Looking for God

Within the Kingdom of Religious Confusion

[Semi-Fiction] Scriptural realities illuminate this mythical journey to discover the truth about God

A. W. Schade

with a foreword by Sankara Saranam
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AW Schade

Foreword by SANKARA SARANAM

POINCIANA, FLORIDA
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Special Author Notes

The names in this book are fictional and no name or reference to any person or position is intended to represent any individual, past, present or future. While the story of the journey is fiction, the book contains factual references which the reader may validate through historical text, if desired.

Throughout the story I have used “God” in the masculine form, as referenced in most religious texts. Whether God is male or female, black or white, or encompasses all human virtues is immaterial to this writing. God as a man is the common, acceptable reference and the one I have used to keep this writing simple.
Also, the name God, as used by the Jewish and Christian faiths, is synonymous with Allah, of the Islamic faith. I will reference both in capital letters to demonstrate respect for the same Supreme Being. At times, the names may be interchanged. No disrespect intended.
IN GRATITUDE

My sincerest thanks to my loving wife, family and friends for their support, patience and suggestions.
Also, to Sankara Saranam who selflessly provided ongoing advice and encouragement to this stranger, and novice author.

For your convenience I have added a few pages in the back of the book for notes.
The Journey

[Semi-Fiction] Scriptural realities illuminate this mythical journey to discover the truth about God

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FOREWORD

As we cross the threshold of the twenty first century, many of those who have chosen to believe in God within the patronage of the three monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have not had the luxury of spending years researching the history of their religion. Often, this has inhibited tolerance toward different faiths, and reinforced an unwillingness to ask penetrating questions about God. While many believers cannot admit to being confused, confusion is freely available to all who decide to question accepted doctrine.

At the same time, questions concerning how the world works with an appreciation for the vastness of the universe are more common and poignant today than when the world first heard of the Hebrews. We have made steady progress in material science despite the discomfort it may cause the true believer, and our ability to historically analyze events repeatedly challenges long held beliefs.

Despite our commonplace reliance on reason and logic to function properly in our daily lives, and the growing necessity to short circuit our intellectual faculties in order maintain faith, religious obsession remains consistently used as a means to promote public support for ethnic hatred and wars fought to secure material wealth, and to impose religious beliefs on others. These contradictions of modern life clarify how failing trust in our social institutions outwardly reflects inner spiritual uncertainty.
Widespread vulnerability of the self has resulted in a shift toward extreme religious ideology for a segment of the populace. Emboldened, religious America is in the throes of civil unrest, where not merely the age of the earth is called into question but America's secular roots are also a major point of contention. As tens of millions of people seriously anticipate the so-called biblical “End Times,” science and religion clash on the field of policymaking and unabashed contempt for opposing points of view is standard fare on television and talk radio.

It is in these times that Schade is publishing the book you hold in your hand. Art's rare gift to his reader is not one of theoretical conjecture: it is his sincerity to simplify the chaos plaguing the kingdom of religion. In this work of semi-fiction, the simple but real truths that philosophers spend years contemplating are humbly presented through the journey of his character's quest to find God. Though limiting his story to Western traditions, Art arrives at universal truths that are as pertinent today to human beings as they were throughout all other periods of history.

In limiting the scope to traditions commonly associated with the West, however, Art in fact does a service to readers who are, by conditioning, inclined to limit their search for answers about God to the three monotheistic religions. This book serves as both a bridge to nonfiction works, which discuss religion in greater depth and as a map out of the confusion, Western religions have been wrought in the name God.
Like most authors who want the best for their books, Art could have labored over this book without end, even for years, to create a spotless novel. Nevertheless, as I reviewed one version after the other, I found that the original spontaneity and innocence of discovery was being eclipsed by descriptive narrative.

By returning to his conversational style of writing, Art served the reader best by not overwriting his book and maintaining its natural honesty and innocence. Knowing Art, the only award he is interested in is the reward of peace for his readers, a peace he has clearly found in his quest for the truth about God.

Sankara Saranam
Award winning author of “God Without Religion”
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AGONY

Jacob fell to his knees weeping as he watched his nine-year-old daughter, Jessica, lowered into the abyss of death, a site eloquently referred to earlier in the sermon as her "peaceful resting place, to await the second coming of the Lord." To Jacob it was the cold, dark hole where Jessica's body would remain alone forever.

"I should have protected you!" Jacob muttered repeatedly, as family and friends stood by helplessly, unable to comfort him – each trying to control their own anguish as they watched the descending casket.

Protect her! Jacob angrily thought to himself, as he recalled watching the car speed through the stop sign, striking Jessica as she walked her bicycle across the street within the unspoken safety of the crosswalk. He had screamed at her to stop, but she was too far away to hear him. Yet, as always when she spotted him, she enthusiastically smiled and waved to her daddy, this time never seeing the approaching instrument of death.

Helpless, he watched in horror as her body and bicycle were violently hurled into the air. Then, as if time had altered his senses, he watched her fall from the heavens to the asphalt road, as if she were tumbling in slow motion.
"Where is God?" he had screamed, as he cradled her tangled, lifeless body in his arms. "Where is God?" he demanded! It was the same plea he shouted decades before on the battlefields of Vietnam, when he held the dead or mutilated bodies of brother Marines. "Where is God?" he sobbingly repeated, not actually expecting an answer.

He remembered clutching Jessica firmly against his chest, and suddenly hearing a voice behind him. A stranger hoping to comfort him said, “She is with God.” Jacob did not respond, as he continued to stare down at his beloved daughter.

Within moments, and without warning, Jacob remembered thrusting his eyes to the heavens and harshly responding to the stranger’s earlier remarks; “how the hell do you know she is with God? Why did God take her in the first place? She should be with me!"

The stranger had ignored Jacob’s anger, bent down and wrapped his strong arms tenderly around both of them; tearfully embracing them until the police and ambulance arrived.

***
At Jessica's memorial service, Jacob A. Hinsen felt the agony of self-condemnation, demanding of himself answers to why he did not do more to prevent her death. He chastised himself as he told those around him that he should have run faster to catch her before her body hit the asphalt, yelled louder to warn her of the approaching vehicle, or begged God sooner to take him instead of Jessica.

The well-intended condolences after the services did nothing to heal the anguish in his heart. Nor did they lessen the scorn he felt as his thoughts reluctantly drifted to Jessica's mother. Brenda was absent from her daughter’s funeral, as she had been throughout Jessica's short life.

