

Thoughts on Christianity 2

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1 Thoughts on the Old Testament

The Old Testament is the name Christianity has given to the Hebrew Bible known as the Tanakh, although the two are not word for word the same. The title came into being in the second century CE as a counterpoint to the New Testament. The word 'Testament' might more correctly have been translated as 'Covenant' reflecting God's promise to the people of Israel but the translation was taken from the Latin translation of the Greek without referring to the original Greek. The New Testament, or New Covenant, is God's promise to all people conveyed through the pre-resurrection life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth and through the post-resurrection spiritual Jesus the Christ.

Christianity reads the Old Testament quite differently from Judaism whose book it is. The experience of the resurrected Jesus the Christ caused Christians to search the Tanakh or Old Testament for indications that the human Jesus of Nazareth was God's agent, the Messiah (Hebrew for the anointed or chosen one). For Christians the Messiah would deliver people from the inescapable stain of sin into eternal life, a concept alien to Judaism.

Judaism gives unquestioned pre-eminence to the first five books (scrolls) of the Bible known collectively as the Torah (Hebrew, the teachings) or the Pentateuch (Greek, five scrolls). They are sometimes also known as the Books of Moses and are Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. They contain the foundation stories of Judaism and are the stuff of legends, insofar as there is little or no independent verification of the history they reflect. The principal story is of God's faithfulness to the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) culminating in deliverance from servitude in Egypt, the giving of the Law to Moses and the gift of the Promised Land. God's faithfulness to the people of Israel is the core of Judaism and of synagogue liturgy.

After the Torah, the next most important section of the Tanakh is termed The Prophets and they are understood solely as commentary on the Torah or on contemporary events. Christians read them as foretelling the coming of Jesus as the Messiah. The rest of the Tanakh (or Old Testament) is brought together as The Writings and they get comparatively little attention in Jewish liturgy. The Tanakh comprises 22 scrolls each measuring 24 ft long with 54 columns of text. Scrolls were always meant for public reading in the Temple or synagogue and not for individual study or ownership. The first significant biblical writings date from the prophets of the eighth century BCE, Amos, Hosea, Micah and Isaiah, but no original texts now exist. After the return from Babylonian exile in the fifth century BCE, Ezra wrote and imposed his version of the Torah.

Ezra wrote in Hebrew which was the localized language of Judah and insignificant when compared with the vast regional language of Aramaic. Historically Hebrew continued as the religious language of Judaism because the scrolls were all in Hebrew, but the population generally spoke Aramaic. In the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE the Tanakh of 22 scrolls gradually came together as a unity because they were the most accepted of the Hebrew scrolls.

2 Thoughts on Personal Transformation

Christians use the letters G, o and d (God) to denote that which has caused this universe to come into existence and which continues to sustain it. The character of this God is both known from the interdependent nature of what it has created, and unknown because the human mind cannot embrace the mind of something which is greater than itself. For clarity, the unknown God is sometimes referred to as the Godhead, and the known God as God.

What is the purpose of the Godhead in creating this universe which is continually evolving? From our human standpoint, and there is no other we can use, we human beings appear to be the present peak of evolution, despite being an infinitesimal speck in this apparently expanding universe and yet still within its continuing evolution. Is the Godhead a living organism of which we are a part and are we growing into wholeness with the Godhead, or some aspect of it?

These are questions which it is impossible to answer, but when John the Baptist appeared on the scene he called for personal transformation. The Greek New Testament word is metanoia, meaning beyond the mind, though John would have been speaking Aramaic. From the earliest days there has been an unfortunate tendency to translate the word metanoia as repentance and the Latin translation as the equivalent of penance. But if you translate repentance back into koiné Greek you don't get metanoia! The King James Version of the New Testament uses repentance for metanoia 22 times, but 'saying sorry for your sins' was far too weak for the Baptist. He was calling for personal transformation and it's not surprising that Jesus identified with John's baptism and undertook it as a mark of his own intention.

Repentance doesn't describe fully what God is wanting from human beings. God's intention is for a transformation so powerful that, as with Paul on the road to Damascus, it can even verge on the psychotic, a transformation that transcends or goes beyond the mind. This is the full meaning of metanoia. Does this weakness in translation account for the fact that western Christianity appears to be withering on the vine? We apologize for our inadequacies (repentance) but do we set out with the overpowering intention (reflected in transformation) of creating a society which is whole (perfect) in every respect?

John and Jesus were looking for people to commit their whole life to God's purpose. Commitment needs to be absolute. It needs to be a total spiritual conversion which leaves the previous life behind and has no concern for how irreligious or problematic that previous life may have been. Surrendering to God's will gives rise to a new birth, a new person with a fundamentally different attitude which no longer gives primacy to the ego in oneself. The Godhead's purpose is to bring all humankind to maturity and partner the Godhead in creating 'heaven on earth'. Metanoia or personal transformation involving complete faith in God's leadings results in a life of action to create a just and loving society.

3 Thoughts on Sin and Grace

Sin, as a theological word, describes the wilful disobedience of the human being to the known will of God. Wilful, yet in the sense that human beings on their own can do nothing about it. This is Paul's puzzlement expressed as that which I should do, I don't do and that which I shouldn't do, I do. It is referring to the dominance of the self-centred aspect of the human ego. The roots of sin lie deep in the human brain reflecting that earliest need for self-preservation. It is both individual in each person and universal throughout humankind.

This has an explanation in evolution. As the human being evolved, the over-riding necessity was to continue to live safely. Hence at its earliest and most primitive level the brain sought safety and security for the human being. It was totally self-centred and that basic and necessary impulse still operates. However, what is happening as we evolve is that social intelligence develops and the search for personal safety moves from being based in the individual to being based in the community. Initially the community was just the family, then the tribe, the nation and now regional groupings and ultimately the United Nations. All remain incomplete until the individual changes. The spirit bringing about this evolutionary change is not something we create; it is God's gift to human beings and is known as God's grace. It is the Holy Spirit at work in the world.

