Doing and Saying – a Christian Pilgrimage

Why does this matter? – Week 12

Questions and frustrations.

Day 78: Did Jesus exist?

I just don't get it – this is so frustrating. Ah! Good to hear from you. Please, explain!

The only reason I am here is because of this group of people I am with. I have been patiently listening while you have spoken about a fictitious person who did fictitious things. I am not superstitious, and you cannot convince me to become superstitious. Religion is a social construct which serves the social and psychological needs of the convert and the power needs of the "initiated" – and nothing more. The supernatural does not exist. To quote Carl Sagan, "The cosmos is all that is, or ever was, and ever will be." The more you have talked about this Jesus, his morals and his 'healings', the angrier I have become.

I am glad you are still with us then. Let's spend some time addressing your concerns. You are being introduced to a world paradigm which is very different from what you currently believe. You may decide not to change, and that is totally your choice. However, if you do decide to change, you should know what you are changing, and you must convince yourself, not have us convince you, that it is the right thing and that it makes sense. How about we try to address some of your objections? One of the things which Christianity agrees with you is "always seek the truth."

Please.

Ok – which objection to start with?

Jesus is a fiction – he was made up in order to satisfy the ego needs of a paternalistic group of power-hungry individuals.

There is no definitive physical or archaeological evidence of the existence of Jesus. There aren't archaeological records for 99.9% of the people who lived in Jesus's time and place. This doesn't mean He (or they) didn't exist though. Archeologists *have* been able to identify places and actions depicted in the gospels – for example, the town of Nazareth really did exist. Crucifixions really did happen. The claims of the gospels (self-admittedly biased biographies created to encourage people to believe) about Jesus as a historical figure—a Jew, with followers, executed on orders of the Roman governor of Judea (Pontius Pilate), during the reign of the Emperor Tiberius—are borne out by later sources with different biases.

Oh?

The first-century Jewish historian, Jewish General and eventually Roman citizen Flavius Josephus mentions Jesus as a man who did surprising deeds and was condemned to be crucified by Pilate. He also recounts the unlawful execution of James, the "brother of Jesus-who-is-called-Messiah." He wrote this around 93 A.D., about 60 years after Jesus' death.

Another account of Jesus appears in *Annals of Imperial Rome*, a history of the Roman Empire written around 116 A.D. by the Roman senator and historian Tacitus. In chronicling the burning of Rome in 64 A.D., Tacitus mentions that Emperor Nero falsely blamed "the persons commonly

called Christians, who were hated for their enormities. Christus, the founder of the name, was put to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea in the reign of Tiberius."

Tacitus, if anything, was disdainful of Christians and their superstition.

Shortly before Tacitus penned his account of Jesus, Roman governor Pliny the Younger wrote to Emperor Trajan that early Christians would "sing hymns to Christ as to a god." Some scholars also believe Roman historian Suetonius references Jesus in noting that Emperor Claudius had expelled Jews from Rome who "were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus."

Among scholars of the New Testament of the Christian Bible, there is little disagreement that He actually lived. There was no debate about the issue in ancient times either. Jewish rabbis who did not like Jesus or his followers accused Him of being a magician and leading people astray, but they never said He didn't exist, nor that He didn't do strange and miraculous things.

Please investigate the evidence – there is as much evidence for Jesus as there is for other widely accepted historical figures. The early documents we have speaking of Jesus we call the New Testament. Almost all of these were written 20-70 years after Jesus' death, well within the living memory of His compatriots, when they could have been denounced as made-up stories – but weren't. Scholars agree that Jesus did exist, that He was credited with many miraculous activities, and that He gathered followers.

If you'd like to do further research, a good starting book to understand what we historically know about Jesus, and the context of his times, is *Simply Jesus* by NT (Tom) Wright, a historian of early Christianity and an Anglican bishop. Another book you might find helpful is *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis.

Why is it so important that we convince ourselves about the truth regarding Jesus and what we believe about Him?

Share your answers with others whom you trust.

Day 79: Was He only a man?

So maybe he existed, but how do you know he wasn't only a country preacher – everything else was made up by his disciples for their own ends?

We've briefly shared many snippets from the gospels, accounts of Jesus with His disciples. As you read through those accounts, they frequently depict how Jesus implied He was the Anointed One of God and how His actions backed that up. They also frequently depict the disciples in an unflattering light – with Jesus being exasperated with them and scolding them. If those were made up, they were master documents of psychology.

Maybe they made it up so that they could gain power over other people? To control them and their behaviour?

Of the 12 disciples in his original inner circle, it is believed that 1 betrayed Jesus and then committed suicide, 10 were murdered and one was banished to an island. Christians were routinely ridiculed, mocked, tortured, and used in death-sports of various kinds. Emperor Nero named them as scapegoats, torturing them before crucifying some, putting some in arenas with wild animals, and publicly burning some alive. Any 'power' for Christians wouldn't have come until Emperor Constantine, 300 years after Jesus, because Constantine converted to Christianity.

They were delusional.

It's true that perhaps they had experiences different from you – they experienced things which perhaps you think are impossible. The people of their time had the same thought as you've expressed – as one of Jesus' followers wrote, "we preach about a crucified Christ, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." They were viewed as foolish and crazy – and yet, they were convinced that they were right. And as they shared why, others became convinced as well. Convinced not only that they were right intellectually, but that this understanding made the best sense of their lives.