Brenda was a beautiful young woman with long reddish hair and a smile as broad and bright as the fabled Cheshire Cat. She was intelligent, well educated and a successful lawyer, as was Jacob. They initially met at a legal seminar in New York City. He was forty years old and fell in love at first glance. It took Brenda, only thirty-two at the time, several months before she informed him that she believed she loved him too.

During their two-year courtship, sex and alcohol kept them together in a lifestyle of convenience, which satisfied both their short-term needs for fun and companionship. All was going well until one drunken evening, when they unintentionally conceived Jessica.
Jacob was ecstatic when Brenda told him the news of her pregnancy, but she did not share his enthusiasm. She told him she was too young and did not want to be held back by a baby. Nevertheless, after a few weeks of relentless arguments and pleas from Jacob, she decided to marry him and have their baby.

Their eleven-month marriage was tumultuous. Jacob sobered up after his daughter's birth, and his new aspiration was to be the best father he could be for Jessica. Brenda, however, was not ready for motherhood, nor interested in remaining his wife. She refused to change her lifestyle, and they divorced when Jessica was two months old. Brenda granted full custody of their daughter to Jacob.

Soon after the divorce, Jacob heard that Brenda was promoted to a new position as an international legal attaché; global assignments and enjoying great corporate success, he presumed.

Throughout her young life, Jessica only asked a few times about her mother's whereabouts. He always answered her questions in a positive manner, and never attempted to turn Jessica against her mother. "Maybe one day," Jessica once told him, "me and mom will meet, and I'll ask her if she still loves me?" Jacob did not respond to her comment, unaware if his self-absorbed ex-wife would ever meet with their daughter again.

Brenda never contacted Jessica, yet had the audacity to call Jacob the day before the funeral from Europe to tell him she would not be attending. She said she would be a hypocrite coming to Jessica's funeral, when she never attempted to be with her before her death. Without responding to her comments, Jacob slammed the phone against the wall with enough force to shatter
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the receiver. He was sure Brenda understood his response.

Later that night, regaining his composure, he realized Brenda's decision not to attend the funeral was the best decision she ever made. Her presence would be of no value to Jessica, nor console anyone else.

***

For the next several months, Jacob received psychiatric therapy to help manage the traumatic aftermath of the tragedy. As the result of a few fine doctors and the encouragement and support of family and friends, he learned to cope with Jessica's death - not accept or understand it, merely cope.

After many distressing outbursts the doctors helped him understand that the accident was not his fault, nor Jessica's, and nothing more could have been done to save her. Jacob was thankful for all they accomplished, but it would be a long time before he accepted that he could not have done more to save his child.

The doctors also helped him suppress his hatred toward the seventeen-year-old driver who took Jessica's life. It was a stupid accident caused by a teenage girl, who said she did not see the stop sign or Jessica. She hysterically acknowledged to police that she was talking to her girl friend on her cell phone. The damn topic: her boyfriend's new hairstyle.
Jacob's heart was seized with agony when he was told at the hospital of the girl's explanation. "Jessica died," he said in disbelief, and then screamed, "because the driver could not wait to talk about her boyfriend's hair? Hair! A son-of-a-bitching hairstyle!"

Lowering his voice, he said to the nurse, "Jessica has beautiful brown hair that gently flows to the middle of her back. I grab it when we play touch football, she screams at me to let it go, and then she falls to the ground laughing." He was telling the episode as if Jessica were still alive. He stopped talking, fell back into the emergency room chair, and wept. Jacob had never been a vengeful man, but he felt satisfied to know that like him, the driver would be haunted by the memories of Jessica's death forever.

The doctors, however, were not able to help him answer the enduring questions regarding God's active role in Jessica's death. After all, Jacob thought, he had been raising Jessica as a Catholic, so why did God allow this atrocity to happen to an innocent child?

He often asked himself, why God and Christianity had abandoned them. Would God have saved her if she followed the doctrine of Judaism or Islam, and not Christianity? After all, they worshiped the same God of Abraham, but maybe Christianity was not the way God wanted them to go.

In his heart Jacob wanted to believe in God, but through the conflicting messages of religion, he did not know what God wanted from him - or where to find God to ask Him. He remembered looking for God long before Jessica's birth as a nineteen-year-old Marine hardened by warfare in the jungles of
Vietnam. He sought answers from clerics as to why a loving God closed His eyes to the atrocities of war.

On the battlefield, and his life in general, he asked himself and others how God decides who lives, is violently killed, endures anguish, mutilation, or dies alone in agony pleading to God to help them? How can a loving God also advocate revenge, genocidal fury and condone brutalities? Yet insist on unconditional love in return?

No matter how often he searched for answers, the response from religious leaders consistently fell between "Because it is written," or "God works in mysterious ways, my son." Neither response satisfied Jacob then, or after Jessica's death. He refused, however, to stop searching for the truth.

He recalled meeting with his parish priest to discuss Jessica's violent fate. Although Father Acola was sincere, the response was the same one Jacob had heard too often.

"Jacob, the answers you seek from God are within the scriptures of the New Testament, which I would be pleased to illuminate for you. As for the questions, I cannot explain. You must remain strong in your faith and know that God often works in ways we do not comprehend. Jacob, you must continue to love Jesus Christ, as your family has done for generations. It is what Jesus wants you to do."
My family and religion, Jacob thought ruefully, with a slight smile - that he hoped Father Acola would not interpret as a lack of attention.

He recalled his father answering his inquisitive questions with, "If God wanted you to know the answer the priests at school would have taught you." A question he remembered asking one night over dinner when he was thirteen was, "Dad or Mom, how do we know the Bible is accurate and tells us the absolute facts about how God wishes us to live?"

His father's face turned bright red, and his mother sat frozen with a forkful of food in mid-air. It was the longest period of silence Jacob ever endured, at least an hour he thought. Nevertheless, after what was actually only a few seconds, his father responded sharply, "Jacob, this is not the first time we have told you it is sacrilegious to question your faith, or the writings of the Bible. At some point, you have to believe, as your mom and I do. Accept your faith in Jesus Christ, son. Now!"

When his father finished, Jacob excused himself from the table and went upstairs to his room mumbling to himself, another night of unanswered questions and no dinner.