The lifespan of human beings without access to written materials is too short to recognize evolution, so in order to account for the existence of sin the story of Adam and Eve was created. In the fifth-century Augustine used that story to develop the concept of Original Sin – the human being is irredeemably sinful and predestined to hell unless saved. The cause of sin in the human world, following Paul's statement, is because Adam's disobedience in the Garden of Eden is passed down through humankind and in Jesus the Christ we have our salvation. Jesus is God's grace, our undeserved Saviour. The Old Testament God of Law becomes the New Testament God of Grace and retrospectively the God of Law becomes more understandable as part of an evolutionary development.

Only since the nineteenth-century have we had an understanding of evolution and we now see the story of Adam and Eve as a mythological description of why human beings are inadequate. We now accept that the whole universe as well as the human being is moving from an initial primitiveness to some kind of fulfilment that is beyond our capacity to conceive, except anthropologically as a form of paradise. We create stories to try and make sense of why we exist.

Augustine's concept of Original Sin was opposed by Pelagius, an English monk who taught in Rome, who maintained that the individual has the freewill to choose his own path. This was robustly opposed by the Augustinian camp in North Africa and such teaching was declared heretical at the Council of Carthage in 418. In the present day who does not believe that the individual has the freedom to choose his own path?

4 Thoughts on the Easter Story

Jesus of Nazareth was crucified by the Roman authorities at the behest of the Sanhedrin, which comprised the Sadducean controllers of the Temple in Jerusalem. The year was about 30CE. This was a crushing blow to Jesus's followers. Everything that gave purpose to their lives had now gone and in an extreme way. Judaism understood that anybody who died on a cross was accursed by God. Their leader, their Messiah, was a nobody. Nothing was left.

Yet the Gospels tell us that within a few days of that utter desolation, Jesus's followers became aware of his presence among them. They hadn't been reflecting on the spirit of his teachings; their only concern had been their personal safety and yet they were forced to recognize his presence.

To convey this powerful feeling in words they created stories of the resurrected Jesus's comings and goings. These stories first appear in writing in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew written in the 80s or 90s CE. There are no such stories in the original Mark written in the 70s CE, but we do have Paul's letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. ch15 vv3-8) written about 53CE and listing witnesses to Jesus's resurrection and recording Paul's own life-changing awareness of Jesus's presence.

How can we understand this raising of Jesus from being dead to being present with his followers? This is made all the more difficult when the stories gain legendary elaborations, such as the burial tomb being empty (Matthew and Luke) and the resurrected Jesus eating with the disciples (Luke). Traditional Judaism since the Babylonian exile had come to believe in the raising of most or all people at the end of time, but here was the raising to life of one specific person; a seeming act of God breaking into history. This struck Paul so powerfully that he identified Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ or Messiah, a person marked out by God to bring Israel to salvation, even though a crucified Messiah was certainly not part of Jewish belief. Paul saw the physical death not as a finishing but as a metamorphosis, a transformation. The new spiritual Jesus the Christ was Jesus of Nazareth in a new body and thereby demonstrating God's continuing unconditional love to all people.

The witnesses to Jesus's resurrection were all people who had known Jesus. Their descriptive words are testimonies of faith rather than records of historical physical events. There are no independent witnesses simply because such persons could not have experienced this incredible metamorphosis from physical to spiritual. What was experienced by Jesus's friends was not the physical Jesus of Nazareth but the spiritual Jesus the Christ, now in a new and different body but retaining all the personality of Jesus of Nazareth.

What does this story of physical death and spiritual resurrection mean when even Jesus died thinking that he had been completely let down by God? It shows that faith must be strong enough to pass through physical death and that having passed through that seemingly ultimate state, God will still be there. Post-death is not entry to another place, it is entry to another state of being, poetically understood as being raised to God's presence. How is one to understand the spiritual presence or being of God?

5 Thoughts on the Existence of God

This universe is a seeming miracle. It has produced consciousness apparently from material origins and yet if the interplay of chemical reactions in its first few minutes of existence hadn't been engineered to the millionth of a second this universe wouldn't have existed. That engineering must have been done for a purpose – to create human beings who experience consciousness and whatever that consciousness may develop into in the long-term future. That engineering shows that there is purpose in creation; life has purpose.

Purpose does not arise by chance. In human terminology it requires a mind to create that engineering and to create purpose. Christians call that creative mind 'the mind of God'. So we have the situation that human beings are endowed with the ability to analyse and explain the output of that mind (the consciousness to discover **how** things have come about) but to know **why** they have come about we can only attempt to enter into the mind of God.

Attempting to enter into that mind can only be done from within the limitations of our human condition. Our human experience is that unconditional love is the power at the root of human life and probably of everything that exists. In line with scientific thinking we speculate that this power of love embraces the whole universe; not just that it touches everything but that it has created everything and is in everything, just waiting to be chosen in order to become active. This love forms a spiritual world both embracing and infusing our physical world, and the language of our physical world struggles to give voice to this spiritual presence, hence the religious language of worship. Our physical universe exists within a spiritual universe of love. We live within a latent spiritual world of love. A love that must be chosen.

Science tells us that all physical matter is, at root, an expression coming from energy or electrical impulses which our human sensory system transforms into apparent physical matter. These impulses form both matter and the 'empty' spaces in between; in other words, those 'empty' spaces are teeming with electrical life. This teeming life unifies everything but is not directly recognized by the human sensory system. We have to term it 'non-physical' or spiritual. So, in fact, life and consciousness is created not only from material matter but also from this spiritual reality of latent unconditional love which embraces and infuses everything. Religion sees this as the universal soul and everything created has some part of it, being individual souls. The connection of the individual soul embracing the personality to the universal soul embracing the universe is never lost and for humans when the physical body disintegrates (crucifixion/death), the spiritual soul remains as part of its 'parent', the universal soul (resurrection). God is Abba, Father.

What has happened to the individual soul during its journey with the individual? It has arrived at birth with varied pre-formed characteristics which are improved or diminished by the new personality as it makes its journey through life. When it is resurrected it adds to or diminishes the journey of God's creation. Somehow we have to make sense of life.

6 Thoughts on Suffering

It appears to be a strange conundrum that suffering is inherent in the human condition and yet the strength of the Christian faith lies in the fact that it is based on one specific human life – that of Jesus of Nazareth. Suffering is real and it is not cancelled out in some miraculous way by Jesus's suffering crucifixion, being nailed to a cross. Indeed, his apparent despair at being deserted by God would seem to emphasize the pointlessness of life infused with suffering.