How could Christianity help you make sense of life?

Share your answers with others whom you trust.

Day 80: Does Christianity make sense?

But Christianity doesn't make any sense.

What is ultimate reality?

Matter exists and is all there is. Anything beyond matter is illusion. The cosmos is a uniformity of cause-and-effect in a closed system. There is no purpose, no meaning, we are here as collections of atoms and molecules – there is no soul, no free will, no morality other than for our own gain, no objective truth. Death is our extinction, history has no meaning or lessons, we are evolved from blind, non-rational survival mechanisms.

How do you explain consciousness?

I can't. There are several theories, but each has its problems.

How do you explain that if we are collections of mere atoms, we can think, and feel anger at injustice and joy in beauty? How to explain why do we get such joy from a violin concerto, instead of just staring at catgut being pulled over horse-hair?

I can't.

Why would you feel anger and joy? Why would you identify between right and wrong? Why is there something rather than nothing? What is the meaning of it all?

There is no meaning.

Christians believe humans are unique, exceptional, valuable, have great dignity, the ability to make free choices, some things are right, and some things are wrong.

That's illusion.

But does it match your experience of reality?

How does Christianity match your experience of reality? How does it not?

Share your thoughts with your others you trust.

Day 81: How does Christianity explain consciousness?

The bible contains the following statements:

'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (this is actually the very first statement in the bible).

'God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them.'

'The Lord God formed out of the ground every living animal of the field and every bird of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them, and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.'

From these we can deduce:

a.) Everything was created by a being;
b.) This being is like us (refer back to Day 3 and 4 for further exploration of this);
c.) We were given the awareness that we are separate from other animals (self-awareness in other words) and the ability to name and describe (to communicate in other words).

Consciousness is part of who we are.

Christianity claims that we are conscious because God is conscious, and we are in God's Image.

So where did God get God's consciousness?

Our understanding is that God has always been there and has always been conscious, the ultimate reality (the great "I Am", you could say) within which everything else has been created. We discuss the nature of God in detail a bit down the road yet.

For Christians, the ultimate beginning bedrock of everything isn't a creation of "something out of nothing" (like the big bang or something else), where from nothing somehow came energy and then matter; rather, the ultimate beginning bedrock of everything is an intelligent loving being – which we call "God." God may have used the big bang, God may have worked in ways which modern scientists can understand and theorize (or not), but it was God, not an inexplicable occurrence.

What do you think the ultimate beginning bedrock of everything is? Why?

Share your thoughts with your others you trust.

Day 82: How does Christianity explain morality?

As discussed earlier, Jesus expounded a moral way of living (days 19-48). People are intrinsically selfish (days 8-11), and the bible has several instances of God giving moral advice to people. Some of these we have covered already, focussing on Jesus. There are also the Ten Commandments which predate Jesus' time on earth *(the "cowboy version" goes like this:*

1. *Just one God*
2. *Honor yer Ma and Pa*
3. *No tellin' tales or gossipin'*
4. *Git yerself to Sabbath meetin'*
5. *Put nothin' before God*
6. *No foolin' around with another feller's gal*
7. *No killin'*
8. *Watch yer mouth*
9. *Don't take what ain't yers*
10. *Don't be hankerin' fer yer buddy's stuff).*

There are other commands as well. The bible states people are to obey God's commandments 'so that it may go well with them and their descendants forever.' (Deuteronomy 5:29)

In other words, we have morals because a moral life is a healthy life. If you look at the laws of the country, they are typically one of three types: 1.) preservation of self ('wear your seatbelts'), 2.) preservation of your neighbour ('do not kill'), 3.) preservation of the state ('pay your taxes'). Likewise with God's commands and guidelines: morals are not to be a "kill-joy" to happiness, but rather a ladder to health and ongoing happiness, intended to preserve and enhance your life and that of your community. In other words, they are practical methods of loving. We pursue a moral life because it is a loving life, and we believe it reflects the life God desires of us.

How does your life reflect a morality? How does it not? What things would be healthy for you to change?

Share your thoughts with your others you trust.

Day 83 – How does Christianity explain beauty?

Article two of the "Beglic Confession" (used by a branch of Christianity known as The Christian Reformed Church) states:

We know God by two means:

First, by the creation, preservation, and government
of the universe,
since that universe is before our eyes
like a beautiful book

in which all creatures,
great and small,
are as letters
to make us ponder
the invisible things of God:

God's eternal power and divinity,
as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20.

All these things are enough to convict humans
and to leave them without excuse.

Second, God makes himself known to us more clearly
by his holy and divine Word,
as much as we need in this life,

for God's glory
and for our salvation.

You may feel awe or joy at a stunning sunset, or a fresh morning. At the smell of the air after a rain. At a picture of the earth from space, or of a galaxy far away. From seeing an animal in your backyard. From a rainbow, or the northern lights. You may even feel awe or joy just at waking up in the morning. These times of awe are glimpses of beauty. You see beauty because God delights in beauty – and beauty, by its existence, points to something greater than itself, namely: God. Beauty is an experience of God sharing His love with you.

Describe some beautiful moments you have experienced this week.

Share your thoughts with your others you trust.

Day 84: 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.