

**DARE
TO
QUESTION**

**An Analysis of Christianity's
Paradoxes and Enigmas**

Jack Perrine

INNERCIRCLE PUBLISHING



Dare to Question

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ISBN: 0-9762924-2-4

Thank You

Lee and Carol Jones
for helpful comments and suggestions

Cover Designed/Created by Stacy Lilly
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ABOUT THE BOOK

**The following information is pertinent for anyone
who considers reading this book:**

- *Dare To Question* objectively examines the many concepts of Christianity that defy common sense or lead to paradoxical conclusions. It scrutinize myths and miraculous claims that are based, not on solid evidence or sound reasoning, but on assertions of divine inspiration, and whose sources are accounts that have undergone numerous translations, transcriptions and interpretations.
- The author, in no way, demeans the moral teachings of Jesus. I consider his ethical messages above reproach, and to be the true essence and value of the Christian religion.
- *Dare To Question* was written to illustrate the problems involved in assuming that there is only one valid interpretation of any biblical scripture. The book identifies problems involving classical interpretations and offers alternative points of view. The primary objective is not to prove or disprove, but to encourage objective thinking. Single-minded worldviews are replaced by pluralistic concepts. Relativism is prioritized and absolutism discouraged. The “middle ground” worldview replaces the fundamentalist’s “right-or-wrong” approach.
- It is important for the reader to understand that *Dare To Question* is not intended as a narrative. It is a compilation of over one hundred topics each of which can be read and examined out of context. Therefore,

the topics can be read in any order. And since the topics are self-contained, they will necessarily include certain information found in other topics. This required the incorporation of a degree of redundancy that might be disturbing to the reader, if he chooses to read the book from beginning to end, rather than selecting and evaluating each topic on a stand-alone bases

- A word of warning. If the reader is completely satisfied with the validity of all he or she has been taught regarding religious dogmas and doctrines—**do not read this book**. Place it back on the shelf and select one that is less challenging. If absolute faith in all Christian concepts works for you, then why become disturbed by alternative viewpoints? Thinking “outside the box” is not for everyone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author was born into a Protestant family and raised in a rural-suburban environment. There were no parochial schools nearby, so my classmates in public school were from families with varied religious beliefs.

As a young child I was fascinated by our amazing world, and my curiosity eventually led me into the profession of science. In 1950, I received a BA in biology from Brown University.

A few months after the outbreak of the Korean War, I enlisted in an intelligence branch of the U.S. Army. I served one year in Korea and the remainder of my enlistment in the States.

Upon completion of my military commitment, I became a research scientist in the pharmaceutical industry. While so employed, I used the G.I. Bill to enroll in New York University's School of Graduate Studies. Continuing to work full time, I attended night and weekend classes, and received a M.S and a Ph.D. in biology.

During this time, I married into a fine and very devout Catholic family, which provided me the experience of intimate interactions with another major division of the Christian religion. I was intrigued by the great diversity of religious concepts that I encountered within both Christian divisions.

Upon my retirement, I attended *Master Gardener* classes, which led to a decade as a volunteer horticultural therapist in the geriatric unit of a county hospital.

Around this time I became increasingly interested in how various Christians viewed their religion and began to record my thoughts and findings. When I realized that this rather large compilation of religious topics argued strongly for a pluralistic approach to biblical interpretations, I decided to publish my research.

PREFACE

Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind.

Romans 14:5

Most Christians have heard the admonition, “To question is to disbelieve.” It is often said with the best of intentions. Many have heard this warning from their clerical leaders, their parents and friends, and in bible study groups and catechism classes.

But this caution does more harm than good. Christians would be appalled if our public school systems took the same view of education. Most everyone is well aware that the process of learning involves the asking of questions. It is erroneous to assume that this essential learning process should be forbidden in matters of religion.

To inhibit one’s inclination to question is to impede education. It results in individuals with immature worldviews. To admonish the curious for asking questions is a disservice to both the questioner and the Christian religion. Reluctance to answer theological queries may be an indication that the individual being questioned is unprepared or incapable of providing rational answers. Sins of omission are as harmful as sins of commission.

Faith has an obvious value for humankind. But this value ends when faith is based on unquestioning belief. The realistic individual will read a contract before signing, will ask for a second medical opinion regarding serious health problems, and will thoroughly examine any real estate he plans to purchase. These actions are not performed for cynical reasons. They are for securing the truth, so as to avoid becoming the victim of someone’s deliberate falsifications or unintentional errors. Questioning is not for the sake of destroying a faith, but for determining the validity of the reasons given for embracing any belief or concept.

If a belief is based on reliable evidence or valid reasoning, than no amount of questioning can damage that belief. Just those religious concepts that result in paradoxical conclusions or defy common sense are at risk when objectively examined.