There is no separate power rivalling God which brings evil and suffering into the world. Suffering is a condition that arises within God's creation, but it's not a case of God creating suffering. It's entirely a case of human beings and nature being able to create suffering, whether intentional or not. This arises indirectly in that in human terms we understand God to be the expression of an unconditional love that is striving to guide what it has created along those self-emptying channels of unconditional love. But that guidance is only meaningful if it is drawing us to it in an entirely voluntary manner. In other words, unconditional love is a path that can only be chosen voluntarily by us. If there were a stick compelling us to move in a particular direction it could not give birth to unconditional love because compulsion is not in love's nature. Choosing the path ahead has to be a matter of freewill and that means the wrong path may equally be chosen. It is the wrong path chosen by the human being or the natural world that ultimately gives rise to suffering and even entirely unwarranted suffering, as in Jesus's crucifixion or in innumerable aspects of human life on earth. God's only power to prevent suffering in humankind is to urge the expression of unconditional love.

If we take the crucifixion of Jesus as an example of unwarranted suffering, what is the antidote? Jesus arrived at his cry of despair despite placing his wellbeing solely in the hands of God. Yet God cannot intervene in this life because that would be contrary to his nature of unconditional love being freely chosen. But God can show us that when physical life ends, spiritual life will continue – that is what the resurrection stories are telling us. In the end, God. God's love is so unconditional that it will accompany us through suffering to resurrection. It cannot protect us against suffering, but it will accompany us through suffering till we come out the other side.

When we're talking about freewill, the freedom to choose, we mean that every constituent part of every atom in existence is capable of exercising freewill and potentially making wrong choices. At the next level in the chain of growth wrong choices can be absorbed and controlled, but freewill again operates at that new level to give the possibility of wrong choices. And so it moves through the chain of complexity and control until we may suffer natural disasters and human genocide, to take the two extremes. Suffering is a consequence of parts of creation making the wrong choices.

7 Thoughts on Morality

Morality or ethics reflects moral principles which aim at the fulfilment of human life. For Christians these principles are rooted in the mind of God. One reason for creating the universe is for these values in God's mind to be actualized. The human person is made by God with the potential to be like God. In an evolutionary sense that potential has been evolving since the original act of creation (the Big Bang) and in practice the human being has to move from his incompleteness at his point of creation to the end point of wholeness or union with God. The Ten Commandments would have been an early expression of the moral standards needed to live in community though our moral beliefs can also evolve through new experiences.

The human being as such did not exist at the initial point of creation but his potential did. So, what now goes for the human being must also apply to everything God has created because all has been made from the same matter. Everything is evolving purposefully towards union with God. This universe is an ordered cosmos with a past and a future which is in the mind of God. We are human beings who possess consciousness and being apparently the present peak of evolution, we strive to understand that greater mind of God. But a lesser mind cannot fully comprehend a greater mind and in the end we have to have faith in God's provision for us.

Humanists do not believe in any creator, but they do seek fulfilment in life. They would claim that this fulfilment arises from the experiences of living a social life and that it is the development of community living which gives expression to moral standards. They would say that morality arises from human striving and is quite independent of any belief in God.

There is a degree of truth in this view but the Christian would understand that because the act of purposeful creation is within the mind of God, then everything created has this urge to evolve; this is not just physical evolution but spiritual evolution and morality as well. The present peak of the urge to develop our inherent divine potential is human consciousness which is able to conceive that God has embedded in everything the urge to fulfil itself. So whilst the humanist sees the establishment of moral principles as a natural consequence of having to live alongside others, the Christian goes deeper and understands those moral principles to be inherent in God's creation. The philosophy of Natural Law exists because of the inclinations God has set in all creation.

The humanist can say a lot about how the universe works but he cannot explain why the scientific laws exist which make his understanding of reality possible. Not that the Christian can do much more other than positing that they exist in the mind of God. Similarly with the values of beauty, goodness, human rights, justice, love. There are no mathematical or chemical equations to explain them; they are irreducible values held in the mind of God and woven into the fabric of the universe. How these values are discerned in relation to human life is the concern of morality.

8 Thoughts on Death

Death is defined in my dictionary as "the permanent end of all functions of life in an organism". For example, a human being. The definition refers to the end of physical life. Spiritual life is another matter; it never ends.

Why do Christians have intercessory prayer? Because we believe our prayers or thoughts can improve another person's situation through the medium of God. Quite an astonishing claim but then the advancing tide of scientific knowledge is always astonishing. Science has to work intuitively and then find the facts to support the intuition. Whether we call it dark matter (an intuitive name) or the medium (that of God) in whom we live and move and in whom we exist (Acts 17, v28), or whether it's electron entanglement whereby once electrons have paired they never lose contact, no matter how far apart they may be. There is always something more to our existence than we understand.

There are thousands of recorded near-death experiences. Physically people move into a coma, advance some way towards the next stage in their spiritual life, but then return to physical life before that final physical death kicks in. Others do lose all physical signs of life; the brain is dead but they continue to live in the mind and experience consciousness. They then try to recall and describe their journey. There are some people who claim the gift of being able to communicate, generally for a limited time, with somebody previously close to them who has now physically died. We cannot explain this except by saying that their unusual spiritual sensitivity allows it. As with electrons it implies a form of communication we are not normally able to use.

We can be at a loss to truly describe these situations because we live in a world where our physical situation has largely formed our language. Hence the word 'spiritual' can have many varied connotations. For Christians it refers to a relationship with a creator God and the concept that we live within a greater spiritual universe that embraces our physical universe. There is another spiritual plane of existence which embraces everything physical. Hence intercessory prayer. We live in it without fully recognizing it and we are still in it when our physical life ends; some refer to it as the Ground of our Being.

When the human Jesus of Nazareth died a terrible death by being nailed to a cross, his physical life ended but his spiritual life continued. This spiritual life was so in tune with God that he was able to manifest himself for a limited time and continue his relationship with those he loved although he was now a spiritual being, Jesus the Christ. Those aware of his continuing presence could only describe it in physical terms.

