“Which Version of the Bible is Most Accurate?”

Do you know which version of the Bible is most accurate? The main ones I’m considering for thorough Bible study are the King James Version, New International Version, and the New American Standard Version. Are the NIV and NASB inferior to the KJV? Also, what study bible do you feel is most helpful? Life Application, Scofield, Ryrie?

I would never recommend the KJV for Bible study because language has changed so much since 1611, and better manuscripts are now available as the basis for translation than what they used for the KJV. (I suggest you read our article on the King James debate.)

The NIV is a dynamic translation, where the translators sought to communicate the general idea and thoughts behind the original languages, rather than an actual word-for-word translation, which can tend to be more wooden. I no longer use the NIV exclusively (although I did for 20 years) because I am frustrated by the fact that they translate the word “flesh” as “sin nature,” which leads to a misunderstanding of the Christian life, I believe. I have joined the ranks of a growing number who have returned to the NASB for serious Bible study. However, I am very much enjoying the NET Bible (New English Translation), which can be downloaded for free (www.netbible.org) although the beta version is now out in print. Each page has more translator notes and study notes than actual text, which gives the reader a VERY full understanding of what’s going on in the original languages. I am using the NET Bible to augment my NASB reading; it’s like listening to color commentary during a sports telecast.

In terms of the study Bibles, that is really a personal preference issue depending on one’s theology. The Life

Application, Scofield and Ryrie Bibles are dispensational, and the Reformation Study Bible is reform in its theology. The Student Bible is especially good, as is Kay Arthur's Inductive Study Bible. All the study Bibles you mentioned are good and have their fans. The best way to judge, I think, is to compare the notes on the same passage between the various versions.

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

"What Makes the Bible a Reliable Text on Angels?"

You cite the bible as a source of insight into angels. What makes the bible a better source than any other fiction book that has been written by anyone at anytime? Say I wrote a book about angels because I wanted to get people to believe in something they have never seen or felt or touched or smelled or tasted. If I aged it 2 or 3 thousand years and there were people like you around, would they believe it? What if I gave it a prolific name like The Word, or Holy Text, or The Greatest Truest Book Ever Written, does it then become more plausible? What are your thoughts?

Hi _____,

My thoughts are that the Bible gives more than "insight" about angels; it gives actual revelation—information from "outside the box," so to speak.

You can choose to call the Bible a book of fiction, but that would only be because you haven't considered the evidence that shows it's not. For instance, fulfilled prophecy alone is a

staggering evidence that it was divinely inspired, for who else could write history in advance other than the God who is outside of time?

I invite you to try and debunk the truth and validity of the Bible. Many others have, and they have become its most convinced defenders. If it truly can be debunked, then it's not worth believing in. But if it's true, and I completely believe it is because of the evidence, then it's worth paying attention to.

I have a suspicion you have an opinion of the Bible that is not based on anything more than a contempt for God and possibly for the people who believe in the Bible. (And allow me to concede, regretfully, that a lot of religious people say and do things that make God wince because they misrepresent Him so egregiously, and it has a negative impact on others who are watching—people like you? I think God grieves over this.)

You might consider shoring up your reasons. Our website is full of resources that provide good evidence that Christianity, and the Bible, are both true. If you don't care to check anything out, then at least I would hope you would be honest enough to admit that your unbelief is based on a refusal to investigate and not because there are good reasons for it.

Respectfully,

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

Goddess Worship – A Christian View

Pagan, Wiccan, and practitioners of New Age religion are turning to belief in a Goddess to express their God-created desire to worship. Russ Wise examines goddess worship from a Christian perspective.

"The goddess, or Great Mother, has existed since the beginning of time . . . it is out of the primordial depths of her womb that the Universe and all life is born." –Morwyn, *Secrets of a Witch's Coven*

Reverence for the goddess is becoming prevalent in our day. The goddess is embraced by witchcraft, radical feminism, the occult, and the liberal church. The New Age that is about to dawn upon us will be, according to the occult world, a feminine age. Likewise, those who hold this view believe that this current, masculine age has been an age of destruction and broken relationships among humanity. The New Age with its feminine energies will bring balance to the destructive aspects of the Piscean Age.

Rosemary Radford Ruether, in her book *Womanguides: Readings Toward a Feminist Theology*, states that

> It is to the women that we look for salvation in the healing and restorative waters of Aquarius. It is to such a New Age that we look now with hope as the present age of masculism succeeds in destroying itself.

According to Starhawk, a feminist and a practicing witch,

> The symbolism of the Goddess is not a parallel structure to the symbolism of God the Father. The goddess does not rule the world; She is the world.(1)

In order for this feminine age to come into full fruition, a shift in consciousness must take place in the world. This shift in thinking and perception of reality will bring forth the goddess.(2)

According to those who believe in the Great Goddess, Europe was once inhabited by a matriarchal, egalitarian society. Europeans, they claim, worshipped a matrifocal, sedentary, peaceful, art- loving goddess 5,000 to 25,000 years before the rise of the first male-oriented religion. They maintain that this egalitarian culture was overrun and destroyed by a semi-nomadic, horse-riding, Indo- European group of invaders who were patrifocal, mobile, warlike, and indifferent to art.(3)

These Indo-European invaders considered themselves to be superior to the peaceful and art-loving goddess worshippers because of their superior military ability. The matriarchal religion of these early settlers was eventually assimilated into the patriarchal religion of the invaders. As these invaders imposed their patriarchal culture on the conquered peoples, rapes(4) and myths about male warriors killing serpents (symbols of the goddess worshippers) appeared for the first time. As the assimilation of cultures continued, the Great Goddess fragmented into many lesser goddesses.

According to Merlin Stone, author of *When God Was a Woman*, the disenthronement of the Great Goddess, begun by the Indo-European invaders, was finally accomplished by the Hebrew, Christian, and Moslem religions that arose later.(5) The male deity took the prominent place. The female goddesses faded into the background, and women in society followed suit.(6)

The Goddess and Witchcraft

In the world of witchcraft the goddess is the giver of life. Jean Shinoda Bolen, M.D., in her book *Goddesses in Everywoman*, has this to say about the goddess:

> The Great Goddess was worshipped as the feminine life force deeply connected to nature and fertility, responsible both for creating life and for destroying life.(7)

Bolen goes on to say that "the Great Goddess was regarded as immortal, changeless, and omnipotent" prior to the coming of Christianity. For witches, the goddess is the earth itself. Mother Earth, or Gaia, as the goddess is known in occult circles, is an evolving being, as is all of nature. Starhawk, in her best-selling book *The Spiral Dance*, says that "the model of the Goddess, who is immanent in nature, fosters respect for the sacredness of all living things. Witchcraft can be seen as a religion of ecology. Its goal is harmony with nature, so that life may not just survive, but thrive."(8)

The witch views Gaia, or Mother Earth, as a biosystem. She attributes consciousness to the earth and believes it to be spiritual as well. In other words, Gaia is a living and evolving being that has a spiritual destiny.

The environmental movement of our day is greatly influenced by those who practice witchcraft or hold neo-pagan beliefs. Witchcraft is an attempt to reintroduce the sacred aspect of the earth that was, according to its practitioners, destroyed by the Christian world. The goddess is, therefore, a direct affront against the male-dominated religion of the Hebrew God.

Christianity teaches that God is transcendent, is separate from nature, and is represented to humankind through masculine imagery. Witchcraft holds a pantheistic view of God. God is nature, therefore God is in all things and all things are a part of God. However, this God is in actuality a goddess.

A fundamental belief in witchcraft is the idea that the goddess predates the male God. The goddess is the giver of all life and is found in all of creation. "The importance of the Goddess symbol for women cannot be overstressed. The image of the Goddess inspires women to see ourselves as divine, our

bodies as sacred, the changing phases of our lives as holy, our aggression as healthy, and our anger as purifying. Through the Goddess, we can discover our strength, enlighten our minds, own our bodies, and celebrate our emotions."(9)

For Betty Sue Flowers, a University of Texas English professor, the women's spirituality movement is the answer to the male-oriented religion of Christianity. At the International Conference on Women's Spirituality in Austin, Texas, Flowers stated that

> The goddess is a metaphor that reminds us of the female side of spirituality. Metaphors are important. You can't know God directly. You can only know images of God, and each image or metaphor is a door. Some doors are open and others are closed. A door that is only male is only half open.(10)

The Goddess and Feminism

For many in the feminist world, the goddess is an object of worship. Those in the women's spirituality movement "reject what they call the patriarchal Judeo-Christian tradition, deploring sexist language, predominantly masculine imagery and largely male leadership."(11)

According to a *Wall Street Journal* article by Sonia L. Nazario, "women first wanted to apply feminism to political and economic realms, then to their families. Now, they want it in their spiritual lives."(12)

To understand fully the implications of the women's spirituality movement, one only needs to read the current literature on the subject. The editors of the book *Radical Feminism* state that "political institutions such as religion, because they are based on philosophies of hierarchical orders and reinforce male oppression of females, must be destroyed."

The radical feminist believes that the traditional church must be dismantled. Naomi Goldenberg, in her book *Changing of the*

Gods, states that “the feminist movement in Western culture is engaged in the slow execution of Christ and Yahweh. . . . It is likely that as we watch Christ and Yahweh tumble to the ground, we will completely outgrow the need for an external God.”(13) The deity that many in the feminist camp are searching for takes on the form of a goddess. Some in the goddess movement, according to a *Wall Street Journal* article, “pray for the time when science will make men unnecessary for procreation.”(14) The radical feminist sees the goddess movement as a spiritual outlet for her long-held beliefs. Mark Muesse, an assistant professor of religious studies at Rhodes College, agrees that “some feminist Christians push for changes ranging from the ordination of women and the generic, non-sexual terms for God and humanity to overhauling the very theology.”(15)

Perhaps the most descriptive word for the feminist movement is “transformation.” Catherine Keller, associate professor of theology at Xavier University says in her essay “Feminism and the New Paradigm” that “the global feminist movement is bringing about the end of patriarchy, the eclipse of the politics of separation, and the beginning of a new era modeled on the dynamic, holistic paradigm. Radical feminists envision that era, and the long process leading toward it, as a comprehensive transformation.”

Another aspect of this transformation is the blending of the sexes. The feminist movement seeks a common mold for all of humanity. Jungian psychotherapist John Weir Perry believes that we must find our individuality by discovering androgyny. He states, “To reach a new consensus, we have to avoid falling back into stereotypes, and that requires truly developing our individuality. It is an ongoing work of self-realization and self-actualization. For men it means growing into their native maleness and balancing it with their femaleness. For women, it’s the same—growing into their full womanhood, and that includes their masculine side.”(16)

This process sounds more like androgyny or sameness than it does individuality.

This paradigm-shift is nothing less than the reordering of man's understanding of God, a shift in thinking of God through predominantly masculine imagery to seeing and experiencing God as a goddess, the mother of life.

The Goddess and the Occult

In the world of the occult, also known as the New Age, the goddess is believed to be resident within the individual and simply needs to be awakened. In other words, the individual is inherently divine. Starhawk, a witch who works with the Catholic priest Matthew Fox at his Institute of Creation Spirituality, says that an individual can awaken the goddess by invoking or inviting her presence. Starhawk tells us that "to invoke the Goddess is to awaken the Goddess within, to become . . . that aspect we invoke. An invocation channels power through a visualized image of Divinity."

