of outside forces, systems equilibrate. We even have an energy term called entropy which assigns a value to the energy of organization. The conservation of mass-energy is a fundamental hypothesis of the physical sciences. Presently, the best explanation for our existence is that an entity greater than ourselves provided the initial mass-energy. But philosophy and physical science can do no more than attempt to describe reality. A quick review of history reveals that many conclusions have been accepted as fact for centuries, only to be dismantled by someone who found the hidden assumption. So, although we may wish to answer the question, we must recognize that we can only guess. A definitive answer may originate only from the Creator. So, although all our philosophy, logic, and science weigh heavily in favor of Creation, we must be humble and patient. The truth does not originate from us.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE CREATOR?

If we assume that the universe has not always existed, certain attributes of that Creator can be deduced from that has been made. For example, the universe is decaying. Death is inevitable. Our knowledge is incomplete. All power within the universe is insufficient to explain its existence. Time is our enemy. Therefore, the Creator is not composed of the same materials as we are and is timeless. The complexity of the universe implies great intelligence.

The attributes of the universe that we perceive are not necessarily the same as the Creator. For example, we would not assume that a carpenter is made of wood because his creations are of wood. The notions of right and wrong cannot be derived from observation of the universe. For example, people cannot deduce the intended family structure by observing the various family structures of the animal kingdom because those structures are of wide variety and are often contradictory to one another. Certainly, the attributes of power, intelligence, and timelessness can be asserted with confidence. Perhaps the attribute of consistency can be added to the list. An inconsistent being is self-destructive. Evil, however that may be defined by the Creator, causes permanent damage. A part of intelligence is memory; the memory of evil both prompts

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future evil and damages the ability to choose well in the future. Although some have proposed a Creator that is a balance of good and evil, if that good were truly powerful, it would stamp out evil, or vice versa. Consistent evil also would be self-destructive, so we may deduce that the Creator is consistently good as defined by that Creator. Consistency, however, does not imply changelessness. The Creator fashioned a universe in which time is meaningful. The Creator, although eternal, understands time. Time is the concept we use to mark change. Philosophers have debated whether time is a real quantity or if it is a construct we use to describe change. The impact of that debate is profound in mathematics, physics, and chemistry. But both positions imply that the Creator is affected by time, having memory and anticipating outcomes. From these four initial attributes (power, intelligence, timelessness, and consistency) and from the fact of Creation, we may further deduce that the Creator possesses a set of positive character traits. The act of creation implies purpose. Power of itself has no need to express itself and no boundaries for its exercise. When power is exercised, purpose is implied. Intelligence of itself has no need to express itself. The exercise of intelligence implies purpose. The attribute of consistency implies that the purpose is positive and consistent with such positive character traits as justice, mercy, patience, love, truth, goodness, wisdom, and faithfulness.

CAN WE KNOW THE PURPOSES OF THE CREATOR?

Although some generalizations can be deduced about the Creator, the purpose or purposes for that creation are beyond our ability to ascertain independently. Some purposes may be ruled out by the fact that a proposed purpose may be contrary to the presumed character of the Creator. For example, creating people in order for them to worship the Creator implies that the Creator is egocentric, inconsistent with love. The Creator's positive and consistent character implies selflessness. Creating people in order to have someone to dominate also implies egocentrism. But, a number of purposes could be proposed that harmonize with a consistently positive character. Therefore, the purposes of the Creator must be given by the Creator. More importantly, the consistently positive character of the Creator will communicate those purposes. Because people are unable to interrogate the Creator, and because the Creator must have purposes, that Creator must communicate in order for the creation to know and participate in its purposes. Participation by the created is self-evident; we believe that we consider information and make decisions. If each person is merely playing out an inevitable plan from the Creator, then our existence is a fraud perpetrated by the Creator, which is contradictory to the Creator's consistently positive character. Therefore, the Creator must, in order to be consistent, communicate those purposes.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO KNOW THE PURPOSES OF CREATION?

The universe is a confusing place. Evil exists. Some people die unexpectedly or seemingly for no reason. Doing good does not always bring reward. Evil does not always fail. Knowing why the world is the way it is puts events in context, enabling understanding and reasonable expectations. If our hopes are based on purposes other than those of the Creator, we will be self-deceived at best. Worse, were our unfounded hopes

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exposed, we would become hopeless. Therefore, seeking that communication from the Creator is a worthy task.

