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"Christianity declares ••• that the order, diversity, the intricate interdependence and beauty of the natural world have been created by the living and self-existent God •• "

Christianity True to the Way Things Are

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Christianity claims that the Bible explains the world in which we live, tells us of the origin and meaning of man's existence, gives us a basis for knowledge and for understanding the difference between good and evil, shows us how to live in this world, provides answers to the problems we face as humans, and offers us a hope for the future which lends a purpose to our life now. Before such claims can be examined, there is an important objection that must be considered.

Some feel that it is unnecessary and unhelpful for the Christian to think about questions concerning the nature and meaning of the world, of knowledge, of man, of good and evil, et cetera. They would say, "Surely these are the questions that philosophy deals with, and Christianity has nothing to do with philosophy." They might continue: "Philosophy is abstract - for intellectuals only. Philosophers ask questions, in language that cannot be understood by the majority of people, concerning issues about which no ordinary human being thinks. Equally, they give unintelligible answers." "No," they might say, "Christianity is not like philosophy. Christianity is an affair of the heart, like marriage. The questions it deals with are practical questions: "Do I love God or don't I?"; "Will I humble myself before God and acknowledge I am a sinner or not?"; "Will I accept the gospel of Christ's death and resurrection or not?"

Some would go even further and argue that it is dangerous and unspiritual for Christians to get involved in such issues and would quote Paul: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ." (Colossians 2:8, NIV); and: "For it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate. Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe,'" (1 Corinthians 1:19-21, NIV) "Paul," they would argue, "says that for the Christian to discuss questions about existence and meaning is to abandon the gospel and resort to the methods of the world, of philosophy. Further, the simplicity of the gospel is lost and there is a failure to depend upon the power of the Holy Spirit to convert men's hearts,"

These are very serious criticisms, and it is important to answer them.

First, Paul is not saying that the gospel is literally foolish, but that this world, the world in rebellion against God, thinks that the gospel is foolish and that, in contrast, its own philosophy is wise. Second, Paul goes on to say that the gospel that men think is folly is, in fact, wiser than the wisdom of men. In other words, it is the non-Christian thinking or philosophy which is, in truth, foolish, and the Christian message which is the only true wisdom.

It is helpful to compare the statements in 1 Corinthians 1 with Romans 1:18-25, where Paul says something very similar. There Paul argues that the universe around us clearly declares God's existence and power and that men are without excuse if they do not acknowledge this. However, men refuse to have God in their knowledge and think that this refusal to acknowledge God is wisdom. In reality, their thinking is foolish, because they worship some part of the creation rather than God, and point to it rather than to God as the cause of life and the means of understanding man's place and purpose in the world.

The thinking of the non-Christian, no matter how wise and sophisticated it may appear at points, is foolish at base. For only the Biblical message makes sense of the way things are in the world. If men refuse to acknowledge God, they can no longer make sense of the world. They have exchanged truth for a lie and worship and serve creation rather than the Creator. Therefore, the Christian ought to be prepared to answer the questions that philosophy asks, that all men and women everywhere ask, because the Christian is not making up answers to the questions; rather, the Bible itself gives the answers to the questions. "We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ." (2 Corinthians 10:5, RSV) The Biblical answers fit like a glove on the hand of the way things are, whereas, to change the metaphor, the answers of non-Christian philosophy fit like a square peg in a round hole.

The basic questions concern: 1. the nature of knowledge; 2. the nature and origin of life; 3. the nature of human life; 4. the issue of morality; 5. the problem of suffering and evil; 6. the purpose of existence and the meaning of history; and 7. how man should live.

As we examine each of these questions and see the Biblical answer, we will compare it with the problems of the 20th Century western society's basic views.

1. The question of knowledge. How do we know? How can we be sure that what we think we know is accurate? Our society's pervading philosophy is humanism. Humanism answers this question by appealing to human reason: man starting from himself has to work out all the answers. David Hume, Scottish philosopher and historian, stated: "Reason appears in possession of the throne, prescribing laws and imposing maxims, with an absolute sway and authority."¹ This belief in the power of reason is basic to our whole modern western society. However Hume himself acknowledged that, beginning from man alone, the value of reason could never be demonstrated, nor the accuracy of one's sense perceptions, nor sure knowledge even of one's own physical existence, nor of the objective existence of the material world around us, nor of cause and effect. In a famous passage Hume acknowledged, however, that, though his reliance on reason as the basis for all knowledge could not be shown to be adequate, yet he would not despair:

Should it be asked me whether I sincerely assent to this argument which I have been to such pains to inculcate, whether I be really one of those skeptics who hold that all is uncertain, I should reply...that neither I nor any other person was ever sincerely and constantly of that opinion ...I dine, I play backgammon, I converse and am merry with my friends, and when, after three or four hours'

amusement. I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold and strained and ridiculous that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any further. Thus, the skeptic still continues to reason and believe, though he asserts that he cannot defend his reason by reason, and by the same rule, he must assent to the principle concerning the existence of body, though he cannot pretend by any argument of philosophy to maintain its veracity.²

In the 20th Century this problem that arises from trusting in reason has led many thinkers to a position of complete despair. Man's reason was made into his god - but it has become a corpse around his neck reminding him constantly of the decay of meaning, of the death of value in human existence.

