

Dwight Longenecker

Christianity
Pure and Simple

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*Christianity
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Chapter One

Is Anybody There?

THE RELIGIOUS INSTINCT

Have you ever noticed that people everywhere tend to be religious? No matter where or when they have lived, the vast majority of human beings have acted on an instinct that someone else is “out there.” In times of danger and in times of peace they have paused to ask for protection or to give thanks for blessings. When faced with the awesome force of nature or the miracle of a newborn child, they have looked beyond themselves to a greater power. This shared instinct has caused people throughout history to come together and establish religions.

In every society and culture, from the most primitive to the most sophisticated, people have told stories about gods, built temples, established rituals, and honored men and women they thought were particularly holy. Whether tribal people living in the jungle or sophisticated city-dwellers, simple peasants or educated scientists, most human beings at all times and in all places have worshiped some kind of divine being.

Today, no less than in times past, the signs of this religious instinct are everywhere. Walk around most any town or city, and every time you turn a corner, you will see some kind of church or religious meeting hall. Travel across the world, and you find that all the greatest monuments and buildings have religious purpose.

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Everywhere you come across temples and shrines of every shape and kind, from Stonehenge to St. Peter's Basilica, from a simple Baptist church to the temples of Angkor Wat, from the ruins of a makeshift shrine in a cell at Auschwitz to the Parthenon, Chartres Cathedral, or a Buddhist pagoda.

In a multitude of fascinating, bewildering, and strange ways human beings have been driven by their religious instinct. The religious instinct has driven both individuals and empires, and has produced the greatest literature, art, architecture, and music the world has ever seen.

So, this religious instinct isn't just a quirk of one group of people; it's virtually universal among human beings. This instinct is so common to humanity that we can say it is an integral part of our nature — that being religious is as natural to human beings as swimming is to fish.

Because it is a universal human phenomenon, we have to ask ourselves what it means. Why is it that virtually all human beings everywhere have believed in some sort of God? I think that this is pretty strong evidence that there must be a God of some sort. If everyone gets thirsty, there must be such a thing as water.

Something New and Strange

Although this religious instinct can be found everywhere and in all times down through human history, in relatively recent years something strange has developed: large groups of people have come to disbelieve that there is a God. This modern phenomenon of widespread atheism is almost unique in human history, but because we are so used to it today, we don't realize how strange it is.

In our society, for all sorts of reasons, ordinary people have been taught — by their parents, their schools, their governments — not to believe in the existence of God. Therefore, before we

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can discuss religion, we are forced to explain why we actually believe God exists in the first place.

To the believer this is a tricky exercise. It is a bit like trying to explain the existence of love to someone who has never been in love. You might argue for love in intellectual terms. You might explain what it is like to be in love, but you would feel that you were always missing the point. You would feel that you were using intellectual language for something that is much bigger than just clever ideas and arguments. The words you used would sound awkward and inadequate. Furthermore, even if you were to convince the person who doesn't believe in love that such a thing as love exists, he still wouldn't understand what it's like to be in love. Your effort wouldn't really succeed. You would end up frustrated and think the whole exercise wasn't worth the bother.

Nevertheless, even though such explanations can take us only so far, we must start with the reasons we believe there is a God at all. Such explanations are like the instruction you have to take before an exciting sport like water skiing or skydiving. You're always tempted to skip the training and get on with the real thing. But without the training you might make critical mistakes. The basic training lays necessary foundations, and we skip it at our peril.

Do Atheists Exist?

I said just a moment ago that almost all people throughout history have believed in a God of some sort.

"Wait a minute!" you might reply. "Don't forget about the atheists."

It's a good point. Atheists don't believe God exists. But I don't believe *atheists* exist. What I mean is, even the most atheistic person lives for something. And unless he is a totally depraved and wicked person, he lives for something he believes is good.

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Maybe he is passionate about truth and spends his life exposing fakes and searching for truth. Although he denies that there is a God, perhaps the atheist spends his whole life pursuing justice and peace. Or perhaps some atheists live for love. Even if they flit from one boyfriend or girlfriend to another, deep down they are looking for a love that will last forever. Maybe the atheist lives only for what he thinks is “the good life” — in other words, for his own personal pleasure. But even that is good in a way, simply because it gives him pleasure, which is good. His pursuit of pleasure also shows that he believes there is such a thing as real happiness. It’s true that his pursuit of pleasure may lead him to behave selfishly. But even so, he is still, at the very basic level, living his life in the pursuit of something he believes is good.

If most “atheists” live their lives seeking something good, then they believe in something good, and if they believe in something good — something so good that they are willing to work hard to get it — then in a way they are worshipping a god. Compared with the God of religious people, the atheist’s god is a very little god, and a god of their own making, but it is still a god, because it is a source of goodness outside themselves.

The Caveman and the Stars

So this desire to live for something good that is greater than ourselves is part of the universal human religious instinct. But why should this religious instinct be there at all? How did we develop this idea that there is something good worth living for, or some great being out there that we ought to worship?

Some people believe it is simply a matter of how we evolved. The caveman, they suggest, looked up at the sun, the moon, and the stars and was filled with wonder and fear at their greatness. He heard the thunder, saw the lightning, and imagined that some

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great being like him lived in the clouds. He imagined that this being was sometimes angry and sometimes pleased, because sometimes he blessed the man with rain and sunshine and other times punished him with drought and disaster. The caveman concluded that this being on the other side of the clouds needed to be satisfied and kept happy, and all the rest of religion, with its complicated doctrines, rules, and rituals, started to evolve.

Do you notice how this argument makes certain assumptions about cavemen? It treats the caveman as a noble savage. Because he feels a sense of wonder at the natural world, he is portrayed as an ignorant, but touchingly sensitive brute. But have you seen the trick? Because he is a caveman, we assume that he must be far inferior to us and that therefore his conclusion that there is a God who caused the thunder must, too, be inferior, primitive, and wrong.