Jacob responded to the good priest with kindness in his voice, "Thank you, Father, but the scriptures do not remedy the pain in my heart, and in many respects, they have introduced more questions."

"Such as?" Father asked.

"For instance," Jacob replied. "If God is the one God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, whose side is he on? Which scriptures and doctrines must I follow? I understand Christianity is
the path you have chosen, and the one I have followed; yet, it did not save Jessica.

"Father," Jacob continued without giving the priest an opportunity to respond, "I simply am not sure anymore. In addition, it is imperative that I determine whether God is a Jew, Christian, Muslim, somewhere in-between, or none of the above. I must know, Father, the ideology that will insure I find God. When I find God, He will confirm there is a Heaven, resolve the contradictions of scriptures, and assure me Jessica is safe beside Him.

Afterward, when it is my turn to depart from this life, I will know I am on the right road to join her. I promised her we would be together always, and I will not disappoint her again."

Father Acola tried again to respond, but Jacob cut him off once more, explaining that he had a scheduled meeting to attend. Jacob was not emotionally prepared to engage in a debate regarding the validity of the scriptures. His questioning of the accuracy of the scriptures was another reason he needed to find God. He was confused as to which of the thousands of scriptures were correct, and why some were handed down in parables - giving mankind the ability to devise a multitude of contradicting interpretations – and why God gave His Word to only one person at a time.
No, Jacob silently confirmed, he did not want to begin a debate on scriptures. As he looked at the priest's weary expression, he sensed that he was in no hurry to discuss them either.

As Jacob was leaving, Father Acola said, "Travel safely, and may your heart find the answers you are seeking. Peace be with you, my son."

"And also with you," Jacob replied instinctively, as he was taught to do as a Catholic.

***
As he left Father Acola, Jacob wondered if he would ever find God amid the diversity and contradictions of religion. Or, would he discover God exists only within the creative minds of human beings? Whatever the outcome, unlike his earlier attempts to find God, he was determined not to yield to doubt or complacency on this journey. Jessica had been his salvation in an otherwise humdrum life, yet he failed to protect her. He had to be sure now if she was at peace, and only God can provide the answer.

"Only God can provide the answer," he smiled, as he repeated the statement. Yet, what if God decides not to enlighten him? After all, what makes Jacob A. Hinsen so special that God would meet him in secret to answer the controversies men have been debating since the dawn of time?

Jacob paused as he considered his dilemma. He knew prior to Jessica's death, questions like this would have provided an excellent excuse to avoid finishing his journey. But not this time, he told himself. If God would not enlighten him personally, at least, he should be able to confirm the road of religion God wants him to follow. There was no turning back, he concluded. Never!

Jacob decided to begin his journey on the religious roads of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He knew his decision was based in part on his familiarity with Christianity, and that in his heart, he wanted to believe the God he was taught to worship, was indeed
dwelling in one of these three religions- each of which descended from God’s Patriarch Abraham.

***
Jacob sat alone in his disheveled office on an old sofa, cloaked with his departed dog's hair, stuffing research papers into his already-overburdened backpack. It was six months, almost to the day, since his daughter lost her life in the senseless accident. At fifty-eight, he was still a nice-looking man of average height and build, but above average intelligence. He had more than the intellect measured by standard IQ tests. He seized upon the knowledge a person acquires though decades of rising above the challenges life randomly places before all of us. No challenge, however, was greater than the one on which he was about to embark.

Unlike earlier journeys, this time he began by charting the specific course he would travel, and crammed well thought-out essentials into his backpack. He would need water and food, of course, at least enough to keep him content between destinations. Indispensable were his documents: a condensed Bible, internet research, synopses of various religious wars, and a collection of diverse commentaries on God's Word, by prominent religious leaders.

In the past, he had been passionate about his journey, but not committed. Whenever travel became difficult, he found it
easiest to surrender to the spiritual doctrine he knew best. This only soothed his heart’s petition for answers temporarily.

This time he knew he had to be more than passionate. He must be conclusive.

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Before he left, he walked through his empty home to make certain everything was secure and in order. He had no idea how long he would be away. As he planned, his last stop was Jessica's room. When he entered, an intense sorrow overwhelmed him. Perhaps, he thought, it was the realization he was leaving their home for the first time since her death, and would not visit her room again for an unknown period.

He overcame his sadness as he forced himself to think of positive events he shared with Jessica. He recalled the time when she was around four years old, and woke him one morning by pulling out his dresser drawers, and using them as a ladder, climbed to the top. She jumped from the dresser top to his bed and on to his stomach with a thud.

He grimaced as he remembered the weight of her landing, but smiled as he recalled how she tossed her small arms around his neck, hugged him, and said, "I love you daddy." He would give anything to hear her say those four words again.

He blew Jessica a kiss as he closed her bedroom door behind him. He knew she was not there, but sometimes it felt good to pretend. After all, she would be in his heart forever.
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After six long days of traveling by air, train, and hired gypsy taxi cabs, Jacob reached the ancient Gateway of Abraham - the only entrance to The Kingdom of Religious Confusion. Once through its portal, he would begin his journey on the war-torn roads of God's three religions.

From his position, he observed that one of the roads of religion was more opulent than the others. Another heralded the virtues of peace to all believers who endeavored to reach God. The third road was narrower and older, yet affirmed itself as the true road chosen by God.

Beyond the Gateway, he noticed that although these three roads of religion began adjacent to each other, they soon separated infinitely, into the darkened Kingdom of Religious Confusion - where Jacob hoped to find God.

Breaking from his thoughts, Jacob stepped through the Gateway and selected the largest and most opulent road to travel first. It was not the oldest of these religions, but it was the road most familiar to him. He remained steadfast, took a deep breath of faith, and stepped onto the glistening Road of Christianity.

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He saw indicators of wealth and power along both paths, but could also see it was not in every place. As with other religions, Jacob assumed Christianity featured both the grandeur and wealth of a few and the poverty of many. He reminded himself to keep an open mind. He sought the truth and needed to be patient; not prejudge how he believed things should be.

After all, he told himself, when I find God, I will find the reason some people are rich, and others poor and subject to strict religious and social boundaries. Jacob smirked as he considered how ridiculous this sounded and hoped a loving God would agree.

The beauty of Christianity's pageantry, and the allegiance of over two billion faithful parishioners, overwhelmed Jacob. Within a few steps, however, the road divided before him into two wide paths. One summoned him toward the path of Catholics and the other to the path of the Protestants.