O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? (1 Cor 15 v55/6). Physical life and death is no more than an episode in our now entirely spiritual journey and who can really know what that spiritual journey will entail, except that we have faith in a God who, in the big picture, always provides for our needs. We all go the same way but depending on the physical life we have lived, some may be better prepared for the journey than others.

9 Thoughts on Creationtide

We seem to have been without the sun for some time (August into September 2021), but this morning it was back again and so was 'our' robin singing its heart out in praise to the sun whilst we ate of the fruits of the earth over breakfast. In the churches' calendar this is Creationtide – 1st September to 4th October. It was originally established by the Eastern Orthodox Church as a day of prayer in 1989 but by 2007 it had become a period of five weeks endorsed by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland as a time for reflection on how we as a nation and as individual people are meeting our responsibilities for upholding God's creation.

Ironically, in 2007 that avaricious economic system which worships the god of money and profit had a financial meltdown. It was an opportunity for change that came to be missed because re-adjustment never ceased to be anything other than business as usual. In every year since that meltdown the poison we put into our atmosphere known as carbon dioxide has increased and is still increasing (2021).

In about two months' time the prime ministers of the world will be offering their solutions to this climate crisis at a conference in Glasgow (COP 26). There will be many good words spoken, but what about actions? With so much experience of unfulfilled political promises it is easy to be pessimistic and see the glass as half empty, but the spiritual approach is always to see the glass as half full. The potential for good is always there and it is not as if this is a problem to which we have no answers. We know the answers but politicians fear taking the necessary unprecedented steps because it may lose them votes and power.

It is not as if this is a novel predicament. It was outlined 2500 years ago when Deuteronomy was written encapsulating the oral wisdom of even earlier centuries. The biblical setting was Moses voicing the thoughts of God as his tribe was about to enter the promised land under Joshua: *Today I offer you the choice of life and good, or death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, conforming to his ways, …. then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you are about to occupy. But if in your heart you turn away and do not listen, and you are led astray to worship other gods and serve them, I tell you here and now that you will perish …. Deuteronomy 30: 15 to 18.*

We have been led astray. The capitalist motive to maximise profits now means that wages can be so low that working families qualify for government benefits. Also the big international companies transfer their business income to tax-free countries so as not to contribute to the taxable income of the country where they make the profit. Poor countries, in particular, are not able to afford health and social services because the raw materials that are exported from their country earn them insufficient income. This is not conforming to God's ways of equality and justice. Controlling the capitalist economic system is vital if God's creation is to become healthy again.

Will this greed be controlled or is our civilisation destined to perish?

10 Thoughts on our Spiritual Universe

This physical universe, no matter how large, is embraced within and infused by a spiritual universe which gave birth to it and which maintains it in being. In Acts 17:28 this spiritual universe is understood as God or that of God (this is Paul reflecting on some Greek philosophy). Communication in this physical universe has to contend with space and time. In the spiritual universe there is no space and time, so communication is instant, and past, present and future (that is time) are all accessible instantly. This is not science fiction; this is where spiritual science is taking us. But not, of course, materialistic science which simply denies the existence of any form of spirituality.

What is this spiritual universe? Is it what the scientific world calls consciousness? Consciousness transcends material science because it cannot be divided into atoms, electrons, etc; it is irreducible. It is non-physical, so we cannot separate it from ourselves; it is part of us; we are infused by it. The human being is both physical (we exist in a physical universe) and spiritual (we are infused by a consciousness which facilitates non-physical experiences and values). And as the spiritual universe is the primary universe, having given birth to the physical universe, so the human being is primarily a spiritual being. Genesis 1:27 God created human beings in his own image, and God is spirit John 4:24.

Perhaps we are consciousness. The brain registers the presence of consciousness which has been processed through the mind, but we do not possess an individual bit of consciousness. We are part of that consciousness which has given birth to everything physical. Because we are consciousness it is impossible to investigate it with any clear degree of objectivity and science is presently unable to tell us what consciousness is. Our consciousness and our physical body are not two separate things; attempting to maintain subjectivity and objectivity has limited value and may be misleading.

This all makes sense religiously. The life of everything in the physical universe is limited by time and space, but in the spiritual universe, because of its nature, there is no time and space and life has no end that we know of. So a believer understands that when we die a physical death our underlying spiritual life continues – in religious language we are resurrected; the 'contents of our mind' (our personality and values, good and bad) continue in the spiritual consciousness form in which they already exist. In traditional religious language, we are always held in the palm of God's hand (Isaiah 49:16) if that's where we choose to remain.

The spiritual universe which infuses our physical universe is named by Christians as the Holy Spirit of God or the Quaker Inner Light. The infusion is purposeful. It is the life force which guides evolution towards greater complexity and some ultimate point beyond our comprehension – the mystery that we call God or the Godhead.

11 Thoughts on Continuing Creation

I believe that this universe has been created by a Mind far greater than mine. I do not believe it self-created from 'nothing' which appears to be what humanists and atheists claim. In order to appear from 'nothing', there must have been laws in existence which enabled it to appear. These laws would have been made by a Mind greater than mine. This mind I call God. Greek philosophy calls it the Word. My mind is spiritual (non-physical) and this greater Mind is spiritual (God). Perhaps my mind is integrated with this greater Mind. Certainly my mind also exists outside my body as evidenced by people who have experienced watching surgery being done to them whilst under full anaesthetic.

God is not just the creator of the physical universe but also of the spiritual universe in which the physical is embedded. Everything is both physical and spiritual. The spiritual permeates and sustains the physical. This spiritual universe is alive with the Holy Spirit of God. Perhaps my spiritual qualities, residing in my soul, are linked with God's Holy Spirit and just as God's Holy Spirit is prompting the evolution of the physical universe, so it is also prompting my spirit to evolve into an ever-deeper relationship with God.

