

## EPILOGUE

### 1. Tentative Conclusions

This book has considered various ways in which science and religion respond to our questions about the origins of our kind, the nature of the world, the workings of our minds, our sense of right and wrong, and our ultimate destiny. The answers are incomplete and often contradictory. The following conclusions are therefore only tentative.

#### *(i) Truth is an amalgam of the real world and the mind of man.*

What we know is a combination of both experience and interpretation. Knowledge does not occur without imagination. In science, understanding something requires formulating hypotheses and then testing them against reality. In religion, understanding requires attuning our behavior to some purpose for which there is as yet no empirical evidence. Religion typically depends on a community of like-minded believers. Yet it need not. Each individual can pattern her or his life on a personal ideal.

Scientism, the concept that the empirical methods of science provide the only road to truth, is unhelpful. To think that everything which cannot be presently explained is illusion is to look at the world with blinders on our eyes. Something is an illusion if there is a better explanation, not if there is as yet no explanation. At present we have no clear understanding of consciousness or free will. This does not mean that they are illusory. The tendency to conclude that something is “nothing but” what we already know is a dangerous mixture of arrogance and foolishness.

Many are the levels of interpretation. Gilbert Ryle described the difficulty of understanding a game of chess without any concept of either “chess” or “game.” Suppose a scientist observes the moves of the game on a screen without the players being visible. He or she quickly infers that the moves are rigidly determined by rules that are specific to each piece: the bishop is limited to diagonal moves, the rook to vertical and horizontal moves, etc. After finding out that human players are actually moving the pieces, the scientist commiserates with them:

Every move that you make ... is governed by unbreakable rules.... The whole course of what you tragically dub your ‘game’ is remorselessly

pre-ordained; nothing in it takes place which cannot be shown to be governed by one or other of the iron rules. Heartless necessity dictates the play, leaving no room in it for intelligence or purpose. True, I am not yet competent to explain every move that I witness by the rules that I have so far discovered. But it would be unscientific to suppose that there are inexplicable moves. There must therefore be further rules, which I hope to discover, and which will satisfactorily complete the explanations I have inaugurated.<sup>1</sup>

Ryle suggests that physical rules may “govern” events, but they do not necessarily “ordain” anything. This is playing with words, but it does indicate that causality operates at different levels.

The laws of the world are our interpretations of what happens. These laws exist only in the human mind or in the mind of some other conscious agent. What we perceive is a creative interaction with the world.

The universe is made of stories  
not of atoms<sup>2</sup>

Nothing is certain. What we predict for the morrow is based on our prior experience with the regularities of reality. Such predictions are twice uncertain. They assume that the regularity we have observed in the past will continue into the future. Furthermore, they assume the very process that we used to infer the regularity is the correct way to predict the future because similar inductions have worked before.

Nowhere is the interaction between mind and world more intense than in the creation of a personal narrative. Our past needs a story to explain it, and our future needs an ideal to be emulated. Religious believers fit their lives to the narratives of the great teachers and to the ideas contained within their teachings. In this manner, we may journey to paradise with Muhammad, or ride the great wave of being with the Buddha. When we insist on what is right despite the consequences, we can model our actions on Luther’s “Here I stand.” Scientists also have their narratives. When results are not first accepted, we can claim our truth with Galileo’s “And yet it moves.”

An underlying pattern is that knowledge increases. Everything new that we learn contributes to the understanding of the universe. This story does not

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<sup>1</sup> Ryle, G. (1949). *The concept of mind*. London: Hutchinson's University Library. (p. 76).

<sup>2</sup> Rukeyser, M. (1968). *The speed of darkness*. New York: Random House. (p 111).

work if everything is already known, and then made available to us in heaven. As the character Hannah Jarvis in Tom Stoppard's play *Arcadia* says

Believe in the after, by all means but not the life. Believe in God, the soul, the spirit, the infinite, believe in angels if you like, but not in the great celestial get-together for an exchange of views. If the answers are in the back of the book, I can wait, but what a drag. Better to struggle on knowing that failure is final.<sup>3</sup>

***(ii) Many are the ways to religious insight.***

Many years ago in the West, the two sources of truth were the Holy Scriptures and the Real World: that which God revealed and that which God created. Although it has considered the Judeo-Christian Bible more extensively than other sacred writings, this book has made a point of quoting from the scriptures of many different religions. What is revealed differs from one religion to the next. Contradictions occur even within the same set of scriptures. Understanding requires interpretation. No one religion can be true. Why should what is divinely revealed to one culture be truth and to another culture only myth?