Starhawk continues, "We are already one with the Goddess—she has been with us from the beginning, so fulfillment becomes . . . a matter of self-awareness. For women, the Goddess is the symbol of the inmost self. She awakens the mind and spirit and emotions."(17)

Jean Shinoda Bolen, a Jungian analyst and clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of California, answered the question, What ails our society? by saying, "we suffer from the absence of one half of our spiritual potential—the Goddess."(18) Individuals who follow New Age teaching believe that the male-dominated religion of this present age has done an injustice to humanity and the ecosystem. Therefore there must be a balancing of energies. The male energies must diminish and the feminine energies must increase in order for the goddess to empower the individual.

The New Age of occultism promises to be an age of peace, harmony, and tranquility, whereas the present dark age of brokenness and separation continues to bring war, conflict, and disharmony. So it is the goddess with her feminine aspects of unity, love, and peace that will offer a solution for mankind and circumvent his destruction. For many in our society, this appears to be the answer to man's dilemma. However, an occult solution that denies Christ's atonement for sin cannot fully meet a Holy God's requirement for wholeness.

For the pagan, the goddess represents life and all it has to offer. "The Goddess religion is a conscious attempt to reshape culture."(19) This reshaping is nothing less than viewing man and his understanding of reality from a female-centered perspective, the focus of which is on the Divine as female. Therefore considerable emphasis is placed on feminine attributes, ultimately focusing on eroticism and sexuality. "Women are clearly the catalyst for the formation of the new spirituality. It is women above all who are in the process of reversing Genesis . . . by validating and freeing their sexuality."(20)

A major part of this transformative process is the empowerment of women. The rise of the goddess is a direct assault on the foundation of Christianity. This new spirituality affirms bisexuality, lesbianism, homosexuality, and androgyny through the expression of transvestitism.

As this revival of the goddess continues, a growing lack of distinction between male and female will become the norm. Jungian psychotherapist John Weir Perry believes that "both current psychology and ancient history point to an emerging transformation in our sense of both society and self, a transformation that includes redefining the notion of what it means to be men and women."(21)

The Bible clearly indicates that men and women were created as distinctive beings, male and female. The rising occult

influence in our society seeks to undermine the biblical absolute that gives our culture stability. Once again the Bible rings true as it states, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.”(22)

The Goddess and the Liberal Church

The message of the goddess has gained a hearing in the church as well. The philosophy of the goddess is currently being taught in the classrooms of many seminaries. Mary Daly, who considers herself to be a Christian feminist, says this about traditional Christianity: “To put it bluntly, I propose that Christianity itself should be castrated.”(23) The primary aim of this kind of “Christian” feminist is to bring an end to what she perceives as male-dominated religion by castrating the male influence from the religion.

Daly continues by saying, “I am suggesting that the idea of salvation uniquely by a male savior perpetuates the problem of patriarchal oppression.”(24)

Rev. Susan Cady, co-author of *Sophia: the Future of Feminist Spirituality* and pastor of Emmanuel United Methodist Church in Philadelphia, is one example of the direction that Daly and others are taking the church. The authors of *Sophia* state that “Sophia is a female, goddess-like figure appearing clearly in the Scriptures of the Hebrew tradition.” *Wisdom Feast*, the authors’ latest book, clearly identifies Jesus with Sophia. Sophialogy presents Sophia as a separate goddess and Jesus as her prophet. The book takes liberty with Jesus by replacing Him with the feminine deity Sophia.

Another example of how goddess thealogy (feminist spelling for theology) is making its way into the liberal church is through seminars held on seminary campuses. One such seminar,

“Wisdomweaving: Woman Embodied in Faiths,” was held at the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in February of 1990. Linda Finnell, a wiccan and one of the speakers, spoke on the subject of “Returning to the Goddess Through Dianic Witchcraft.” Two of the keynote speakers were of a New Age persuasion. In fact, one speaker, Sr. Jose Hobday, works with Matthew Fox and Starhawk at the Institute for Creation Spirituality.

A growing number of churches in the United States and around the world are embracing the New Age lie. Many churches have introduced A Course in Miracles, Yoga, Silva Mind Control, Unity teachings, and metaphysics into their teaching material. Some churches have taken a further step into the New Age by hiring individuals who hold a metaphysical world view.

Whether the individual seeks the goddess through witchcraft, the feminist movement, the New Age, or the liberal church, he or she is beginning a quest to understand and discover the “higher self.” The higher self, often referred to as the “god self,” is believed to be pure truth, deep wisdom. This truth or wisdom embodies the basic lie of deification. As Christians we must learn to discern every spirit lest we become deceived.

Notes

1. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance* (New York: Harper & Row 1989), 23.

2. Elinor W. Gadon, *The Once and Future Goddess* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), xiv.

3. Ibid., xii-xiii. See also Lynnie Levy, *Of a Like Mind* (Madison, Wis.: OALM, 1991), vol. viii, no. 3, pp. 2-3.

4. See also Zsuzsanna Emese Budapest, *The Holy Book of Womwn’s Mysteries* (Oakland, Calif.: Susan B. Anthony Coven No. 1, 1986), 12.

5. See also Gadon, *The Once and Future Goddess*, xiii.

6. Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Goddesses in Everywoman* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 21.

7. Ibid., 20.

8. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, 25.

9. Ibid., 24.

10. Carlos Vidal Greth, "The Spirit of Women," *The Austin-American Statesman*, 5 Mar. 1991, sec. D.

11. Ibid.

12. Sonia L. Nazario, "Is Goddess Worship Finally Going to Put Men in Their Place?" *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 June 1990, sec. A.

13. Naomi Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 4, 25.

14. Nazario, "Goddess Worship."

15. Deirdre Donahue, "Dawn of the Goddesses," *USA Today*, 26 Sept. 1990, sec. D.

16. John Weir Perry, "Myth, Ritual, and the Decline of Patriarchy," *Magical Blend* 33 (January 1992): 103.

17. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, 99.

18. Jean Shinoda Bolen, "The Women's Movement in Transition: The Goddess and the Grail," *Magical Blend* 33 (January 1992): 8.

19. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, 11.

20. Donna Steichen, "The Goddess Goes to Washington," *Fidelity Magazine* (December 1986): 42.

21. Perry, *Decline of Patriarchy*, 62.

22. 2 Tim. 4:3.

23. Alice Hageman, *Theology after the Demise of God the Father: a Call for the Castration of Sexist Religion* (New York: Association Press, 1974), 132.

24. Hageman, *Theology*, 138.

Christian Environmentalism – A Biblical Worldview Perspective on You and the Earth

Dr. Bohlin applies a biblical point of view in determining a concerned Christian relationship to environmentalism. As Christians, we know we have been made stewards of this earth, having a responsibility to care for it. Understanding our relationship to God and to the rest of creation gives us the right perspective to apply to this task.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

Is There an Environmental Problem?



The news media are full of stories concerning environmental disasters of one kind or another, from global warming to endangered species to destruction of the rain forests to nuclear accidents. Some are real and some are imaginary, but it's not hard to notice that the environmental issue

receives very little attention in Christian circles. There are so many other significant issues that occupy our attention that we seem to think of the environment as somebody else's issue. Many Christians are openly skeptical of the reality of any environmental crisis. It's viewed as a liberal issue, or New Age propaganda, or just plain unimportant since this earth will be destroyed after the millennium. What we fail to realize is that Christians have a sacred responsibility to the earth and the creatures within it. The earth is being affected by humans in an unprecedented manner, and we do not know what the short or long term effects will be.

Calvin DeWitt, in his book *The Environment and the Christian*,{1} lists seven degradations of the earth. First, land is being converted from wilderness to agricultural use and from agricultural use to urban areas at an ever-increasing rate. Some of these lands cannot be reclaimed at all, at least not in the near future.

Second, as many as three species a day become extinct. Even if this figure is exaggerated, we still need to realize that once a species has disappeared, it is gone. Neither the species nor the role it occupied in the ecosystem can be retrieved.

Third, land continues to be degraded by the use of pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers. While many farmers are rebelling against this trend and growing their produce organically or without chemicals, the most profitable and largest growers still use an abundance of chemicals.

Fourth, the treatment of hazardous chemicals and wastes continues as an unsolved problem. Storing of medium term nuclear wastes is still largely an unsolved problem.

Fifth, pollution is rapidly becoming a global problem. Human garbage turns up on the shores of uninhabited South Pacific islands, far from the shipping lanes.

Sixth, our atmosphere appears to be changing. Is it warming

due to the increase of gases like carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels? Is the ozone layer shrinking due to the use of chemicals contained in refrigerators, air conditioners, spray cans, and fire extinguishers? While I remain skeptical of the global threat that many see, pollution continues to be a local and regional concern prompting ever more stringent emission controls for our automobiles.

Seventh, we are losing the experiences of cultures that have lived in harmony with the creation for hundreds or even thousands of years. Cultures such as the Mennonites and Amish, as well as those of the rain forests, are crowded out by the expansion of civilization.

Never before have human beings wielded so much power over God's creation. How should we as Christians think about these problems?

The Environmental Ethics of Naturalism and Pantheism

Some people have blamed Western culture's Judeo-Christian heritage for the environmental crisis. These critics point squarely at Genesis 1:26-28, where God commands His new creation, man, to have dominion over the earth and to rule and subdue it.{2} This mandate is seen as a clear license to exploit the earth for man's own purposes. With this kind of philosophy, they ask, how can the earth ever be saved? While I will deal with the inaccuracy of this interpretation a little later, you can see why many of the leaders in the environmental movement are calling for a radical shift away from this Christian position. But what are the alternatives?

The need to survive provides a rationale for environmental concern within an *evolutionary* or *naturalistic* world view. Survival of the human species is the ultimate value. Man cannot continue to survive without a healthy planet. We must act to preserve the earth in order to assure the future of our

children.

The evolutionary or naturalistic view of nature is, however, ultimately pragmatic. That is, nature has value only as long as we need it. The value of nature is contingent on the whim of egotistical man.{3} If, as technology increases, we are able to artificially reproduce portions of the ecosystem for our survival needs, then certain aspects of nature lose their significance. We no longer need them to survive. This view is ultimately destructive, because man will possess only that which he needs. The rest of nature can be discarded.

In the fictional universe of *Star Trek*, vacations are spent in a computer generated virtual reality and meals are produced by molecular manipulation. No gardens, herds, or parks are needed. What value does nature have then?

Another alternative is the *pantheistic* or *New Age* worldview. Superficially, this view offers some hope. All of nature is equal because all is god and god is all. Nature is respected and valued because it is part of the essence of god. If humans have value, then nature has value.

But while pantheism elevates nature, it simultaneously degrades man and will ultimately degrade nature as well. To the pantheist, man has no more value than a blade of grass. In India the rats and cows consume needed grain and spread disease with the blessings of the pantheists. To restrict the rats and cows would be to restrict god, so man takes second place to the rats and cows. Man is a part of nature, yet it is man that is being restricted. So ultimately, all of nature is degraded.{4}

Pantheism claims that what is, is right. To clean up the environment would mean eliminating the undesirable elements. But, since god is all and in all, how can there be any undesirable elements? Pantheism fails because it makes no distinctions between man and nature.

The Christian Environmental Ethic

A true Christian environmental ethic differs from the naturalistic and pantheistic ethics in that it is based on the reality of God as Creator and man as his image-bearer and steward. God is the Creator of nature, not part of nature. He transcends nature (Gen. 1-2; Job 38-41; Ps. 19, 24, 104; Rom 1:18-20; Col. 1:16-17). All of nature, including man, is equal in its origin. Nature has value in and of itself because God created it. Nature's value is intrinsic; it will not change because the fact of its creation will not change.{5} The rock, the tree, and the cat deserve our respect because God made them to be as they are.{6}

While man is a creature and therefore is identified with the other creatures, he is also created in God's image. It is this image that separates humans from the rest of creation (Gen. 1:26-27; Ps. 139:13-16).{7} God did not bestow His image anywhere else in nature.