But first, we don't know if the caveman actually did this sort of thing. And cavemen might not have been as educated as we are, but were they really so much more stupid? Are we sure cavemen wore crude skin clothes, grunted, and dragged their women around by their hair? We don't have any evidence of this. Some of the evidence we *do* have of the caveman's way of life, such as those sophisticated and beautiful paintings of animals in caves in Spain and France, suggests that whoever painted those graceful bison and deer were not primitive brutes.

If those cave artists observed the natural world with such sensitivity, they must also have gazed at the stars with awesome wonder, and perhaps they were frightened by the thunder. But in this were they really so very different from us? Which of us hasn't tried to create a work of art or been filled with wonder on a starlit night or frightened by a terrible storm?

If the caveman felt awe and wonder in the face of nature's power, is that really a sign of stupidity? Isn't it rather a sign of their

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heartfelt humanity? Neither does the feeling of awe rule out a greater understanding of something. It is perfectly possible to understand something and still feel awed by it. In principle, the caveman is really just the same as a mother who marvels at the beauty of her newborn baby, or a biologist who studies the intricate parts of nature and is amazed by the beautiful patterns he finds there. We may understand an event and still be struck dumb with wonder.

The Caveman's Conclusion

In other words, the caveman is being quite sensible, in his own way, to observe nature and see the signs of an unseen intelligence. Like most easy theories, this theory of where our religious instinct comes from is both right and wrong. It is right because it tells us that even primitive people can see the power of nature and conclude that there is a mind behind it all. However, the theory is wrong in what it assumes. It assumes that because we modern humans are not quite so frightened of thunder, and have telescopes to study the stars, we can conclude that there is no God.

The other thing the caveman got right was his idea that whoever was “out there” was stronger than he was. He may have concluded that this Great Spirit in the sky was angry with him and needed to be kept happy, but what is so very wrong with that conclusion?

As a basic starting point for religion, it sounds like common sense doesn't it? If the caveman then started to think about his discovery and come to the idea that this Being was probably not all bad and fearsome, that, too, makes sense. Humans are always exploring their discoveries and learning more about them.

The question of how the human religious instinct developed is fascinating, but for now let's assume that the caveman was right.

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In the forces of nature he sensed a larger force. He instinctively sensed that the forces of nature had to have some ultimate cause. The caveman may not have thought it all through logically, but like a child, he sensed this force, and he responded with fascination and curiosity. He wanted to know more.

This curiosity lies at the root of our own religious instinct, too. No matter who we are, we sense that there is more to life than meets the eye. Like the caveman, we see the beauty of the natural world; we marvel at the stars and the rolling thunder. But we also sense that the force behind them is active in our own lives. This unknown force exerts a powerful magnetic influence on us. We want to learn more about this mysterious presence, and that is what the religious quest is all about.

HOLD ON A MINUTE

What about the evils of religion?

I've started with the very basic question of whether there is a God or not, and maybe you don't have any arguments with what I've said so far. But then again, maybe you do. In fact, maybe you have some pretty tough and demanding questions you want to ask.

When I said that religion has been the source for some of the greatest achievements of the human race, you have thought, "But religion is also the source for the worst things in history! What about terrorism, witch hunts, the Spanish Inquisition, the troubles in Northern Ireland and in Israel? Think of all the torture, wars, and murder in the name of religion!"

It's true that terrible things have happened because of religious zeal (although probably not as terrible, or as many, as some people think). Some people have abused religion for their own ends, but we can't dismiss all religion because of that, any more than we

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should close down all the football stadiums because there are such things as football fanatics and ticket scalpers. There might be some crooked football fans, but it is impossible that everyone who likes football is mad or bad. Likewise, if virtually the entire human race has a religious instinct, there must be something to it, even if there are some religious people who are evil or crazy.

The universal religious instinct should make us ask if there really is a God out there or not. However, as soon as you say that there is a God, you are immediately faced with several more difficult questions.

The Big One

Anyone who believes in God will have to face the Big One — the most difficult problem of all. It is the question about suffering. You know how it goes: “If there is an all-loving, all-powerful God, why does he allow such terrible suffering in the world?” This is the best question anybody can ask about the existence of God.

Everyone is right to ask how we can possibly believe in a God who allows the horrors of concentration camps, terrorism, war, starvation, and natural disasters. I hope you don’t mind if I put that question to the side for now. It’s not that it can’t be answered. Rather, the question is so important that I have to devote quite a bit of space to it in the next section.

The other reason I’d like to put that question to the side is that there are other problems that must be considered just to make sure the foundation for an answer is laid properly. The question about suffering and an all-loving God is jumping the gun, because we’ve only begun to consider the probability that some sort of God is out there. We haven’t decided what that God is like. In other words, we haven’t gotten to the point of saying that God is all-powerful and all-loving. We’re still discussing whether he exists at all.

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The Security-Blanket God

It's possible to acknowledge the universal religious instinct in humanity, but still not draw the conclusion that God must exist. You might say, "This universal religious instinct is just a feeling. No more and no less. Evolution has ingrained in us the desire to survive. However, we know death is around the corner, so the natural instinct is to deny death and hope that somehow we might go on living. Like the child who clings to his security blanket, we clutch the hope that there is a great and good Being out there who will keep us alive after death."

On the surface, this sounds plausible. It's easy to draw that conclusion because Christianity *does* worship a God who offers eternal life. However, that's not actually the way religion started. Most of the primitives' gods were fearsome beings who didn't promise eternal life. In fact, they didn't promise anything to anybody. Instead of offering life, they demanded death.

Part of some primitive religions was the offering of human sacrifices to keep the terrible gods happy. There was no idea of eternal life. The only thing you could hope for was that if your god was satisfied, he would make sure your harvest was good and he would protect you from the enemy tribe.

The idea of individual people enjoying life after death is a fairly recent development. The history of religion shows us that people worshiped their gods before they had the idea of an afterlife. Therefore, the idea that the religious instinct is simply the result of our wish to live forever can't be true.