Only questioning can identify flawed concepts. Belief must be supplemented by a reasonable degree of doubt, for it is the latter that induces one to seek the truth, and it is truth that prevents one from losing contact with reality.

INTRODUCTION

“Truth and reason are eternal.”

Thomas Jefferson

Dare To Question is a truth-seeking book directed to the rationally minded Christian. It examines not only the paradoxes and enigmas of Christianity, but also explores the various concepts and ramifications of this fascinating religion. The study includes many of the philosophical, psychological, historical, scientific, social, political, and educational aspects of Christianity.

This religion has been the inspiration for wondrous works of art, for festive holidays, for great sacrifices, for charity and decency, for hope and peace of mind. But it has also been the source and rationale for wars, slavery, corruption, racial and religious hatred, suppression of women, and the degradation of the environment.

The Christian saga is a composite of guidance, ethics, morals, myths, mysticism, miracles, esoteric messages, parables, prophecies, superstition, absolutism, communism, millennialism, and wishful thinking. There is hope, exploitation, rationalization, injustice, salvation, sin, guilt, damnation, forgiveness, heroes and villains, intrigue, pathos, and betrayal. Its history is a blending of objective facts embellished by subjective opinions. It is no wonder that so many authors and filmmakers have made such extensive use of biblical literature.

Dare To Question addresses fundamental questions. Why does one embrace this religion? Is the average human being incapable of understanding God’s messages? What do we really know about Jesus and his religion, and Paul’s religion? How do the scriptures address such things as slavery, the rights of women, holy wars, and clergy? Can the scriptures

be used as historical documents? Are miracles the creation of God, nature, or man? And how does the Christian deal with the multitude of paradoxical and enigmatic situations he encounters in the scriptures? These are just some of the questions that are herein addressed.

The material included in this book is designed to make one think. It is not, in any way, intended to either enhance or depreciate one's faith. It was written with the assumption that the more one truly understands the beliefs and concepts of his religion, and his interaction with his religion, the more comfortable he will be in defending it through the use of credible evidence and sound reasoning.

Plato stated that individuals who could rationally defend their beliefs were those who possessed true knowledge. And Aristotle taught that we must constantly reassess our beliefs as new information is received that reflects on the bases of these beliefs. The early Christian church held both of these philosophers in high regard.

Many individuals are fearful of defending Christianity because of their lack of understanding of its philosophical, psychological and historical ramifications. But the Christian that fails to understand the basis for a skeptic's questions may not truly understand the basis for his own beliefs. Many Christians feel that they know the truths of their religion, but are not skilled enough to convince others of such truths. These individuals should spend more time in objectively analyzing the scriptures for logical justifications for their beliefs, and the terms "objectively" and "logical" cannot be emphasized enough.

Objective analysis of scriptural material or religious concepts is not a natural course of action for those whose earlier instruction was based on unquestioning acceptance. Many Christians are taught to accept most scriptural material as fact and for one basic reason—because the church leaders say it is fact. To break that absolute trust in

religious authorities, to examine biblical writings for possible erroneous or conflicting material, or to make interpretations based on one's own ability to discriminate between valid and invalid evidence, is not easy, but it is definitely doable. And when accomplished, one is instilled with a greater confidence that he is beginning to better understand and appreciate the important role biblical scripture plays in Christianity, not for its miracles or its mysticism, but for the ethical and moral messages that impart a sense of decency, and can improve the lives of the believers as well as those with whom they interact.

Believers who are uncomfortable in examining scriptural material objectively are not always the uneducated, and it is not that people lack the mental capacity to think objectively. If they so choose, most Christians are quite capable of examining religious concepts and drawing valid conclusions.

The problem arises when the believer has been programmed as opposed to educated. The programmed person may be likened to a computer. Such individuals are incapable of analyzing any biblical material that is not contained in their programmed conception of their religion. In general, no amount of fact or reason will alter their religious worldview. Their faith justifies their views, and their views justify their faith. Josh Billings summed it up when he wrote, "The trouble with people is not that they don't know, but that they know so much that ain't so."

Much effort has been made to employ the strictest objectivity in analyzing and appraising any Christian concept. Throughout my long experience with the Christian religion, I have been unable to find fault with the ethics and morality taught by Jesus and his followers. However, the New Testament contains numerous paradoxical and otherwise questionable materials. Whether or not this was the result

of subjective interpretation is a matter of opinion, and the inclusion of such questionable material is understandable when one considers the problems inherent in the recording, translation, and interpretation of information from the time of Jesus and down through the centuries. Adding to this problem is the inherent religious or social bias of those individuals that were involved in such activities.

However, the major liability of Christian scripture lies in its employment. Countless unspeakable acts have been justified by the rationalization of scripture and by the biased selection and application of biblical material taken out of context. Jesus recognized this as a basic defect in his religion. He saw hypocrisy as a major problem in Judaism. Jesus warned, time and again, of the evils of hypocrisy, and his religion was only one of many that were afflicted with this human weakness.

