Making Sense of Spiritual Soup?

Thanks for listening to a reading of my third letter in my search for God. I titled it **Making Sense of Spiritual Soup?** because I wanted to make sense of the bits of spiritual talk I hear. Just a heads up that some of the conclusions I draw rely on content I explained in my first two letters. Throughout my research I figured out why people don't take the time to investigate where they stand spiritually. It's because it takes a long time to do and is difficult to define the scope. To recap my prior letters: My first letter was both a case for a creator of some type and a list of what logic suggests are the natures of God. It also explained why I decided to investigate The Bible. My second letter was an investigation into the compatibility of science and God which revealed that the two are extremely compatible. Before I dig into religious investigations, I wanted to share a cursory high level overview of how I found myself doing all of this research.

It started when I lost my blind faith in atheism after investigating it and finding it scientifically unsupported. Next, I skeptically researched whether there is a God and concluded that God definitely exists. I was bummed and tried to find a way to argue that God didn't request anything from me. All of my arguments failed. I reluctantly considered whether God may have given some direction for humans like me and in my first letter concluded that it was very likely that God had. I considered several philosophical ideas about God and found that many felt nice from a human perspective but didn't square with reality from a non-human, deistic point of view. Before I dug into the religious manifestations of these philosophies, I recognized a big stumbling block which came in the form of science potentially conflicting with God. In my second letter I dug into the details of this concern and confirmed that science and faith aren't just able to coexist, but the evidence is overwhelmingly in favor or the two supporting one another.

Spiritual Soup

This third letter shares my investigation into existing religious practices to learn which meet the guidelines from my first letter and which fall short. It goes on to explain how I arrived at investigating Christianity.

I thought back to the many spiritual exposures I've had over my life to see how they might hold up to my findings in the first two letters. To be honest it was hard to make sense of the experiences I've had because they have been so disconnected and intermittent. For example, I remembered spending my summers in the wilderness as an Outward-Bound instructor and raising our boys in the mountains around Portland where I felt surrounded and supported by the beauty and power of nature. At that time a prayer to mother earth felt appropriate. I practiced meditation to clear my mind of cluttering thoughts. I practiced silent mindfulness and loosely followed the peaceful tenants of Buddhism through Thich Nhat Hanh in an attempt to quiet my mind and did have moments when I felt more relaxed and less anxious. I joined western Yoga studios and was taught the "holistic well-being of mind, body, and spirit" and that through self-realization I could "transcend the limitations of the ego, foster a deep sense of inner peace, wisdom, and spiritual awakening".

For many years I lived lost in the particulars of this spirituality soup which failed to articulate what "it" was and what "it" contained. Often, I found myself having to pick out bones from my spiritual soup like when a 23-year-old Yoga instructor Instructed me that "I am enough" if I could "live my power" and that "being kind" was more essential than following my common sense. It was hard to tell if these bones were part of the spiritual soup or a contaminant in it. What I had never done was step back from the soup bowl and back into the kitchen to see where the soup comes from. This led to my investigation into Tolerance vs Pluralism

One of the reasons I lived in a state of vague spiritual confusion was because I believed that choosing one religious view over another, based on a claim that it was the "right" one, might be unkind. I'd rarely taken the time to think beyond this gut response, but when I did, I realized I'd overlooked something really obvious: "that being tolerant of other religious views does not mean also believing that those views are correct". We can respect others with different beliefs and treat them respectfully but pretending that their views, which logically contradict with our own, are also true is nonsensical. Those who make this mistake of believing that all religious beliefs are to be approved of as correct (and not just to be tolerated) are called pluralists.

Anyone who has raised kids has run into the distinction between tolerance and approval. A parent may tolerate their son's dirty dished in the sink, but it would be quite a different thing to approve of it. Every parent knows the right thing is for a child to clean up after themselves regardless of how much the parent tolerates behavior to the contrary. Pluralists believe a person needs to not just tolerate behavior they believe is wrong but to approve of it. As adults we tend to clearly recognize the fallacy of their argument when it comes to dishes so how is it that we aren't so clear when it comes to spiritual beliefs?