Every part of the universe has a degree of consciousness which arises from its integration with everything that exists and from its evolving nature. It would seem that the human being possesses the greatest degree of this consciousness and therefore the greatest degree of awareness that it is both physical and spiritual. The scientist can search and explain how our physical nature works, but we need a different approach and a different vocabulary to delve into our spiritual nature. All our non-tangible feelings are spiritual. We have a spiritual side to our sensory system which makes us capable of appreciating the beauty of music, of nature, of relationships. When physical death occurs the physical side of our sensory system dies, but the spiritual side embracing our personality remains in place and this is why we have thousands of recorded near-death experiences. People who are in the throes of dying say they have advanced along a tunnel towards a bright welcoming light, only to recover and tell their story. Moving towards that light is the journey of the spiritual continuation of human life and recorded in the resurrection stories of Jesus of Nazareth. It is a journey for everybody. When the physical life dies, the spiritual life continues.

Jesus emptied himself of any vestige of human power and placed himself absolutely in God's hands. At the point of death on the Cross the physical Jesus even despaired – 'My God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark) – but he continued with – 'Into thy hands I commit my soul' (Luke). Jesus of Nazareth the human being became Jesus the Christ the spiritual being as God took his soul into himself and allowed those spiritual qualities to continue to communicate with those he loved – the resurrection stories.

12 Thoughts on God, the Trinity and the Godhead

Michael Servetus (1511 - 1553) was a polymath who realised that the theological concept of the Trinity was a product of Greek philosophy and not of the Bible. He dared to publish his belief, was condemned by Protestant and Catholic alike and for his heresy was burnt at the stake in Calvin's Geneva in 1553.

The nature of God is such that we human beings can be aware of it where it touches us. Hence the Christian concept of the Trinity involving three aspects of personality. God the Father represents God's unconditional love and forgiveness; God the Holy Spirit is the life blood of God running through everything that exists; God the Son (the Christ [Greek] or the Messiah [Hebrew]) represents the potential in humankind to achieve a higher state or divinity.

Because 'the Father' is too easily juxtaposed with 'God', some have found it helpful to refer to that which is beyond the Trinity (the transcendent God beyond our comprehension) as the Godhead.

The Godhead is the source of everything that exists; both that of which we are aware and that of which we are yet to become aware. Here the limitations of language fail us. We fall into the essentially human trap of asking 'Who created the Godhead?' This is a *non sequitur* and simply arises from the limitations of our human thinking. The Godhead, or God, is meant to answer those limitations. It is a concept to reflect the Mystery of creation. That fact that scientifically the creation that we know through our human senses may have come from the other end of a black hole is irrelevant. The word God, or the Godhead, reflects the Mystery which is beyond the ability of our human minds to comprehend.

The physical universe exists; it must have been brought into existence; it must have been created by intention, otherwise, from the point of view of our human comprehension, there would have been nothing. Hence the concept of 'God' as creator.

What I am struggling to express was well understood two to three thousand years ago by whoever put into writing the story of Moses' mystical experience of the burning bush (Exodus 3). As evening drew on, the shepherd Moses experienced the Mystery of God as the setting sun glowed through the vegetation. Moses said to the Mystery 'Who are you?' and the Mystery said ' I AM that I am' (Revised English Bible). Literal attempts at translation of language between different cultures should be eschewed and the translation of the enigmatic Hebrew phrase can be something like 'I am what I am and what I shall be'. God is everything, and everything is more than the human being can comprehend. Moses felt impelled to take his sandals off because wherever he stood he was on holy ground.

That of God is struggling everywhere and in everything to be born, to evolve. Does 'God' exist or is it always struggling to be born? Let he who has the answer light the first match! My answer lies both in my faith and my personal experience that it is a transcendent God that gives birth to an immanent ever-present God, but just one God.

13 Thoughts on God, Jesus and Liberal Evangelism

The Old Testament and the New Testament are two separate testaments or covenants. The Old Testament is understood as the covenant between God and the Hebrew tribes. It's a very human story of a long struggle to discover the true character of their one God. A God who was powerful enough to cause the universe to come into being and yet concerned enough to champion the needs of the widow and the orphan and others marginalized in society.

The New Testament is the story of Jesus of Nazareth and after the crucifixion the coming of the spiritual Jesus the Christ reflecting the belief that the purpose of life is that human love should mature into God's unconditional love and that God will still be caring for us after our physical death. The all-powerful Hebrew God is now understood to be the God whose power is real before the act of creation and after the end of time. "I am alpha and omega, the beginning and the end." In-between times the only lasting power is that which humankind is led to recognize as unconditional love.

God is always present within history, whether as God the Holy Spirit working through evolution, or God as present in Jesus of Nazareth being a reflection of how human life should be lived, or God as in Jesus the Christ representing God's limitless love in that we are provided for not only in this physical life but in the spiritual life to come.

How does one relate to or transform these religious terms into the language of the 21st century? Of course, those who understand the deeper meaning of these terms, have, for themselves, no need to change, but those without any religious or spiritual background simply don't connect with such language – and they are the growing majority of the population. For them, what is the point of 'going to church'?

The church premises need to be a place where spirituality, or an awareness of God, is explored without being told what the 'right answer' is. Reality or Truth has to be built from an individual's experience; nothing else will stand the test of time; the sermon from the pulpit is somebody else's experience. Sermons must cease to be pulpit monologues and become opportunities for everybody's input and what is discussed should be the practicalities of living for the benefit of the community. The life of the congregation has to centre around bringing ever more love into the community in which they are living. The unconditional love of God must become the reality of everyday living. The educated person's need to understand the Bible can be met simply as one aspect of church life, whilst serving or meeting the community's needs has to be the main aspect. Any present requirements of institutional religion have to be put in the background or set aside

Perhaps it's a good thing that the church in general is short of clergy and ministers if it makes the congregation take full responsibility for what they do as a church. It doesn't need a theological education to create spiritual sensitivity in the busyness of life.

14 Thoughts on Perfect Humanity is Divinity

During the reign of King David, about 1000 BCE, the Hebrew people conceived the idea of a Messiah, that is a person chosen by God who would bring their tribe to a state of perfect living. Over time their conception of this Messiah would have been coloured by their varying historical circumstances. In the first century CE they were under Roman control and with the time of their earlier independence under the Maccabean family still strong in communal memory, they saw the Messiah primarily as a military king of the Davidic line who would free them from Roman rule.