Isn't Religion Just Wishful Thinking?

"Nevertheless," you might say, "the whole religious enterprise is just a form of wishful thinking. Because this life is hard, people imagine that a good God in heaven will make them happy."

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It is true that some people worship a God who is like a big vending machine. They put prayer and worship in, and they expect God to make whatever they want come out. But I think this is a superstitious and immature form of religion. *Real* religion doesn't just dish out shallow happiness. Rather than fulfilling our wishes, real religion challenges our wishes. This is true of all religions. They make the most strenuous demands on people. All the great religions enforce strict moral codes. Jesus Christ says, "You cannot be my disciple unless you take up your cross and follow me."¹ In other words, authentic religion doesn't offer an easy life. Just the reverse: it offers a life that is more demanding than anything you can imagine.

Is God just a big, happy grandfather in the sky who religious people vainly hope will make them happy one day? It is true that we hope for final happiness. It is also true that we believe God loves us. But God's love is not sweet and fluffy like cotton candy. Instead, it is solid, severe, and awesome. Remember, those who believe in God also believe that God is their judge. If God is their judge, he holds them accountable for what they do with their lives. This is not exactly a cozy idea. If I were thinking wishfully, this is not the kind of God I would have invented.

Something Has to Keep Society Together

Other people argue that religion came about not because of wishful thinking, but because society needed it. "As people began to live in communities," they explain, "they needed certain taboos, such as 'You must not sleep with your brother's wife' or 'You must not kill pregnant cows.' Before long they saw that religion could help enforce these necessary taboos. The Great Being in the sky

¹ Cf. Luke 14:27.

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was invoked as an ultimate source of punishment. If you broke the taboos, you not only endangered the tribe, but you might also be punished by God.” For people with this opinion, religion is simply part of a necessary social structure. Over time it became complex and ornate, and full of doctrines and rules.

It is true that religion helps to support our families and our communities. But can that be the only source of our religious instinct? I don’t think so, for two reasons. First, religion was there before the social taboos were. The first religious instinct had nothing to do with rules, and the first religions were simply rituals to keep the unpredictable gods happy. Because religion came before rules, the rules cannot be the root source for religion.

Second, while religion supports society, it also criticizes it. The priest, pastor, or prophet may work with the ruling power, but history shows us that in virtually every society, religious leaders have at times also felt obliged to contradict worldly rulers and point out where society is going wrong. The martyrs of every religion have been willing to die in their opposition to the society they were in.

And so, because religion came before rules, and because religion often finds itself at odds with society, we have to conclude that religion must be both older and bigger than society.

What You See Is What You Get?

Finally, there are some very practical-minded people who object to God and religion because it is all too complicated. “Look,” they say, “all this complicated religious stuff is just hogwash. The world simply is. What you see is what you get. There is no God up there. What you think is a marvelous pattern in the world has been projected there by your own mind. That’s it. End of story.”

It’s true that we don’t actually *want* things to be so complex. We wish the world were simpler to understand. In fact, we often

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think things are rather easily explained, and then whenever we try to *really* understand something, we discover that it is more complicated than we could have imagined.

Indeed, the further and closer we look at the natural world, the more total understanding seems to slip away from us. We just about come up with a scientific theory and some detail arises that doesn't quite fit, and we are back to the drawing board. Experience shows us that reality is constantly more slippery and complicated than we had hoped. Wouldn't you suspect that if we were imagining a pattern, things would be a bit tidier?

Nevertheless, this sort of person insists that the complex pattern we see is simply the result our minds' imposing some kind of order on everything. "In fact," they insist, "the universe is random and meaningless." Hold on. There's a hole in their bucket. Have you seen it?

If it is true that there is no pattern, and that everything is random, how would it be possible for someone to say so, since to think and speak you have to use a language with grammar?

Look at it this way: the whole process of thinking and speaking is logical. It is patterned, planned, and complex. If there is no plan or pattern in the universe, how could such a thing as human thought and language even come about? Could we think logically in a universe that is illogical? If everything were random, we would only be able to grunt at each other and wave our arms like madmen. So as soon as you say, "The universe has no meaning or pattern," you have proved yourself wrong, because you have thought and said something with meaning and pattern.

Finally, as I said, this way of thinking is like a leaky bucket. The leak is rather large, because, when you think about it, everything in the world may leak out the same hole. What I mean is: if there is no meaning or pattern, if everything is just in our mind, then the

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whole world, including ourselves, may also be no more than a random figment of our imagination. Is it really common sense to say that everything is just a dream inside our heads?

The Master Builder

There are only two choices: that the whole universe is meaningless and random, or that it is planned and meaningful. If it is random and meaningless, it is pretty hard to account for the evidence all around us.

We should ask ourselves which takes more faith: to believe that this complex, beautiful, and intricate universe happened purely by random chance, or to believe that there is a designer behind the whole thing. Like the caveman gazing at the stars, most people would draw the commonsense conclusion that since there is so much evidence that the world was designed, that there must be a designer.

The beauty and complexity of the world doesn't give us watertight proof for the existence of God, but it does give us plenty of evidence to infer it — on the basis of our common sense and the universal experience of the human race. However, accepting a designer for the universe is not the same thing as accepting the Christian God.

The first step is simply to accept that the religious instinct in human beings is on to something. That “Something” is bigger than all our wishes, dreams, and needs. It is greater than all the needs we have as either individuals or communities. That Something is the First Thing, the Thing from which everything else has come. If we have gotten that far, and are really convinced, then the next thing we need to ask is whether that *Something* is a *Someone*. If this force of creation and power exists, is it simply a vague energy source, or does it have a personality?

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CAN THE FORCE BE WITH YOU?