The problem has arisen because man is finite; he is small; he cannot from his own very little and limited grasps of reality generate sufficient knowledge to answer all the questions, or understand the whole of reality. Everything seems so big and yet man is so little; how can he be sure that any of his knowledge is accurate?

For the Christian, man's finiteness is not a problem, We can freely acknowledge that we are small and that our understanding is limited. But God exists, and His knowledge is complete; everything in the universe is known to Him. God has revealed Himself to us in his word, the Bible, and this word, though it does not tell us everything, tells us truly. We have a sure foundation for knowledge in God's word, and further God assures us that He has created us in His image to understand the world in which we live; so that our perception of the world is accurate. Reason, when it stands under God's revelation, becomes a servant of great value, which can be used to explore and reflect on the world in which we live. However, when reason is made master, it is a tyrant that leads man into the blackest night of ignorance and confusion.

2. The nature and origin of life. Modern humanist and secular thought in our society is tied up in a single parcel with the theory of evolution. At its crudest, this can be stated as the belief that all of the things we see in the world around us have developed by chance over enormous periods of time; that there is no God who created the world, no first cause that has brought into being the extraordinary diversity of the natural world. This belief requires us to accept that order has developed from disorder, that chance processes have given rise to the immensely complex and interdependent web of life, that matter has given rise to living things, inanimate life to thinking life, thinking life to self conscious life in man.

The irrationality of a system that requires man to believe $2 + 2 = 5$ not just once but thousands of times in the history of the universe is obvious. Christianity declares, in contrast, that the order, diversity, the intricate interdependence and beauty of the natural world have been created by the living and self-existent God whom the Bible reveals to us. Order, diversity and beauty are thus the result of God's creative activity, not chance processes and natural selection. Scripture sees this truth as self-evident, that it is simply a matter of common sense to look at the world and realize that it is the product of a Creator. David wrote: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands," (Psalm 19:1, NIV) and Paul "since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse." (Romans 1:20, NIV)

When we look at a beautiful painting, we ask, "Who painted that?" and we praise its creator; in the same way, when we look at the universe, we ought to seek to know and praise its maker. "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (Psalm 8:1, NIV)

3. *The nature of human life.* Bertrand Russell sums up the dilemma that non-Christian thought is confronted with as it applies evolutionary dogma to man:

Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; ... his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms ... no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; ... all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins.³³

Russell has to acknowledge that man is different, that he is unique in this world; that his moral character, creativity, love, heroism, thought and devotion to other men set him apart from all else that he sees; but Russell, like all modern secular philosophy, has no explanation for this uniqueness. Some thinkers like Russell acknowledge the difference in man, but cannot explain it. Others try to deny the uniqueness of man and insist that man's only difference is his complexity. Man, for them, is a piece of complicated chemistry, a physical organism like the mosquito and the mouse, but so complex that he can be compared to a digital analysis computer. Perry London, an American psychotherapist, appeals to this model for man, and then acknowledges that this means that, like a computer, man is completely insignificant, for, if he is only mechanics, he has no responsibility whatsoever for anything he does. In the end man's difference is illusory; the things that we experience every day - love, commitment, choice, creativity, rationality, et cetera, have no meaning at all: they are fleeting shadows on the wall, tricks of sunlight, thrown up by the complicated nature of the brain.⁴

The Christian faith, however, gives an explanation for the uniqueness of man.. Man, male and female, is made in the image of God. The infinite person, God, has made other beings, men and women, who are finite and yet are persons like Himself. We are reflections of God's nature. "God is love," says the Apostle John. We are made to love God and to love one another. God is righteous. We are made to distinguish between good and evil, to judge what is right and to choose the good and live it. God is the Creator. We are like Him, made responsible for every choice we make, made to create life, relationships, beauty, order. God is a communicator: Scripture speaks of communication between the Father, Son and Spirit both in this age and before the world was made. We are made to communicate in language with one another and with God. God is a God of order and not chaos, sense and not nonsense, reason not absurdity. We are made as rational persons, called to reflect on our life, and the world in which we live. All the aspects of our experience which set us apart are the characteristics of personality. Rather than lamenting that our experience of personality is an illusion in an impersonal universe, we can rejoice in it because, as little persons, we are at home in a universe made by the three personal God.