Apologists for religion typically attempt to reconcile one set of Holy Scriptures to what science proposes as true in the real world. Such efforts are usually not convincing. They often leave us with a "god of the gaps," who fills in for what we have not yet figured out, or a "god of the laws," who created the principles that science has induced.

Trying to reconcile more than one religion to the findings of science becomes impossible because of the contradictions among the different doctrines. Religions tend to believe in immortality. This leads in the West to resurrection and in the East to reincarnation, neither of which is compatible with empirical science.

Each religion is adamant that it is right and all the rest are wrong. Christian salvation requires believing in Christ. Does damnation await all those who have never heard of Christ because they lived before his teachings or beyond the reach of his gospel? Do Christians have no hope of Paradise because they believe in a tripartite God and not the one God of the prophet Muhammad? Is nirvana unattainable unless we follow the teachings of the Buddha?

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<sup>3</sup> Stoppard, T. (1993). *Arcadia*. London: Faber & Faber. (p. 75-76).

Despite their differences, however, many scriptures do have common ground. All believe in justice. All recommend compassion. All suggest that detachment from desire can lead to tranquility. The different scriptures provide completely different views of the transcendent, but remarkably similar advice on how to behave.

The scriptures were written many years ago by wise men and women who thought a lot about how we should live our lives. They illustrated their precepts with stories, legends, histories, and parables. Most of what they wrote is well worth reading. Study of the scriptures can lead to insight into how we should act. Nevertheless, we should not accept the advice of scripture without subjecting it to disputation, qualification and interpretation. Some of what the scriptures recommend is wrong. Scriptures should not be learned by rote but should be properly understood. Literal interpretations of scripture provide an impoverished view of the transcendent.

And the stories are stories.

A man is not, I think, a professing Christian unless he both proposes to live according to Christian moral principles and associates his intention with thinking of Christian stories; but he need not believe that the empirical propositions presented by the stories correspond to empirical facts.<sup>4</sup>

The stories invest the ideas with something beyond simple meaning. Matthew Arnold suggested Goethe's idea of *Aberglaube*: the belief in something beyond what is verifiable by logic or experience.<sup>5</sup> This is the emotional content of religious belief, the metaphorical magic of the stories.

### ***(iii) Two opposing goals can organize our lives.***

One human goal is to fulfill our inheritance: to make of ourselves something worthwhile, to work out our individual destinies. Natural selection requires

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<sup>4</sup> Braithwaite, R. B. (1955). *An empiricist's view of the nature of religious belief*. Cambridge UK: University Press. . (p 27).

<sup>5</sup> Arnold, M. (1873, popular edition 1883). *Literature & dogma: An essay towards a better apprehension of the Bible*. London: Smith, Elder (p. 58). Arnold notes that the German word does not have all the negative connotations associated with "superstition," which is its typical translation. Goethe claimed that *Aberglaube* is the poetry of life: Goethe, W. (1823, edited by Schmidt, E. & Suphau, B., 1907) *Maximen und Reflexionen*«, nach den Handschriften des Goethe- und Schiller Archivs. Weimar: Verlag der Goethe-Gesellschaft (p. 31).

that we compete and survive. The other goal is to negate our desires: to link our ambitions to a more general purpose, to attain union with the absolute. Religion requires that we seek the end of life rather than be propelled from its beginnings. Both goals entail striving. We can strive to be ourselves and accomplish greatness, or we can strive to lose ourselves and attain salvation.

Both ideas play out in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The individual goal is highlighted in the last piece of advice given by Polonius to his son Laertes, the culmination of his flight of aphorisms:

This above all: to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.<sup>6</sup>

We should not trust this advice. Polonius is a pompous hypocrite who spies on everyone, even his own son and daughter. Laertes takes not the advice to heart. He later joins in the plot to kill Hamlet, acting falsely by poisoning the tip of his dueling foil.

Being true to one's nature is common advice: finding yourself, following your dream, doing it your way. The problem is that we do not really know ourselves. And different levels of the self may have different goals.

The alternative goal is to surrender one's self to a greater good. Here, the difficulty is that we do not know the greater good. We are often led to disaster by those who claim to understand what should be done. Before being sent to England, Hamlet watches the forces of Norway on their way to battle for a plot of land that is not worthy of their death.<sup>7</sup> When human visions of the greater good are not to be trusted, perhaps we should align ourselves to divine rather than to human goals. Toward the end of the play, Hamlet reconciles himself to a purpose beyond his comprehension.