The Energy Source for Life

In the film *Star Wars*, the wise old man Obi-Wan Kenobi introduces Luke Skywalker to “the Force.” He explains to the young hero that the Force is the power behind the created universe, and that you can either fight for the good side of the Force, or be seduced by the dark side. The *Star Wars* films have been a tremendous success, not only because of the great storytelling and special effects, but also because they weave in another aspect of this universal religious feeling: that there is a battle between good and evil in the universe and that there guiding Force behind it all.

Most humans who admit the existence of God fall into two camps: those who believe God is a Someone, and those who believe God is Something. The latter, those who say God is an impersonal “Force,” see behind all created things the “awful shadow of some unseen power.” This power, however, remains vague, because it is far beyond anything we can imagine. All religions agree that God is greater than anything our minds can conceive. All agree that God is the energy source for all life. But some religions prefer to leave it there. The followers of Hinduism, Buddhism, New Age religions, and primitive religions hold to this view. If you like, they think God is a vast form of focused energy.

“The Force” is an excellent name for this God-power because you can think of it like electricity. This force or energy drives all things and holds all things together, but in the end it is an impersonal force. Like electricity, it doesn’t have a mind or a will.

Beyond Good and Evil

A “Life Force” *does* seem to surge through all creation, and if God is simply the Life Force, it would explain why all the different

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religions seem to be headed in the same basic direction; for Christians, Jews, and Muslims also believe that God is the source and energy-force of creation. This idea of God, then, seems like a simple one that would solve all our problems and differences.

But if God is *only* the Life Force, this in fact raises more problems than it solves.

First, if God is merely the Life Force, then that force (because it has no personality) must be indifferent to what we call good and evil.

This is easy enough to understand if you think of the Life Force as electricity. Can electricity be good or evil? It seems good when it lights your desk, but it seems evil when it electrocutes your grandma. In fact electricity itself is neither good nor evil. In the same way, if what we call God is just the Life Force, then it is neither good nor evil. It can't decide anything one way or another.

If this Life Force is impersonal and has nothing to do with good and evil, then our concepts of "good" and "evil" must be an illusion. Some people take this line and say that a particular thing is only good or evil depending on your point of view. Good is what helps you to survive. Evil is what hurts you.

But are good and evil only useful illusions? The innate human sense of right and wrong is about more than just what happens to be pleasant for us or helps us survive. For example, what we consider to be good is often not pleasant. Being good is hard work. I would rather sit home and watch TV than go and visit my irritable, but lonely neighbor, or learn to play the piano.

Furthermore, what we consider most good often doesn't help us to survive at all. It does the opposite. If I die for my country or become disabled because I rescued a drowning child, everyone will think it good, even though, for me as an individual, it is not good at all. Good and evil, then, are actually bigger than what happens

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to be pleasant or helpful to us. Because of this, people have concluded that there is some ultimate source of good and evil that is above and beyond our own individual needs and desires.

Does the Force Have a Face?

For good and evil to exist, there has to be such a thing as choice. In other words, an action can be good or evil only if we have chosen it. If we had no choice in our lives, if we simply did what we are programmed to do by our genetic history or by our upbringing, then there could be no such thing as good and evil. We'd be simply acting out a destiny that had already been determined for us.

But as humans we all have a mind and a free will. We can “go with the Force” or “turn to the dark side.” Where did this power to choose come from?

If the Life Force were just energy and not a person, it could not be the source for beings like us, who have minds and free will. Could the Life Force be inferior to the things it created? Could an energy force without a mind and will create beings with minds and wills? If so, how would the Life Force have thought of such beings in the first place?

However, if the Life Force also has a mind and a will, then in some sense it has personality. Therefore, Jews, Christians, and Muslims conclude that God is more than just the Life Force. We say that God is *personal*. In other words, the Force has a Face.

Is God Good?

As soon as we say, “God is personal” we don't mean that God is just a great big fellow who happens to live in the sky beyond space and time. What we mean is, instead of saying he is the “Force” of creation, we say he has an individual mind and will; that he is the

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Mind and Will by whom all things were created, and by whom all things live and move and have their being.

Since he's not just a force, God can be good or evil. And Christians believe he is all-good.

But can God truly be all-powerful and all-good? Now we have come to that most troublesome question. If this personal God we've discovered is all-powerful and all-good, why does He allow evil? If he were all-good, he would want to stop evil from happening, and if he were all-powerful, he would be able to do what he wants. It is easy to conclude therefore, that if there is a God, he can't be all-good and all-powerful.

Good God/Bad God?

There are some religious systems that get around this problem by proposing that there are two equal and opposing gods or forces: a good force and a bad force. This is called *dualism*. Another form of dualism teaches that God holds within himself both the good and the evil, and that evil is simply the "shadow side" of God. There seems to be some common sense in this idea, since we know that in the world around us there is both good and evil.

But this view doesn't really hold up, because we also know that good and evil aren't equal forces. We know from experience that goodness is positive, original, and creative. Evil, on the other hand, is negative and parasitic. It isn't equal to good; it feeds on good. So a lie, for example, is nothing positive in itself; it is the absence of truth, or it is the truth twisted. Evil is an absence, not a presence. It is nothing new, but something broken that once was whole.

This is why Christians say there cannot be two equal gods — a bad one and a good one. Nor could God have any of that parasitic negative force within himself, for that which is all-positive and

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everlastingly creative must be utterly incompatible with anything that can only mock, twist, and destroy.

But back to the important question at hand. If God is truly all-good and all-powerful, how could he possibly allow evil?

Freedom to Turn to the Dark Side

The answer to the riddle is actually built into the question. When we say God is all-good and all-powerful, we are automatically saying that his goodness and power are very different from ours. In other words, because he can see and know everything, his goodness and power must be of a different order than what we're used to.

This means if God creates something, he cannot help but create it perfectly. Because God is all-good and all-powerful, he created everything, including human beings, as perfect as they could be. Part of that perfection is that he gave us a mind and a will. This is what the old creation story means when it says humans were created in God's image.