Religions provide fertile ground for hypocrisy. Failure to recognize and eliminate this problem in religion has allowed for the gross misuse of institutions and beliefs that are intended for the betterment of mankind. The only way to prevent this flagrant misuse is to recognize the hypocrite, and this can only be accomplished by a thorough understanding of the scriptures; an understanding of their true meaning and intent.

This is best accomplished by the believer's use of his own common sense. To simply defer scriptural interpretations and explanations to "authorities" is to invite trouble. Sir Thomas Browne warned us that, "men have lost their reason in nothing so much as their religion." Unfortunately, the legitimacy and expertise of the authorities are too often taken for granted.

There are very few people in the Christian religion who are incapable of reading and understanding biblical scripture and its wonderful ethical and moral messages. God has no reason to hide His messages in some esoteric or mystical writings. Christians must have faith in their own ability to

interpret straightforward scripture in a straightforward way. If they chose not to do so, then their religion will always be plagued by persons who misuse the scriptures, and by those who blindly accept the leadership of individuals with subjective views and self-serving purposes. “Wisdom is the principle thing; therefore get wisdom; and with all thy getting get understanding.” (Proverbs 4:7)

The author accepts the existence of religion as a part of man’s nature. But I take neither the route of blind faith nor that of the abject cynic. This book is written using views from the middle ground. The author is a Christian by birth and a skeptic by nature. By skeptic is meant someone who says “show me” before he accepts anyone’s religious views or concepts. And the more extraordinary the claim, the more reliable must be the evidence. The objective of skepticism is not to destroy someone’s belief. That’s the objective of the cynic. The skeptic attempts to establish the truth or falsity of any belief by rationally evaluating its quality of proof. Lack of proof does not mean a concept is fallacious, but it is certainly not supportive.

To accept any religious interpretation without a thorough and objective evaluation is to court trouble. The acceptance of religious concepts must be based on solid evidence and sound reasoning—otherwise anything can be a religion. The strange religion-based events seen in the newspapers and on television over the last few decades illustrate the truth of this statement.

One final comment: The author again notes that it is important for the reader to understand that *Dare To Question* is not intended as a narrative. It consists of a compilation of topics, any of which the reader can select at random and concentrate his attention. The use of stand-alone topics necessitates the incorporation of a degree of redundancy that may be disturbing to the reader if this book is read as a narrative.

Chapter 1

FAITH

Development of Religious Beliefs

**“Life is the art of drawing sufficient conclusions
from insufficient premises.”**

Samuel Butler

To assure that the author and the reader are at one with the terminology, it is important that the definitions of such terms as “belief” and “faith” be placed in perspective. The following is a schema of the evolutionary development of ideas or concepts from remote possibilities to absolute (blind) faith:

The first idea or thought is simply a **possibility** that is open for consideration. As more attention is given, the possibility may become a **suggestion**. A suggestion is reached when thoughts lead to a tentative concept.

With more evidence or reasoning, the suggestion becomes an **opinion**. At this stage a **conclusion** may be reached, but one that is still open to debate.

Additional positive reinforcement leads to a **belief**. A belief exhibits varying degrees of confidence and implied certitude. Further reinforcement can lead to a **conviction**, which is a strong persuasion regarding a belief, usually accompanied by explicit certitude.

After additional persuasive input, there is often **faith**. Faith may eventually gain such strength that it becomes what is called **blind faith**. This is an unquestioning faith so absolute that it requires no further proof, for the faith itself is considered proof enough.

Thus, one may define belief as a confidence in an idea or concept that is strong but not absolute. Unlike faith, beliefs are more amendable to change as new situations arise and more convincing evidence becomes available. Beliefs can undergo modification, but rarely for frivolous reasons.

Despite the fact that religious beliefs tend to resist change, their ability to be amended when the need becomes obvious provides the believer with a greater measure of adaptability in a changing world.

Why does one embrace certain beliefs? Why does an individual maintain a set of beliefs over prolonged periods of time?

- One's social and cultural setting plays a major role in the formation and instillation of religious beliefs. The family unit is the primary source of one's religious concepts. A child will invariably begin life with those same religious beliefs that are held by his parents. These beliefs are further augmented by the many similar views proclaimed by friends and relatives. Support is derived from religious instructions and various socio-religious activities. In addition, the maintenance of religious concepts is generally abetted by ancestral ties. What was proven to have worked for our forefathers should also work for us. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."
- Fear of the unknown is another factor in creating and sustaining a religious individual. Since the dawn of time mankind has had to face nature with little or no understanding of how his world works and of how to deal with the many threats associated with living. It was, and still is, natural for humans to seek the aid of supernatural powers to counter those capricious forces of nature. This need forms another basis for religious belief.
- Supporting or augmenting the desire to believe is the element of gullibility. Because most theological concepts are based on myths, miracles and claims of divine inspiration, a significant level of naiveté is often necessary to allow acceptance of such ideas.