There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will.<sup>8</sup>

Yet Shakespeare undercuts even this idea. Hamlet immediately follows this realization by a description of how he has taken revenge on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and sent them to their death. If the divine purpose will work out its own proper ends, what need is there of human mercy or morality?

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<sup>6</sup> Shakespeare, W. (1601). *Hamlet* I:3 lines 78-80.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, IV:4 lines 59-64

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, V:2 lines 10-11

These are quotations from literature rather than from scripture. However, works like *Hamlet* have attained the level of secular scripture.<sup>9</sup> They are worth studying for what they can tell us of ourselves. Their teachings come from the imaginative interplay between the reader and the text, or between the viewer and the action. Religious scriptures should be treated in the same way as literature. They carry great truths. Yet they should be interpreted imaginatively rather than dogmatically.

***(iv) The numinous is independent of organized religion.***

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor* is the touchstone for any interpretation of the relations between personal belief and organized religion.<sup>10</sup> Ivan Karamazov, tormented by the realization that God, if he indeed exists, allows the suffering of innocent children, rejects the salvation proffered by such a God. Justice is more important than divinity. After discussing these ideas, Ivan narrates to his younger brother Alyosha a story about Christ's Second Coming.

In the legend, Christ returns to the world in Seville in the 16<sup>th</sup> century at the height of the Spanish Inquisition. The people immediately recognize him. An old man is cured of his blindness, and a young girl is raised from the dead. The Cardinal Grand Inquisitor beholds these miracles, and yet is moved not by wonder but by anger. He has Christ arrested and imprisoned.

The Cardinal visits Christ in jail and explains how the Church has done what Christ refused to do when he was tempted in the desert.<sup>11</sup> Christ would not change stones into bread to feed the people because man does not live by bread alone. The Church, however, has provided the poor with sufficient food to live on, feeding them first before asking them to be virtuous. Christ would not show the people his supernatural powers. The Church, however, has given the people the miracles of the resurrection, and the mystery of the Eucharist.

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<sup>9</sup> The use of this description in reference to *Hamlet* comes from Bloom, H. (2003). *Hamlet: Poem unlimited*. New York: Riverhead Books (p. 3). The term itself originates with Frye, N. (1976). *The secular scripture: A study of the structure of Romance*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

<sup>10</sup> The legend is told by Ivan Karamazov, one of the characters in the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoevsky, F. (1880, translated, Pevear, R., & Volokhonsky, L., 1991). *The brothers Karamazov: A novel in four parts with epilogue*. New York: Vintage Books. (Book V Chapter 5, pp 246-264).

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

Christ would not rule the world because the kingdom of Heaven is spiritual rather than temporal. The Church, however, has allied itself to the Caesars of the world and given man community. The Church has accepted the responsibility of making God's creatures happy:

And everyone will be happy, all the millions of creatures, except for the hundred thousand of those who govern them. For only we, we who keep the mystery, only we shall be unhappy. There will be thousands of millions of happy babes, and a hundred thousand sufferers who have taken upon themselves the curse of the knowledge of good and evil. Peacefully they will die, peacefully they will expire in your name, and beyond the grave they will find only death. But we will keep the secret, and for their own happiness we will entice them with a heavenly and eternal reward.<sup>12</sup>

Christ offered man spiritual salvation, but this could only be understood by a few. The Church has provided the "miracle, mystery and authority" that can be understood by all. The Church has corrected the Gospel preached by Christ and cannot now allow him now to disrupt their work. The Inquisitor therefore condemns Christ to death on the morrow.

Throughout the Cardinal's long diatribe Christ says nothing. Finally he "approaches the old man in silence and gently kisses him." The Cardinal shudders, opens the door to the prison and lets Christ leave, telling him never to return. "The kiss burns in his heart, but the old man holds to his former idea."

The legend ends on this ambiguous note. Does the kiss recognize the Cardinal's betrayal of the truth, like the kiss of Judas when he identified Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane? Does it represent Christ's love for the sinner no matter how great the sin? Does it suggest that Christ approves of what the Cardinal is doing and sympathizes with his sacrifice for the greater good?

Dostoevsky invested the legend with many meanings. One intent was to examine the socialist ideals that were developing in Russia, ideals that were directed to improving the lot of the poor and oppressed.<sup>13</sup> Such idealism usually came bound together with atheism. Yet there were similarities to the organized church. Socialist ideas typically require an elite to interpret the rules

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<sup>12</sup> Dostoevsky, F. (1880, translated, Pevear, R., & Volokhonsky, L., 1991). *The brothers Karamazov* (p. 259).