There were always would-be Messiahs around, but one who didn't seek that title was Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee, who far from being a potential military leader apparently advised people to love their enemies. He interpreted the application of the main features of the Mosaic law as applying to all people rather than just to each Hebrew tribe. Under Paul of Tarsus this universal message, along with the story of Jesus's apparent divine resurrection from death by crucifixion, was taken to the Greek-speaking world of the Mediterranean diaspora.

The Aramaic worldview of the Galilean people was concerned with the impact of Jesus's life but the totally different worldview of the Greek philosophers cum theologians of the diaspora brought an exploration into whether Jesus's origins were divine. There were many opinions but the Roman Emperor Constantine, now a Christian, wanted uniformity and called the first Ecumenical Council at Nicaea near Constantinople in 325 CE. The Council finally declared Jesus of Nazareth as 'the Lord Jesus Christ the only Son of God', Christ being the Greek word for the Hebrew Messiah. Those holding alternative understandings (heretics) were persecuted, particularly after the fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE which produced philosophic credal words to gloss over the otherwise seemingly unbridgeable divine-human gap.

Eighteen centuries later we have another worldview, largely formed through the growth of scientific knowledge. It is possible now to see that although little is known of Jesus's actual life, the portrayal of that life in the Gospels and Paul's letters is of a human being responding so perfectly to the will of God the Father that he must have been divine (Nicene creed: 'of one substance with the Father').

We can also look further back to the Genesis story of creation written after the return from Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE, where there is the remarkable insight that humankind is made in the image and likeness of God. In other words, perfect humanity is divine and so, subsequently, Jesus of Nazareth is proclaimed divine.

The evolution of the human being is clearly a progression from a single cell lifeform to the present fifty trillion cells, each of which makes the decisions which enable us to experience consciousness. The ultimate outcome of evolution is presumably perfection (divinity) or God; certainly, something we are not capable of experiencing or even comprehending in our present state. But our fifty trillion cells are not going to give up altogether when their unifying strength weakens with age. They ensure that our physical death is followed by spiritual life (resurrection), so that we all continue our evolutionary journey to a presumed perfection but with our varying characteristics.

15 Thoughts on God

Some people like to say that they believe in Jesus but don't believe in God. As Jesus believed in God the Father it is difficult to understand why they are rejecting the concept of God. Perhaps it's a caricature they're rejecting? In feudal times the artistic expression of God in church wall paintings or stained-glass windows was of a man-like person sitting on a throne up in heaven above the sky. Well, we all reject that image; it no longer fits our worldview. We have to go back to the expression 'God is Spirit', even if we don't really know what we mean other than that God is not physical.

But why have a God? Somebody or something had to cause this universe to come into existence. Different cultures have different words for this occurrence. The ancient Hebrews had several words which eventually crystallized into our word 'God' or 'Godhead'. The Godhead is the creator God and because this planet has so incredibly produced humankind and provides for its needs, our patriarchal society knows the Godhead more personally as God the Father.

The Godhead is beyond the comprehension of our human minds and is assumed to be all-powerful: 'I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.' But in between the beginning and the end, he/it, as God the Father, has irrevocably shared that power with humankind. This is a necessity for the God who is unconditional love, so that he/it is no longer all-powerful in this physical world. But, like the artist who inevitably expresses his character in his artistic expression, God the Father's character is expressed in his creation and is called God the Holy Spirit.

This Spirit of God is present everywhere and is pre-eminently expressed through the growing consciousness of the human being. That consciousness is eternally developing and is meant to co-operate with God the Holy Spirit to produce the reign of God on earth – the kingdom of heaven.

The worldview of ancient Greek philosophers saw in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, as portrayed in the Gospels and Paul's letters, the character of a man who, for them, revealed perfection and they styled him 'the Son of God', 'of one substance with the Father' (Nicean Creed 325 CE). Jesus of Nazareth might have been somewhat bemused! His worldview was Aramaic, concerned with the realities of the land and of life and not with philosophical reasoning.

Gods exist to explain life, to be placated, to be worshipped. Christianity has taken one God (monotheism) and used Jesus (metaphorically the Son of God) as a window through which to understand both this physical life on earth and the spiritual life to come. Christian worship is an attempt to feel or communicate with the eternal, the transcendent God. We see Jesus's life as showing how we should build the reign of God on earth and his resurrection as evidence that God's love is unconditional in that spiritual life continues beyond physical death.

16 Thoughts on God

Why does the word 'God' cause people such a problem? Presumably the institutional churches have failed to keep up with an increasingly sophisticated population and hadn't realized it was necessary to explain it. It is just like the 4th and 5th century creeds based on the philosophical thought of ancient Greece. They are still used despite the fact they were drawn up (and fought over) when it was believed that there were seven bands of existence beyond our skies occupied by a hierarchy of angels etc. The worldview of those philosopher-theologians is quite different from our 21st century understanding of existence, and their statements of Christian belief need to be re-expressed in today's language if they are thought to be of value.

Language can have its limitations and when people use the word God it could have either of two meanings. Firstly, those three letters, G. o, d, are our only answer to why the universe was created. We cannot know why it exists because the mind that created us is far greater than the ability of our minds to comprehend it. We cannot know the answer to 'why?', so the full purpose of God is an absolute Mystery. The 14th century German mystic Meister Eckhart preferred the term 'Godhead' to describe this Mystery, so that people could use the word God solely to describe that which was close to them.

The God which is close to people, the second meaning, is strictly God the Holy Spirit, that power of the Godhead which infuses everything which it has created. In his time George Fox found the term Holy Spirit so mixed up with magical overtones that he had to use alternatives such as Light Within, Seed Within, that of God in everyone. Because we and everything that exists is infused with the Godhead's Holy Spirit, we ascribe what we have come to see as our highest virtues to the nature of God the Mystery (the Godhead). In that sense we make the Mystery more meaningful, though in the process we must take care not to re-create the Mystery in our image. But the fundamental inter-dependence of everything in creation (the Integrity of Creation) is evidence for the centrality of love based on community. In this human sphere God whether as Mystery or as Holy Spirit is Love expressed in Community.