- Gullibility is reinforced by superstition. Superstition acts as a preconditioner. It allows the individual to readily accept a doctrine or belief that might otherwise give him pause for thought. Fascination with the mysterious and occult has always intrigued humankind. Mysterious entities such as UFOs, the Devil's Triangle, crop circles, extraterrestrial beings, séances, ghosts, ferries, witches, secret rituals, and poltergeist intrigue many individuals. Stories abound regarding the supernatural. This mind-set provides a major basis for belief in the myths and rituals that form the foundation of today's theologies, from cults to institutionalized religions. The superstitious person is less likely to question ideas or concepts that might appear outlandish to others.
- Religious training also augments religious belief. Many individuals undergo intense indoctrination in the religious concepts that they are born into. Memorization and repetition are primary tools. Unfortunately, this sometimes results in programming rather than educating.
- Companionship is a factor of great importance to many. They need to be part of a group, to be accepted, to be appreciated as an integral part of an organization with similar views. Members of religious groups are generally very social and can provide a sense of belonging. This is particularly important for those individuals who have a difficult time making friends.
- Desire for salvation is often a major factor in an individual's involvement with religion. The promise of immortality has enticed many into joining religious organizations. With few exceptions, human beings have an intense desire to continue living beyond death. Life, despite its many tribulations, is considered superior to a state of nonexistence.

- Guilt, with its threat of punishment in the afterlife, is the burden of many. One of the promises of Christianity is the removal of such guilt. Repent and your transgression will be forgiven. Believe in Jesus and you will be saved. Perform certain actions and your sins will be pardoned. Religion provides a perfect forum for atonement and, thereby, relief from guilt.
- Proselytization, or the active marketing of a religion, is a common means of recruiting members. Forced conversion, which was popular in the past, is seldom used in today's societies. However, institutions such as marriage are still a major factor in religious conversion. There are many believers, both professional and lay, who express a missionary zeal for converting others to their way of thinking. Through today's mass media one frequently encounters such individuals or their messages.
- Alleged proof is a primary factor in instilling religious concepts. Scriptures, dogmas, doctrines, myths, miracles, and the edicts and proclamations of church patriarchs derived by divine revelation are accepted, without question, by many of the religious faithful. Historical evidence enhances one's religious beliefs. Ancient materials such as sacred narratives tell of many miraculous works that have occurred in the past, thereby providing "proof" of the existence and the power of God.
- Religions are often the haven of the ignorant or biased. Many religions have a mind-set that is quite restricted in what is to be believed and whom it will accept. If a religion believes itself to be elitist, it will accept only those who hold similar beliefs or cultural similarities. Such beliefs may be theologically and/or

socially biased toward certain groups or ideas. Radical social groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and the Aryan Nations cloak their antisocial objectives with righteous religious metaphors. But their superior views of themselves and their philosophy often leads to horrific attacks on those they see as inferior or who they perceive as dangerous to their religion or their society. Biblical quotes and scriptural distortions are often used to justify their antisocial activities.

- Nationalism is often a basis for joining a particular religion. Many nations have theocratic governments, i.e., governments that are active supporters of a single institutionalized religion. A nonmember may live in such a state, but these citizens are generally considered as outsiders and are often made to feel uncomfortable or even threatened. In such cases it is usually expedient to join the state religion or to leave the country.
- The opportunity for self-aggrandizement is sometimes an incentive to join a religion and to make religion one's career. The title of reverend or father opens many doors. Opportunities abound for persons who use the position of clergy as a stepping stone into political office or for obtaining a position wherein they may work the system to their advantage. Religion is the perfect environment for such con men and power seekers.
- An important factor in maintaining religious concepts is how well they serve the believer. Most beliefs are designed to give aid and comfort to the faithful. If the believer finds such support in his beliefs, it is very likely that he will continue with those beliefs.
- There is the conception by many of the faithful that belief supersedes reason, that absolute belief in a religious

concept takes precedence over most rational arguments and documented proof to the contrary. Disturbing truths must yield to comforting beliefs and many church “authorities” champion this view.

- One final reason for joining a religion is the desire to become a better person. This is the noblest reason for such participation. A gauge of a religion’s worth is the proportion of its adherents whose primary goal is to upgrade their level of decency. But the majority of the individuals who join a religious group are often those who already possess a high level of decency. This creates the impression that religion produces decent people, when actually it simply attracts such people.

Two caveats should be noted. First, any listing of factors that play a role in enticing people to participate in a religion is certain to be incomplete. The complexity of the circumstances and interactions that are involved in making one a religious believer are too numerous and subtle to ever be completely identified.