4. *Morality.* How can we know what is good and evil? Perry London, mentioned above, admits that if man is a machine, it is meaningless to speak of good and evil or moral responsibility. We do not accuse computers of criminal behaviour, nor do we bring the animals (from which we are said to have evolved) to stand trial for breaking the law. If man is simply a mechanism, a complex physical organism, a relative of the tree rat and the whale, why do we hold him responsible for his actions and regard him as a moral agent? London agrees that good and evil and moral responsibility are imaginary; though men, he recognizes, seem to need them to live meaningfully. He goes on to suggest ways of programming people to create a better society, forgetting that the term *better* is, on his own

admission, quite meaningless. We find a theory about reality and man's behaviour which cannot explain the common factor in all human societies that good and evil are seen to be distinct, and people are regarded as moral agents. In our own day, however, we see the terrible fruit of a philosophy which denies any final distinction between good and evil. We see it in the West, where the slaughter of unborn babies and handicapped newborns is called compassionate medical care. We see it in the communist world, most strikingly in Cambodia, where between a third and a half of the population were killed in the name of a pure Marxist revolution. *Time* magazine commented on this turning of a whole nation into a concentration camp:

Where the insane reversal of value lies is in the belief that notions like "purity" or "corruption" can have any meaning outside an absolute system of values: one that is resistant to the tinkering at will by governments or revolutionary groups. The Cambodian revolution in its own degraded "purity," has demonstrated what happens when the Marxian denial of moral absolutes is taken with total seriousness by its adherents. Pol Pot and his friends decide what good is, what bad is, and how many corpses must pile up before this rapacious demon of "purity" is appeased.

In the West today, there is a pervasive consent to the notion of moral relativism, a reluctance to admit that absolute evil can and does exist. This makes it especially difficult for some to accept the fact that the Cambodian experience is something far worse than a revolutionary aberration. Rather, it is the deadly logical consequence of an atheistic, man-centred system of values, enforced by fallible human beings with total power, who believe, with Marx, that morality is whatever the powerful define it to be and, with Mao, that power grows from gun barrels. By no coincidence the most humane Marxist societies in Europe today are those that, like Poland and Hungary, permit the dilution of their doctrine by what Solzhenitsyn has called "the great reserves of mercy and sacrifice" from a Christian tradition.⁵

Christianity does not have this problem of being uncertain of what is good and evil, nor a reluctance to admit that real evil can and does exist. No, God's own character is one of perfect goodness, justice and holiness. His character defines for us what is good and right, and all behaviour must be measured against His character and in the light of the final judgment, when all the actions, words and thoughts of men will be seen for what they are.

God's law in Scripture expresses God's righteousness, and man, made to reflect that righteousness, is called to obey God's law and judge his life against it. All men are created with a moral conscience, the law of God written on the heart, but this can become confused or hardened, either by cultural tradition or by the individual's sinful choices. Beyond this, however, we have an absolute basis for knowing what is good and what is evil, for we can check all man's ideas against God's character and law. This means, too, that the Christian has a firm ground to stand on when confronted with the immorality of those in power, either in a democracy or in a dictatorship, or with the will of the 51 percent in a western society where morality changes with the consensus of the day.

In addition, rather than being embarrassed by the doctrine of judgment, we should rejoice in it as one of the glories of the Christian faith. All men feel in their hearts that some things are right and others wrong, though unable to explain ultimately why this is so or even give final significance to the notions of good and evil and moral responsibility. The Christian can say with confidence that there is a difference and that in the end, at the judgment, all evil will be exposed and found wanting.

5. *The problem of suffering and evil.* Further, because modern philosophy has no final means of discerning between good and evil or of granting moral significance to man, then, equally, it has a hard time understanding suffering, sickness and death. In the end our culture has to say that suffering is normal, a part of reality. There is good and evil, light and darkness, life and death, kindness and cruelty - all are aspects of the whole.

Some would go further and argue that suffering is a necessary part of the evolutionary process - natural selection means that the strong survive and the weak get crushed. Development and improvement on the earth have only come about by this mechanism of change. Suffering becomes a good, a necessary sacrifice of some for the benefit of all. Teilhard de Chardin sees the evolutionary process this way, and Jacques Monod is wistful at the loss of natural selection in the human race. Modern medicine makes it possible for the weak to survive and pass on their genes to future generations. This stops the process of evolutionary improvement of the human race. This is why some lament and demand that handicapped babies, the mentally retarded, the unwanted and fragile elderly be eliminated: they would no longer be able to breed, nor would they be a drain on society.