Therefore, while a cat has value because God created it, it is inappropriate to romanticize the cat as though it had human emotions. All God's creatures glorify Him by their very existence, but only one is able to worship and serve Him by an act of the will.

But a responsibility goes along with bearing the image of God. In its proper sense, man's rule and dominion over the earth is that of a steward or a caretaker, not a reckless exploiter. Man is not sovereign over the lower orders of creation. Ownership is in the hands of the Lord.{8}

God told Adam and Eve to cultivate and keep the garden (Gen. 2:15), and we may certainly use nature for our benefit, but we may only use it as God intends. An effective steward understands that which he oversees, and science can help us discover the intricacies of nature.

Technology puts the creation to man's use, but unnecessary waste and pollution degrades it and spoils the creation's ability to give glory to its Creator. I think it is helpful to realize that we are to exercise dominion over nature, not as though we are entitled to exploit it, but as something borrowed or held in trust.

Recall that in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25, the steward who merely buried his talent out of fear of losing it was severely chastised. What little he did have was taken away and given to those who already had a great deal.{9} When Christ returns, His earth may well be handed back to Him rusted, corroded, polluted, and ugly. To what degree will you or I be held responsible?

This more thoroughly biblical view of nature and the environment will allow us to see more clearly the challenges that lie ahead. Our stewardship of the earth must grapple with the reality that it does not belong to us but to God though we have been given permission to use the earth for our basic needs.

Abuse of Dominion

While God intended us to live in harmony with nature, we have more often than not been at odds with nature. This reality tells us that man has not fulfilled his mandate. The source of our ecological crisis lies in man's fallen nature and the abuse of his dominion.

Man is a rebel who has set himself at the center of the universe. He has exploited created things as though they were nothing in themselves and as though he has an autonomous right to do so.{10} Man's abuse of his dominion becomes clear when we look at the value we place on time and money. Our often uncontrolled greed and haste have led to the deterioration of the environment.{11} We evaluate projects almost exclusively in terms of their potential impact on humans.

For instance, builders know that it is faster and more cost effective to bulldoze trees that are growing on the site of a proposed subdivision than it is to build the houses around them. Even if the uprooted trees are replaced with saplings once the houses are constructed, the loss of the mature trees enhances erosion, eliminates a means of absorbing pollutants, producing oxygen, and providing shade, and produces a scar that heals slowly if at all.

Building around the trees, while more expensive and time-consuming, minimizes the destructive impact of human society on God's earth. But, because of man's sinful heart, the first option has been utilized more often than not.

As Christians we must treat nature as having value in itself, and we must be careful to exercise dominion without being destructive.{12} To quote Francis Schaeffer, We have the right to rid our house of ants; but what we have no right to do is to forget to honor the ant as God made it, out in the place where God made the ant to be. When we meet the ant on the sidewalk, we step over him. He is a creature, like ourselves; not made in the image of God, it is true, but equal with man as far as creation is concerned.{13}

The Bible contains numerous examples of the care with which we are expected to treat the environment. Leviticus 25:1-12 speaks of the care Israel was to have for the land. Deuteronomy 25:4 and 22:6 indicates the proper care for domestic animals and a respect for wildlife. In Isaiah 5:8-10 the Lord judges those who have misused the land. Job 38:25-28 and Psalm 104:27-30 speak of God's nurture and care for His creation. Psalm 104 tells us that certain places were made with certain animals in mind. This would make our national parks and wilderness preserves a biblical concept. And Jesus spoke on two occasions of how much the Father cared for even the smallest sparrow (Matt. 6:26, 10:29). How can we do less?

Christian Responsibility

I believe that as Christians we have a responsibility to the earth that exceeds that of unredeemed people. We are the only ones who are rightly related to the Creator. We should be showing others the way to environmental responsibility.

Christians, of all people, should not be destroyers, Schaeffer said.{14} We may cut down a tree to build a house or to make a fire, but not just to cut it down. While there is nothing wrong with profit in the marketplace, in some cases we must voluntarily limit our profit in order to protect the environment.{15}

When the church puts belief into practice, our humanity and sense of beauty are restored.{16} But this is not what we see. Concern for the environment is not on the front burner of most evangelical Christians. The church has failed in its mission of steward of the earth.

We have spoken out loudly against the materialism of science as expressed in the issues of abortion, human dignity, evolution, and genetic engineering, but have shown ourselves to be little more than materialists in our technological orientation towards nature.{17} All too often Christians have adopted a mindset similar to a naturalist that would assert that simply more technology will answer our problems. In this respect we have essentially abandoned this very Christian issue.

By failing to fulfill our responsibilities to the earth, we are also losing a great evangelistic opportunity. Many young people in our society are seeking an improved environment, yet they think that most Christians don’t care about ecological issues and that most churches offer no opportunity for involvement.{18} For example, in many churches today you can find soft drink machines dispensing aluminum cans with no receptacle provided to recycle the aluminum, one of our most

profitable recyclable materials.

As a result, other worldviews and religions have made the environmental issue their own. Because the environmental movement has been co-opted by those involved in the New Age Movement particularly, many Christians have begun to confuse interest in the environment with interest in pantheism and have hesitated to get involved. But we cannot allow the enemy to take over leadership in an area that is rightfully ours.

As the redeemed of the earth, our motivation to care for the land is even higher than that of the evolutionist, the Buddhist, or the advocate of the New Age. Jesus has redeemed all of the effects of the curse, including our relationship with God, our relationship with other people, and our relationship with the creation (1 Cor. 15:21-22, Rom. 5:12-21). Although the heavens and the earth will eventually be destroyed, we should still work for healing now.

For Further Reading

Beisner, E. Calvin. *Prospects for Growth: a Biblical View of Population, Resources, and the Future*. Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1990.

DeWitt, Calvin B., Ed. *The Environment and the Christian: What Can We Learn from the New Testament?* Grand Rapids , Mich.: Baker Book House, 1991.

Schaeffer, Francis. *Pollution and the Death of Man: a Christian View of Ecology.* Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1970.

Notes

1. Calvin DeWitt, ed., *The Environment and the Christian: What Does the New Testament Say About the Environment* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).
2. Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science*, 155 (1967):1203-07.

3. Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1970), 26-27.
4. Ibid, 30-33.
5. Ibid, 47-49.
6. Ibid, 54-55.
7. Ibid, 49-50.
8. Ibid, 69.
9. Ibid, 69-70.
10. Ibid, 71.
11. Ibid, 83.
12. Ibid, 74-75.
13. Ibid, 74.
14. Ibid, 74.
15. Ibid, 90-91.
16. Ibid, 92-93.
17. Ibid, 85.
18. Ibid, 85.

© 2005 Probe Ministries

Buddhism: A Christian Perspective

Dr. Patrick Zukeran gives a brief overview of the basic beliefs of Buddhism, covering the doctrine of salvation, eternal state, the founder, and a comparison to Christianity.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

For centuries, Buddhism has been the dominant religion of the Eastern world. With the rise of the Asian population in the United States, Buddhism has had a tremendous impact on this

country as well. Presently, there are an estimated 300 million Buddhists in the world and 500 thousand in the United States.{1} It remains the dominant religion in the state of Hawaii, and many prominent Americans have accepted this religion, including the former governor of California, Jerry Brown,{2} Tina Turner, Phil Jackson (coach of the Los Angeles Lakers), Richard Gere, and Steven Seagal. The Dalai Lama has become a prominent spiritual figure for many throughout the world.

The Origin of Buddhism

Buddhism began as an offspring of Hinduism in the country of India. The founder was Siddhartha Gautama. It is not easy to give an accurate historical account of the life of Gautama since no biography was recorded until five hundred years after his death. Today, much of his life story is clouded in myths and legends which arose after his death. Even the best historians of our day have several different—and even contradictory—accounts of Gautama's life.

Siddhartha Gautama was born in approximately 560 B.C. in northern India. His father, Suddhodana, was the ruler over a district near the Himalayas which is today the country of Nepal. Suddhodana sheltered his son from the outside world and confined him to the palace where he surrounded Gautama with pleasures and wealth.

Despite his father's efforts, however, Gautama one day saw the darker side of life on a trip he took outside the palace walls. He saw four things that forever changed his life: an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and an ascetic. Deeply distressed by the suffering he saw, he decided to leave the luxury of palace life and begin a quest to find the answer to the problem of pain and human suffering.

Gautama left his family and traveled the country seeking wisdom. He studied the Hindu scriptures under Brahmin priests,

but became disillusioned with the teachings of Hinduism. He then devoted himself to a life of extreme asceticism in the jungle. He soon concluded, however, that asceticism did not lead to peace and self-realization but merely weakened the mind and body.

Gautama eventually turned to a life of meditation. While deep in meditation under a fig tree known as the *Bohdi* tree (meaning, “tree of wisdom”), Gautama experienced the highest degree of God-consciousness called *nirvana*. Gautama then became known as *Buddha*, the “enlightened one.” He believed he had found the answers to the questions of pain and suffering. His message now needed to be proclaimed to the whole world.

As he began his teaching ministry, he gained a quick audience with the people of India since many had become disillusioned with Hinduism. By the time of his death at age 80, Buddhism had become a major force in India.

Expansion and Development of Buddhism

Buddhism remained mostly in India for three centuries until King Ashoka, who ruled India from 274-232 B.C., converted to Buddhism. Ashoka sent missionaries throughout the world, and Buddhism spread to all of Asia.

Even before its expansion, two distinct branches developed, a conservative and a liberal school of thought. The conservative school is labeled Theravada, and it became the dominant form of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. Thus, it is also called Southern Buddhism. Southern Buddhism has remained closer to the original form of Buddhism. This school follows the Pali Canon of scripture, which, although written centuries after Gautamas death, contains the most accurate recording of his teachings.

The liberal school is Mahayana Buddhism, which traveled to the north into China, Japan, Korea, and Tibet, and is also called

Northern Buddhism. As it spread north, it adopted and incorporated beliefs and practices from the local religions of the land. The two branches of Buddhism are so different they appear to be two different religions rather than two branches of the same tree. Here are a few differences.

Theravada Buddhism sees Buddha as a man. Gautama never claimed to be deity, but rather a "way shower." Mahayana Buddhism, however, worships Buddha as a manifestation of the divine Buddha essence. Since Gautama, many other manifestations or *bodhisattvas* have appeared. An example is Tibetan Buddhism, which worships the spiritual leader the Dalai Lama as a bodhisattva.

Theravada adheres to the Pali Canon and Buddhas earliest teachings. Since Mahayana believes there have been many manifestations, this branch incorporates many other texts written by the bodhisattvas as part of their canon.

Theravada teaches that each person must attain salvation through their own effort, and this requires one to relinquish earthly desires and live a monastic life. Therefore, only those few who have chosen this lifestyle will attain nirvana. Mahayana teaches that salvation comes through the grace of the bodhisattvas and so many may attain salvation.

Divine beings do not have a place in Theravada. The primary focus is on the individual attaining enlightenment, and a divine being, or speculations of such, only hinders the process. Therefore, several sects of this branch are atheistic. Mahayana, on the other hand, has many diverse views of God since this branch is inclusive, and has adopted the beliefs and practices of various religions. Many schools are pantheistic in their worldview while others are animistic. Buddha is worshipped as a divine being. Some schools pay homage to a particular bodhisattva sent to their people. Other schools have a mixture of gods whom they worship. For example, Japanese Buddhism blended with Shintoism and includes worship

of the Shinto gods with the teachings and worship of Buddha.