God as Mystery must have had a purpose in creating this universe and perhaps other realms of existence of which we are generally unaware. Did the Mystery dissolve itself into its creation and is now on an evolutionary journey to re-create itself/ perfection/ the Garden of Eden? Why it should do this, or anything else, is a mystery. Hence, God (Godhead) as Mystery is our only answer to why creation exists, and God as Holy Spirit is the answer to why everything created lives in relationship to everything else and is on a purposeful evolutionary journey. In faith we believe we have been created with the potential to be instrumental in that purposeful evolutionary journey. Do we need the two concepts of God as Mystery and God as Holy Spirit? Yes, because God as Mystery acknowledges that God is ultimately beyond the ability of the human mind to comprehend, whilst God as Holy Spirit reflects as much of God the Mystery as the human mind can comprehend.

17 Thoughts on Palestine in The Time of Jesus

On the death of Herod the Great in 4 BCE his kingdom was divided by Rome between his three sons with Archelaus taking Samaria and Judea, whilst Antipas took Galilee. After ten years Rome deposed Archelaus for misrule and put in place a Roman governor who was responsible to the Roman Province of Syria. Antipas, a Hellenistic Jew, developed the cities of Tiberias, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, and Sepporis, eight miles from Nazareth, into Greek-style towns, with Tiberias as his capital. The Gospels do not record Jesus ever visiting these major towns. Nazareth, where Jesus may have been born, was likely no more than a hamlet of 20 or 30 dwellings and most unlikely that it would have had a synagogue (Luke 4 v16) as Capernaum did.

A synagogue is a meeting place for the conduct of civic business and usually the most prominent town centre building. On the Sabbath (Saturday) there would be readings from the Torah (the Books of Moses, the first five books of the Christian Old Testament). The readings would be from a scroll made of papyrus and up to 24ft in length. Handwritten, and therefore expensive and valuable, the length also depended on whether the writing was in capitals or lower case. When the Tanakh (the complete Old Testament) was finally codified by common use in the second century CE it comprised 24 large scrolls.

In Palestine, Jewish worship centred on the Temple at Jerusalem in Judea, a huge enterprise covering some 34 acres, employing many thousands of people and governed by a Sanhedrin or Great Council of 71 members. For Galilean Jews this was a journey of about 60 miles from leaving Galilee and along the Jordan valley, bypassing Samaria. Samaria was no longer sufficiently orthodox to come within the ambit of the Jerusalem Temple and it had its own worship centre on Mount Gerizim. The Temple was financed by an annual Temple tax which every adult Jew was expected to pay; the Romans levied taxes to finance their occupation and empire, and in Galilee, for instance, Antipas collected taxes to finance his palaces and building projects. There was much disquiet with the level of taxation.

Synagogues, as purpose-built places of worship, were few and far between in Palestine because worship was Temple-centred until yet another revolt caused the Romans to destroy the Temple in 70 CE and then synagogues became a necessity for Jewish worship. They were already common in the Diaspora, the Jewish communities in the eastern Mediterranean, and to the east in Babylon, because the distance from Jerusalem meant that worship had to be local. In Jesus's time we know from archeological evidence that there were synagogues in Capernaum and Magdala on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee and at Masada and Herodium south of Jerusalem in Judea. In the Torah, God commands worship at Passover (Pesach, deliverance from Egypt), Pentecost (Shavuot, the wheat harvest) and Booths (Sukkot, the fruit harvest). Passover was the big one with many thousands arriving in Jerusalem. It was potentially a very volatile time because deliverance from Egypt equated to freedom from Roman occupation. Roman troops would have moved from their base on the coast at Caesarea to Jerusalem. Even the Roman governor (Pontius Pilate, 26-35 CE) might have come.

18 Thoughts on Christianity's Problem with The Divine Feminine

As early tribal groups developed socially, it was Great Mother goddesses who were worshipped because they brought into the world a flow of life-creating energy. This culture arose from observing the cycle of the moon, where the first tiny sliver of the new moon represents birth from the invisible depths of the womb of the Earth Goddess, on to the maturity of the full moon, followed by its waning into old age and returning to the invisible depths again. The moon carried the image of eternal life as it never failed to be re-born; it was a deity worshipped as Mother Earth. Her qualities of nurture and abundance were in the ascendant for many thousands of years according to palaeolithic and neolithic carvings and drawings. She gave their lives meaning because people felt they lived within a Sacred Order where spirit held nature in its embrace. Spirit was real. It was Divine. The God with masculine characteristics was nowhere to be seen. Where did he come from?

About 4000 years ago the huge fertile crescent in the Middle East formed by the rivers Tigris and Euphrates and known as Mesopotamia was invaded by tribes from the north and from the east. Perhaps prolonged failure of harvests caused this tumultuous movement of people. Warfare is male-dominated and the warrior became the role model for manhood and leadership, and killing became normalized. Around the same time in Egypt and Mesopotamia the feminine Moon God is displaced by the Sun God who exhibits the new male virtues of aggressive manhood. The military quest for empire is launched throughout the Middle East and we get a succession of empires fighting for supremacy. What we might call the more civilized virtues of Mother Earth become secondary and a monotheistic male God who hates rivals is dominant. In the initial colonization of Canaan by the legendary twelve tribes of Israel there was toleration and even absorption of local deities, and in particular the feminine deity Asherah. Subsequently, however, local deities were fiercely suppressed and the feminine disappeared from Hebrew worship. It became almost inevitable that the patriarchy of Hebrew and Greek culture would be absorbed by Christianity to the detriment of the feminine principle.

Nevertheless, for a century or two after Jesus's crucifixion, women performed notable service in church affairs, but gradually the dominant patriarchy deliberately excluded them. Of the early Church Fathers, Origen and Tertullian in the 3rd century were particularly virulent in their opposition to women having positions within the Church. It all went back to the bad behaviour of Eve who was held responsible for Adam's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The consequent concept of 'original sin' as expounded by Augustine about 400 CE became the curse to be borne by the whole of humankind forever and, because of Eve's failings, the feminine principle was to be treated derogatorily for the next 1600 years and still running.

Many theologians do not accept Augustine's 'Original Sin' interpretation of the Genesis story, seeing it as reflecting an excuse for his unbridled youthful life. Born in 354 CE he was not baptized into the Church until the age of 33 having led a dissolute and pagan private life.