Somehow, we feel it is unkind to acknowledge this same reality when it comes to religious views. We either forget (or feel guilty) about not accepting other religious views, even though we believe that those beliefs are also incorrect. In fact, the belief that you shouldn't question other people's beliefs (or that you should believe that they are also right) is in itself a pluralist belief!

Pluralism can look reasonable at a passing glance because on the surface it looks kind and politically correct. However religious leaders of multiple faiths recognize that each has views that are logically incompatible with the others. While each religion may have complicated explanations of what their followers believe, all of them can easily disprove pluralism because pluralism illogically claims that conflicting statements are true. Christians believe Jesus is God, Muslims do not, while they tolerate one another neither is insane enough to believe that both can be correct.

And pluralism has another catch because pluralists believe that all non-pluralists are wrong. They think that someone who elevates one religious belief and rejects another is guilty of violating pluralism. It turns out that pluralists are just as closed minded and dogmatic as those that they accuse of the same. Requesting that everybody adopt their values is actually not very tolerant of them. Pluralists who say "you shouldn't question other peoples beliefs or "you shouldn't judge another religion" are actually making a judgment themselves about how other religions should

act. What these pluralists are implying, through a person's passive appeasement is that "you should bypass logic and believe that the pluralist way is right" even if based on blind faith."

Pluralists' beliefs have been smuggled into our discourse through nice sounding logical inconsistencies that support a specific pluralist approach by default. For example, rather than supporting peaceful tolerance of beliefs that do not agree with one another, Pluralists instead assert that belief in pluralism is the solution everyone should adopt. They replace a desired behavior "peaceful practice" with the universal dogma of pluralism "everyone is right" - which is nonsense. Pluralists naively believe that everyone can be right. If so, then pluralists believe that the Muslim belief in annihilation of pluralists is also "right". See the problem? Major world religions do not believe the same thing in many cases. They can in fact hold opposite views. In response, the pluralist denies the existence of the mismatch in favor of creating an illogical materialistic world view. All of this can be resolved by remembering that Tolerance does not mean acceptance, it means treating with respect.

With this realization I felt I had a green light to investigate the four main classifications of religion and not run afoul of some basic truth related to kindness.

Congratulations, You made it through Tolerance and Pluralism. Let's take a 20 second break to regroup. Okay I'm back and we are about to talk about groups of spiritual beliefs.

Animism, Pantheism, Deism and Monotheism

I learned that human spiritual beliefs can be grouped into 4 main classifications: animism, pantheism, deism, and monotheism. I looked at each to see not just how it felt but how it lined up with the philosophical conclusions I had reached in my first paper regarding the nature of God. Here is what I found starting with Animism.

"**Animists** believe that animals, trees, rivers, mountains—all things—have a spirit and that these spirits are unique rather than being part of a greater spiritual whole. These spirits are frequently approached with reverence and offerings to ensure continued goodwill between humanity and the spirits." Animistic worship at first glance looks enticing. It harkens back to native Americans who were "at one" with the land with practices that involved appreciating and being mindful of the world around because it is the divine. It also presents itself as a solution to the ecological and climate crisis. I loved the feel of it when I lived in Portland. It held out the promise of hope without having to confront the more logical realities involved in considering a God. But unfortunately, the magic stopped there.

Animism is a polytheistic religion which is a non-starter because it doesn't recognize a single creator of the universe. The existence of multiple Gods in animism creates unsolvable logical inconsistencies. These spirits inevitably either cancel one another out or compete with one another. "Is the God of the mountain superior to the God of the flower or are they all the same even though the mountain is bigger and more complex? Is the God of all humans above or below the God of the rock?" This kind of vague morality is useless when a human must decide between saving another human or disrupting a spirit of nature. It's easy to see how this spiritual approach quickly turns into an indistinguishable collection of competing gods as it totally runs afoul of the

monotheistic conclusion, I arrived at in my first letter. Kind of a bummer because the "spirituality of nature" approach felt good at the time, too bad it falls apart with a little bit of logic.

The second grouping falls under the heading of **Pantheism**. **"**Pantheism is the belief that God and the universe are one and the same. There is no dividing line between the two. Pantheists view God as immanent and impersonal. In being immanent, God is present in all things. Pantheists believe God didn't make the earth or define gravity, but, rather, God *is* the earth and gravity as well as everything else in the universe. Pantheists believe that because God is uncreated and infinite, the universe is likewise uncreated and infinite. They believe that God did not choose one day to make the universe. Rather, the universe exists precisely because God exists, since the two are the same thing."