Both paths were lined with majestic cathedrals where ceremonial rituals seized custody of believers' minds and souls. Rituals so captivating they stimulate faith in Jesus Christ across all human senses. Beyond the cathedrals, he noticed extravagant palaces constructed for esteemed Christian leaders. One palace Jacob was familiar with was the Vatican. There, the Roman
Catholic Pope resides along with priceless treasures of ancient Christian art, architecture, and literature. Jacob wondered if the opulence and rituals of Christianity was the way Jesus Christ wanted things to be.

Christian symbols were in abundance. Some were large, many small, and a multitude of tattered, hand-painted items were affixed indiscriminately to trees and buildings lining each path. The symbols beckoned seekers of God to choose from the independent paths of Roman Catholicism, Orthodox and other Eastern beliefs, Pentecostals, Baptists, Methodists, Anglicans, Lutherans, Jehovah's Witness, Mennonite, Christian Disciples of Christ, Amish, Episcopal, Mormon, Presbyterian, Seventh-Day Adventist, Quakers, Apostolic, and more.

He was exhausted trying to differentiate between them all. Although, each symbol pointed toward a unique denominational path, they shared a common theme: “Follow this path, for it is the way to our Lord, Jesus Christ, and your salvation.”

Jacob was already aware of these symbols and the great divisions on the Road of Christianity. It was at this point, where he previously abandoned searching for God on several occasions. The numerous paths to God on this road alone overwhelmed him, making it impossible for him to decide which path God wanted him to travel. Nevertheless, this journey was different, he whispered to himself - this time he would not retreat from the challenge.

Determined to succeed, Jacob decided to seek out his old friend on the Path of Roman Catholicism.

Jacob knew that with over a billion parishioners along the
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path of Roman Catholicism, it was the largest faith in Christianity. He stood in awe as he observed parishioners moving in and out of religious gathering places. They reminded him of bees hovering outside hives, each with a specific purpose in support of the hive and queen bee.

In addition to parishioners, numerous cardinals, bishops, and priests governed their flocks of liturgical educators, other clerics, and lay people.

“Father! Father Doyle!” Jacob yelled, as his focus turned to the priest walking into the rectory at St. Andrew’s Church, “May we talk?”

After a long look, Father Doyle recognized Jacob and replied, “Absolutely Jacob, absolutely!” Jacob crossed the busy street and walked briskly up the steps to meet the priest. They reached out and embraced each other, as old friends do, without pretense.

“Where the hell have you been for the past twenty years or however long it's been?” Father Alfred Doyle asked with great interest and enthusiasm.

Jacob responded with a broad smile, equally excited, and told him that it had been more than thirty years since they had last seen each other. Over the next few hours, Jacob filled Father Doyle in on his life's events. Father asked him so many questions, he felt as though he had been through a marathon confession. He
was sure the priest would ask him to recite 2000 Hail Mary's for his sins, but Father Doyle seemed satisfied with knowing he was okay.

It was hard to believe, Jacob thought, but the last time they talked for a long time, was when Jacob returned home from Vietnam and the carnage of war. A time in his life when he was engulfed with conflicting emotions, wondering who was right or wrong. Bewildered, as to why a loving God allowed gruesome atrocities to occur, and doubtful his assignments in combat were sanctified by God. He was also haunted with the guilt he harbored for returning home, when so many of his friends did not.

Jacob smiled as he recalled the many conversations they shared, and thankful to Father Doyle for listening to his anguish, as a friend. Father comforted him by speaking of the relationship with God, but did not pretend to know why God allowed terrible things to happen. Jacob respected his truthfulness and loved the priest as a dear friend.

To Jacob, Father Doyle demonstrated the love of God and never emphasized the punishments of God's wrath. Jacob often wondered if Father Doyle shared some of his doubts, but he respected him too much to ask.

Father Doyle was supportive when he heard about Jacob's divorce, and nothing saddened him more than Jessica's death. He wished he had the opportunity to be a part of Jessica's life, and for several minutes, he prayed silently for her and Jacob. When he finished, he put his hand on Jacob's shoulder and said, "I am sorry for your loss my son. If I had known of the tragedy, I would have come to you as a friend. If ever you need me, I am here for you. Jacob, know God is always there for you."
Jacob saw the sadness in his mentor's eyes, and with a heartfelt smile, gently replied, "There is no doubt in my mind, Father. I often thought of calling you, but – "Jacob stopped, he knew whatever he was about to say was no more than an excuse for not calling. He wondered how he had let the decades go by without getting in touch with his dear friend. Jacob was saddened by the sudden recognition of his disrespect.

"Thank you, Father," Jacob said, as tears filled his eyes. He knew Father Doyle understood.

Jacob noticed his friend had aged, but so had he. He figured Father to be in his late eighties, yet he was still sharp, articulate, and good-natured. Jacob remembered how the girls in his ninth grade class at St. Andrews School thought Father Doyle was gorgeous and wished he were not a priest, so they could marry him when they got older. Of course, as soon as they said that, they looked to Heaven and asked God for forgiveness, just in case He was listening.

It became a joke for the boys to watch the girls from across the courtyard as they talked and immediately looked Heavenward for forgiveness. Jacob smiled at this memory, one from his pre-war life, memories he conditioned himself to forget after the horrors of Vietnam, and certainly since Jessica's death.

Jacob knew for over a quarter of a century, Father Doyle had been a pillar of his community and active in the Christian education of his congregation. His focus had always been on the
youth of the parish and the adults who struggle to understand the
disciplines and controversy of the Catholic faith. "The Bible is not
perfect," Father would tell his students, "nor is man. Even so, we
must build on a foundation of trust in order to be at peace with
God."

In contrast to many Christian educators, he believed
questioning the status quo was a positive thing, because it
challenges the educator and strengthens people's faith. To him this
philosophy was a simple approach to teaching, since he
passionately believed God would one day bring all the lost souls
who ventured into the chaos of spiritual wandering, back to him
and the Catholic Church.

Jacob recalled how different this approach was from Sister
Mary Elizabeth Russell's teaching. She told him when he was an
impressionable young boy of nine, that if he did not stop asking
questions about his religion, he would go straight to Hell. She had
certainly scared the hell out him.