<sup>13</sup> Sandoz, E. (1971, revised 2000). *Political apocalypse: A study of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor*. Wilmington, Del: ISI Books

of history and to provide for the masses. Though socialism does not lie about heaven, it may exaggerate the inevitability of history. Dostoevsky had no patience with the supermen who try to refashion the world into what they conceive as a better place, be they cardinals or commissars.

The legend has been interpreted in many ways, ways that are often incompatible with each other. D. H. Lawrence was fascinated by both Ivan Karamazov and the Grand Inquisitor. The world needs leaders to govern the weak. Yet Lawrence could not understand how a leader like the Cardinal could be involved in the Inquisition: "He could not possibly have burnt a hundred people in an *auto da fé*. He would have been too wise and far-seeing."<sup>14</sup> We want our leaders to be just, but their idea of justice may not be the same as ours. Albert Camus stressed how Ivan would protest against God's injustice and refuse his salvation "even if" he were wrong. Justice may be better found in the aspirations of man than in the laws of God: "Ivan incarnates the rejection of salvation. Faith leads to immortality. Yet faith requires accepting the mystery of suffering, submitting to injustice."<sup>15</sup> Tony Kushner used the legend to illustrate how wrong the members of a governing elite become when they stubbornly follow principles despite what happens.<sup>16</sup> Philip Pullman's *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* is a recent imaginative reinterpretation of the double nature of religion.<sup>17</sup> His scoundrel is the ancestor of the Inquisitor.

Yet there remains a need for religious community. Stories are more meaningful when shared. Without doctrine, religious communities dissolve into a myriad of sects. Ultimately, each person would believe what they will. Some balance must be struck between individual belief and communal faith.

Ivan Karamazov is driven close to insanity by his inability to reconcile what is with what should be. Yet he maintains his hold on life because, in its essence, life is good. The numinous can be found in simple things. He tells Alyosha

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<sup>14</sup> Lawrence, D. H. (1930). Introduction to *The Grand Inquisitor*. In Reeve, N. H., & Worthen, J. (2005). *Introductions and reviews*. (pp 127-134). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. (p 131).

<sup>15</sup> Camus, A. (1951). *L'homme révolté*. Paris: Gallimard. (Le refus du salut, pp 79-86, quotation from p 80)

<sup>16</sup> Kushner, T. (2003, March 24). Only we who guard the mystery shall be unhappy (first scene of a new play) *The Nation*.

<sup>17</sup> Pullman, P. (2010). *The good man Jesus and the scoundrel Christ*. Edinburgh: Canongate.



Though I do not believe in the order of things, still the sticky little leaves that come out in the spring are dear to me, the blue sky is dear to me, some people are dear to me, whom one loves sometimes, would you believe it, without even knowing why; some human deeds are dear to me, which one has perhaps long ceased believing in, but still honors with one's heart, out of old habit. Here, they've bought your fish soup – help yourself. It's a good fish soup, they make it well.<sup>18</sup>

**(v) *Art is the way we can face what we do not know.***

Science handles well the day-to-day. Nevertheless, many of our questions are not yet answered by the scientific method. In the meantime, we tell stories, play music, or paint pictures of the possible answers. We create answers for what we do not know:

There is a line of Pope's which exists in two versions: "A mighty maze of walks without a plan," and "A mighty maze, but not without a plan." The first version recognizes the human situation; the second refers to the constructs of religion, art, and science that man throws up because he finds the recognition intolerable. Literature is an aspect of the human compulsion to create in the face of chaos.<sup>19</sup>

Religion is a form of art. Scriptures can be considered as works of literature, even though they differ significantly from modern literary creations.<sup>20</sup> Most importantly, scriptures represent the work of many writers rather than of one, and were created over many years rather than several. Scriptures come from an

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<sup>18</sup> Dostoevsky, F. (1880, translated, Pevear, R., & Volokhonsky, L., 1991). *The brothers Karamazov.* ( p 230). The sticky little leaves allude to Alexander Pushkin's poem *Chill winds still blow* (1828) available at <http://www.johnbyronkuhner.com/2010/06/chill-winds-still-blow-by-alexander-pushkin/>.