When speaking with a Buddhist, it is important to understand what branch of Buddhism they are talking about. The two branches are dramatically different. Even within Mahayana Buddhism, the sects can be as different as Theravada is to Mahayana.

The Way of Salvation

The main question Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, sought to answer was, “Why is there pain and suffering?” His belief in reincarnation (the belief that after death one returns to earthly life in a higher or lower form of life according to his good or bad deeds) prompted a second question that also needed to be answered: “How does one break this rebirth cycle?” The basic teachings of Buddhism, therefore, focus on what Gautama believed to be the answer to these questions. These basic tenets are found in the Four Noble Truths and in the Eight-fold Path. Let us begin with the Four Noble Truths.

The First Noble Truth is that there is pain and suffering in the world. Gautama realized that pain and suffering are omnipresent in all of nature and human life. To exist means to encounter suffering. Birth is painful and so is death. Sickness and old age are painful. Throughout life, all living things encounter suffering.

The Second Noble Truth relates to the cause of suffering. Gautama believed the root cause of suffering is desire. It is the craving for wealth, happiness, and other forms of selfish enjoyment which cause suffering. These cravings can never be satisfied for they are rooted in ignorance.

The Third Noble Truth is the end of all suffering. Suffering will cease when a person can rid himself of all desires.

The Fourth Noble Truth is the extinguishing of all desire by following the Eight-fold path. “The Eight-fold path is a

system of therapy designed to develop habits which will release people from the restrictions caused by ignorance and craving."{3}

Here are the eight steps in following the Eight-fold path. The first is the Right View. One must accept the Four Noble Truths. Step two is the Right Resolve. One must renounce all desires and any thoughts like lust, bitterness, and cruelty, and must harm no living creature. Step three is the Right Speech. One must speak only truth. There can be no lying, slander, or vain talk. Step four is the Right Behavior. One must abstain from sexual immorality, stealing, and all killing.

Step five is the Right Occupation. One must work in an occupation that benefits others and harms no one. Step six is the Right Effort. One must seek to eliminate any evil qualities within and prevent any new ones from arising. One should seek to attain good and moral qualities and develop those already possessed. Seek to grow in maturity and perfection until universal love is attained. Step seven is the Right Contemplation. One must be observant, contemplative, and free of desire and sorrow. The eighth is the Right Meditation. After freeing oneself of all desires and evil, a person must concentrate his efforts in meditation so that he can overcome any sensation of pleasure or pain and enter a state of transcending consciousness and attain a state of perfection. Buddhists believe that through self-effort one can attain the eternal state of nirvana.

In Buddhism, ones path to nirvana relies on the effort and discipline of the individual. By contrast, Jesus taught our goal is not a state of non-conscious being, but an eternal relationship with God. There is nothing one can do to earn a right relationship with God. Instead, we must receive His gift of grace, the sacrificial death of His Son, Jesus Christ and this restores our relationship with our creator.

Karma, *Samsara*, and *Nirvana*

Three important concepts in understanding Buddhism are *karma*, *samsara*, and *nirvana*.

Karma refers to the law of cause and effect in a person's life, reaping what one has sown. Buddhists believe that every person must go through a process of birth and rebirth until he reaches the state of *nirvana* in which he breaks this cycle. According to the law of karma, "You are what you are and do what you do, as a result of what you were and did in a previous incarnation, which in turn was the inevitable outcome of what you were and did in still earlier incarnations."{4} For a Buddhist, what one will be in the next life depends on one's actions in this present life. Unlike Hindus, Buddha believed that a person can break the rebirth cycle no matter what class he is born into.

The second key concept is the law of *samsara* or *transmigration*. This is one of the most perplexing and difficult concepts in Buddhism to understand. The law of Samsara holds that everything is in a birth and rebirth cycle. Buddha taught that people do not have individual souls. The existence of an individual self or ego is an illusion. There is no eternal substance of a person, which goes through the rebirth cycle. What is it then that goes through the cycle if not the individual soul? What goes through the rebirth cycle is only a set of feelings, impressions, present moments, and the karma that is passed on. "In other words, as one process leads to another, … so one's human personality in one existence is the direct cause of the type of individuality which appears in the next."{5} The new individual in the next life will not be exactly the same person, but there will be several similarities. Just how close in identity they will be is not known.

The third key concept is *nirvana*. The term means "the blowing out" of existence. Nirvana is very different from the Christian concept of heaven. Nirvana is not a place like heaven, but rather an eternal state of being. It is the state in which the law of karma and the rebirth cycle come to an end. It is the end of suffering; a state where there are no desires and the individual consciousness comes to an end. Although to our Western minds this may sound like annihilation, Buddhists would object to such a notion. Gautama never gave an exact description of nirvana, but his closest reply was this. "There is disciples, a condition, where there is neither earth nor water, neither air nor light, neither limitless space, nor limitless time, neither any kind of being, neither ideation nor non-ideation, neither this world nor that world. There is neither arising nor passing-away, nor dying, neither cause nor effect, neither change nor standstill."{6}

In contrast to the idea of reincarnation, the Bible teaches in Hebrews 9:27 that "man is destined to die once and after that to face judgment." A major diverging point between Buddhism and Christianity is that the Bible refutes the idea of reincarnation. The Bible also teaches that in the eternal state, we are fully conscious and glorified individuals whose relationship with God comes to its perfect maturity.

Jesus and Gautama

There is much I admire in the life and teachings of Gautama. Being raised in the Japanese Buddhist culture, I appreciate the ethical teachings, the arts, and architecture influenced by Buddhism. As I studied the life and teachings of Gautama and of Jesus, I discovered some dramatic differences.

First, Buddha did not claim to be divine. Theravada remains true to his teaching that he was just a man. The idea that he was divine was developed in Mahayana Buddhism 700 years after his death. Furthermore, Northern Buddhism teaches that there

have been other manifestations of the Buddha or bodhisattvas and some believe Jesus to be one as well. However, Jesus did not claim to be one of many manifestations of God; He claimed to be the one and only Son of God. This teaching was not the creation of his followers but a principle He taught from the beginning of His ministry. In fact, the salvation He preached was dependent on understanding His divine nature.

Second, Buddha claimed to be a way shower. He showed the way to nirvana, but it was up to each follower to find his or her own path. Christ did not come to show the way; He claimed to *be* the way. While Buddhism teaches that salvation comes through Buddhas teachings, Christ taught salvation is found in *Him*. When Jesus said, "I am the way the truth and the life" (John 14:6), He was saying He alone is the one who can give eternal life, for He is the source of truth and life. Not only did He make the way possible, He promises to forever be with and empower all who follow Him to live the life that pleases God.

Third, Buddha taught that the way to eliminate suffering and attain enlightenment was to eliminate all desire. Christ taught that one should not eliminate all desire but that one must have the right desire. He stated, "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be satisfied." Christ taught that we should desire to know Him above all other wants.

Fourth, Buddha performed no miracles in his lifetime. Christ affirmed His claims to be divine through the miracles He performed. He demonstrated authority over every realm of creation: the spiritual realm, nature, sickness, and death. These miracles confirmed the claims that He was more than a good teacher, but God incarnate.

Finally, Buddha is buried in a grave in Kusinara at the foot of the Himalaya Mountains. Christ, however, is alive. He alone conquered sin and the grave. His death paid the price for sin,

and His resurrection makes it possible for all people to enter into a personal and eternal relationship with God.

After a comparative study, I came to realize Buddha was a great teacher who lived a noble life, but Christ is the unique revelation of God who is to be worshipped as our eternal Lord and Savior.

Notes

1. Isamu Yamamoto, *Buddhism, Taoism and Other Eastern Religions,* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 1998), p. 23.
2. Walter Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis: Bethany House 1985), p. 261.
3. Kenneth Boa, *Cults, World Religions, and the Occult* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, (1977) p. 35
4. Davis Taylor and Clark Offner, *The World's Religions,* Norman Anderson, ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1975), p. 174.
5. John Noss, *Man's Religions* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1968), p. 182.
6. Taylor and Offner, *The World's Religions, p. 177.*

©1994 Probe Ministries.

---

7 Questions Skeptics Ask About the Validity of Christianity

Rusty Wright considers some common questions skeptics ask about our belief in Christianity. He shows us how to answer

these questions from an informed biblical worldview.

Questions of Faith

Picture the scene. You're discussing your faith with a coworker or neighbor, perhaps over lunch or coffee. You explain your beliefs but your friend questions:

> *How could a loving God allow evil and suffering? The Bible is full of contradictions. What about people who've never heard of Jesus?*

How do you feel about these questions and objections? Anxious? Confused? Defensive? Combative?

Sensitively and appropriately answering questions that skeptics ask you can be an important part of helping them to consider Jesus. Peter told us, "In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."{1} This series looks at seven common questions skeptics ask and gives you some pointers on how to respond. Consider first a story.

As the flight from Chicago to Dallas climbed in the sky, I became engrossed in conversation with the passenger to my left. "Aimee," a French businesswoman, asked me about my work. On learning I was a Christian communicator, she related that a professing Christian had signed a contract with her, attempted to lead her to Christ, then later deceitfully undercut her. "How could a Christian do such a thing?" she asked.

I told her that Christians weren't perfect, that some fail miserably, that many are honest and caring, but that it is Jesus we ultimately trust. Aimee asked question after question: "How can you believe the Bible?" "Why do Christians say there is only one way to God?" "How does one become a Christian?"

I tried to answer her concerns tactfully and explained the message of grace as clearly as I could. Stories I told of personal pain seemed to open her up to consider God's love for her. She did not come to Christ in that encounter, but she seemed to leave it with a new understanding.

Hurting people everywhere need God. Many are open to considering Him, but they often have questions they want answered before they are willing to accept Christ. As Christian communicators seek to blend grace with truth,{2} an increasing number of skeptics may give an ear and become seekers or believers.

As you interact with skeptics, compliment them where you can. Jesus complimented the skeptical Nathanael for his pursuit of truth.{3} Listen to their concerns. Your listening ear speaks volumes. It may surprise you to learn that your attitude can be just as important as what you know.

Dealing with Objections

How do you deal with questions and objections to faith that your friends may pose?

When I was a skeptical student, my sometimes-relentless questions gave my Campus Crusade for Christ friends at Duke University plenty of practice! I wanted to know if Christianity was true. After trusting Christ as Savior, I still had questions.

Bob Prall, the local Campus Crusade director, took interest in me. At first his answers irritated me, but as I thought them through they began to make sense. For two years I followed him around campus, watching him interact. Today, as I am privileged to encounter inquisitive people around the globe, much of my speech and manner derive from my mentor.

Consider some guidelines. Pray for wisdom, for His love for inquirers{4} and for your questioner's heart. If appropriate,

briefly share the gospel first. The Holy Spirit may draw your friends to Christ. Don't push, though. It may be best to answer their questions first.

Some questions may be intellectual smokescreens. Once a Georgia Tech philosophy professor peppered me with questions, which I answered as best I could.

Then I asked him, "If I could answer all your questions to your satisfaction, would you put your life in Jesus' hands?" His reply: "[Expletive deleted] no!"

Okay. This first objection is one you might have heard:

1. It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere.

I once gave a speech arguing *for* this proposition. Later, I reconsidered. In the 1960s, many women took the drug thalidomide seeking easier pregnancies. Often they delivered deformed babies. Sincerely swallowing two white pills may cure your headache if the pills are aspirin. If they are roach poison, results may differ.