Secondly, the factors involved in the causality of religious belief vary greatly from individual to individual. Certain factors may play a predominant role in formulating one individual’s religious preference, while quite different circumstances may influence another’s reason for embracing a religion.

Faith

**“Faith is the substance of things hoped for,
the evidence of things not seen.”**

Hebrews 11:1

The first impression of unquestioning belief is positive. What can be wrong? If an individual is correct in his beliefs, and leads an ethical life, he is guaranteed a place in paradise. And if he is wrong he will simply cease to exist. There will be no regrets for the time spent in following erroneous beliefs. His condition would simply be the same as it was before he was conceived. The believer will suffer no regrets if his beliefs are incorrect, for only two conditions can possibly exist, one positive (paradise) and the other zero (nonexistence). There is no negative.

However, that may be too simplistic. By following the path of unquestioning belief one opens up the door to abuse by others, especially that minority of unscrupulous or self-serving Christians. Catholics failed to detect, and otherwise ignored, the unchristian acts perpetrated by pedophilic priests. Protestants ignore the fact that certain of their clergy divert church monies for their own creature comforts, and other nefarious activities.

There is an interesting pyramid of guilt that must be acknowledged. At the top of this pyramid are the perpetrators. These are the individuals who are conducting the unchristian acts. But supporting these offenders are the church authorities that act to conceal, or simply ignore, such activities. The sin of omission is just as despicable as the sin of commission.

However, the most interesting and disturbing aspect of this pyramid of guilt is its base, a base comprised of those who accept Christian leaders with unquestioning obedience. If this base was composed of a significant number of questioning Christians, the great majority of these despicable activities

would never have taken place. A little questioning can be extremely important in most aspects of Christian belief.

Human beings make all their decisions based on two processes: logic (questioning and reasoning) and emotion (feelings such as intuition, belief or faith). Unlike logic, emotion does not require reasoning. Intuition, belief, and faith are not usually objectively scrutinized. They are simply accepted as an integral part of life.

Belief is a stronger emotion than intuition, and faith is the strongest of all. Thus, faith is an extremely powerful psychological entity. It can be useful in defending against emotional angst and the infiltration of uncomfortable concepts.

But unbridled faith has a significant downside. It can have a stultifying effect on religious thought. Faith can inhibit needed changes in religion, changes necessary for it to reach its full potential. Blind faith is the epitome of absolutism. Such faith inhibits intellectual maturation. For those with complete faith in a religious concept there is no alternative, no middle ground, and no opportunity for compromise.

Winston Churchill once said that in wartime truth is so important that it must be protected by a bodyguard of lies. What holds for truth also holds for faith. Faith is so important in the life of the average individual that it must frequently be protected by a cadre of falsehoods. And these pervarications can be introduced, by the individual or by his religious leaders, either as deliberate acts or by misinterpretations.

Adding to the problem of blind faith is the chance that the individual will become militant in his attempt to assure that his religious views prevail. Such militancy can range from simple street demonstrations to horrendous acts of terrorism. The individual exhibiting blind faith is not inhibited by a conscience, and why should he? He is convinced that his actions are divinely sanctioned. The end justifies the

means, and in assuring that his God-sanctioned objectives are attained, no man, woman, or child is exempt from the consequences of his actions.

An example of unexamined faith took place in Germany in 1934. Shortly after Hitler had taken power, there was a meeting of the entire Nazi party. The keynote speaker was the Deputy Fuhrer, Rudolf Hess. In his address Hess told the party members that they must accept Hitler, not with their minds, but with their hearts. That is, not by reason, but by faith. The majority of the German people were able to develop sufficient faith to overcome any moral trepidation they may have had.

The price paid for such unquestioning faith was worldwide misery and death. Misdirected faith is one of the primary man-made threats to humanity. The history of man is mainly comprised of actions taken by persons possessing a misguided faith in themselves or in other individuals or organizations with questionable views of how society should operate. Unexamined faith is extremely dangerous to the individual and to society in general.

Another example regarding the dangers of blind faith came from the disaster at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. A disenchanting young man had left the compound and obtained employment in a nearby library. One day, prior to the conflagration, a young girl came to the library to visit him. They talked of their friendship and the good times they had shared at the compound. During the conversation, she asked the young man why he had left the Davidians. His answer was that he simply could not accept David Koresh's claim that he was Jesus Christ. Her reply was that she, too, had some doubt regarding his claim, but elected to stay on as a disciple because, for in the remote possibility Koresh's claim was true, she could burn in hell if she left.

What a horrendous distortion of reality! This girl felt duty bound to believe anything, if it was even remotely possible. And anything is remotely possible. To attach validity to beliefs that are extremely unlikely is to believe anything one is told. Such a mind-set is courting tragedy. The young woman died in the Waco conflagration.