Further, we must adopt the attitude of a scientist in this search. A true scientist constantly seeks to prove his conclusion to be wrong. Unfortunately, many very intelligent people in the various fields of science have failed to become scientists because they seek to prove themselves to be correct. A cursory glance at the conclusions of science over the past few hundred years illustrates clearly that we cannot take ourselves too seriously. We come to more wrong conclusions than right ones. For example, the periodic table is less than 150 years old. Maggots were believed to spring spontaneously from rotting meat. A state of matter was believed to be the "ether," which filled outer space. Inaccurate understandings of the universe arise from honest scientists because of undiscovered assumptions and gaps in logic.

The same is true of religion. The best religious minds always have questioned accepted religious truth, including their own beliefs. Those who respond to different ideas with anger or ridicule are of the same mold as those who tried to suppress Galileo and da Vinci. A scientist considers new ideas rationally, looking for the hidden assumption in the proposal as well as those in himself. The new idea may be accepted, rejected, or modified, but always with respect and reason. Those who respond badly mark themselves as seekers of themselves, not of truth.

HOW CAN WE DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN EVIDENCE AND SELF-DECEPTION?

Throughout history, many communications have been presented as if from the Creator. Various groups have espoused different communications. One conclusion is certain; if two communications contradict one another, at least one claim is false, if not both. If one communication teaches re-incarnation while another teaches that each person physically dies exactly once, then both cannot be true. If two proposed communications both claim to be the last, they cannot both be true. Certainly, devotees of the same communication may interpret and apply the same communication differently. Poor reading comprehension, cultural assumptions, and personal agendas all have contributed to contradiction. Careful analysis is necessary in order to determine whether the contradiction is inherent in the proposed communication from the Creator, or if that contradiction finds its source in the limitations of human thought. Having separated the proposed communication from the accretions of culture, certain attributes may be expected.

1. Universal. A proposed communication must apply equally to all: male and female, rich or poor, of any ethnic derivation. The genetic variation between people is miniscule compared to the huge quantity of similarities. Classifying some humans as unable to connect with God implies that some are not human.
2. Understandable. A proposed communication must be understandable by a common person. The Creator certainly is capable of clear communication. If ordinary people cannot understand a communication from the most capable communicator, then neither

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can they understand an interpretation by a person of less intelligence than the Creator. Obviously, this precludes a clergy system.

3. Useful. A proposed communication must be applicable in the lives of the hearers. Further, it must provide the keys to successful life on earth, success being defined by the Creator.

4. Unmistakable. A proposed communication must be based on irrefutable physical proof. History is littered with fervent yet misguided followers who followed a good story but neglected to check for evidence. People are masters of self-deception in every field from fashion to politics to religion. Therefore, a communication from the Creator must be accompanied with verifiable evidence.

DOES THE BIBLE QUALIFY AS A COMMUNICATION FROM THE CREATOR?

The evidence for the accuracy of the Bible is unparalleled in history. For example, the entire New Testament can be reconstructed in its entirety based on copies made by people who knew the authors personally. Although many have made claims concerning errors in the transmission of the New Testament across nearly 2000 years, the claims have no evidence. Copies of various portions of the New Testament dating back to within 100 years of writing are displayed in hundreds of museums. High quality photographs of all ancient manuscripts are readily available. The Old Testament has survived a longer period through entirely different circumstances, but is equally well documented. Due to the archeological discoveries known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest copies of the Old Testament were suddenly pushed back at least 1000 years. Incredibly few variants exist between copies from 300 BC and 1300 AD, most in the spelling of names, and none which changed the meaning of a sentence. The historical accuracy of the Bible also is remarkable. Over the centuries, various scholars have questioned the veracity of some of the recorded events. For example, for more than a century, many scholars taught that Nineveh was a mythological place, not the capital of a real empire. Then, Nineveh was located, excavated, and shown to agree exactly with Biblical descriptions. In summary, no historical account in the Old Testament has been shown to be inaccurate. Many events are recorded in both the Bible and in the annals of the country on the other side of the battle, and both tell the same story, albeit with different prejudices. Jesus staked his entire claim to being the Son of God on His prediction of His own resurrection on the third day. All evidence agrees that the tomb was empty. Several have offered alternate theories as to what happened to the body, but all such arguments have been found to be fundamentally flawed. Jesus predicted publicly His own execution and resurrection. Two governments worked together to ensure that the tomb and its contents were guarded and undisturbed. Yet, the body still disappeared and more than 500 people saw Jesus alive over a period of 40 days. Those same two governments did all in their power to recover the body or to disprove in some other way the claim of resurrection. They were unable to overcome the eyewitness testimony of 500 people in different places at different times. The gospels record a darkness of three hours during Jesus' execution. This was observed by millions. The cause of the darkness was debated for centuries following. No physical explanation has been found. The physical evidence for the accuracy of the Bible and for Jesus' claim to being God is irrefutable. Several excellent compilations are available. So, the Bible qualifies as a communication from God in one