Having a mind means we can make decisions, and having free will means that we have the power to act on those decisions. If we have free will, we have the choice to do good or to do evil. Indeed, as I tried to show earlier, good and evil don't actually have any meaning *unless* we have the free will to choose. If you like, as soon as free will existed, so did good and evil.

If we didn't have this free will, we wouldn't have been created perfect. Would we have been more perfect if we were robots? I doubt it. However, you can see where this leads: if we have free will, there is the very real risk — in fact the very real probability — that sooner or later we will use that free will to choose evil. For if God forced us to do the right thing, it wouldn't be the right thing, because we wouldn't have chosen it freely.

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Having created us with free will, God continues to extend that gift to us today. It's up to us. Will we choose good or choose evil? Because he is all-good, God will not force us one way or the other. We must conclude that for God to take away the gift of free will in order to stop suffering and evil would be an even worse evil. An all-good God who allows evil actions that inevitably lead to suffering is better than a God who would turn us into his robots.

The Downward Spiral

Now, there are other forms of suffering that are not caused by the bad choices of human beings. Natural disasters, for example, cause much human suffering. However, despite the terrible suffering they cause, natural disasters are not evil in themselves. They are merely part of the natural order. We suffer from them not because they are evil or because we have made a bad choice, but simply because we are in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Likewise, disease, birth defects, and accidents also cause terrible suffering in the world and cannot always be blamed on the bad choices of individual humans.

This kind of suffering, seemingly random and without blame, is part of a deeper problem. The violence of the natural world shows us that there is a fault line running right through the whole of the created order. Things aren't quite right. Violence, pain, and fear seem to be woven into the world at a deep level.

Psychologists even tell us that some of our illnesses and even many of our accidents are caused by stress, anger, aggression, and violence. The world is more complicated than we imagine, and the causes of all events are interrelated. It may be that in some dark pattern, even the natural disasters, birth defects, and accidents are part of the negative effects of the bad choices of the whole human race.

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That doesn't mean we are all to blame for our own suffering. Often we are the victims of the bad choice of another person. We live in a world that is riddled with hidden horrors — shot through with bad choices and the twisted results of those bad choices. The beauty of the world is darkened by evil, and we're right to question God about this grim fact.

The Price of Freedom

God has an answer, but just as the question isn't an easy one, so the answer isn't easy. If all the evil in some mysterious way comes back to the bad choices of the human race, we have to conclude that God must have foreseen all the suffering that would result from our bad choices, and considered it worth the risk.

But it may not be quite as grim as it sounds. It may be, too, that the suffering, in the long run, teaches us lessons that we could not learn in any other way. Maybe, in some mysterious and terrible way, we are becoming more perfect by going through the evil and coming out on the other side than if we had never gone through it at all — just as a muscle becomes stronger through being strained, exerted, and torn, then rebuilt.

I said the question of suffering was vitally important. It is important because it brings us to the very heart of God and to the very heart of the Christian faith. Some people think Christianity is simply a happy-clappy religion that skirts the enormous problem of suffering. Nothing could be further from the truth. As we shall see throughout this book, struggling with the problem of human suffering is precisely what Christianity is all about.

Rather than giving an intellectual answer to the problem, the Christian religion is itself the solution to the problem. The answer to the problem of suffering runs through the whole story of Christianity like a scarlet thread in a vast and beautiful tapestry.

Is Anybody There?

If you really want to answer the question of suffering, you can't be satisfied with mere intellectual answers. Each one of us is stuck in the middle of the problem of suffering, because we all suffer. Finding the answer requires getting involved and struggling to work out the problem — not just with our heads, but with our hearts and our whole lives.

This is far from easy, because one of the symptoms and causes of the suffering is the fact that we are confused and cut off from the answer. We are cut off from God. Like wounded, lost children, we are in pain and we do not know where to turn. The next thing we have to consider is how God might be trying to wade into our confused, lost state to find us and bring us home.

HIDE AND SEEK

Our Choices Guide Our Destiny

At the heart of every great story is some great conflict. A clever author weaves the hero's individual problems into the greater struggle between good and evil that drives the plot forward. This is nowhere more true than in the great stories in the Bible. From the beginning we not only see humanity asking theoretical questions about good and evil, but we see human beings locked into a battle of choices and actions that have everlasting consequences.

The ancient story of the Garden of Eden shows us the situation. God created men and women with free will, but without the knowledge of good and evil. He placed them in a beautiful primeval paradise and gave them one commandment: they should not taste the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

As the story goes, they used their will to make a bad choice: they disobeyed God's command and ate of the tree. As soon as they had chosen badly, they *did* have the knowledge of good and

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evil, and part of that knowledge was that they felt guilty. Their first instinct was to run and hide from God. Suddenly, instead of being content in God's presence, they began to fear God and do anything they could to stay away from him.

God, however, was not going to let them go. He came to find them and asked them what had gone wrong. When they told him, he had to expel them from the Garden of Eden, to wander the earth as exiles. Worst of all, they would have to grow old and die; otherwise they would live in their twisted condition forever.

The ancient religious stories are full of simple wisdom. They can be far richer than intellectual arguments about the existence of God, and about the nature of good and evil. The Garden of Eden story outlines the stark truth about our human condition quite simply. Men and women choose to disobey God's plan for their lives. This makes them suspicious of each other, unsure of themselves, and fearful of God.

As a result, their instinct is to hide from God. Adam and Eve's expulsion from paradise symbolizes the fact that we all wander in a hard and dangerous land, full of anger, violence, and fear. This is the spiritual condition of the human race. We live in a land of exile, where we are cut off from God, cut off from eternal life, and cut off from real happiness.

Here I Come, Ready or Not

The Garden of Eden story also shows us what God is like. He doesn't wash his hands of Adam and Eve. Although they are hiding, he comes to find them. Even though he expels them from paradise, the later chapters of the book of Genesis show that God stays with them.

