

DISCUSSION STARTERS ON TOPIC OF GOD --- by Charles Horejsi (Oct 11, 2012)

This session is to be a discussion of our images of or our ideas about God. Review the “discussion starter” questions below and comment on any that spark a thought. Or identify the ones that you would most like to have the group discuss.

1. When you use the word “God,” what do you mean? For you, what or who is God? For you, what is God like?
2. If prayer is speaking to and listening to God, then what is your image of or picture of the God who is on the other end of this communication?
3. How has your image or your understanding of God changed since you were a child?
4. Do you believe that God listens to humans and sometimes responds to their prayers or pleas? If yes, why do you believe this to be so?
5. Do you think of God as personal in the sense that this God actually knows you, cares about you, and cares about your life, and how you live it?
6. Have you had an experience that you would describe as an “experience of God”? Have you felt or sensed the presence of God? What was that like? Why do you think God was somehow a part of that experience?
7. In the midst of the unspeakable horrors of war, both sides are convinced that God is on their side and favors their cause. The soldiers on both sides are praying for protection from the other side. What sense do you make of this?
8. Over the years, writers have given names to the mystery we name God. Here are some of those names: Higher power, Presence. Ground of being. Something more. Source or all love. Ultimate reality. Source of life. Love. Do any of those names help you to describe your idea of God?
9. In his book, What is God, Catholic theologian John Haught tries to answer that question by exploring five concepts: God as Depth, God as Future, God as Freedom, God as Beauty, and God as Truth. Do any of words describe your idea of God?
10. Does your image or concept of God include the idea of God as a judge willing to condemn and punish individuals for wrong behavior, wrong beliefs, or lack of faith?

11. Our universe began to form about 13.7 billion years ago. Our planet Earth began to form about 4.5 billion years ago? Our earth rotates around a medium size star we name the Sun. Our sun is one of billions of stars in a galaxy we name the Milky Way and it is just one of billions of galaxies in the universe. Each galaxy contains billions of stars. How big is a billion? Consider that there are 60 seconds in a minute and 3,600 seconds in an hour. There are one million seconds in 12 days. There are one billion seconds in about 33 years.

Human-like beings (genus *Homo*) came into existence about 2.5 million years ago. Either 5 or 8 species of *Homo* have been identified. Modern humans, (our particular species = *Homo sapiens*) emerged about 195,000 years ago. About 98% of our DNA matches exactly the DNA of chimpanzees. How does such information shape or challenge your image or understanding of God?

12. Do you now or have you previously doubted the existence of God? When have you been certain that there is a God? When have you seriously questioned the existence of God? How do you deal with your doubts?

13. Do you believe that from time to time God suspends existing natural laws of biology, chemistry, and physics in order to intervene in human or natural processes in order to perform what we term a miracle?

14. Do you have trouble reconciling what you know from science and history with your religious beliefs?

15. How do you reconcile a belief in a powerful, caring, and loving God with the existence of terrible evil and suffering among the innocent? (See handout regarding Theodicy)

16. If God created all that exists, why did God create the viruses and bacteria that cause such great pain and death? Why would God create biological and developmental processes that can go wrong and result in birth defects and mental retardation?

17. Within Christianity God is said to be love. If God is love, what then is love? How do you recognize, define, or describe this thing you are calling love.

18. Jesus of Nazareth lived 2000 years ago in Palestine. Is Jesus God?

19. Christians view Jesus as the source of their salvation. For you, what is salvation? Have you been saved? From *what* have you been saved?

20. Do you believe that the bread and wine of the Eucharistic celebration is God?

SOME CONCEPTS RELATED TO DISCUSSIONS OF GOD

The numinous (i.e., supernatural or mystical) mystery or power that is named God (or another sacred names) is said to be ineffable (i.e. cannot be described in words.) By definition, God is beyond the understanding by the human mind. Nevertheless, people need to talk about God and they must use words and concepts and form images of God as the think about and speak of God. Even those who do not believe in a God will possess some notion that describes the God they have rejected as a fiction. People's images of God vary widely. One's image of God can cause a person to feel loved or rejected, secure or fearful, close to or far from God. How we view God and what we believe about how God treats people can shape the way we treat other people.

Transcendence and immanence. To conceive of God as transcendent is to see or imagine God as beyond and apart from the Universe and separate from all that we call creation. To conceive of God as immanent is to see or imagine God as somehow with and within all that exists. Orthodox Christianity views God as being both transcendent and immanent. However, most individual Christians seem to view God as mostly transcendent.