After discussing this point, a widely respected psychologist told me, "I guess a person could be sincere in what he or she believed, but be sincerely wrong." Ultimately faith is only as valid as its object. Jesus demonstrated by His life, death and resurrection that He is a worthy object for faith.{5}

Focus on Jesus. Bob Prall taught me to say, "I don't have answers to every question. But if my conclusion about Jesus is wrong, I have a bigger problem. What do I do with the evidence for His resurrection, His deity and the prophecies He fulfilled? And what do I do with changed lives, including my own?"

I don't have complete answers to every concern you will encounter, but in what follows I'll outline some short

responses that might be useful.

The second question is:

2. Why is there evil and suffering?

Sigmund Freud called religion an illusion that humans invent to satisfy their security needs. To him, a benevolent, all-powerful God seemed incongruent with natural disasters and human evil.

God, though sovereign, gave us freedom to follow Him or to disobey Him. Oxford scholar C.S. Lewis estimated that eighty percent of human suffering stems from human choice. Lewis called pain "God's megaphone" that alerts us to our need for Him.{6} This response does not answer all concerns (because God sometimes does intervene to thwart evil) but it suggests that the problem of evil is not as great an intellectual obstacle to belief as some imagine.

Pain's emotional barrier to belief, however, remains formidable. When I see God, items on my long list of questions for Him will include a painful and unwanted divorce, betrayal by trusted coworkers, and all sorts of disappointing human behavior and natural disasters. Yet in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection{7} I have seen enough to trust Him when He says He "causes all things to work together for good to those who love God."{8}

3. What about those who never hear of Jesus?

Moses said, "The secret things belong to the LORD."{9} Some issues may remain mysteries. God's perfect love and justice far exceed our own. Whatever He decides will be loving and fair. One can make a case that God will make the necessary information available to someone who wants to know Him. An example: Cornelius, a devout military official. The New Testament records that God assigned Peter to tell him about Jesus.{10}

A friend once told me that many asking this question seek a personal loophole, a way so they won't need to believe in Christ. That statement angered me, but it also described me. C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* wrote, "If you are worried about the people outside [of faith in Christ], the most unreasonable thing you can do is to remain outside yourself."{11} If Christianity is true, the most logical behavior for someone concerned about those without Christ's message would be to trust Christ and go tell them about Him.

Here's a tip: When someone asks you a difficult question, if you don't know the answer, admit it. Many skeptics appreciate honesty. Don't bluff. It's dishonest and often detectable.

4. What about all the contradictions in the Bible?

Ask your questioner for specific examples of contradictions. Often people have none, but rely on hearsay. If there is a specific example, consider these guidelines as you respond.

Omission does not necessarily create contradiction. Luke, for example, writes of two angels at Jesus' tomb after the Resurrection.{12} Matthew mentions "an angel."{13} Is this a contradiction? If Matthew stated that only one angel was present, the accounts would be dissonant. As it stands, they can be harmonized.

Differing accounts aren't necessarily contradictory. Matthew and Luke, for example, differ in their accounts of Jesus' birth. Luke records Joseph and Mary starting in Nazareth, traveling to Bethlehem (Jesus' birthplace), and returning to Nazareth.{14} Matthew starts with Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, relates the family's journey to Egypt to escape King Herod's rage, and recounts their travel to Nazareth after Herod's death.{15} The Gospels never claim to be exhaustive records. Biographers must be selective. The accounts seem complementary, not contradictory.

Time precludes more complex examples here. But time and again,

supposed biblical problems fade in light of logic, history, and archaeology. The Bible's track record under scrutiny argues for its trustworthiness.

5. Isn't Christianity just a psychological crutch?

My mentor Bob Prall has often said, "If Christianity is a psychological crutch, then Jesus Christ came because there was an epidemic of broken legs." Christianity claims to meet real human needs such as those for forgiveness, love, identity and self-acceptance. We might describe Jesus not as a crutch but an iron lung, essential for life itself.

Christian faith and its benefits can be described in psychological terms but that does not negate its validity. "Does it work?" is not the same question as, "Is it true?" Evidence supports Christianity's truthfulness, so we would expect it to work in individual lives, as millions attest.

A caution as you answer questions: Don't offer "proof" but rather evidences for faith. "Proof" can imply an airtight case, which you don't have. Aim for certainty "beyond a reasonable doubt," just as an attorney might in court.

Don't quarrel. Lovingly and intelligently present evidence to willing listeners, not to win arguments but to share good news. Be kind and gentle.{16} Your life and friendship can communicate powerfully.

6. How can Jesus be the only way to God?

When I was in secondary school, a recent alumnus visited, saying he had found Christ at Harvard. I respected his character and tact and listened intently. But I could not stomach Jesus' claim that "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."{17} That seemed way too narrow.

Two years later, my spiritual and intellectual journey had

changed my view. The logic that drew me (reluctantly) to his position involves three questions:

- *If God exists, could there be only one way to reach Him?* To be open-minded, I had to admit this possibility.

- *Why consider Jesus as a candidate for that possible one way?* He claimed it. His plan of rescuing humans – "by grace…through faith…not…works"{18} was distinct from those requiring works, as many other religions do. These two kinds of systems were mutually exclusive. Both could be false or either could be true, but both could not be true.

- *Was Jesus' plan true?* Historical evidence for His resurrection, fulfilled prophecy{19} and deity, and for the reliability of the New Testament{20} convinced me I could trust His words.

One more common objection:

7. I could never take the blind leap of faith that believing in Christ requires.

We exercise faith every day. Few of us comprehend everything about electricity or aerodynamics, but we have evidence of their validity. Whenever we use electric lights or airplanes, we exercise faith – not blind faith, but faith based on evidence. Christians act similarly. The evidence for Jesus is compelling, so one can trust Him on that basis.

As you respond to inquirers, realize that many barriers to faith are emotional rather than merely intellectual.

As a teenager, I nearly was expelled from secondary school for some problems I helped create. In my pain and anger I wondered, "Why would God allow this to happen?" I was mad at God! In retrospect, I realize I was blaming Him for my own bad choices. My personal anguish at the time kept me from seeing that.

Your questioners may be turned off because Christians haven't acted like Jesus. Maybe they're angry at God because of personal illness, a broken relationship, a loved one's death, or personal pain. Ask God for patience and love as you seek to blend grace with truth. He may use you to help skeptics become seekers and seekers become His children. I hope He does.

Notes

1. 1 Peter 3:15 NIV.
2. John 1:14.
3. John 1:45-47.
4. Romans 9:1-3; 10:1.
5. For useful discussions of evidences regarding Jesus, visit www.WhoIsJesus-Really.com.
6. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 89-103 ff. The Problem of Pain was first published in 1940.
7. A short summary of Resurrection evidences is at Rusty Wright and Linda Raney Wright, "Who's Got the Body?" 1976, www.probe.org/whos-got-the-body/.
8. Romans 8:28 NASB.

For more complete treatment of this subject, see Rick Rood, "The Problem of Evil," 1996, www.probe.org/the-problem-of-evil/; Dr. Ray Bohlin, "Where Was God on September 11?" 2002, www.probe.org/where-was-god-on-sept-11-the-problem-of-evil/ .

9. Deuteronomy 29:29 NASB.
10. Acts 10.
11. C.S. Lewis, "The Case for Christianity," reprinted from *Mere Christianity*; in *The Best of C.S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), 449. The Case for Christianity is copyright 1947 by The Macmillan Company.
12. Luke 24:1-9.
13. Matthew 28:1-8.
14. Luke 1:26-2:40.
15. Matthew 1:18-2:23.
16. 2 Timothy 2:24-26.

17. John 14:6 NASB.
18. Ephesians 2:8-9 NASB.
19. A summary of some of the prophesies Jesus fulfilled is at Rusty Wright, "Are You Listening? Do You Hear What I Hear?" 2004, www.probe.org/are-you-listening-do-you-hear-what-i-hear/ .
20. A summary of evidences for New Testament reliability is at Rusty Wright and Linda Raney Wright, "The New Testament: Can I Trust It?" 1976, www.probe.org/the-new-testament-can-i-trust-it/ .

Adapted from Rusty Wright, "7 Questions Skeptics Ask," *Moody Magazine*, March/April 2002. Copyright© 2002 Rusty Wright. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

© 2005 Probe Ministries

Utilitarianism: The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number

Utilitarianism is an ethical system that determines morality on the basis of the greatest good for the greatest number. A modern form of utilitarianism is situation ethics. Kerby Anderson examines the problems with this ethical system, and evaluates it from a biblical perspective.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

You have probably heard a politician say he or she passed a piece of legislation because it did the greatest good for the greatest number of citizens. Perhaps you have heard someone justify their actions because it was for the greater good.

In this article, we are going to talk about the philosophy behind such actions. The philosophy is known as utilitarianism. Although it is a long word, it is in common usage every day. It is the belief that the sole standard of morality is determined by its usefulness.

Philosophers refer to it as a “teleological” system. The Greek word “telos” means end or goal. This means that this ethical system determines morality by the end result. Whereas Christian ethics are based on rules, utilitarianism is based on results.

Utilitarianism began with the philosophies of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). Utilitarianism gets its name from Bentham’s test question, “What is the use of it?” He conceived of the idea when he ran across the words “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” in Joseph Priestly’s *Treatise of Government*.

Jeremy Bentham developed his ethical system around the idea of pleasure. He built it on ancient hedonism which pursued physical pleasure and avoided physical pain. According to Bentham, the most moral acts are those which maximize pleasure and minimize pain. This has sometimes been called the “utilitarian calculus.” An act would be moral if it brings the greatest amount of pleasure and the least amount of pain.

John Stuart Mill modified this philosophy and developed it apart from Bentham’s hedonistic foundation. Mill used the same utilitarian calculus but instead focused on maximizing the general happiness by calculating the greatest good for the greatest number. While Bentham used the calculus in a quantitative sense, Mill used this calculus in a qualitative sense. He believed, for example, that some pleasures were of higher quality than others.

Utilitarianism has been embraced by so many simply because it seems to make a good deal of sense and seems relatively simple

to apply. However, when it was first proposed, utilitarianism was a radical philosophy. It attempted to set forth a moral system apart from divine revelation and biblical morality. Utilitarianism focused on results rather than rules. Ultimately the focus on the results demolished the rules.

In other words, utilitarianism provided for a way for people to live moral lives apart from the Bible and its prescriptions. There was no need for an appeal to divine revelation. Reason rather than revelation was sufficient to determine morality.

Founders of Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham was a leading theorist in Anglo-American philosophy of law and one of the founders of utilitarianism. He developed this idea of a utility and a utilitarian calculus in the *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1781).

In the beginning of that work Bentham wrote: "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it."{1}

Bentham believed that pain and pleasure not only explain our actions but also help us define what is good and moral. He believed that this foundation could provide a basis for social, legal, and moral reform in society.

Key to his ethical system is the principle of utility. That is, what is the greatest good for the greatest number?

Bentham wrote: “By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness.” {2}

John Stuart Mill was a brilliant scholar who was subjected to a rigid system of intellectual discipline and shielded from boys his own age. When Mill was a teenager, he read Bentham. Mill said the feeling rushed upon him “that all previous moralists were superseded.” He believed that the principle of utility “gave unity to my conception of things. I now had opinions: a creed, a doctrine, a philosophy; in one among the best senses of the word, a religion; the inculcation and diffusion of what could be made the principle outward purpose of a life.”{3}

Mill modified Bentham’s utilitarianism. Whereas Bentham established an *act* utilitarianism, Mill established a *rule* utilitarianism. According to Mill, one calculates what is right by comparing the consequences of all relevant agents of alternative rules for a particular circumstance. This is done by comparing all relevant similar circumstances or settings at any time.