In other words, God does not forsake what he has made. He is always on a search-and-rescue mission. Like a salvage expert, he

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goes out and about, seeing what can be hauled up, recycled, rescued, and restored. He doesn't want us to be lost forever. He wants to straighten out the twist in our character and put us on the road back to Eden.

But God has a problem: we are very good at hiding. Ever since Eden we have learned to run and hide not only in the bushes, but within any bit of cover we can find. Furthermore, part of this inherited twist in our nature is the habit of blaming God for doing the hiding. We realize he is difficult to follow and understand, so we say that it's *his* fault and that he is distant and unconcerned about us.

Wake Up

Many religions speak of the beginning of the religious quest as “waking up.” It is as if, in our natural human state, we are dozing. We are spiritually asleep and need a wake-up call. It is easy to stay in bed, and difficult to open our eyes to the light.

But if we are to make any progress in our knowledge of God, we must first ask God to wake us up. We have to open our eyes and see that God has been there all the time, waiting for us to wake up. In fact, rather than being distant, he has been closer to us than we are to ourselves. Instead of hiding, he has constantly been trying to reveal himself to us.

If God wants us to be aware of his presence and to learn more about him, how would he make himself known? God speaks to us in four general ways, which interact with each other, working together to help us see God and understand how we can get back to the garden of perfection. Seeing God with our minds is only one aspect of the plan. He also wants us to be involved with our hearts, our wills, and our bodies, to understand who he is and what we should do, and then to do something about it.

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In other words, it is not enough for us to open our eyes and wake up. We also have to get up, get dressed, get washed, and get a life.

If I Only Had a Brain

In the first part of this chapter, I said the arguments for the existence of God take us only so far. Our intellectual processes can help us to figure out that God exists. They can also help us deduce what God is like. However, those intellectual processes are not foolproof. If you are clever enough, and have the desire, you can use statistics, science, logic, and argument to prove or disprove almost anything. If only we had brains that were totally reliable! As it is, they are leaky buckets. What we know with our brains we only know in part.

This is because our brains were never intended to be just logical computing machines. We were never meant to be pure intellect. Our brains work together with our bodies. Brains do not just process ideas and form conclusions. They also register all the stimuli from our senses and form all those sensations into a picture of the physical world around us.

Furthermore, our brains help us to find meaning in the world that our senses perceive. Our brain evaluates and decides what is good and evil and which option we should take. Finally, our brains are used in the powerful experience of love. Through relationships with others — through talking, laughing, arguing, crying, making love, making war, and making up, we come to the fullest understanding of life.

Four Ways to Find God

Our brains and bodies work together in four ways to help us discover God. These ways are not purely logical. Instead they involve

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our heads, our hearts, and our bodies. First, we are able to observe the world and make reasonable conclusions about it; secondly, we are able to perceive beauty; thirdly, we can discern right and wrong; and fourthly, we can experience something called *love*. I've spent most of this first part of the book trying to engage that first, intellectual ability to know God, but that's only part of the story.

The first way to find God is to look around you. The world is God's creation, and it tells us what God is like in the same way that a poem, a play, or a painting reveals the personality of the writer or artist. By observing nature we can gather that God has created an ordered and complex world, both beautiful and terrible.

But we can also gather that something has gone wrong with his creation. Humans aren't the only ones who are troubled by fear, violence, and death. Nature may be beautiful, but it is also cruel. Nature itself seems somehow cut off and alienated from total harmony. Things go wrong. The earth quakes, and mountains explode. Violent storms destroy life. Sometimes it seems that all creation writhes in torment, and the turmoil tells us that there is not only harmony, but discord in God's world.

If this is so, then God's world is a place of conflict, struggle, and striving. There is a battle going on, and our participation in that battle will help us to understand more about God himself.

Beauty Is Truth and Truth Beauty

We recognize the battle that is going on, but within the battle we often respond with feelings of desire, longing, and awe. In other words, we feel that the world is beautiful. We also have a deep sense that what is beautiful is also true, and what is true always has an air of beauty about it. We often decide what is true and beautiful by relating it back to nature. The more natural a thing is, the more we consider it to be true and beautiful. So, although we

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might like silk flowers, real roses will win every time. That is because real roses are both truer and more beautiful than silk roses.

Our sense of beauty, then, points us to truth, and this unlocks another secret of God's personality. The world he has created has an inner logic, simplicity, and unity that we look to as a model for all that is beautiful and true.

We might disagree about the relative beauty in the world around us. You might like beaches while I love rugged mountains. Furthermore there is a whole second level of beauty and truth created when human beings make things. Yet each form of beauty and truth, from music and drama to poetry and paintings, points us to a beauty and truth beyond and above this earthly plane. The beauty and truth we see around us are not infallible pointers to God, but they do reveal more of what God is like. So we conclude that God is the source of beauty and truth, and thus, he must have that simplicity, unity, and beauty to an overwhelming degree.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

The sense of beauty and truth helps us to discern what God is like, but along with this instinct for beauty and truth we also have a sense of right and wrong. People might not agree on the details, but they all agree that there is such a thing as right behavior and wrong behavior. For example, some people might think it is all right to have ten wives. Others think you may have only one. But almost all agree that you mustn't sleep with another man's wife.

Our moral instinct is another pointer to God's personality. Since we all have this general sense of right and wrong, God must be the ultimate source of what is right. However, this is the sense that needs the most instruction.

Just as what is beautiful and true is usually that which is most natural, you might think that what is "right" is what is also that

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which is “natural.” But what seems natural to some people is most certainly not right. So, for example, some people think it is the most natural thing in the world to steal or lie or cheat to further their own ends. Such people have forgotten what is truly natural, confusing it with whatever feels right at the moment. They have slipped into a distorted mind-set in which they consider unnatural actions and desires to be natural and good.

This kink in our character is what needs correction, and that is why we believe God revealed through the Jewish religion a code of right behavior. This was not to make everyone feel guilty, but to tell us what we *ought* to be like. It reminds us that we were created in God’s image, and to be truly natural we ought to be very different from what we sometimes are.