Long before Augustine the forces of male domination were at work. The named disciples were all men; the disciple Jesus loved, Mary Magdalene, was described in the Gospels as needing to be cured of seven demons, and described in folklore as a prostitute. Most likely she was superior to all the other disciples in understanding Jesus's teaching, yet it was Peter who, out of the blue, was named as the leader, whilst Mary was largely written out of the text. Women were to have no part in the institutional church. Modern society is trying hard to take a firm stance on the fundamental equality of all people but it will still need many more generations before society's institutions are sufficiently reformed to reflect this outlook and establish the equality of femininity and masculinity.

Masculinity and femininity need not be thought of primarily as gender distinctions, man and woman. They represent value differences which culture has reflected in the two genders. Masculinity represents leadership, military power, physical prowess, domination over nature and finding God in the heavens. Femininity reflects co-operative relationships, sexuality, kindness, living within nature's boundaries and finding God in the earth. They are generalisations which help us to see how with the Earth Goddesses we once lived within the boundaries set by nature, but when masculine values took over society lost that sense of integration with nature and came to exploit it for human purposes, and now we are now belatedly recognizing our dependence on nature. The human species cannot exist unless it has the supporting presence of nature. The natural order expressed through our environment is sacred and not to be exploited and ravaged. Social harmony, or the kingdom of heaven, can only exist when respect for all of God's creation is the order of the day, and that can only come about when the feminine principle is at least equal and creative alongside the masculine principle.

19 Thoughts on Faith and Belief

The special mark of a human being is the ability to reflect on life; being conscious of oneself and conscious of the environment in which one lives; conscious of the past and conscious that there is a future which one can influence. This awareness leads one to wonder why we exist and what we should be doing with our lives. These initially rudimentary thoughts give rise to actions which bind people together to form a way of life whose framework in more recent times is called a religion, and within that religious framework art, philosophy, science, etc have emerged to stand independently of any religious control.

The source of this awareness is held to be a creator God, who in Hebrew society was known as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; that is a God who is present in history and whose 'commandments' form the basis of tribal society. The best known are the Ten Commandments, though for the Pharisees there are another six hundred or so. This is the basis of Hebrew society: commandments from God which require an active response.

Jesus of Nazareth simplified this plethora of commandments by offering two sides of the same coin: You must love the Lord your God ……. and your neighbour as if he were yourself. Paul of Tarsus was a Pharisee who came to recognize Jesus as the Messiah or Saviour and he took this personal revelation beyond the confines of Hebrew society into the gentile (non-Jewish) world. This had the consequence that the Hebrew Messianic message of trust in the one God (monotheism) became re-expressed in the course of time in Greek or Platonic thought. This Hebrew message of a God active in history and in community life became a set of intellectual beliefs, an organized system of doctrine which the individual expressed in words rather than in actions. Augustine, Aristotle and the Neo-Platonists established theological creeds and any opposition to them was actively put down. Hebrew faith lost out to Greek belief.

This change was effected by the conversion to Christianity of the Roman Emperor Constantine (312-337 CE), and the emergent institutional church developed along the lines of Roman administration with a system of absolute hierarchical power. In Hebrew society Church and State (if one may use this more recent term) were integrated; there was no Church and State, only an integrated tribal life centred on trust in the one God. In Greek/Roman/western society there are two gods. One is the State which claims all political power and the other is the institutional church which clings to religious leadership. The material and the spiritual have been separated; a dualist society has emerged in which in the UK the last remnant of an integrated monotheism are the 26 Lords Spiritual (Bishops) appointed by the established church to sit in the House of Lords.

Faith comes through revelation and can be a powerful personal experience. Belief comes through the intellect and tends to be an academic experience learnt at second hand.

20 Thoughts on The World of Jesus

Palestine originally meant the coastal country of the Philistines, but by Jesus's time it covered a much wider area. It is estimated that there were half a million Jews living there, along with other races. A Jew was a person whose ancestry came from Abraham, who observed the Mosaic Law and, if male, had been circumcised. A Jewish woman was subservient to the man and could not exercise any legal powers.

Major international trade routes passed through Palestine and the area was conquered first by the Assyrians (8th century BCE) and then by the Babylonians (6th century BCE), both of whom took significant parts of the Jewish population into slavery. This meant that there were Jews everywhere in the Mediterranean area and the Middle East. In Jesus's time this Jewish Diaspora is estimated at 7 – 8 million people or possibly 8% of the Roman Empire's population. The Jews were an important people with many holding Roman citizenship and some even serving in the Emperor's entourage.

Aramaic was the common language from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean coast, though further west into Greece, Rome and North Africa the Greek language was the dominant one, even among Jews. Hebrew was an ancient language which had become the religious language because the ancient texts were in Hebrew. Jesus would have been brought up in the Galilean dialect of Aramaic and would have had to learn Hebrew. Both languages are Semitic, using positive terms with words rich in multiple meanings. Greek was an Indo-European language using abstract concepts, so that translation from one to the other was never straightforward. Hebrew thought and language evolved from a belief that humankind is held in existence by a creator God and has little room for individualism. Greek thought and language is more precise and factual and cannot reflect the richness of Hebrew thought.

Palestine was part of the Roman Imperial Province of Syria which was administered by a Legate appointed by the Emperor. The Legate had military power at his disposal. Some regions within the Province were governed by a Prefect and Judea had Pontius Pilate from 26 – 36 CE. His headquarters was at Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast and at the time of Jewish festivals he would move his garrison to Jerusalem to ensure order.

The Jews had paid taxes since the time of Solomon (c.1000 BCE). A Temple tax had to be paid by every Jew including those in the Diaspora. Traditionally this was paid before Passover and partly accounts for the large number of people present in Jerusalem at that time. The Temple had a staff of 22,000 and was still being built. There was also the tithing (one-tenth) of the value of the produce of the earth which went to support religious personnel, the Levites, historically members of the tribe of Levi. There were regional taxes levied by the provincial rulers for their upkeep and their building programmes. Finally, Roman tax for the upkeep of the army, levied by contractors who, in turn, employed local people (publicans) to collect it. The weight of taxation was severe.

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