Pantheism looks to me like a big upgrade from Animism. The overarching Pantheistic God looks like it partially corrects for the competing gods problem with animism. However, one big logical problem with Pantheism is that it leaves out the creation of the universe. Back before the discovery of the Big Bang, we used to believe in a steady state universe with no beginning. Pantheism would have fit that older understanding better. Since then, the Big Bang Theory more than suggests that the universe has an age and that it began as a singularity. Unfortunately for pantheism the evidence for the big bang has been getting stronger and stronger since the 1930s to the point where challenges to it appear to be dead. Pantheism doesn't account for this first cause by a creator because Pantheism elevates creation to the level of the creator and in doing so leaves out the actual creator, which logic indicates must exist outside the system. This is a deal killer for Pantheism as the “all-in-one” solution to God because this belief omits the creator who made the universe, time and space and everything we know. Not a small detail to leave out. The Big Bang indicates that God is necessarily above creation and not merely part of it. This looks to be the death blow to Pantheism which is a real bummer because Pantheistic belief systems include the beautiful and often peaceful eastern practices of Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism along with the less articulate claims of new age religions like Yoga that focuses on "self-realization and transcending the limitations of the ego."

These philosophies offer some great mindfulness practices and ways to transition out of the trappings of a materialist and achievement-based mind-set. This seems to really help balance the Western materialist way of thinking by helping people view reality with a new perspective. Being mindful, humble, content, and grateful have their place but that said these practices don't seem to be an end in and of themselves. Not only do they not address God as the creator, but many also reduce the role of humans into that of being passive, making one wonder why God created human beings in the first place. If our most effective contributions as humans is to practice stillness, avoid harming living things and just get out of the way then why bother making us at all? It's one thing for a pantheist to voluntarily dilute their own purposes and aspirations and something entirely different for a Pantheist to mandate their approach onto others regardless of the situation.

The third grouping is that of **Deism**, which asserts that "God actively created the universe but retreated from the universe after its creation, uninterested in the humans in it." This philosophy seems to neglect the role of both human consciousness, in that we are self-aware, and human

conscience in that we can distinguish good from evil. For deism to be correct God made 117 billion souls since the dawn of time and continues to create them at a rate of 250 every minute and is actively ignoring His creation while simultaneously keeping His creation intact and alive. Not only is it logically baffling but on a subjective level Deism as a belief system seems a pointless, hopeless, and irreverent view that prematurely mismatches a complicated and intentional universe with a disinterested God. It feels like a hyper skeptical waiting room for those who recognize there is a God and are either too busy to continue their investigation or are afraid of what they might find. Deism allows humans to remain unaccountable for their behavior which seems like a feature intended to appeal to humans rather than God.

Monotheism

So after finding animism, pantheism and deism all logically inconsistent with the findings in my first letter including the big bang theory as the birth of our universe, I moved on to **monotheistic** religions. It turns out that there are just three main types: Islam, Judaism and Christianity. One advantage of the three monotheistic religions is that they claim to be rooted in history. More than mere philosophical positions, these belief systems try to ground themselves in time to people, places, and events. This puts them in a more vulnerable position than animism, pantheism and deism which can insulate themselves from historical scrutiny because of their more ethereal forms. I started my investigation with Islam.

In Islam Muhammad is said to be "the Seal of the Prophets and earthly manifestation of primordial divine light, who transmitted the eternal word of God from the angel Gabriel to humans." Interestingly, Mohammed isn't said to have done any miracles in the Quran. In addition, his claim regarding the revelation he received from the angel Gabriel was a private affair. The evidence provided shows him to be merely a man whom no one witnessed do anything miraculous. Miracles were not attributed to him for 100s of years after his death when Christians asked for proof that he was a profit. The history and propagation of the Islamic faith is very different from Christianity and Judaism. Islam was spread primarily through military force, distributing wealth to supporters from lucrative military victories. This and political prowess were at the core of the religion's growth. Islam was put forward by a self-proclaimed prophet who began a military conquest 11 years after sharing his message and controlled all of Arabia within 6 years. While all of these findings don't make Islam untrue it certainly doesn't move it to the front of the Monotheistic line for consideration.