It was Father Doyle's openness and willingness to discuss
religious differences that made him popular. Jacob was eight years
old when he first met the good Father. Throughout his adolescent
years, Father Doyle's tutelage was indispensable to helping Jacob
understand himself and the religious confusion buried in his heart.
At a young age, Jacob learned to love this devout messenger of
God.

To bring himself and Father back to the reason for his
visit, Jacob summarized the purpose of his quest. As he watched
Father Doyle's expression, he imagined Father was thinking to
himself, “Jacob, haven't we discussed these same conflicts a
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hundred times before?” They probably had - more times than either man cared to remember.

The priest replied with enthusiasm, “Let the questioning begin!”

Jacob grabbed a handful of notes from his backpack and eagerly began. "Father, why do Christians believe a person will only receive God's blessing by accepting Jesus Christ?"

“The straightforward answer,” Father Doyle replied, "is because it is written in the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, Mark and John, as well as other holy scriptures of St. Paul and the saints thereafter. It is the essence of our belief as Christians.”

"But why is Jesus the only way and not one of the ways?” Jacob asked, continuing, "What about the Jews and Muslims who believe in the same God, but have chosen different doctrines to reach Him?”

“I see I will need to be more specific in answering your questions, Jacob,” Father Doyle pleasantly replied. "I should have remembered that simple answers never satisfied you, even in your youth." Father Doyle removed his jacket and placed it on the back of his chair. Jacob knew he was preparing for a thoughtful discussion.

“Okay, let me begin again," Father Doyle said. "Our Catholic faith, which has differences from other Christian faiths, believes Jesus is our Savior and the Son of God. This is taught to us foremost in the scriptures of the New Testament, and the
Epistles of our saints, twenty-seven writings in all, including several books from the Old Testament.

Each of these scriptures was dictated, or influenced by God. Although there are some inconsistencies caused by the translation of Hebrew to Greek, for instance, together they are the result of what Catholic leaders have discussed and agreed upon over centuries. Therefore, when I say ‘Jesus Christ is the path to God,' it is because 'It is written.' I believe Saint John said it best," he continued from memory, “‘Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life, no man cometh unto the Father, but by me (John 14:6).’"

"Father," Jacob said, "you know I respect your teaching and faith, but if all three religions believe in the same God, why would God shun those who do not believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God? After all, from Abraham to Muhammad many great prophets have taught the love and wisdom of God. Are those not valid teachings?"

“You have touched on the major difference of our religions, Jacob." Father Doyle replied and continued, "You recall our belief is that Jesus Christ is more than a prophet, He is the Son of God. This is confirmed best in Matthew 3:16-17," which Father again quoted verbatim: “And when Jesus was baptized he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the Heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from Heaven, saying, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’"

"Nevertheless," Jacob responded, "the love, compassion, and guidance taught through the alleged biblical teachings of Jesus
are wonderful, but…” Before Jacob finished Father Doyle interrupted abruptly.

“What do you mean by the ‘alleged' teachings of Jesus? The words of Jesus have been researched, debated, and recorded by the greatest of scholars. There are no ‘alleged' teachings, Jacob. They are the accepted teachings of God and canon of the Catholic Church.”

Whoops! Jacob thought. He had hit a hot spot with the good Father. He sensed the priest was telling him that we need to believe, and that he chose to believe in the scriptures of the Catholic Church. Jacob was not sure if he emphasized his response, because he had no desire to debate the authenticity or accuracy of scripture.

Nevertheless, Jacob knew discussing the scriptures was essential to finding God. After all, it is the varying interpretations of scriptures that create the disparate paths of religions. If he can find the true scriptures written by God without Man's intervention, then he will have the confirmation he needs.

"Father Alfred," Jacob continued, "you have chosen to believe in the Catholic Word of God, as recorded in the New Testament. If you don't mind, I would like to pursue this matter in more detail." Father Doyle gave one of those, ‘Oh, what the Hell' smiles, and said, "Bring it on!"

Jacob continued, "Why were the scriptures written in a manner which allowed them to be subject to a wide range of
interpretations? Even today radical groups as the Klu Klux Klan can locate passages in the New Testament to justify their hate and racial discrimination."

"Scriptures,” Jacob went on to say, “are similar to tax laws. Instead of being easy to understand, they require lawyers and accountants to decipher the hidden code and manipulate, within reason, the outcomes. Therefore, wouldn't disagreement within Christianity be resolved if every Christian was only taught and adhered to the two greatest commandments?"

“You have outdone yourself with the simplicity of your suggestion," Father Doyle said to Jacob with a grin. "First, let me clarify the ‘two greatest commandments' you refer to.” As Jacob searched through his notes for the commandments, Father Doyle recited both aloud:

"The first," he said, "is Matthew 22:37 to 38, where ‘Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind…” The second, of course, begins in Matthew 22:39, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself… On these two commandments hang all the laws of the prophets'."

"Yes, those are the two," Jacob responded. Before Father Doyle continued, Jacob asked, "If Christianity taught and lived by only these two commandments, wouldn't there be less schism between religious ideologies, fewer wars, and no debates regarding who God loves best? Do you know what I mean, Father?" Jacob said with frustration.

“I do know what you mean," Father Doyle replied, "and, I share your frustration. I also believe it will be a long time before..."
humanity will reach the degree of religious simplicity you are searching for. If God gave Man only those two Commandments, I am sure within a short period of time humankind would be debating the definition of love, and whether the love you give God is the same love, you give your neighbor. Nevertheless Jacob, it is a wonderful thought."

Father Doyle continued, "The majority of counseling I do is to help people learn to love themselves through Jesus Christ. Until they accept and love Jesus, they will never be able to love themselves or their neighbors. You see Jacob, as simple as your solution appears; people have to understand how to love. Love is taught through the teachings of Jesus Christ."

Jacob understood the point Father was making, but he had serious reservations with the implementation of his philosophy. Jacob was going to ask Father why, if all Christians are taught to love and live peacefully through Jesus Christ, is there an abundance of hatred, wars and butchery by Christians, done in Jesus' name? However, he decided to hold his question for a later time and brought the discussion back to the scriptures.

"Is it possible," Jacob pressed, "that the scriptures were modified over the centuries by social, military, or political chaos? After all, a religions faith is determined by its leaders' interpretation of scripture and ancient manuscripts. For instance, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share some of the same scriptures, yet disagree on the interpretation and intent of essential passages."
Similar disagreements occur within Christianity, where the Roman Catholic interpretation is different from the Lutherans', which is different from the Methodists' who differ from the Orthodox, et cetera.