The vision thus opened up should be horrifying to the Christian, who must see suffering and death as abnormal and unnatural, as, in fact, all human beings feel in their hearts in some situation or moment. Until they become hardened, little children are appalled at death and see it as horribly unnatural rather than as simply an aspect of life. The Christian knows that this feeling is true to the way things are, for the Bible tells us that we are living in a fallen world, that sin entered the world through man's rebellion against God, and that suffering, sickness, pain and death come in its train. This means that suffering and death are abnormal, that the world was originally good, but now it is marred and broken. Christ could be sorrowful, compassionate and angry when faced with pain and death, even though He 'is God. He could be angry and sad because He did not create them; rather, they resulted from man's rejection of Him and His law. The Christian, too, must follow Christ in seeing all suffering as abnormality, and rather than consenting to the brutality of the age toward the weak and needy, should reflect God's character of concern for the widow, the orphan, the broken in body and mind, the unborn, the old, the dying'.

6. *The purpose of existence and the meaning of history.* Every man feels that his life has some purpose and that history must be going somewhere. However, the question arises, Does he know why his life ought to have purpose or what that purpose should be? Can he be sure history is going somewhere, and where it is going? People, of course, invent all kinds of meanings for themselves and for the human race as a whole; a better lot for all, personal affluence, gods and religions of various sorts, peace for the world ... Many of these are refuges from facing up to what Bertrand Russell sees as the ultimate reality of history: the death of the individual and the death of the solar system. How can one avoid the consequence that all is meaningless if Russell is right? Neither the individual life nor the history of the human race has any final value on such a view, and Russell is honest enough to acknowledge this. The earlier quotation from Russell goes on: "Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built. ... How, in such an alien and inhuman world, can so powerless a creature as man preserve his aspirations untarnished?"⁶ Russell has no real answer to this question, and, of course, cannot have, once he has denied the existence of the God who has revealed Himself to us in the Bible.

The Bible tells us that our longing for purpose and for meaning to history has been placed within us by God, and that this longing can only be satisfied by our turning to God. We have been made to love God, to reflect His character, and enjoy Him forever; to love, enjoy

and serve one another; to enjoy and have dominion over the creation as God's vice regents. We are living in a fallen and twisted world where sin has brought enmity and brokenness between ourselves and God, within our own hearts, between ourselves and others, between us and the creation, within creation itself. Everything is touched by sin and death. Yet God in His love has sent His own Son into the world to redeem us and the whole creation from sin and death. Through the work of Christ, by faith in Him, we are restored to fellowship with God, we begin to be made whole within, and we are called to exercise our dominion under God over the whole of life and over all the brokenness which sin has produced in ourselves and in the world. We are called, in fact, to be the firstfruits of the new creation which will transform everything at Christ's return. Christ Himself has already been raised physically from the dead. God promises us that the goal of history is the physical resurrection of all who believe in Christ and the making of a new heaven and a new earth in which there is only righteousness. The brokenness of every aspect of life will be removed and everything made new. At the same time the devil and all evildoers will be judged forever. Our own individual lives are given eternal significance and history is coming to a glorious conclusion.

7. *How man should live.* Our age confronts us with several alternatives, none of them satisfactory. The government decides what is right for man; The majority decides what is right; or the individual decides on the basis of his or her own feeling of what is good for him or her. Again, there are no absolutes, and we see on every side the resultant confusion and sorrow in people's lives and homes.

God promises us liberty if we obey his law. The law of God, as we saw in an earlier section, is a reflection of God's character. Man is made to be like God. The law, then, describes how man should live. It is not a set of arbitrary rules imposed by an angry God; rather, it is fitted to human life. James writes: "the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it - he will be blessed in what he does." {James 1:25, NIV) Similarly, the Psalms describe God's law as being a lamp to our feet to stop us falling into dangerous pits and bogs. If we obey God's law, we shall enjoy life. God's truth sets us free to live. We can see this in any area of life: If we obey God's commandments about marriage, for example, then we will enjoy marriage. If we do not obey his commandments, then the resulting chaos and unhappiness in our society are only too obvious. Again, Christianity fits.

Coming back to our starting point, the Christian need not be afraid of philosophy or the questions that philosophy raises. No, the Christian faith, because it is the true wisdom revealed by God, is wiser than man's wisdom, If we look into Scripture, it answers the questions that are raised by our life in this world. Christianity is true to the way things are.

¹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1896) pp:183-187

² *ibid*

³ Bertrand Russell, *Why I am not a Christian*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1957

⁴ See Perry London, *Modes and Morals of Psychotherapy* (New York: Holt, 1964) p.169ff

⁵ D. Aikman, "Cambodia: An experiment in Genocide" *TIME*, July 31, 1978, pp39-40 Used with permission of the publisher.

⁶ Bertrand Russell, *Why I am not a Christian*