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area: unmistakable. But is it universal, useful, and understandable? The New Testament claims that it is for all people. It purports to provide the means to overcome the cares of this life during this life. And it claims that the people of God have no temple, no clergy, and no secrets. Believers, individually and collectively, are the temple of God. They are also all priests; there is no separate class. And, the New Testament claims that all mysteries have been revealed. Worthy of note are the contradictions caused by mainline denominations of Christianity. Few are exclusive, but many have a clergy and many have places of worship. Neither clergy nor places of worship can be asserted from the text, but only from the cultural biases and assumptions of various persuasive teachers over the centuries.

The Bible is the only known document to meet all the requirements of a proposed communication from God. Christianity as described in the New Testament is the only religion based on empirical evidence. This is the communication from the Creator that settles the question of creationism versus materialism and provides the purpose for existence.

WHAT PURPOSE DOES THE BIBLE ASSIGN TO THE CREATED UNIVERSE?

An account of creation is in the first book of the Bible, Genesis. Repeatedly, the various parts of the universe are described as "good." Further, in the portion of the story in which the creation of people is described, the point is made that God created man in His own image. From our observation that the universe is decaying and that death is inevitable, this image of God cannot be physical. Therefore, the nature which people share with God is not physical. Many religions give this non-physical part the name "spirit." A description that perhaps avoids religious overtones would be to describe that shared image as the character, the part of people that will exist forever. This shared image is real and dynamic in the same way as the Creator, so people are more than a fleeting memory but have real abilities and attributes that are eternal and non-physical. Twice, in Colossians 1 and John 1, the Bible states that the universe was created by Jesus for His purposes. This elevates Jesus, whose history is recorded in the gospels, to a divine status unlike any human before or since. The Bible also describes in several places the existence of other non-physical, intelligent, decision-making beings that existed before the universe was created, often called angels. Because the Bible attributes to them both action and choice, several hypotheses of the purpose of creation can be eliminated. The universe was not created so that the Creator would have someone to love and to be loved in return. Angels already did that. The purpose of creation is to be other than redundant, the purpose must be something that angels cannot. The most complete discussion of the purpose of creation is in Romans 8:18 - 25. The theme of that letter is faith. Chapter 8 describes the role of God in enabling people to overcome themselves and the challenges of living on this planet. The author, Paul, who proved his authority to speak for God by many miraculous works, reveals that the apparent futility of the universe was planned, that followers of Jesus were the goal, and faith, not sight, was the method. In short, the universe was created as an incubator for faith. Angels cannot experience faith since they exist in the presence of the Creator. They learn faith by observing Christians (Ephesians 3:10). The spirit (character) of a human can have faith, but

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consciousness is separated from the Creator. Faith reconnects humans with God (Ephesians 2:6). The Bible describes angels who chose badly and have been discharged from connection with God. The Bible also describes people who have done the same. For either group to remain connected to God eternally, two attributes are necessary: being in the presence of God and faith. When the collection of faithful spirits is complete, at an unknown and unspecified point in the future, the universe will become without purpose and will be discarded. Thereafter, all faithful spirits will be connected to God forever.

WHAT PURPOSE DOES THE BIBLE ASSIGN TO THE CHURCH?

The collection of Christians, sometimes called the church, is described with several figures of speech: the kingdom of God, the family of God, the body of Christ, the Temple. The kingdom does not have physical boundaries, a physical army, or any authority figures other than Jesus as king. The illustration of family describes the status of believers as members of the royal household. Since Jesus no longer walks the earth, the faithful are His body, each with different but equally important functions. The Temple image describes Christians as the place to which seekers come to find God and His Word. The members of the church also are responsible for teaching one another and providing for the physical needs of one another. Faithful angels also are members of this church. Further, Jesus prayed that the miraculous godly character of His future followers would be an evidence that He is One with God (John 17:20 - 26).

WHAT PURPOSE DOES THE BIBLE ASSIGN TO FOLLOWERS OF JESUS?

The spirits of Christians already are with God and constantly worship God in a non-physical realm often called heaven. Therefore, Christians do not gather on earth for the purpose of worship. Rather, they serve people as representatives of God. All Christians are described as ambassadors and as priests, those who entreat the uninitiated,. They serve one another using the power of God, not merely through human effort. These assigned tasks are of the utmost importance in accomplishing the purpose of creation: faith. Therefore, Christians are willing to remain in this futile and decaying world in order to contribute to the furthering of this immense task. But, advancing to the reconnection of consciousness with character in the presence of God is preferred.

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