Analysis of Utilitarianism

Why did utilitarianism become popular? There are a number of reasons for its appeal.

First, it is a relatively simple ethical system to apply. To determine whether an action is moral you merely have to calculate the good and bad consequences that will result from a particular action. If the good outweighs the bad, then the action is moral.

Second, utilitarianism avoids the need to appeal to divine

revelation. Many adherents to this ethical system are looking for a way to live a moral life apart from the Bible and a belief in God. The system replaces revelation with reason. Logic rather than an adherence to biblical principles guides the ethical decision-making of a utilitarian.

Third, most people already use a form of utilitarianism in their daily decisions. We make lots of non-moral decisions every day based upon consequences. At the checkout line, we try to find the shortest line so we can get out the door more quickly. We make most of our financial decisions (writing checks, buying merchandise, etc.) on a utilitarian calculus of cost and benefits. So making moral decisions using utilitarianism seems like a natural extension of our daily decision-making procedures.

There are also a number of problems with utilitarianism. One problem with utilitarianism is that it leads to an "end justifies the means" mentality. If any worthwhile end can justify the means to attain it, a true ethical foundation is lost. But we all know that the end does *not* justify the means. If that were so, then Hitler could justify the Holocaust because the end was to purify the human race. Stalin could justify his slaughter of millions because he was trying to achieve a communist utopia.

The end never justifies the means. The means must justify themselves. A particular act cannot be judged as good simply because it may lead to a good consequence. The means must be judged by some objective and consistent standard of morality.

Second, utilitarianism cannot protect the rights of minorities if the goal is the greatest good for the greatest number. Americans in the eighteenth century could justify slavery on the basis that it provided a good consequence for a majority of Americans. Certainly the majority benefited from cheap slave labor even though the lives of black slaves were much worse.

A third problem with utilitarianism is predicting the consequences. If morality is based on results, then we would have to have omniscience in order to accurately predict the consequence of any action. But at best we can only guess at the future, and often these educated guesses are wrong.

A fourth problem with utilitarianism is that consequences themselves must be judged. When results occur, we must still ask whether they are good or bad results. Utilitarianism provides no objective and consistent foundation to judge results because results are the mechanism used to judge the action itself.

Situation Ethics

A popular form of utilitarianism is *situation ethics* first proposed by Joseph Fletcher in his book by the same name.{4} Fletcher acknowledges that situation ethics is essentially utilitarianism, but modifies the pleasure principle and calls it the *agape* (love) principle.

Fletcher developed his ethical system as an alternative to two extremes: legalism and antinomianism. The legalist is like the Pharisees in the time of Jesus who had all sorts of laws and regulations but no heart. They emphasized the law over love. Antinomians are like the libertines in Paul's day who promoted their lawlessness.

The foundation of situation ethics is what Fletcher calls the law of love. Love replaces the law. Fletcher says, "We follow law, if at all, for love's sake."{5}

Fletcher even quotes certain biblical passages to make his case. For example, he quotes Romans 13:8 which says, "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow man has fulfilled the law."

Another passage Fletcher quotes is Matthew 22:37-40. “Christ said, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. . . . Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Proponents of situation ethics would argue that these summary verses require only one absolute (the law of love). No other universal laws can be derived from this commandment to love. Even the Ten Commandments are subject to exceptions based upon the law of love.

Situation ethics also accepts the view that the end justifies the means. Only the ends can justify the means; the means cannot justify themselves. Fletcher believes that “no act apart from its foreseeable consequences has any ethical meaning whatsoever.”{6}

Joseph Fletcher tells the story of Lenin who had become weary of being told that he had no ethics. After all, he used a very pragmatic and utilitarian philosophy to force communism on the people. So some of those around him accused him of believing that the end justifies the means. Finally, Lenin shot back, “If the end does not justify the means, then in the name of sanity and justice, *what does*?”{7}

Like utilitarianism, situation ethics attempts to define morality with an “end justifies the means” philosophy. According to Fletcher, the law of love requires the greatest love for the greatest number of people in the long run. But as we will see in the next section, we do not always know how to define love, and we do not always know what will happen in the long run.

Analysis of Situation Ethics

Perhaps the biggest problem with situation ethics is that the law of love is too general. People are going to have different

definitions of what love is. What some may believe is a loving act, others might feel is an unloving act.

Moreover, the context of love varies from situation to situation and certainly varies from culture to culture. So it is even difficult to derive moral principles that can be known and applied universally. In other words, it is impossible to say that to follow the law of love is to do such and such in every circumstance. Situations and circumstances change, and so the moral response may change as well.

The admonition to do the loving thing is even less specific than to do what is the greatest good for the greatest number. It has about as much moral force as to say to do the "good thing" or the "right thing." Without a specific definition, it is nothing more than a moral platitude.

Second, situation ethics suffers from the same problem of utilitarianism in predicting consequences. In order to judge the morality of an action, we have to know the results of the action we are about to take. Often we cannot know the consequences.

Joseph Fletcher acknowledges that when he says, "We can't always guess the future, even though we are always being forced to try."{8} But according to his ethical system, we have to *know* the results in order to make a moral choice. In fact, we should be relatively certain of the consequences, otherwise our action would by definition be immoral.

Situation ethics also assumes that the situation will determine the meaning of love. Yet love is not determined by the particulars of our circumstance but merely conditioned by them. The situation does not determine what is right or wrong. The situation instead helps us determine which biblical command applies in that particular situation.

From the biblical perspective, the problem with utilitarianism and situation ethics is that they ultimately provide no

consistent moral framework. Situation ethics also permits us to do evil to achieve good. This is totally contrary to the Bible.

For example, Proverbs 14:12 says that "There is a way *which seems* right to a man, but its end is the way of death." The road to destruction is paved with good intentions. This is a fundamental flaw with an "ends justifies the means" ethical system.

In Romans 6:1 Paul asks, "Are we to continue sinning so that grace may increase?" His response is "May it never be!"

Utilitarianism attempts to provide a moral system apart from God's revelation in the Bible, but in the end, it does not succeed.

Notes

1. Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation,* printed in 1781 and published in 1789 (Batoche Books: Kitchener, ON Canada, 2000), 14.
2. Ibid.
3. John Stuart Mill, "Last Stage of Education and First of Self-Education," *Autobiography, 1873* (New York: P.F. Collier & Sons, 1909-14).
4. Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966).
5. Ibid., 70.
6. Ibid., 120.
7. Ibid., 121.
8. Ibid., 136.

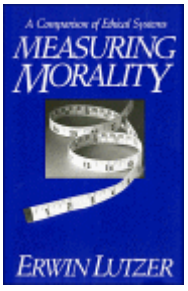
© 2004 Probe Ministries

Cultural Relativism

Kerby Anderson presents the basics of cultural relativism and evaluates it from a Christian worldview perspective. Comparing the tenets of cultural relativism to a biblical view of ethics shows how these popular ideas fail the reasonableness test.

This article is also available in Spanish.

John Dewey



Any student in a class on anthropology cannot help but notice the differences between various cultures of the world. Differences in dress, diet, and social norms are readily apparent. Such diversity in terms of ethics and justice are also easily seen and apparently shaped by the culture in which we live.

If there is no transcendent ethical standard, then often culture becomes the ethical norm for determining whether an action is right or wrong. This ethical system is known as *cultural relativism*.{1} Cultural relativism is the view that all ethical truth is relative to a specific culture. Whatever a cultural group approves is considered right within that culture. Conversely, whatever a cultural group condemns is wrong.

The key to cultural relativism is that right and wrong can only be judged relative to a specified society. There is no ultimate standard of right and wrong by which to judge culture.

A famous proponent of this view was John Dewey, often considered the father of American education. He taught that moral standards were like language and therefore the result of custom. Language evolved over time and eventually became organized by a set of principles known as grammar. But language also changes over time to adapt to the changing circumstances of its culture.

Likewise, Dewey said, ethics were also the product of an evolutionary process. There are no fixed ethical norms. These are merely the result of particular cultures attempting to organize a set of moral principles. But these principles can also change over time to adapt to the changing circumstances of the culture.

This would also mean that different forms of morality evolved in different communities. Thus, there are no universal ethical principles. What may be right in one culture would be wrong in another culture, and vice versa.

Although it is hard for us in the modern world to imagine, a primitive culture might value genocide, treachery, deception, even torture. While we may not like these traits, a true follower of cultural relativism could not say these are wrong since they are merely the product of cultural adaptation.

Clifford Gertz argued that culture must be seen as "webs of meaning" within which humans must live.{2} Gertz believed that "Humans are shaped exclusively by their culture and therefore there exists no unifying cross-cultural human characteristics."{3}

As we will see, cultural relativism allows us to be tolerant toward other cultures, but it provides no basis to judge or evaluate other cultures and their practices.

William Graham Sumner

A key figure who expanded on Dewey's ideas was William Graham Sumner of Yale University. He argued that what our conscience tells us depends solely upon our social group. The moral values we hold are not part of our moral nature, according to Sumner. They are part of our training and upbringing.

Sumner argued in his book, *Folkways*: "World philosophy, life policy, right, rights, and morality are all products of the folkways."{4} In other words, what we perceive as conscience is merely the product of culture upon our minds through childhood training and cultural influence. There are no universal ethical principles, merely different cultural conditioning.

Sumner studied all sorts of societies (primitive and advanced), and was able to document numerous examples of cultural relativism. Although many cultures promoted the idea, for example, that a man could have many wives, Sumner discovered that in Tibet a woman was encouraged to have many husbands. He also described how some Eskimo tribes allowed deformed babies to die by being exposed to the elements. In the Fiji Islands, aged parents were killed.

Sumner believed that this diversity of moral values clearly demonstrated that culture is the sole determinant of our ethical standards. In essence, culture determines what is right and wrong. And different cultures come to different ethical conclusions.

Proponents of cultural relativism believe this cultural diversity proves that culture alone is responsible for our morality. There is no soul or spirit or mind or conscience. Moral relativists say that what we perceive as moral convictions or conscience are the byproducts of culture.

The strength of cultural relativism is that it allows us to

withhold moral judgments about the social practices of another culture. In fact, proponents of cultural relativism would say that to pass judgment on another culture would be ethnocentric.

This strength, however, is also a major weakness. Cultural relativism excuses us from judging the moral practices of another culture. Yet we all feel compelled to condemn such actions as the Holocaust or ethnic cleansing. Cultural relativism as an ethical system, however, provides no foundation for doing so.

Melville Herskovits

Melville J. Herskovits wrote in *Cultural Relativism*: "Judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation."{5} In other words, a person's judgment about what is right and wrong is determined by their cultural experiences. This would include everything from childhood training to cultural pressures to conform to the majority views of the group. Herskovits went on to argue that even the definition of what is normal and abnormal is relative to culture.

He believed that cultures were flexible, and so ethical norms change over time. The standard of ethical conduct may change over time to meet new cultural pressures and demands. When populations are unstable and infant mortality is high, cultures value life and develop ethical systems to protect it. When a culture is facing overpopulation, a culture redefines ethical systems and even the value of life. Life is valuable and sacred in the first society. Mercy killing might become normal and acceptable in the second society.

Polygamy might be a socially acceptable standard for society. But later, that society might change its perspective and believe that it is wrong for a man to have more than one wife.