<sup>19</sup> Frye, N. (1976). *The secular scripture: A study of the structure of Romance.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press. (pp 30-31). The quotation is from Pope's *Essay on Man*, line 6 of the first epistle. The original version of the line was amended in subsequent publications. See Hunter, J. (1879). *Pope's Essay on Man, edited with annotations.* London: Longmans Green (p 4).

<sup>20</sup> Alter, R. (1981, 2011). *The art of Biblical narrative.* New York: Basic Books; Frye, N. (1982). *The great code: The Bible and literature.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; Alter, R., & Kermode, F. (1987). *The literary guide to the Bible.* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press (Harvard University); Berlinerblau, J. (2004). The Bible as literature? *Hebrew Studies* 45, 9- 26.

age when literature was in the form of epics. Sometimes the two are interwoven. The *Bhagavad Gita*, considered one of the most important of the Hindu scriptures, is part of the larger epic tale of the *Mahabharata*. Most importantly, scriptures have served to provide the basis of communal belief. Yet literature can do the same: the culture of England comes as much from the plays of Shakespeare as from the Bible of King James.

Frank Kermode proposed that great literature is “tolerant of a wide variety of readings.” He often expressed this as “patient of interpretation,” quoting from Alfred North Whitehead’s description of nature as “patient of interpretation in terms of laws which happen to interest us.”<sup>21</sup>

We are coming full circle. The laws of the world are to be interpreted and re-interpreted as we understand them more fully. Literature and other creative arts need to be approached in a similar way. They have levels of meaning that can be evaluated. Finally, the sacred scriptures need this interaction with the believer. Considering the scriptures as literature enriches rather than diminishes them.

**(vi) *Life has a purpose.***

Ancient philosophy conceived of four causes: material, efficient, formal and teleological. Modern science uses only the first two and eschews any idea that forms and ends might control what happens. Nevertheless, biological processes are often described as though designed towards an end. For example, a species acts in a particular way “in order to” ensure its survival. However, such statements can usually be recast so as not to be overtly teleological: a species acts in a particular way “and” therefore survives. Evolution occurs as a result of random mutations, with natural selection retaining only those that impart advantage to survival.

The term “teleonomy” may describe the apparent purpose of evolution brought about by the working out of a program like the genetic code. It is hard to conceive of a program that has no goal. “Teleology is like a mistress to a biologist: he cannot live without her but he’s unwilling to be seen with her in

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<sup>21</sup> Kermode, Frank. 1975. *The classic*. London: Faber & Faber. (pp 133-134); Whitehead, A. N. (1933). *Adventures of ideas*. Cambridge, UK.: University Press (p 136). As well as in *The Classic*, Kermode also considered this idea in *The Genesis of Secrecy* (p xi) and *The Sense of an Ending* (p 38).

public.”<sup>22</sup> Nowadays he has married his mistress and changed her name to teleonomy.<sup>23</sup>

Behaviorist approaches to psychology were once adamant that behavior was not purposeful.<sup>24</sup> A pigeon did not peck at a red spot in order to obtain access to a grain hopper. Rather the pigeon pecked the spot “and” gained access to a reward that strengthened that particular behavior.

Yet the cognitive revolution completely changed that approach to psychology. Human behavior is now generally considered in terms of goals and consequences. Actions are mediated by intentions. We imagine the future and adapt our behavior to what might occur. Economics and medicine are sciences that would be meaningless without their ends. Businesses are managed to lead to profit, and evaluated on their bottom line. Medical treatments are designed to improve health, and evaluated using outcome measurements.

So when we think of nature, we often consider its actions in the same way as human actions, and wonder whether what happens is directed toward some end. Does not rain fall so that crops may grow? Does life evolve toward some end, working out a divine plan, or fulfilling human destiny? It is not easy to conceive of life without meaning, even if its only meaning is the one we create for it. Evolution is the development of ever greater understanding, history the path to human civilization. It is difficult to think otherwise.

Indeed, science and religion might be reconciled if we made them both study the same thing. Process theology effectively unites God and the Universe. To study science is then to understand God. There remain differences of method. The universe is observed externally; God is perceived internally. Panentheism is perhaps too easy and too abstract a reconciliation. It lacks the magic of the

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<sup>22</sup> Attributed to J. B. S. Haldane. See Mayr, E. (1974). Teleological and teleonomic: A new analysis, In R. S. Cohen & M. W. Wartofsky (Eds.) *Methodological and Historical Essays in the Natural and Social Sciences (Boston Studies in the Philosophy and History of Science, vol. 14)* Dordrecht: D. Reidel. (p. 115).