All too frequently we hear of the folly that results from overzealous faith. In Guyana, Jim Jones and his followers commit mass suicide. Solar Temple cult members take their lives due to some misguided belief. The members of Heaven's Gate gladly kill themselves in the hope of attaining a new and better level of life by boarding a spaceship located in the tail of the Hale-Bopp comet. Everyday multitudes of people thank God that their prayers are answered, and everyday uncounted numbers die because their faith delayed their seeking secular assistance such as medical attention.

The foolishness will go on. There will always be fanatical fringe elements in religion that will believe anything they are told. Unfortunately, most of those who operate via blind faith do not realize that they may be major supporters of this pathologically inclined fringe element.

Excessive belief is not limited to religion. Everyday millions of people accept, without question, statements from persons or organizations claiming they know how to improve health or amass wealth. Information is taken as gospel, so there is little inclination to research these claims. Such unexamined faith is the mainstay of the swindler, the scam artist, and the unscrupulous businessperson.

The religious faithful should exercise even greater care. Such persons, with their propensity to believe, make easy targets for unscrupulous individuals, and unprincipled people can be found operating both within the system as well as from the outside.

“Pilate saith unto him, ‘What is truth?’” (John 18:38). We teach our children what we were taught. We ask them to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, even though such an action is neither realistic nor possible. That is not to say that lies should replace truth. But there are times when the truth is simply not appropriate.

We place truth on a pedestal and make it appear our first priority, but it is our emotions and our beliefs that actually govern our actions. Why should this be so? It is because the truth often hurts. Truth is certainly the most viable option, but only up to the point where it begins to cause suffering. At this point most humans rely on their emotions. The emotion elicited by a belief can be the ameliorating balm that allows us to function in the face of unacceptable truths.

Our conception of death is the prime example of our reluctance to deal with truth. The fear of the finality of death is innate in mankind. It is a condition or reaction that keeps us from frivolously throwing away our lives. But as creatures that can think abstractly, we pay a price. Because we can contemplate the inevitability and the apparent permanency of death, we become preoccupied with this terminal event. Do we face what appears to be an end to life, or do we look for some way out of this dilemma? For peace-of-mind, most individuals will invariably search for a means of circumventing the permanency of death. This human predication is what led to Voltaire’s classic statement that if there was no God, man would create one.

We should again note the argument put forward by Tertullian for his Christian faith, “I believe because it is absurd.” His reasoning differed little from that of the young Branch Davidian woman.

The propagandists of the Second World War realized early on that the more outlandish the statements, the more likely they were to be believed. If you are going to tell a lie,

tell a big one. But be sure to tell it with unrelenting certitude. Many unprincipled religious leaders are well aware of this axiom.

At some time in their life, many believers experience a crisis of faith, often initiated by a traumatic experience. For example, a person who has devoted his life to his religion is faced with the loss of a loved one. That individual, his friends and relatives, members of his congregation, and clergy all pray avidly for God's intercession. But the loved one dies. The person feels betrayed. After all his devotion to his religion, God had forsaken him at the time He was most needed. This can be a devastating experience and cause the individual to lose his faith in God.

But this loss of faith, while generally very real, is seldom permanent, because the person has based his whole life on his beliefs. Without such trust there is no hope. And without hope, one faces a life of despair. Few people are willing to face such a life and therefore come to some accommodation with their beliefs. They rationalize their situation. They may accept the idea that God had His reasons; that God works in mysterious ways. In the end there is reconciliation, and faith is restored.

Faith is often very effective in controlling fear. Fear occurs when an individual is faced with a lack of understanding of a perceived threat and/or he has little or no hope or support in dealing with a menacing condition.

Fear can be controlled primarily by two means. The first is training. This provides a better understanding of potential problems and furnishes effective ways of dealing with them. The second method for confronting one's fears is through religious faith. This process provides the individual with the belief that he can call upon his god for help.

These two methods of controlling fear are quite compatible, and faith is often employed in conjunction with training. Combining these two methods of allaying fear often proves very successful. Employing both methods simultaneously can have a potentiating effect. Understanding one's fears and learning how to deal with them can be greatly augmented by the belief that some supernatural support is available if all else fails. There is some truth in the saying that "there are no atheists in foxholes."

Faith provides moral support in a world that is often terrifying or otherwise unbearable. Karl Marx referred to religion as the opiate of the masses. This statement was meant as a condemnation of religion, but it is more of a justification. When beings are in great physical pain, they are often given narcotics to relieve their discomfort. When individuals have emotional problems, the medical profession prescribes tranquilizers or antidepressants. Faith and hope are the medicinals of the spirit.

But, unfortunately, the aforementioned also have serious side effects, particularly when abused. The propensity for the abuse of faith is just as common, and just as dangerous, as the abuse of medicinals.