Herskovits believed that whatever a society accepted or rejected became the standard of morality for the individuals in that society.

He believed that "the need for a cultural relativistic point of view has become apparent because of the realization that there is no way to play this game of making judgment across cultures except with loaded dice."{6} Ultimately, he believed, culture determines our moral standards and attempting to compare or contrast cultural norms is futile.

In a sense, the idea of cultural relativism has helped encourage such concepts as multiculturalism and postmodernism. After all, if truth is created not discovered, then all truths created by a particular culture are equally true. This would mean that cultural norms and institutions should be considered equally valid if they are useful to a particular group of people within a culture.

And this is one of the major problems with a view of cultural relativism: you cannot judge the morality of another culture. If there is no objective standard, then someone in one culture does not have a right to evaluate the actions or morality of another culture. Yet in our hearts we know that certain things like racism, discrimination, and exploitation are wrong.

Evolutionary Ethics

Foundational to the view of cultural relativism is the theory of evolution. Since social groups experience cultural change with the passage of time, changing customs and morality evolve differently in different places and times.

Anthony Flew, author of *Evolutionary Ethics,* states his perspective this way: "All morals, ideas and ideals have been originated in the world; and that, having thus in the past been subject to change, they will presumably in the future too, for better or worse, continue to evolve."{7} He denies

the existence of God and therefore an objective, absolute moral authority. But he also believes in the authority of a value system.

His theory is problematic because it does not adequately account for the origin, nature, and basis of morals. Flew suggests that morals somehow originated in this world and are constantly evolving.

Even if we concede his premise, we must still ask, Where and when did the first moral value originate? Essentially, Flew is arguing that a value came from a non-value. In rejecting the biblical idea of a Creator whose character establishes a moral standard for values, Flew is forced to attempt to derive an *ought* from an *is*.

Evolutionary ethics rests upon the assumption that values are by nature constantly changing or evolving. It claims that it is of value that values are changing. But is *this* value changing?

If the answer to this question is no, then that would mean that moral values don't have to always change. And if that is the case, then there could be unchanging values (known as absolute standards). However, if the value that values change is itself unchanging, then the view is self-contradictory.

Another form of evolutionary ethics is *sociobiology*. E. O. Wilson of Harvard University is a major advocate of sociobiology, and claims that scientific materialism will eventually replace traditional religion and other ideologies.{8}

According to sociobiology, human social systems have been shaped by an evolutionary process. Human societies exist and survive because they work and because they have worked in the past.

A key principle is the reproductive imperative.{9} The

ultimate goal of any organism is to survive and reproduce. Moral systems exist because they ultimately promote human survival and reproduction.

Another principle is that all behavior is selfish at the most basic level. We love our children, according to this view, because love is an effective means of raising effective reproducers.

At the very least, sociobiology is a very cynical view of human nature and human societies. Are we really to believe that all behavior is selfish? Is there no altruism?

The Bible and human experience seem to strongly contradict this. Ray Bohlin's article on the Probe Web site provides a detailed refutation of this form of evolutionary ethics.{10}

Evaluating Cultural Relativism

In attempting to evaluate cultural relativism, we should acknowledge that we could indeed learn many things from other cultures. We should never fall into the belief that our culture has all the answers. No culture has a complete monopoly on the truth. Likewise, Christians must guard against the assumption that their Christian perspective on their cultural experiences should be normative for every other culture.

However, as we have already seen, the central weakness of cultural relativism is its unwillingness to evaluate another culture. This may seem satisfactory when we talk about language, customs, even forms of worship. But this non-judgmental mindset breaks down when confronted by real evils such as slavery or genocide. The Holocaust, for example, cannot be merely explained away as an appropriate cultural response for Nazi Germany.

Cultural relativism faces other philosophical problems. For example, it is insufficient to say that morals originated in

the world and that they are constantly changing. Cultural relativists need to answer how value originated out of non-value. How did the first value arise?

Fundamental to cultural relativism is a belief that values change. But if the value that values change is itself unchanging, then this theory claims an unchanging value that all values change and evolve. The position is self-contradictory.

Another important concern is conflict. If there are no absolute values that exist trans-culturally or externally to the group, how are different cultures to get along when values collide? How are we to handle these conflicts?

Moreover, is there ever a place for courageous individuals to challenge the cultural norm and fight against social evil? Cultural relativism seems to leave no place for social reformers. The abolition movement, the suffrage movement, and the civil rights movement are all examples of social movements that ran counter to the social circumstances of the culture. Abolishing slavery and providing rights to citizens are good things even if they were opposed by many people within society.

The Bible provides a true standard by which to judge attitudes and actions. Biblical standards can be used to judge individual sin as well as corporate sin institutionalized within a culture.

By contrast, culture cannot be used to judge right and wrong. A changing culture cannot provide a fixed standard for morality. Only God’s character, revealed in the Bible provides a reliable measure for morality.

Notes

1. The general outline for this material can be found in

chapter two of *Measuring Morality* (Richardson, Tx.: Probe Books, 1989).

2. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

3. E. M. Zechenter, "Cultural Relativism and the Abuse of the Individual, *Journal of Anthropological Research,* 1997, 53:323.

4. William Graham Sumner, *Folkways* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1906), 76.

5. Melville J. Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism* (New York: Random House, 1973), 15.

6. Ibid., 56.

7. Anthony Flew, *Evolutionary Ethics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968), 55.

8. E. O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975).

9. Robert Wallace, *The Genesis Factor* (New York: Morrow and Co., 1979).

10. Dr. Ray Bohlin, "Sociobiology: Evolution, Genes and Morality"

© 2004 Probe Ministries.

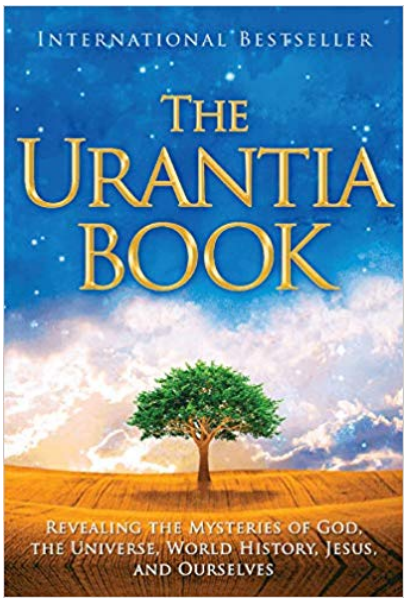
The Urantia Book – A Biblical

Worldview Perspective

Dr. Michael Gleghorn takes a hard look at the claims of The Urantia Book *and finds it lacking in substance and evidence.*

This article is also available in Spanish.

Introduction to *The Urantia Book*



Not long ago a woman wrote to me about a very painful episode in her life. About fifteen years ago her husband embarked on a spiritual quest that ultimately destroyed their marriage and family. He began reading *The Urantia Book*, a massive tome of 2,097 pages that was allegedly revealed by celestial beings from higher universes. He also became involved in various occult practices such as channeling and astral projection. Eventually, she and her husband divorced, leaving both her and her children hurt and confused.

Of course, it would probably not be fair to blame all of this family's difficulties on *The Urantia Book*. Although my correspondent's experience was quite negative, others describe their own encounter with *The Urantia Book* in very positive terms. If you visit the official Urantia Foundation Web site you can read many of these testimonials for yourself.{1} One woman wrote, "I have found *The Urantia Book* to be the most enlightened source of wisdom I have ever come across." And another person declares *The Urantia Book* to be "the most conclusive and inspiring book on our existence."

So what is *The Urantia Book*? Where did it come from and what does it teach? And how do its doctrines compare with those of biblical Christianity? These are just a few of the questions

that we want to consider in this article.

The Urantia Book claims to have been revealed by superhuman personalities from higher universes. The word "Urantia" is simply the book's name for Earth. The book consists of 196 papers and is divided into four major parts entitled: 1. "The Central and Superuniverses," 2. "The Local Universe," 3. "The History of Urantia," and 4. "The Life and Teachings of Jesus." The alleged "authors" of these papers refer to themselves by their order of being with such glorious titles as Divine Counselor, Perfector of Wisdom, Brilliant Evening Star and Chief of Seraphim. Although originally written in English, the book has since been translated into Dutch, Finnish, French, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. In addition, translations into a number of other languages are currently underway. These include Arabic, Chinese, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Romanian, and Swedish—-just to name a few.

Although devoted Urantians are absolutely convinced that every part of *The Urantia Book* was revealed by celestial intelligences, there are a number of problematic issues that need to be addressed. We'll consider a few of these later in this article. Before we do so, however, it is first necessary to give some account of the origin of *The Urantia Book*.

The Origin of the Urantia Papers

The Urantia Book was first published in 1955. But the alleged "revelations" from extra-planetary personalities apparently began early in the twentieth century.{2} Who received these "revelations"? And who wrote them down in the massive volume that has come to be known as *The Urantia Book*?

While there is not space to specifically mention everyone who played a role in this process, two individuals were key in the reception and recording of this "revelation." The first, Dr.

William Sadler, lived from 1875 to 1969. He was a psychiatrist, teacher, and prolific writer. The other individual's identity cannot be known with certainty. Dr. Sadler referred to this person as the "contact personality" and the "sleeping subject."{3} In a manner similar to that of Edgar Cayce, the so-called "sleeping prophet," the "sleeping subject" of our story was the vehicle through whom the celestial visitors supposedly communicated their revelations to Dr. Sadler and others. This small group of people, known as the Contact Commission, "was the focal point for the production of . . . the final text of The Urantia Book."{4}

Although members of the Contact Commission were sworn to secrecy regarding the identity of the "contact personality," Martin Gardner has made a strong case that the evidence points to Wilfred Custer Kellogg, Sadler's brother-in-law and a relative of the famous Kellogg family.{5} Of course, not everyone agrees with Gardner's conclusions. Ernest Moyer, a Urantian researcher, while acknowledging his inability to determine the identity of the "sleeping subject," is nonetheless convinced that it was not Wilfred.{6}

Although the identity of the "sleeping subject" may never be known with certainty, we have a fairly good record of how the Urantia papers came into being. Although there is some debate about the precise date in which Dr. Sadler first became aware of the "sleeping subject," it was probably in the summer of 1912.{7} "In 1923 the Sadlers began to invite twenty or thirty friends over for Sunday afternoon teas to discuss religious topics. At about the fourth meeting Sadler began telling the group, which came to be called the Forum, about the sleeping subject and his startling revelations."{8} He invited Forum members to help prepare questions for the celestials. The following Sunday members returned with hundreds of questions. "Shortly thereafter," Sadler wrote, "the first Urantia paper appeared in answer to these questions . . . This was the procedure followed throughout the many years of the reception

of the Urantia papers."{9} By the time this process was over there were 196 papers, consisting of 2,097 pages of material, that had allegedly been channeled through the "sleeping subject."

Problems with *The Urantia Book*

In his article, "A History of the Urantia Movement," Dr. Sadler stated, "The [Urantia] Papers were published just as we received them. The Contact Commissioners had no editorial authority. Our job was limited to 'spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.'"{10} But is this really so? There is actually ample evidence for questioning this statement.