Furthermore, once we get a glimpse of what we ought to be like, we also get a glimpse of what God is like. In other words, when we see how totally natural and good we are meant to be, we can see that God is totally natural and therefore totally good. He is as he should be. He lives in a simple condition in which all that he is and does is good.

God Is Love

If God is beautiful, true, and good, then part of that goodness means he is active and outgoing. Goodness is, by its nature, creative and positive. Goodness does not stay bottled up, but reaches out to those around it. Therefore God must be actively involved in promoting goodness, truth, and beauty in the world.

The Bible affirms this by telling us that God is love. In other words, at the very core of God’s being is this mysterious power we call *love*. This is not a sentimental kind of love. This is not a sweet emotion. Instead it is a powerful, overwhelming desire for the good of others. It is a passion for the perfection of beauty and truth

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and goodness. It is an ever-increasing spiral of outgoing dynamic power that wishes to reach out and reconcile all things in its embrace. In other words, God is in a loving relationship with the universe and everything in it.

This love is not only what God does. It is what he *is*. God is not only in a relationship; he *is* relationship. This is one of the reasons Christians have understood God to be a *Trinity*: Three Persons in One. In a magnificently mysterious way we believe that at the core of God is a loving relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Logic is useful, but it is *love* that really helps us find our way to God. Learning about God does not mean simply studying books of theology; it means entering into a relationship with him. To learn about God we do not just study beauty, truth, and goodness. We enter into Beauty, Truth, and Goodness. The Old Testament talks about “knowing” God, and the word *knowing* is the same word it uses to describe the intimate relationship between husband and wife.

It is through the drama of human love, with all its hopes and fears, all its triumphs and tragedies, that we really find God. It is not in formal religion and intellectual theories alone, but also in the stories of real people, and their struggles with good and evil, joy and sorrow, that we discover God. And while we search for God in this same human story, we discover that all the time he has been searching for us.

KNOWING GOD

Knowledge Comes from Experience

Anyone who has learned to ride a bike knows that we learn better by doing than by being told. We learn to ride a bike by

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hopping on and pedaling — and falling down and doing it again. It would be easier just to read a book about how to ride a bike, but actually trying to ride one is far more effective. It is also far more dangerous. Reading about bikes involves no risks. Riding a bike means crashes and grazed knees.

Knowing God is just the same. Although study comes into it, we're talking about an activity, not a spectator sport. Knowing about God and knowing God are not the same thing. Knowing God is far more like making friends with a person than learning facts about that person. It is in doing things with a person that we learn most about him, and so it is in living life with God that he reveals himself to us most powerfully. God reveals himself to us through our own relationship with him, but he also reveals himself as we learn about his relationship with other people.

Show Me, Don't Tell Me

If God is love, and if he is best known within a relationship, you would expect religion to be concerned with stories about God's relationship with people. In fact, most religions do just that. They tell stories about God's interaction with human beings.

These religious stories show us what God is like because they show what he *does*. Stories are truth in action. They reveal God's personality and unlock the way he deals with people.

However, the religious stories of the world are not all straightforward. Some are myths and legends — stories about gods, goddesses, and human beings that no one pretends are actual real, historical figures. These stories are useful, because they reveal the truths of that particular religion. The stories “incarnate” the religious principles and ideas. The word *incarnate* simply means “to put flesh on.” The stories of the various religions flesh out the teachings about God.

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The Myth of the Hero

The stories from many religions around the world vary enormously, but there is one type of story that comes up time and time again. The story of the hero's quest arises in almost every culture and at every time down through history, from ancient India to the latest Hollywood film.

The story of the hero's quest is simple. The hero is a special person who must leave his home to set out on a great adventure. Usually he has to find some treasure or rescue a loved one. But the outer quest also has an inner meaning. The hero may be looking for a Golden Fleece or a magic sword, but he is also looking for spiritual enlightenment, salvation, and eternal life. To do this he has to overcome great difficulties, defeat a terrible enemy, and gain the prize.

The hero's story shows us how to fight life's battles, but it also shows us that we are all on a spiritual quest to find God. The ultimate prize is not just happiness, health, and wealth, but spiritual enlightenment, salvation, and eternal life.

In most religions, the various kinds of myths have no link with history. The stories help people on their own spiritual quest, but everyone knows the hero is not a real person; or if he was real, that the story has been made much more elaborate to teach the necessary lessons. Hero stories crop up in every religion and culture, but there is one religious tradition that is startlingly different. In the Jewish religion, the heroes are all portrayed as real people. They are not magical figures from wonderful fairytales. Instead they are presented as historical characters who lived in a real relationship with God himself.

As a result, when you read the book of Genesis you find that Abraham traces his ancestry back to Noah, and from Noah to Adam. In other words, the Hebrew writers are keen to show that

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Abraham was a descendent of that first person with whom God had established a special relationship. If Adam was created in God's image as a son of God, then Abraham, as Adam's descendent, is also part of the same family. This is a curious detail, and one that becomes very important later on in the story.

The Saga of God's Family

The Old Testament is a bit like one of those soap operas about the life and loves of a vast extended family. It is in fact a saga of one family's unique relationship with God. The father of the family was Abraham. He was the chieftain of a nomadic tribe in the Middle East sometime around 2000 BC. He lived with the great civilizations of Babylon to the East and Egypt to the southwest, and wandered in the territory that is now the nation of Israel and Palestine. In the book of Genesis God promises Abraham a large family and a rich land, if he would only step out and follow God's lead.

The problem was, Abraham was childless. But late in their lives, Abraham's wife Sarah bears a son called Isaac. In a very strange and terrible story, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac on a hill called Moriah. As they are going up the mountain the boy asks his father why he has no animal for the sacrifice. Abraham says to his son, "God himself will provide the sacrifice."² Then, at the last minute, God calls from heaven that Abraham should kill a ram instead, and the boy's life is spared.