Man's derivation of his religious views is best expressed in Herbert Spencer's comment that "opinion is ultimately determined by the feelings, and not by the intellect." Therefore, faith must be assessed on the basis of both its truth and its emotional value.

But it is essential to keep in mind that it is dangerous to allow faith to take precedence over reason. To do so is to lose contact with reality. Reality is not there to deliberately help or hinder. Like the force of gravity, reality is simply there. If any individual divorces himself from reality, for whatever reason, he must be ready to accept the consequences.

Doubt

**“There lives more faith in honest doubt,
believe me, than in half the creeds.”**

Alfred Lord Tennyson

Various degrees of faith are essential in the lives of most human beings. Concepts and beliefs are rarely absolute, but vary both qualitatively and quantitatively. So faith in events, either secular or religious, will generally be supported by an array of declared truths ranging from valid reasoning and documented truths to pure flights of fancy.

Man has been endowed with two methods for dealing with life in a fickle and challenging world. He has faith, which provides him with comfort and hope. But he also has doubt, which warns him of possible problems that should be addressed.

Christian leadership often acts to discredit the latter. Doubt, they claim, is a sign of a lack of faith. But they are wrong. Doubt is often the first step in establishing the degree of truth in any claim. If any Christian is admonished by the accusation that, because he asks questions regarding a religious tenet he must lack faith, he should ask the accuser why such beliefs must be protected from any request for a rational explanation. And a reasonable clarification does not include such replies as, “Because God works in mysterious ways.” If religious beliefs are to be accepted with no critical evaluation, then anything—anything—can be claimed as a valid religious precept.

Doubt is not evil. Jesus frequently expressed doubt about his world and his religion. Such doubt is personified in Jesus’ dying question, “Lord, why has thou forsaken me?” Doubts were expressed many times by his disciples. Their evaluation of most such doubts only resulted in the strengthening of their beliefs.

If a belief is poorly founded, then there is every reason to fear its being questioned. But well-founded beliefs cannot be destroyed by questioning. A Christian who fears anyone who questions his beliefs is, by that very act, demonstrating either his lack of understanding, or his subliminal doubts, of the very concepts he protects so vigorously.

Unquestioning faith leads to a *status quo* condition that inhibits intellectual maturation. It keeps the believer in a condition of child-like acceptance. Newborn humans, with no experience in the procedure of living, must go through a process of maturation in order to understand their world and to be successful in the art of living. Parents make every effort to assure that necessary degree of maturation. If such critical development is not attained, the individual will continue to remain uneducated in dealing with the vicissitudes of life, and he, as well as those with whom he interacts, will suffer the consequences.

Without man's propensity to doubt, the human race would have remained in the dark ages. If, for example, Copernicus had not doubted Ptolemy's theory that the earth was the center of the universe, astronomy would have been set back countless years. And the same can be said of Einstein's questioning of the completeness of Newton's theory of our natural world.

Doubt is a vital factor in man's well-being. It forces us to question. It saves lives and promotes a safer world. It directs us to search for the truth, to ferret out the erroneous, and to distinguish between reality and fantasy. Unquestioning believers should heed Horace Walpole's warning: "When people will not weed their own minds, they are apt to be overrun with nettles."

The planners and builders of the ill-fated *Titanic* held the unquestioned belief that their creation was unsinkable. Think of how many lives would have been saved if even a small

number of those involved in the design and constructing this ship had cultivated the ability to doubt, to ask questions about the flaws in the ship's design that were only acknowledged after the tragedy had occurred.

Augustine fostered the view that one must first believe in order to understand biblical material. He argued that the scriptures could not be fully understood and appreciated unless one first exhibits unquestioning faith in the validity of such writings. The author of this book regards Augustine's view as completely irrational. Augustine's concept is flawed because he had his priorities reversed. One must first understand the scriptures before one can believe.

Truth, like progress, is most always arrived at through processes initiated, not by unquestioning belief, but by nagging doubt. As Francis Bacon so aptly stated, "If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties." I have followed Bacon's advice.

The most dangerous people in this world are those religious individuals who exhibit faith without some doubt. Think about it! If it wasn't for doubt, a great number of the fanatic faithful in the world's population would be strapping explosives to their bodies and blowing up all those who do not share that faith. It is doubt—not religious faith—that prevents most human beings from acting so foolish. The suicide bomber is a believer, not a doubter. A degree of contrariety keeps man's mind focused on the most valid answers and prevents his drift into a fool's paradise.

Two+Two=Five

“It is a remarkable fulfillment of the vision that the human mind can know reality and test this knowledge against experience.”

Heinz Pagels

Around a hundred generations ago a shepherd fell asleep in a field. As he slept he dreamed that an angel spoke to him, telling him that $2 + 2 = 5$. Believing this to be a divinely inspired message, he rushed back to tell his family and friends. They, too, believed this to be a message from God and they began to spread the word.