Urantian researcher Ernest Moyer has carefully documented that Dr. Sadler made changes to the text of *The Urantia Book*.{11} The unsettling thing about these changes, at least for loyal Urantians, is that they were made after 1935, the date that Dr. Sadler claimed *The Urantia Book* was "completed and certified" in its entirety.{12} The evidence for such changes is compelling. Matthew Block, another Urantian researcher, discovered that human sources published after 1935 were later incorporated into *The Urantia Book*. For example, a book by Charles Hartshorne, published in 1941, lists seven possible meanings of "absolute perfection." Block discovered that these same seven meanings were reprinted in *The Urantia Book* almost word for word. This is merely one of several examples that could be offered of human sources published after 1935 that were later plagiarized in *The Urantia Book*.{13}

But not only were changes made after the book had been "completed and certified," they were also made after *The Urantia Book* was first published in 1955. Many examples could be offered, but let me simply mention two. First, both Martin Gardner and Ernest Moyer point out that in the first printing of *The Urantia Book*, toward the end of the account of the Last Supper, Jesus is said to have addressed the twelve apostles.

However, as the context makes clear, only eleven of the apostles were currently present. Judas had already left the group. According to Gardner, “in later printings ‘the twelve’ was replaced by ‘the apostles,'” thus eliminating the error.{14} Second, both Gardner and Moyer also note that in the first printing of *The Urantia Book* the wise men are said to have visited the newborn Jesus “in the manger.” However, according to a later passage in *The Urantia Book*, this visit must have occurred when Jesus and his parents were in a room at the inn. Gardner notes, “When this contradiction was noticed, the words ‘in the manger’ were removed from the next printing.”{15}

What are we to conclude from such known and acknowledged errors, contradictions and plagiarisms in *The Urantia Book*? Such problems clearly raise doubts about the integrity of this “revelation.” Wherever the information in *The Urantia Book* has come from—whether extra-planetary personalities, human beings, demonic spirits, or some combination of these—the source of this information is not entirely trustworthy. Moreover, it is not entirely biblical either.

The Bible and *The Urantia Book*

In his appendix to *The Mind at Mischief*, Dr. Sadler stated that the information imparted through the “sleeping subject” was “essentially Christian.”{16} Since this information is allegedly contained in *The Urantia Book*, we would expect the contents of this book to likewise be “essentially Christian.” But are they?

If we compare the teachings of *The Urantia Book* with those of the Bible, we quickly discover that *The Urantia Book*, far from being consistent with biblical Christianity, actually denies or distorts almost every fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith. For example, contrary to the testimony of Jesus in the New Testament—that the Scriptures are the word of God (Matt.

15:3-6), inspired by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 22:43), and completely true and accurate in all details (Matt. 5:17-18; Luke 24:44; John 17:17)—*The Urantia Book* has Jesus declaring to Nathaniel, "the Scriptures are faulty and altogether human in origin" (*UB,* 1767).

The rejection of the Bible as a fallible human document sets the stage for the rejection of many other biblical doctrines as well. For example, *The Urantia Book* rejects the Bible's views about God, Christ, man, sin, and salvation. Contrary to the biblical position that there is only one God (Deut. 6:4; Isa. 45:21), *The Urantia Book* espouses polytheism, the belief in many "Gods." Martin Gardner points out that the term "Gods" (a capitalized plural) "appears more than a hundred times" in *The Urantia Book*.{17} For instance, on page 364 we read, "We are all a part of an eternal project which the Gods are supervising and outworking." Although *The Urantia Book* does acknowledge the existence of one supreme God, it rejects biblical Trinitarianism in favor of its own view that there is actually a "Trinity of Trinities" (*UB*, 1170-73). But this is only the beginning. According to Gardner, there are so many "gods" in *The Urantia Book* that its polytheism "puts Greek and Hindu mythology to shame."{18}

The view of Jesus presented in *The Urantia Book* is equally disturbing and unbiblical. To begin, the virgin birth is rejected. Jesus was simply born of Joseph and Mary (*UB*, 1344-45). Nevertheless, although he had human parents, he is also presented as the incarnation of Michael of Nebadon, the creator of our universe and one of "more than 700,000 Creator Sons of the Eternal Son."{19} This clearly conflicts with the New Testament's view of Jesus, which reveals that He was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary (Matt. 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38). Furthermore, John tells us that Jesus is the one and only eternal Son of God in an absolutely unique sense (John 1:1-2, 14; 3:16). He is *not* merely one of more than 700,000 other Creator Sons; He is truly unique.

These doctrinal differences are only the tip of the iceberg. There are many other differences between *The Urantia Book* and the Bible. However, due to space considerations, I can only mention the following.

The Urantia Book declares, "There has been no 'fall of man.'" (*UB*, 846). This explains, at least in part, why there is also no need for any blood atonement for sin (*UB*, 60). *The Urantia Book* tells us, "The whole idea of ransom and atonement is incompatible with the concept of God as it was taught and exemplified by Jesus of Nazareth" (*UB,* 2017). The notion of "substituting an innocent sufferer for a guilty offender" is dismissed as a "childish scheme" (*UB*, 2017). What, then, was the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross? According to *The Urantia Book*, "We know that the death on the cross was not to effect man's reconciliation to God but to stimulate man's *realization* of the Father's eternal love and his Son's unending mercy" (*UB*, 2019). Obviously, these teachings strike at the very heart of the Christian message.

Genesis 3-5 and Romans 5 make it quite clear that there has indeed been a "fall of man" into sin and rebellion against his Creator. The entire race was ruined and condemned because of Adam's disobedience. Paul tells us plainly that "the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men" (Rom. 5:18). The ideas of ransom and substitutionary atonement are not incompatible with Jesus' view of God. Indeed, Jesus Himself stated that He came "to give His life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). The Bible tells us that "all have sinned" (Rom. 3:23), but it also tells us that "Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor. 15:3). Contrary to *The Urantia Book*, Jesus did not die merely to stimulate man's *realization* of the Father's love; He died to reconcile us to God (Rom. 5:10; Col. 1:22). It is because Christ died for our sins that God can now offer us salvation as a free gift (Rom. 6:23). We cannot earn this gift; we can only gratefully receive it through faith in Christ (Rom. 3:22-28; Eph. 2:8-9).

The Urantia Book proclaims a different God, a different Jesus, and a different Gospel than the Bible. Its message, allegedly revealed by higher spiritual beings, is fundamentally at odds with biblical Christianity. In light of this, it's sobering to think of all the biblical warnings about lying and deceptive spirits (e.g. 1 Kings 22:22-23; John 8:44; 1 Tim. 4:1; Rev. 20:7-10). Dr. Sadler once wrote that if there was anything supernatural about mediumistic phenomena, it was probably demonic.{20} But when he actually encountered someone whose channeling he thought genuine, he did not resort to this hypothesis. He embraced the revelations and eventually helped publish *The Urantia Book*. It's a pity he didn't stick with his original hypothesis. Who knows? It may have even been true.{21}

Notes

- See "What People Are Saying About *The Urantia Book* . . ." at http://www.urantia.org/about.html#What (Dec. 2, 2003).
- Martin Gardner, *Urantia: The Great Cult Mystery* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1995), 114.
- William S. Sadler, "A History of the Urantia Movement," at http://www.urantia.org/pub/ahotum.html.
- "Where Did *The Urantia Book* Come From?" at http://www.urantia.org/about.html#Where (Dec. 2, 2003).
- Gardner, *Urantia,* 97-134.
- See Ernest Moyer, *The Birth of a Divine Revelation,* chapters 16-17, at http://www.world-destiny.org/tocp.htm.
- Gardner, *Urantia,* 114-122.
- Ibid, 116.
- Sadler, "A History of the Urantia Movement," at http://www.urantia.org/pub/ahotum.html.
- Ibid.
- See Moyer, *The Birth of a Divine Revelation,* chapters 34, 37, and 43 at http://www.world-destiny.org/tocp.htm.

- Sadler, "A History of the Urantia Movement," at http://www.urantia.org/pub/ahotum.html.
- For more information, see Gardner, *Urantia,* 321-57.
- Gardner, Urantia, 126. See also Moyer, *The Birth of a Divine Revelation,* chapter 43, at http://www.world-destiny.org/tocp.htm.
- Ibid.
- Gardner, *Urantia,* 125.
- Ibid., 25.
- For example, see Sadler, *The Truth About Spiritualism* (Chicago: McClurg, 1923), 207-08 and *The Physiology of Faith and Fear* (Chicago: McClurg, 1912), 467.
- Sadler made a distinction between mediums and seers. He viewed the former as those who claim to communicate with the dead; the latter, as those who might genuinely be in touch with some sort of divine reality (see Gardner, *Urantia,* 109). Although Sadler thought it possible that demonic spirits might be behind some mediumistic phenomena, he believed the "sleeping subject" was a seer—not a medium. Nevertheless, if demonic spirits actually exist, and if they can impersonate the spirits of the dead, then why couldn't such spirits also impersonate celestial beings from higher universes?

© 2004 Probe Ministries

"How Do We Use Critical

Thinking with the Bible?”

I was involved in a religious cult for a number of years and am still seeking. I’ve done lots of bible reading and have shared thoughts with many, many people. After reading some info on your site, I was left wondering: If a person takes the bible as the written word, how can it be that critical thinking would have to be applied? Does it not say “My sheep know my voice?”

My chief concern is that it would seem the most simple-minded person should be able to hear the truth and recognize it. Otherwise, truth is only for the intelligent. Does it really need to be that complicated?

Dear _____,

First of all, praise God for bringing you out of the cult! A dear friend of mine is still working through the lies that marked her life because of a cult’s influence on her entire family. I am so glad you have supernatural assistance available to you for working through the differences between the lies and the truth, the deception and the light, just for the asking!

I think of critical thinking as a filter through which we examine truth claims. We ask questions of people and writings to find out if they are reliable—questions like,

- *What do you mean by that? (Defining terms)*
- *Where do you get your information?*
- *How do you know this is true?*
- *What if you’re wrong?*

When it comes to the Bible, which claims to be the very word of God, these questions are still helpful. “What do you mean by that?” is an important question to ask when we come to the

text. We need to discern whether something is literal or figurative, historical or poetic or prophetic. That's why it's so important to read and study the WHOLE Bible and not just verses here and there. The writers (and God inspiring the writers) had a definite meaning in mind when they wrote down the biblical text, and it's important for us to bring our understanding in line with their intent. For instance, when Jesus said, "I am the vine," did He mean He was green and stringy? Or was He speaking in figurative language? When we read the rest of John and see that He drew analogies a lot to help us understand spiritual truth, we can see that He wasn't speaking literally at this point.

The answer to the question, "Where do you get your information?" is that the Bible is revelation. God speaks to us from "outside the box," so to speak, from His throne in heaven to us down on earth, giving us perspective and understanding we could never figure out on our own. The Bible claims to be God's own thought, feelings and words, and the worldview that results from reading the Bible is more consistent with reality than any other worldview.

When we look at the reliability of the biblical documents, we can see that we can trust that the Bible we have today has been reliably handed down from the original documents (or very very close). The support for the Bible being the actual word of God is so strong that it answers the question "How do you know this is true?" We have several articles on the issue of biblical reliability that I invite you to read and enjoy:

Are the Biblical Documents Reliable?

Authority of the Bible

How I Know Christianity is True

I think you make an excellent point about even the most simple-minded person being able to recognize truth and respond to it. That's one of the things I personally love about a

relationship with Christ and reading and studying the Bible: God has communicated to us very clearly on the most important issues, while still tantalizing us with the unfathomable depths of His mind and spirit to keep us interested for all eternity.

The fact that mentally retarded children can understand that Jesus is God’s Son, He loves them and came to die on the cross in their place, and then choose to trust Him as Savior and Lord, shows me that the most basic and essential truths are accessible to everyone.

Thanks for writing!

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries