Doing and Saying – a Christian Pilgrimage

Inconsistencies and Inspiration – Week 13

If Atheism is inconsistent with real life, does Christianity make sense as an alternative?

Day 85: Justice

So if God is so moral and just, why is there injustice? Why doesn't God fix it?

Does Atheism explain injustice?

It doesn't pretend to. Justice and morality are social conventions – psychological illusions. But Christianity seems to claim that injustice is a problem.

Justice is integral to Christianity. There are two kinds of injustice: objective and subjective. Objective injustice occurs when a deserved reward or punishment is not received, or an undeserved punishment *is* received. Subjective injustice is our emotional response when we don't get what we want. Cain suffered from subjective injustice and killed Abel in retaliation. Jesus suffered from objective injustice, in that He took on our lack of holiness, our sinfulness (our missing the mark of how God calls us to live our lives), our lack of belief, and allowed us, humanity, to kill Him in the most degrading way possible despite that He had done no wrong. It was a great injustice. A subjective injustice may be a true (objective) injustice, or it may be a tragedy. Of the following, which are injustice? Which are tragedy?

- cancer?
- a tornado that kills people?
- a person who dies of disease?
- a victim of war who is a non-combatant?
- a victim of war who is a combatant?

Sometimes, subjective injustice is more a matter of feeling sorry for ourselves than it is injustice – we confuse tragedy with injustice. Our emotional response, whether it is to injustice or to tragedy, is a call to us that 'something is wrong here.'

God repeatedly calls us to live in a just way:

"Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute," (Psalm 82:3).
"Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, and please the widow's cause," (Isaiah 1:17).
"He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8).
"But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others," (Luke 11:42).

Think of injustice as one person being cruel to another or taking advantage of them. Think of tragedy as something impartial which happens for which we had no forewarning or capability to mitigate, such as an earthquake or tornado. God "fixes" injustice by telling the followers of His Way (Christians) to live lives that are just and moral, and to confront injustice when they come upon it. Justice and morality are, to a Christian, inextricably linked – both are expressions of love.

What are some examples of injustice that you have heard of or experienced? How does having Christians live justly “fix” injustice?

Share your answers with others whom you trust.

Day 86: How does Christianity give hope?

What happens after you die?

I cease to exist.

Christians believe that God created us with the intent that we live with Him for eternity, in joy. This belief was confusing to many in the beginning of Christianity, and it is still confusing for many today – but it is a source of great hope. A statement of belief known as *The Nicene Creed* ends with: *'We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.'*

Christians believe that those who believe in Christ and walk in His ways, those who have died to themselves and been born again in Christ, shall be resurrected and live with Christ eternally. Like Christ, they shall have a 'resurrection-body' which is at home both on earth and in the heavens (the Jews of Jesus' time commonly believed there were three heavens:

1.) The 1st heaven is the air around us, where the birds fly and the clouds float, what we would today call our atmosphere.
2.) The 2nd heaven is where the celestial bodies are – the stars, the planets, everything in the universe outside of our atmosphere.
3.) The 3rd heaven was beyond the 2nd and was where the spiritual bodies dwelt, both good and evil, including God Almighty.

Our bodies traverse the earth and live within the boundary of the 1st heaven. The resurrection-body of Jesus can traverse the earth and inhabit all three heavens). The bible states,

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and earth had ceased to exist, and the sea (of separation between earth and heaven) existed no more. …. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: "Look! The residence of God is among human beings. He will live among them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death will not exist any more—or mourning, or crying, or pain, for the former things have ceased to exist." And the one seated on the throne said: "Look! I am making all things new!"

Christians live the way they do because they believe it is in keeping with, even helping to bring about, the New Creation which God intends, where God will walk with His people in joy. This New Creation is eternal, and the joy of it will far surpass any sadness or grief of today.

You've lost me with this 'resurrection-body'

I apologize – we will get to it. These concepts are inter-related, and to fully explain I need to keep bringing in wider views of the picture. We will look at Jesus' death and resurrection in depth in the future, for it is at the fundamental core of Christianity. We shall get there! For now, consider the concept that our present lives are but the prologue or introduction to an endless, fascinating, and joyful story.

Are you more comforted by the thought that you cease to exist after death, or that you may continue, in joy? Why? What do you think of the idea that your present life is but a prologue?

Share your answers with others whom you trust.

Day 87: Biblical Inconsistencies

You state the bible is the foundational document for Christians.

Yes.

For a foundational document, why do I hear it has so many inconsistencies?

You've asked for a long answer – and for this, I suggest you get a bible if you don't have one, because I'll be referring to various parts of it over the next few days. First, I'll talk about some contrasts. The Bible, though today it is bound as one book, is not one book – it is rather a library of books. It was created over many years (estimates range from ~1500 BC to ~95 AD) in many different contexts and to address many different concerns. The book of Ecclesiastes describes the hopelessness of life (and exhibits a view very similar to natural atheism). The book of Job describes the injustice of life. The books of Numbers and Chronicles are histories of the nations of Judah and Israel. The book of Genesis explains the beginnings of humanity, how we are all selfish in different ways, and God's initial attempts to walk with us. Exodus describes how the Israelites truly became God's people as He led them out of slavery through a harsh desert and into a land where they could define their own destiny. The Gospels (there are four of them) are biographies of Jesus. The epistles (or "letters") are written by early followers of Jesus to their communities, to address concerns and encourage each other. Consider the stark contrast between these two passages:

- Ecclesiastes (which starts with "Futile! Futile!" laments the Teacher. "Absolutely futile! Everything is futile!") and
- Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (which has in its beginning, 'I always thank my God for you because of the grace of God that was given to you in Christ Jesus. For you were made rich in every way in him, in all your speech and in every kind of knowledge— just as the testimony about Christ has been confirmed among you— so that you do not lack any spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into fellowship with his son, Jesus Christ our Lord.').

The contrast is stark – they were written at different times and for different purposes. The bible was never intended to be a monolithic piece of work. It is instructive, but not an instruction manual like that of repairing a lawn mower for example.

Does the idea that the bible may have inconsistencies comfort you, or make you anxious? Why?

Share your answers with others whom you trust.

Day 88: Was the Bible Inspired (part 1)?

If the bible has inconsistencies, how can you claim it to be 'written by God.'?

Most Christians don't claim it was written by God. Many claim it was inspired by God. Article of Religion # 6 in the Book of Common Prayer of the Anglican Church states (language updated for clarity):

'VI. Of the Sufficiency of the holy Scriptures for salvation.
Holy Scripture (i.e.: the bible) *contains all things necessary to salvation. Anything not in (nor proved by) the bible is not required to be believed as part of the Christian faith nor thought needed for salvation.'*

So, first, the bible contains everything needed for our salvation, and second, nothing that is not of the bible or can be proved from it, is necessary for our salvation. From that point of view, it is Inspired and Godly.

So it's not written by God, but inspired by God?

It was written by people. Some may have had an idea they were writing down 'holy scripture', some may not. For example, it's pretty sure that the Apostle Paul was intending to write letters to specific communities about issues living the Christian life, while the authors of the Gospels and the book of Acts were intending more scripture-like documents, and the writer of Joshua was probably intending to write something to be accepted by the community as holy scripture. Probably Paul never sat down with the thought "and now I shall dictate holy scripture." On the other hand, he did probably think "and now I shall dictate to my problematic little congregation, rebuke them for their conduct, and explain to them the life which God really wants them to lead instead." And the community felt his letters were worth saving.

Explain the claim 'the bible contains everything necessary to salvation.' What are your personal feelings on this?

Share your answers with others whom you trust.

Day 89: Was the Bible Inspired (part 2)?

That doesn't sound God-inspired.

There are different stages to inspiration, and different ways of inspiring. Unlike the Quran, which Mohammad claimed the Angel Gabriel directly dictated to him, no one has ever claimed God dictated any part of the bible to them. However, it is believed that people have at time written documents intended to relate the words of God. The prophetic books for example, are full of quotations from prophets stating, "The Lord said…". They were intended to tell the people what the prophet thought God was saying, and have that recorded.