"That said, Father, my question is since there remains great controversy within Christianity regarding the accuracy of scriptures, why do you even now believe the Catholic interpretation is correct? What proof is there any scriptures touched by man are accurate?"

Jacob sensed irritation in Father Doyle's face when he asked the question - as if he had been asked it, far too many times. He did not intend to put Father Doyle on the defensive, but he needed to understand what proof was strong enough to keep a great man like him believing Catholicism was the only way to reach God.

“Faith, my dear friend," Father Doyle replied firmly. "Faith, not proof, is what binds me to Catholicism, and Jesus Christ."

No! Jacob thought to himself. That was not what he wanted to hear - Father Doyle had to know more. He could not have spent decades as a priest, by just believing in parables from ancient texts. Before he could ask another question, Father Doyle continued as if he read Jacob's mind.

"You and I do not have the ability or knowledge to confirm scriptures, or events which happened centuries ago. Nevertheless, there have been constructive debates, scientific confirmation, and yes, some speculation regarding the validity of our Bible’s texts, both the Old and New Testaments."

Father Doyle continued. Jacob did not intend to interrupt
"When a person has explored their relevant questions, reflected on the answers, and reached an individual decision, they have two options. One, is to remain steadfast in what they believe is true - even if empirical proof is not available. Or, continue to search for alternate pathways to God and spirituality. I have satisfied myself Jacob, that Jesus Christ is the way. Therefore, I believe what is written.”

Father Doyle leaned over and looked deeply into Jacob's eyes, saying, "At some time, Jacob, in your short life on Earth, you will have to acknowledge an absolute belief in a direction. If not, you will find yourself searching and never finding peace."

Jacob supposed it was okay for an individual to completely accept what was written in scriptures. Nevertheless, how were they positive they found God? He wondered if he did not settle on a specific ideology, and continued to search for God, would his life truly be without serenity. What if finding God is a journey toward spiritual growth, through the teachings of many philosophies and not restricted to a single interpretation of God's Word?

What if! What if! What if! Jacob thought to himself as he turned his attention back to what the good Father was saying.

"Even an atheist,” Father Doyle continued, “acknowledges absolute belief in a theory. Even though they have cracks in their beliefs, as not being able to explain the origin of the tiny speck of
energy, said to have exploded to create our universe. All the same, they are as adamant they are correct, as any religion's followers."

"Nice parallel," Jacob replied. "Father, have you no concern with the scriptures as they are written and interpreted?"

"I don't, Jacob yet it appears that you do. So, let's talk about your dilemma, because it is important to you."

"Father," Jacob said softly; "I have so many questions that I'm not sure where to begin."

Before Jacob could continue, he was interrupted by three sharp knocks on the rectory door. Thump! Thump! Thump! They repeated loudly. Each knock resonated through the rectory hall with an eerie cadence, which reminded Jacob of an old haunted house movie.

Father Doyle did not seem surprised as he rose from his chair and walked to the door. Interruptions were common. As he opened the door, he blocked Jacob's view of the figure standing in the doorway. Jacob could not hear what was being said, but he gasped as he recognized the portly man standing before him.

Bathed in the sunlight radiating through the rectory door was Cardinal Abbott Leopold, Jacob's worst nightmare.

As the two holy men walked toward him, he rose from his chair and extended his hand to greet his former high school principal. Jacob's mind raced back to the day he was called to His Eminence's office for swearing on the playground. He sat fearfully on a hard wooden chair as Father Leopold, as he was known then, stared at him for what seemed like hours.

After what was actually only a few minutes, Father Leopold rose from his chair, and while maintaining eye contact, cracked a
ruler so hard across the top of his desk that Jacob thought he might have wetted his pants. The giant man bellowed, "Don't ever let me see you back in my office again, or you will think Satan is an evangelist! Is that clear?"

"Yes, your Highness!" Jacob shouted in terror, calling the priest by the wrong title.

"Now, get out!" Father Leopold yelled.

The next thing Jacob remembered was sitting at his classroom desk, uncertain of how he got there. To this day, he wondered if it happened by some “priestly magic,” or God. After so many years, Jacob felt confident the aged priest did not remember him or the event.

Given their vastly different personalities, Jacob was surprised to learn that the semi-retired cardinal was Father Doyle's mentor and friend and often visited him unannounced.

Jacob caught the gleam in Father Doyle's eyes as he led the cardinal to a chair in the corner of the room, evidently reserved for him alone. The submission he showed while helping the elderly man to his chair revealed the tremendous respect and love he had for him.

In contrast to Father Doyle, Cardinal Leopold was a strict teacher of the Catholic faith, a member of the “Old Guard,” Jacob thought to himself. He spoke of God's love, but ruled his congregation by advocating God's wrath.
Meeting the cardinal for the first time after many years brought on a sense of uneasiness in Jacob's stomach. He did not want to be that young boy again, sitting across from the principal's desk, alone and defenseless, in the presence of religious authority. He had to be stronger, and he told himself he would be.

Jacob heard Father Doyle as he brought the cardinal up to speed on their conversation, but did not hear mention of Jessica or other names from his past. Jacob appreciated Father Doyle's discretion.

"Your Eminence," Jacob began, feeling a little intimidated but glad to have another cleric's response to his questions. "Thank you for agreeing to discuss my questions. Father Doyle and I have been in conversation for several hours, but both of us feel your perspective is of great value." Cardinal Leopold looked at him and smiled, as Jacob felt a small twinge of his old fear.

"The question I have pertains to the accuracy of the Holy Scriptures," Jacob said. However, before he was able to continue, Cardinal Leopold raised his right hand in a gesture to stop the question, as if to indicate he had heard these uncertainties thousands of times, and was not interested in hearing them again.

In a voice that was firm, yet far from the thunderous voice he remembered from his youth, Cardinal Leopold spoke. "My son, your confusion is not unique. Each of us has been on the same journey at some point in our lives. It is important that you understand you are neither alone, nor the first. Please, go ahead and share with us your concerns, confusion, and doubts. I am sure Father Doyle and I will be able to provide you with some answers. If that is agreeable to you, please proceed."
Well, Jacob thought, there goes my fear of Cardinal Leopold. He either had softened over the course of his eighty-nine years, or bored answering the same old questions. Whatever! It was time to take advantage of the moment.