Okay, time for another break. Relax for 20 seconds and we'll be back.

We are back and ready to dig into Christianity beginning with how it was formed.

~~Christianity~~

The way Christianity was formed and spread was nothing at all like Islam. Rather than being spread through lucrative military victories, for the first 300 years Christianity was spread without force by impoverished believers who risked and suffered brutal persecution and in the case of all but one of the apostles deaths, through martyrdom as they refused to deny their belief. In addition, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus were all public events, many witnessed by

multiple sources outside of the Bible. It doesn't make them automatically true but it does make the Christian claims falsifiable unlike the claims of Islam based on private revelation. It also provides quite a few sources to investigate.

Christianity also had a second benefit. Christian churches are far more prevalent than Islam in the area where I live. Another advantage was that Christians believes in the 5 books of the Torah as well as The Psalms and the Wisdom Literature writings which are the same books that the Jews believe in. By checking out Christianity I'd be getting some background for Judaism. An additional bonus is that Christianity points to a core set of common beliefs that are stated in specific and limited writings. This is unlike the new age bookshops I used to visit in Portland, where one department bleeds into the next with no underlying belief structure: astrology morphs into Feng Shui, Wiccan, psychic, tantra, tarot cards, crystals, Chakras, and Aromatherapy each presenting itself as viable "options" that can be selected based on preference. In contrast, Christians site specific texts as elements of its canon and while there is some variance in terms of books between Catholics and Protestants, the message from them all is remarkably unified. My goal was to learn what Christians believe, what makes them tick and if there is anything true, compelling or disturbing about their beliefs.

I referenced a variety of sources to paint a more complete picture. I started with a secular view of the old testament via the human psychology reflected in biblical stories. I learned much from secular professor Jordan Peterson who also connected me to books that are central to our culture's view of morality. Books like "crime and Punishment" by Dostoevsky and "The Gulag Archipelago" by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and "The Quest for Cosmic Justice' by Thomas Sowell. I sought out non-preachy sources to explain the stories in The Bible in everyday language. The Bible Project from Portland Oregon did a great job with podcasts and videos in this regard. I also watched the video series "The Chosen" that did a great job of presenting parts of the New Testament in a relatable way through the eyes of Jesus's disciples. I read accounts by scientists on biochemistry and also read books that compile the secular facts related to Christianity to build a historical case for the claims about Jesus in the New Testament. I also attended three different churches over 3 years, going to Sunday services, watching videos on their prior sermons, joining their bible studies and traveling with the groups on mission's trips.

To investigate effectively I tried to approach Christianity with an open mind like I would studying a foreign culture. I suspended my aversion to dogma, my distain of evangelism, my disconnection with scriptural language and my suspicion of past abuses of church power. I set aside my preconceived notion that Christians were simple-minded, inflexible, uneducated, irrational, controlling and gullible extremists. I did this to figure out if there was anything of substance to Christian beliefs or if they could be dismissed based on the evidence I found. I observed and documented my interactions and findings like a reporter noting strengths, weaknesses, oddities, manipulative practices, use of guilt, group thinking and openness to questioning. I watched my interactions with Christians looking for evidence of intolerance, exclusivity, fanaticism, and self-righteousness. I also took notes on how Christians handled threats to their faith. I recorded my discoveries in my phone diary which I reviewed and edited on a regular basis for 3 years.

At the same time, I tried to see if it was possible to make sense of the Bible. I wanted to know if what I assumed were seemingly outrageous statements and odd stories could be reconciled and survive rational scrutiny. I was curious to find out if an ancient sprawling collection of scrolls could provide a credible and unified story and if other rational people had made sense of it; and if so, how? I had some preliminary successes listening to podcasters at the Bible Project who reframed the book by pointing out that 1/3 of the Bible is poetry which means if a person is reading it all "literally", then they're reading it wrong. They also pointed out that it's super easy to misunderstand the writings because the language is heavily hyperlinked across stories resulting in far more going on than would appear from a simple reading. In some passages every word is a reference intended to bring the reader into other stories and concepts resulting in a simple sounding statement conveying a far more complex meaning. It's like when we refer to the line "My Precious" in The Lord of the Rings or "Luke, I'm your father" in Star War. Each is intended to conjure up an entire complex narrative in the mind of the reader. So, when two film buffs start exchanging heavily referenced statements it could take a stranger half a day to decipher what they are talking about. This is the case with the authors of the bible who were speaking in an analogous code 2000 years ago in a radically different culture and in a different language.