Theism: God is supernatural (above and beyond all nature) and is the creator of all that exists in the universe. God is beyond and outside the universe (transcendent) but also, to some extent, in all things (immanence). Most people with a theistic orientation to God place an emphasis on transcendence and speak of God as being "out there," "above" and "separate" from the created world. Theists also tend to speak of God as masculine (He). God has certain characteristics such as being all knowing, all-powerful, and all good. This God is an interventionist God (i.e., sometimes God the responds to prayers by humans and will sometimes sets aside the laws of nature and work "miracles." As creator and sustainer of all, this God knows and has a "plan" for what will happen. This God expects humans to behave according to laws He has communicated to humans, either in nature or in revelations (e.g., scripture). The monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) hold to theism.

Deism: A philosophic perspective that grew out of the Enlightenment period and the science of that period. God is supernatural and the creator of all that exists. However, The deist God is only the creator; this God has no interest in or any ongoing involvement in what happens after creation, nor in the affairs of humans. God does not intervene in the workings of the world or its natural laws. Human reason determines morality and the meaning of life. (Note: some of the Founding Fathers of the Unites States were deists, e.g., Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Paine.)

Atheism: For most people the word atheism (not-theism) refers to a disbelief in any sort of God, Supreme Being or supernatural forces. The universe and our world exist and operate entirely according to natural laws and principles. Nothing transcends nature. It is important to note that the word atheism can also refer to a rejection of the theistic notion of God. In that sense, an atheist could believe in a God but not the God as envisioned by theism.

Pantheism: The pantheist equates God with the Universe and with all of nature. God is nature and nature is god. Nothing transcends nature. We humans are a part of this god.

Panentheism: Panentheism, as distinct from both theists and deists, affirm that God is in creation and that creation is in God. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines panentheism as “the belief that the Being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part of it exists in God but that this Being is more than and is not exhausted by, the universe.” Panentheist see nature and creation as a revelation or the embodied expression of divinity.

Agnosticism: The agnostic has concluded that he /she does not know and cannot know whether there is or is not a god. Maybe there is; maybe there isn't. The agnostic decides not to decide and simply says, I do not know.

Theodicy (the problem of evil): Theodicy refers to the examination of a problem that is especially troubling for theists. We assume that God is all-powerful and cares for and loves each and every one of us. As Christians we believe that God loves us unconditionally. However, we experience much pain and suffering and truly horrible things happen to so many people. Consider, for example, the suffering of innocent people such as young children who are born with terrible deformities and those who develop painful and disabling diseases. If God is all loving and also all-powerful, how can such a God allow such suffering to exist? Any normal and decent human would stop such suffering if he or she had the power to do so. Perhaps God does not really love us. Might God is cruel or uncaring? Or perhaps God is not really powerful. Perhaps we believe in a false God. Are we fools for believing in a loving and powerful God? (Note: as a result of the Holocaust, a great many Jews abandoned their belief in a caring God because they could not imagine that such a God would permit such senseless suffering.)

OUR EARTH AND UNIVERSE --- WHERE WE LIVE (by Charles Horejsi)

Most of what we know about the universe has been discovered in just the last 50 years.

Our universe began to form about 13.7 billion years ago (the Big Bang). Our planet Earth began to form about 4.5 billion years ago? How big is a billion? Consider that there are 60 seconds in a minute and 3,600 seconds in an hour. There are one million seconds in 12 days. There are one billion seconds in about 33 years.

Our Earth rotates around a medium size star that we name the Sun. Our sun is 93 million miles from earth. Our moon was most likely formed when a giant asteroid hit the earth and broke off a portion of the earth. Eventually, these pieces of earth were pulled together by gravity and also pulled into a rotating orbit by the gravitational force of the earth.

Our sun is but one of the billions of stars in a galaxy that we name the Milky Way. The Milky Way galaxy (apparently an average size galaxy) is so vast that it would take 100 thousand years (traveling at the speed of light) to cross it. The speed of light is 186,000 miles per second. The nearest star to our Sun is four light years away (the distance light can travel in one year) or about 25 thousand billion miles away.

The Milky Way is just one of billions of galaxies in the universe. Each galaxy contains billions of stars. Every galaxy is moving away from every other one at high velocity. With our telescopes we can see only some of the galaxies and only a very small part of the universe. Most of what exists in the universe is invisible and known to exist because astronomers can measure its gravitational effect or its pull on other bodies. This invisible matter is called "dark matter" and it makes up 96% of all that matter that exists in the Universe. At the center of our galaxy (and probably all other galaxies) is a "black hole" that has such a powerful gravitational pull that it pulls all "nearby" matter and light into the hole. Since a black hole emits no light particles, it cannot be seen but can be detected by measuring the pull of gravity.

Bacteria are one of the least complex forms of life. A defining characteristic of life is its ability to reproduce itself. We say that a stone is not alive because it cannot reproduce. On our earth, bacteria make up about 90 % (by weight) of the living creatures.

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