"Thank you," Jacob replied. "I'm sure this is not new news to you, but the many interpretations of religious scriptures have created great schisms between religions and peoples of the world, not only between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but within Christianity itself. Protestants against Catholics for instance."

Both men nodded their heads to indicate they understood where the questioning was going.

"Please don't get me wrong, I'm not questioning whether Jesus existed or exists. But, given the understanding within the Church that men played a pivotal role in the growth of Christian scriptures, I am confused why you believe Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation and the Kingdom of God."

Father Doyle was going to answer, but Cardinal Leopold stopped him, indicating he wanted to respond. The elder man said, "Please give us a few examples of the inconsistencies and man's intervention that you are referring to."

"By some accounts," Jacob said, "the first scriptures were not written down until around 70 or 150 AD, many years after Jesus' resurrection. Therefore, much of what was written was passed down orally, as people told others, who told others, et cetera. Even if we agree that the tellers of the tales, for lack of a
better name, were good people of God with the best of intentions to quote the stories verbatim, there had to be misinterpretations from language translations, missing or partial passages, or even a manipulation of records to support a church or secular leader's demands."

Cardinal Leopold nodded for him to go on, but Jacob was hesitant, not knowing how far he should push for answers. He did not want the conversation to turn into a defensive debate; after all, he was questioning the foundation of Christianity. Nevertheless, if he avoided asking the hard questions, he would never find his answers. He continued.

"Many of the writers of the New Testament are not known. In the cases of Luke, Matthew and Paul, none of them met, walked with, or experienced the teachings of Christ first hand. As great a Christian as Saint Paul was, through his teachings to the Gentiles, he had considerable disputes with Peter and the original Apostles over the ideas he was teaching."

"And, Luke, or maybe it was Mark, and Matthew, who are identified as authors of the gospels, were heavily influenced by Paul, not Jesus himself. I apologize," Jacob added, "if I have the saints mixed up. Anyhow, the concept is the same."

Jacob paused and looked at both men. He thought for sure the cardinal would stop him to ask the origin of the information he was quoting, but neither cleric made a move to stop him. He presumed they heard the same narratives so many times; they simply listened until the speaker was done. If that was the case, he appreciated their patience and continued.

"When differences in doctrine threatened to split the
Christian Church around 325 at the First Ecumenical Council of Bishops in Nicaea, the scriptures as we know them today were selected by a group of clergymen. They poured over thousands of manuscripts and fifty different versions of the Bible. But, only 300 of the 1800 bishops in the Roman Empire attended to debate and vote on which scriptures should be included.

To complicate matters, the Church was under great pressure from the Roman Emperor, Constantine, to compile a single Christian canon. However, how did the bishops and scholars know which scriptures to dispose of and those to include? "

"Shall I continue?" Jacob asked.

"Yes," Father Doyle replied. Sensing Jacob had the impression they were bored with his information, Father Doyle said, "I am sure you understand, Jacob, we have heard these arguments many times. Nevertheless, we are impressed with the research you have gathered. Please continue."

Jacob smiled at his friend, but was not sure His Eminence shared his opinion. Cardinal Leopold only stared at him, and gave an occasional nod of his head. Jacob reminded himself that he was no longer a chastened, intimidated little boy, and continued.

"Subsequent councils continued to settle open issues, but not with the full agreement of the Christian elders. Critical differences in opinions about the relationship of the Trinity - God in three persons: the Father, Son, and Holy Sprit - arose, as did
debates regarding the divine and human nature of Jesus. The Roman and Eastern churches split at this time over the issue.

In 447, at the Synod of Toledo, in Spain, the Filoque Clause changed the Nicene Creed to add, 'of the Son' to show that the Holy Spirit came from both God the Father, and the Son, Jesus Christ. This, I believe, is still a point of disagreement between Roman and Orthodox Christian churches."

Jacob had more examples and plenty of notes to keep going, but he was weary of reciting known events in Christianity to an audience more knowledgeable than he was. He also did not want to appear to have a personal feud with Christianity. He was only seeking his long-sought answers.

"Sirs," Jacob said, "My question once more is with the uncertainties in the evolution, sorry maybe that is the wrong word to use, of scriptures: why does the Catholic Church believe there is no other way to God except through Jesus Christ?"

The Cardinal responded to him again, and was both succinct and philosophical. "Your questions are similar to those that many people have struggled with since the outset of Christianity or any religion for that matter. We have all questioned the mystery of our faith."

"Even you, Cardinal?" Jacob asked with surprise.

"Yes, even me," the Cardinal continued. "We have found that believers reach an understanding of faith at different times in their lives and under a variety of circumstances."

As he spoke, Jacob realized he was not intimidated by the senior cleric any longer. He wondered if it was because he had outgrown the fear of God, taught to him as a young boy in
Catholic school. On the other hand, was it because he realized that over the years there never was a reason to fear a loving God? He did not intend to ponder the reason; he needed to listen to the Cardinal.

"Your concerns pertain to the authenticity and accuracy of our scriptures. Realizing of course that they are two different areas of discussion, for simplicity, I will address your concerns as if authenticity and accuracy are one issue. We always have the option to revisit a specific answer. You must also understand you have limited us to providing you with only our personal knowledge and beliefs, since showing you the resolutions in Biblical Scriptures would not satisfy your doubts. Okay?"

"Yes, your Eminence." Jacob replied. The Cardinal then moved from his chair to sit across the table from Jacob.

Jacob continued speaking. "I am sure you understand my uncertainty as it pertains to religious scriptures in general. They have been written and modified by men and create the basis for the control of people in God's name. Wars, genocide and other atrocities are referenced in scriptures with God's blessing," Jacob finished, frustration coming through in his voice.

Cardinal Leopold tapped him on the shoulder, and handed him several documents he had removed from Father Doyle's bookshelf. "I would like you to read a few passages to us from our Catholic Catechism. You may have read them long ago, but I am not sure if you remember them."
“Our catechism,” Cardinal Leopold continued, "is the day-to-day guidebook bishops, priests, and educators are using to teach Catholic doctrine. In Article 2, under ‘The Transmission of Divine Revelation,' it describes how the Catholic Church considers scriptures to be one way of interpreting God's Word. The other is through the tradition of the Catholic Church. By tradition, I mean when a scripture is unclear or inconsistent, the religious community, in our case the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church’s senior clergy, interpret them to establish clarity."