So that was God-inspired?

In a matter of speaking, yes. Compare that directness with the book of Joshua. Many scholars believe that the book of Joshua is an allegory, attempting to describe not a military conquest put in a historical context, but rather religious conversion which fails through its people, yet nevertheless broadly succeeds because of Yahweh – God Almighty. The understanding that Joshua depicts military conquest as a metaphor for spiritual triumph over forces opposed to the will and nature of God was written by an early Christian scholar named Origen (early to mid 200's A.D.), so it's not just modern scholars who believe this. Yet the book of Joshua has also been interpreted as a justification for murder, carnage, and warfare. This brings us to the second stage of inspiration.

What's that?

The Receptive Community. After someone has written the words, a community must adopt it as foundational to its identity – and how it is to be interpreted.

For more information on the complexity of Joshua and many other early books of the Bible (what we call the Old Testament), a good resource is *Opening Israel's Scriptures*, by Ellen F. Davis.

Does it make sense that though some writers of our bible would feel more direct inspiration, they all could be inspired by God? Pick a book of the bible – what do you think the motivation of the original writer may have been?

Share your answers with others whom you trust.

Day 90: Was the Bible Inspired (part 3)?

In Jesus' days, the bible as we know it did not exist. There was no prescribed list of books, there was not 2,000 years of an entire industry, the most preeminent and sustained scientific endeavour the world has known (i.e.: theology and biblical literacy). Instead, there was a small but intense nation focussed on scriptures and the revelation of God. These people would memorize their scriptures as part of growing up into adulthood. Rather than a canonized collection of books, the scriptures existed as individual scrolls which were separately copied and stored. The scrolls existed in what can be thought of as three clouds of scrolls – the Babylonian cloud, the Alexandrian cloud, and the Jerusalem cloud. While the clouds were broadly similar (all would have recognized Torah ('the Law') or the first five books of the bible for example and most would have recognized the Prophets, but not always the same Prophets, and the Psalms were largely recognized), they had their differences. Beyond the Law and the Prophets, the status of other scrolls was neither clear nor widely accepted. Each cloud of scrolls was nurtured by a Receptive Community.

The Babylonian cloud morphed into what is known as the Masoretic Text. The Alexandrian school morphed into what is known as the Septuagint. The Jerusalem cloud consisted of the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and other schools. Our present bible is mainly from the Septuagint and Masoretic schools, along with the writings we now call the New Testament, which were written mainly by Jews (but also some non-Jews) who were trying to figure out how to live as communities of Christ. The early Christian community largely depended on the Septuagint.

Each of those communities, Babylonian, Alexandrian, and Jerusalem, were receptive to specific versions of the scriptures – for example, the Dead Sea Scrolls, part of the "Jerusalem cloud", have additional psalms compared to our bibles, and other bits and pieces – mostly minor differences of grammar and wording, in other ways larger differences where there are sections added or omitted. For the first years of the Christian era, the Septuagint was the go-to foundation translated into Christian scriptures, and it still is for the Orthodox churches. With increasing scholarship, many Masoretic texts have now been incorporated into non-Orthodox bibles. These were accepted by their originating communities, and then through collectors, interpreters, editors, and copiers, brought into other communities and their contexts – which brings us to the next level of inspiration.

For more information on the versions of the scrolls in Jesus' time, and a deep dive into one of the communities, *The Dead Sea Scroll Bible, by Martin Abegg Jr., Peter Flint, & Eugene Ulrich is* a good introduction.

Does it make sense that different communities would interpret the same writing in different ways? That they would have additional or different versions of texts? How does this fit into being inspired by God?

Share your answers with others whom you trust.

Day 91: Rest

We come again to the seventh day, so today we rest. Reflect on the past week and care for your needs (body and spirit). In the evening get together with a group you trust and share what you would like to from the previous week – good points, hard points, what you've learned, what you've struggled with, etc. Decide again if you wish to continue journeying together or want to stop.