<sup>23</sup> Nagel, E. (1977). Teleology revisited: goal-directed processes in biology. *Journal of Philosophy, 74*, 261–301.

<sup>24</sup> Reese, H. W. (1994) Teleology and teleonomy in behavior analysis. *Behavior Analyst, 17*, 75-91.

stories. Also panentheism comes in many variants, some more and some less compatible with religion.<sup>25</sup>

We may also consider purpose in terms of interactions rather than causes, relations rather than designs.<sup>26</sup> Creative thinking does not proceed in linear sequences but by interactions between ideas. The universe may be striving toward patterns rather than following rules or seeking ends.

***(vii) We exist in a plurality of belief.***

Many are the levels of meaning. I care not what you need to get you through the night, provided it allows me to get through mine. In the realm of the transcendent, one belief is no more valid than another.

I can believe in a fiction if this helps me to live my life, provides me with good ideas about what I should do, comforts me in my grief, and inspires me when I have not the will to do what is right. Truth and belief are complex ideas and cannot just be reduced to simple formulae. I should generally not believe in something when I know it to be wrong. Yet faith can sometimes allow belief in the absurd. However, we must not go too far along this road since it may lead to madness. Yet the opposite road that finds no truth in anything that is not empirically demonstrable leads to foolishness.

We must be careful not to force belief. We need laws to curb the behaviors of those that exploit, harm, and murder their fellows; we do not need laws that tell them what they should believe. Laws against blasphemy, heresy and apostasy should not be allowed. Proselytization should perhaps be accompanied by warnings about the side effects of new belief.

God does not “really” exist. The natural world has no need for the supernatural in. Yet the internal world differs from the real world. If it makes internal sense to live one’s life believing in divinity and purpose, let it be.

Thus we tell ourselves the stories that make the most sense of our experience, and provide us with the comfort that we need. On the one hand, we might perceive our world to be relatively inhospitable; on the other hand, we might

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas, O. C. (2006). Problems in panentheism. In Clayton, P., & Simpson, Z. (Eds.). *The Oxford handbook of religion and science*. (pp 652-664). Oxford: Oxford University Press

<sup>26</sup> ojalahto, b. Waxman, S. R. Medin D. L. (2013) Teleological reasoning about nature: intentional design or relational perspectives? *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* , 17, 166-171.

imagine a divine force that cares for us. We walk an uneasy path between the perception and imagination.

In our different communities, societies, and nations, we believe in many different things. Many details of belief are contradictory. If we are to proceed to some sort of ecumenical understanding, we shall need to accept some principles. The first is that scriptures require interpretation. They provide ideas but not necessary truths. The second is that we must tolerate other beliefs. The atheist must sit down with the believer, the mystic with the compassionate, and the ascetic with the sensualist. The third is that we must learn about the beliefs of others. We should not encourage willful ignorance of what infidels might believe.

Belief is a multifaceted ability. Truth is not absolute. Rather it is our best guess.

## **2. Answers to the questions?**

Where do we come from? The universe did not begin several thousand years ago. Even if we believe it was created by God, it makes more sense if it has existed for billions of years. Human beings have evolved from other animals. This does not mean we are not special, but it makes us one with the rest of creation.

What is this world we live in? It is real. Our experience is far too ordered to be a figment of our imagination. Yet we do not fully comprehend the world. Our ignorance far outweighs our knowledge. What we know about the world depends on how well we have imagined it might be, and how extensively we have checked to see that it is so.

Who are we? We are conscious beings, aware of both the world we live in and the minds that perceive it. Just as the world is real, consciousness is neither an illusion nor an epiphenomenon. We would not have evolved to our present state unless consciousness and personhood had survival value. The creativity of our minds stands us in good stead when trying to understand new experiences. However, if given free rein, it can lead to illusion, delusion or madness. Creativity must be tied to reality.

Why should we be good? The universe follows rules. We believe in justice even if this only means that the universe does not play favorites. Such beliefs are formulated by our social interactions, our families, and our communities. Though we strive to be good, we can easily fail. We can follow fools, act only

for ourselves without regard for others, and think that we know what to do when we do not.

Where are we going? Our fate is to die. There is probably no escape from this in terms of individual immortality. There likely is no God in the sense of one who is particularly concerned with us. We might better consider life in terms of the survival of humanity, or of some transcendent consciousness evolving through the universe. Though life be bounded, yet is it beautiful. We should enjoy the sticky little leaves in the spring, the wind upon the water, and the clouds it trails between the sky and the earth. It is a good life.