Soon many were believers. The faithful then passed on this belief to their progeny, and they to their progeny. So on it went down through the ages. The belief was greatly strengthened by the fact that it was old. It was part of the wisdom of the ancients, the faith of their ancestors.

But one day someone in this circle of the faithful questioned this sacred tenet. He said, “I believe $2 + 2 = 4$.” “Impossible!” exclaimed the true believers. Cries of heresy and blasphemy were heard. “This cannot be. Everybody knows that $2 + 2 = 5$. Throughout the ages it has always been so.”

Then the questioner picked up two stones and, placing them on a table, asked how many stones? “Two,” the believers replied. Then he repeated the process and again asked how many stones were on the table. “Four,” they replied. “Then $2 + 2$ does equal 4,” said the heretic.

The faithful were stunned. They now had to choose between the truth and their sacred belief. Despite the wrenching guilt that comes from the loss of a cherished belief, a few of the faithful chose to accept the truth. But most found it much too difficult to reject the teaching of their parents and their friends of similar faith. They preferred the traditional views of their ancestors. They remained faithful

to their ancient concept. And for the most part the faithful lived a satisfying life, comforted by the thought that they had held to their belief regardless of evidence to the contrary.

This fable raises a most difficult question: Is it better for man to remain faithful to ideas that have no validity regarding evidence and reason, but gives the believer a feeling of hope and well-being, or is it best to accept the truth, which provides a better means for dealing with reality but may reveal aspects of life that are unsettling? This is the difficult choice that human beings must face.

What If?

“Is not this the carpenter’s son?”

Matthew 13:55

How would our world have differed if there had been no mystical aspect to the Jesus story? Let us take some time to examine the differences and similarities as seen through the eyes of a Christian believer and a Christian skeptic. The latter is an individual committed to following the ethical and moral teaching of Jesus but who has little interest in the myths and rituals that constitute the liturgical basis of formal Pauline Christianity.

The Christian believer sees a miraculous and wonderful birthing scenario with a brilliant star, a virgin birth, angels, and visiting dignitaries bearing gifts. He sees a holy man, Jesus, emerge into history with the objective of warning the world to prepare for the imminent coming of the kingdom of God. The believer hears and accepts Jesus’ great ethical and moral teachings. The believer also accepts as true the stories of the many miracles performed by this man. He sees Jesus making enemies of the clergy, eventually leading to his arrest, trial, and execution. The believer considers the high point of his beliefs to be the resurrection of Jesus. His conception of Jesus is as a God, the Son of God, a member of a Holy Trinity, a Messiah, a prophet, or a great teacher of righteousness sent by God.

The Christian skeptic does not subscribe to the miraculous birth of Jesus and the majority of the myths and miracles associated with his life story. Most such skeptics accept, without question, the value of Jesus’ ethical and moral teachings. They see Jesus as a man whose mission was limited to “the lost sheep of Israel,” a man that was an annoyance to the conservative clergy of his time, and whose claim of being a descendant of the House of David

(a treasonous claim under Roman law) brought about his arrest and execution by the Roman authorities. The skeptic sees Jesus' body removed from his tomb and buried by some of his followers, who then claimed resurrection.

And how would the world differ if either one were correct in their interpretation of the Jesus story? It would differ very little. The principle guidelines for decency, for the majority of human beings, are those same ethical and moral codes emphasized by Jesus. These principles for living were not invented by Jesus. He was simply reemphasizing what most of his listeners had already heard many times. But as a millenarian he was introducing a sense of urgency, the need to prepare for the imminent coming of God's kingdom on earth. The rest of the Jesus story is commentary regarding his instructions on how to lead a life that would ensure one's salvation. It was only later that Paul preempted Jesus' teachings and substituted the idea that belief in a divine Jesus was the primary requirement for salvation.

Whether Jesus was a human with an important message on living, or a God, or messenger of God sent to teach righteousness is of little importance. Even without religious input, most human beings are aware of what is required of them to lead a decent life. Most of us will probably succeed in doing so, but with varying degrees of success. It remains to be seen how many people require the fear of God in order to be decent human beings.

There is no substantial evidence for or against the idea that belief in the myths and miracles of the Jesus story adds any significant degree of efficacy to living an ethical and moral life such as that advocated by this charismatic teacher from Nazareth.

It should be noted that it is not the ethical and moral teachings, but rather the belief in the myths and rituals of Christianity, that is essential for the survival of this religion. The ethical and moral teachings are those required to

lead a decent Christian life, but they have little to do with maintaining Christian faith. The faith is maintained by the constant reassurance of the existence of God. And for many Christians this requires an unquestioning belief in the myths and miracles found in the scriptures. Remove the myths and miracles—the proof of God’s existence—and the religion fails.