Hints and Guesses

I took a moment to relate that disturbing story from the book of Genesis because it illustrates another curious fact about the Jewish

² Cf. Gen. 22:8.

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people. All through the Old Testament we get the impression that they are living in the future. They are always looking forward with hope to the promises of God.

No matter how down-and-out they are, no matter how much they rebelled against God, still they eventually turn back to him. In a rather poignant way, the Jews were a hopeful people. No matter how desperate their situation, they always trusted that God would bring them into something better.

The story of Abraham nearly killing his son is one of those strange “pointers” forward. When Abraham says, “God himself will provide a sacrifice,” he is getting a glimpse of the future. The story is littered with these hints and clues about a wonderful future, so that all through the Old Testament we get the picture that God is laying a plan. Through the complicated joys and sorrows of this one tribe we get the picture that God is working out his plan not only for them, but for the whole human race.

Slavery and Freedom

Throughout the stories of the Old Testament God reveals through the history of the Jewish people what we human beings are like, and what he is like. This is the marvelous way God speaks — not primarily through a law or through theological teachings, but through the drama of one family’s roller-coaster ride through history.

As the story moves on, Abraham’s great-grandson Joseph is sold by his brothers to be a slave in Egypt. Then, when a great famine hits the land, the brothers travel to Egypt to get food and are saved by the same Joseph, who has now become the Pharaoh’s regent and governor of the whole country.

Joseph’s brothers settle in Egypt, but several generations later their descendants — the Hebrew people — have become slaves.

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However, they did not forget the promise of a great nation and a great land.

A fugitive from Egypt, a Hebrew called Moses is summoned by God to go back to Egypt and lead the people to freedom. At that point God promises, “I will raise up from among the people a prophet like you.”

Part of Moses’ task is to give the people God’s law and to set up a religious system for them to follow. Part of that religious system is a system of animal sacrifice. The other religions of the Middle East had animal (and human) sacrifice, but they sacrificed animals to please angry gods in order to have fair weather and good harvest. Moses sets up a system in which sacrifice wins forgiveness for breaking God’s law. The theory was that your punishment for sin would be taken by the animal, and you would be forgiven.

Signs and Symbols

This sacrificial system is another one of God’s hints, and the way he takes an existing religious idea and transforms it is typical of the Old Testament. Time and again God works through the religious genius of the Jews to take a crude way of thinking about God and remake it to reveal what he is *really* like. For pagan peoples the sacrificial animal was offered as meat for a hungry god to devour. But God wanted this religious action to carry a more profound and beautiful meaning.

When Moses leads the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, God asks them to sacrifice a perfect lamb. This Passover Lamb (also called the Lamb of God) is killed so that their oldest sons would not die when God sends the angel of death to visit Egypt.

This sacrifice is not performed to please God, but to deliver the Hebrew children from death. The ceremony echoes the sacrifice that Abraham made to deliver *his* son from death. It also points

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forward to another Lamb of God, a final sacrifice that would one day deliver all of humanity from death. Eventually the Hebrew people do go into the land that is now Israel, and once they arrive there, God chooses a shepherd boy to be their king.

Prophets and Priests

In God's way of using signs, actions, and picture language, the shepherd boy David becomes the symbol of another Shepherd-King who would one day come to rule his people. In the whole history of the Jewish people, God gradually reveals himself. He doesn't simply tell them what he is like. Instead he is there with them, as a father is with his child, going beside them and teaching them by showing and doing rather than by telling.

In this way the truth of who God is and what he is like is being lived out within history. God reveals his character to them within their experience as a nation, as individual families, and as individual people. We can see that it is God's way to reveal himself within the very fabric of life.

The Jewish religious system was maintained by priests who were drawn from a special tribe of men. The priests conducted the religious rituals for the people. The priests also instructed the people in the religion and kept the whole system going, just as priests and clergy do today.

However, there was another breed of religious leaders who were not quite so humdrum and part of the establishment. The prophets were men who were inspired by God to preach to the people. They stirred the people up with dramatic actions, radical preaching, and an uncompromising message. The message was that God loved his people; he was unhappy that they continually turned away from his ways, and he called them time and again to return to friendship and fellowship with him.

Is Anybody There?

The Return of the King

King David lived around 1000 BC. His son Solomon would build up the dynasty of David to a point of great power and glory, but within five hundred years, the kingdom would fall and the people would be taken into exile. Nevertheless, the prophets tell them not to give up hope. God will bring them back to the land, and one day a new son of David will be their king.

God sends various prophets to look forward to the coming of the King in different ways. One says that God will be the Shepherd of his people, then says that the coming King will also be the Shepherd of his people. Another says that a virgin will give birth to a child who will be called Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.”³ The prophet Isaiah says that this promised one will be the “Servant of God”⁴ and that he will end up suffering terribly to redeem the people. The prophet Daniel has a vision in which he sees “one like the Son of Man”⁵ sitting at God’s right hand. This “Son of Man” is one who appears like a human being, and yet has the glory and majesty and power of God.

For two thousand years, from the time of Abraham onward, God works in a unique way in the history of the Jews. They are a chosen race, not because they are superior somehow, but because they have a unique faith. This faith doesn’t make them perfect; their history is one of spectacular failures and disastrous choices. But despite their failings, they are God’s people, and through them he works out his plan for the whole human race. Through the Jews, God promises a new King — a chosen one — one anointed to bring in an everlasting kingdom of peace and justice for all. The

³ Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23

⁴ Cf. Isaiah 42:1.

⁵ Daniel 7:13.

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prophecies about this King are mysterious, but they are clear that he will be unique, and that he will come to perform a special function in the world.

By the time of the Roman Empire the Jews have returned to their land, and they are looking forward to the promised King. At this point in history God's revelation of himself comes to a climax. The time of hints and guesses, signs and symbols ends, and the ultimate revelation of God is about to burst upon human history.