The Bible Project also pointed out that the bible is intended to be read as an encyclopedia and not as a grab bag, theological cookbook, or dictionary. What they meant is that The Bible is not an indexed rule book where you thumb through for a yes or no but rather a source of wisdom literature giving guidance to fit situational context. Most of the stories of people in the bible are shown doing the wrong thing. Without this broader understanding people can totally misinterpret a statement by inadvertently criticizing the bible for the action of a character that the bible is likewise trying to criticize. Or another easy error is jumping into the middle of a conversation where a character is responding to a trick question from their adversary, the reader then mistakenly assumes that the character's response is the final word on everything to do with the topic. Similarly, the Bible Project pointed out that creation myths in the Bible were not intended to explain the scientific origin of material objects. The scientific method wasn't even invented for another 1,500 years, so how could they. It would be like us concluding that governments and businesses from the 1970's were backward because they didn't even have a basic webpage even though the internet hadn't been created yet. In the time the bible was written, the authors were interested in establishing an identity for humanity and ascertaining the meaning of life for people on earth. The "why" was far more important than the "how" and "what" that science is now so focused on. The overall effect of my early investigations was a revealing of logical pathway with the potential to make sense of passages and dispel the idea that the bible must be interpreted through an extreme or literal mind set.

Outside of The Bible Project, I visited the three different churches mentioned above and found nearly everyone I spoke with to be surprisingly open-minded and down to earth people. I did find a contingent of oddities, some strange worship practices, some people overly eager to evangelize their faith, some stern, doom and gloom preaching, some who were quick to reference scripture in a defensive manner, as well as bible study questions with loaded presuppositions built into them. But when I pointed out these practices to the Christians around me, they didn't try to silence me. They didn't try to discredit or cancel me. They listened and tried to understand, often responding with supportive comments that validated my concerns. They provided honest answers

when they didn’t know. They seemed to value my input and welcomed me to come back to their bible study even when I hadn’t done the homework. The responses they put forward referring to the bible had a far less didactic approach then I had feared. They didn’t often mindlessly refer to a line of scripture, although several them did speak “Christianese”. The most educated of them more neutrally talked about the intent of the biblical authors and warned of the pitfalls of cross cultural, literal interpretations of the bible. While I didn't find perfection, what I did find was a solid promise of a way through the confusion.

On a personal note, the Christians I met responded with grace. Not just to my direct challenges but to the dire catastrophes of their own lives. I’ve seen Christians using their faith to endure crippling muscular diseases. I’ve seen a Christian parent come to terms with his 14-year-old son dying in his arms. I’ve seen a missionary endure the death of his wife in a horrific car accident. I’ve seen missionaries living is squalor for decades, giving their time, talent, and treasure to help handicapped kids. I’ve seen the father of a son who had been swallowed up by a psychogenic epidemic respond with composure and love. I’ve seen Christian clients willingly agree to accept $100,000 less on a home sale to maintain their integrity. I've seen a terminal cancer patient enthusiastically volunteering to staff a mission project and leading the group brilliantly with his humor and infectious enthusiasm. In short, I have seen people consistently respond in ways that defy self-interest and in the face of paralyzing tragedy transcend normal human capacity to endure their suffering.

This doesn't make Christianity true. It also doesn’t mean I have to share all the same values as every other Christian. I can believe that the environment is sacred, and pollution is destroying our planet, that women have not historically had access to opportunities, that the Catholic church sex abuses were criminal. I can hold Christians just as accountable to justify their truth claims as every other source I've investigated so far. My goal is to find out if the belief and central stories to the Christian faith can be interpreted so that they fit with common sense and perhaps even be demonstrated to be true. I have enough faith in what I found so far to continue investigating to see if it's possible to make sense of the central pillars of Christian belief. So off I go.