"But if that's the case," Jacob interjected, “does that mean over the centuries, men have granted themselves the authority to change scripture?"

“We'll get to that soon enough,” Leopold replied.

The cardinal handed Jacob a copy of the Catechism and asked him to read paragraphs 80 through 82 aloud. Jacob read each passage as requested: “Section 80 - Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture are bound closely together and communicate one with the other; for both of them, flowing out from the same divine wellspring, coming together in some fashion to form one thing, and moving towards the same goal. Each of them makes present and fruitful in the Church the mystery of Christ, who promised to remain with his own always, to the close of the ages.”

“Continue please,” the Cardinal asked.

"Section 81 - Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit. [Holy] Tradition transmits, in its entirety, the Word of God, which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. It transmits it to the successors of the apostles so that,
enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they can faithfully preserve, expound and spread it abroad by their preaching.'

"And Section 82 states that as a result ‘the Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the Holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.’”

“Therefore,” Cardinal Leopold exclaimed, "we determine our doctrine through the scriptures, which we accept have some imprecision, combined with the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church. Since we believe the Catholic Church, meaning the teachings and faith to be infallible, so are the modified scriptures."

Jacob understood that when it came to the acceptance of infallibility, a person either believed it to be true or did not. The priest and the cardinal believed it, but Jacob had deep reservations that a person, or group of people, could be infallible. Besides, he rationalized, if religious leaders are infallible, there is little need for God.

Nevertheless, Jacob concluded that debating their firm beliefs, against his speculation, would be of no value to the conversation. He was sure neither of them had met with God personally, so the exchange would be based on individual faith or opinions.
This was the same challenge Jacob wrestled with religion in general. Without tangible proof from God, religions and devout followers adamantly argue their ideologies are the final commandments of God. Jacob realized his mind was wandering to questions only God could answer. He refocused his attention on the conversation in time to hear Leopold emphasize,

"...as important is what Jesus told us after His resurrection and redemption. He would send the Apostles the Spirit of Truth, better known as the Holy Spirit. It is through the Holy Spirit that the Apostles, saints, popes and other church leaders, continue to learn the truth and the way."

Father Doyle added, "Due to the teachings of the Holy Spirit, it was not necessary that some of the first Church leaders, as St. Paul, St. Matthew and others, did not personally walk with Jesus."

Cardinal Leopold waited for him to finish and added, "And, you're right, Jacob, for the first 300 years Christianity was in search of itself, while growing at a pace faster than anyone imagined. This was good news, but it also allowed the promotion of many variations of individual teachings, that were not the true teachings of Jesus. Many were closer to the philosophies of the Roman government, and some advanced for personal reasons. Remember, all of this took place within an environment of religious fervor. It was a time when multiple gods were still worshiped and religious prosecution was the norm."

As he finished, they noticed Cardinal Leopold seemed exhausted. Father Doyle asked him if he would like to call it a night - the older man nodded in agreement.
Before he left, the Cardinal stared deeply into Jacob's eyes and, once again, Jacob felt like the scared little boy in the principal's office. After a long moment, the Cardinal said in a firm voice, "As for you young man, the things we have said may seem simplistic, but there will come a time in your life when you will understand that all things are not explained to us within the boundaries of Mankind's knowledge. Faith, even though you may call it 'blind faith,' allows us to live within Man's limited knowledge until we have transcended in spirit to receive God's great wisdom."

Then, as an afterthought, he whispered to Jacob, "I almost wet my pants laughing as I watched you jump from your chair and run out of my office."

Jacob was at a loss for words. He remembered, the old cardinal remembered him!

Cardinal Leopold still smiling from seeing the shock on Jacob's face, said good night to both men, gave them God's Blessing through the sign of the cross, and let himself out the door.

Father Doyle poured a glass of wine for each of them. They sat in silence for a moment, each reflecting on the Cardinal's final message. In unison, they toasted the man and his legacy.

"He remembered me," Jacob said in a soft voice, not to be heard. "He remembered me."

As they sipped their wine, Jacob sat back in his chair and relaxed. Father Doyle recognized Jacob's expression and said, "You have more questions, don't you?"
"Yeah, are you up for it?"
"Sure."

"For the moment" Jacob said; "let's say I agree with you, that the scriptures are accurate." The priest smiled and shook his head as if saying to himself, 'you still do not get it do you Jacob.' Jacob decided not to pause and continued his question.

"If the scriptures are accurate, then why doesn't the Church follow them? It seems changes were made only to accommodate the Church or Emperors."

"I'm sure you have some examples in mind?"
"Yes." Jacob responded. "For instance, in the Ten Commandments, God instructed Moses not to worship any god but God and prohibited idolatry."

Father Doyle nodded.

Jacob continued, "Since Catholics teach the one way to God the Father is through His son, Jesus Christ. Isn't that placing another God before the one God of Abraham? In addition, are not the images and statues of Jesus on the Cross, the Virgin Mary, each of the saints, and even the painting of God on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, considered idolatry? Both seem to contradict what Moses said."

“You still have an excellent talent for combining multiple questions into one. I'll take each of them one at a time." The priest replied.

"First, as Cardinal Leopold said, the scriptures, and traditions of the Catholic Church determine our faith; as when the Council of Nicaea condemned the Arian teaching as heresy."

Jacob had never heard of the Arian teachings before and

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asked for an explanation.

"The Arian teaching argued that the Son, Jesus, was only a man, that He was neither equal to, nor co-eternal with God the Father. The other Christian groups of the time believed that God exists as three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are united as one. The Church leaders denounced the Arian teaching because we do not place Jesus before God, because they are one."

Jacob was confused and agitated as he realized again that a small group of men had been able to make significant changes to the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus. "Do you mean," he asked, "that only those who participated at Nicaea decided on the essence of Jesus, and condemned the Arian teaching?"

"Yes, though it wasn't as simple as that."

Jacob pressed the question. "But what about smaller Christian, Jewish and Muslim sects who believe there is one God of Abraham, the Father, and that the Trinity is incorrect, a heresy even?"

“That's a good question,” Father said, “as Christians; we have reservations about the teachings of their religious doctrines. God will be the judge of who is right or wrong. I can only tell you what is written."

"As for idolatry, this question too was debated for several centuries before it was resolved at the Second Council of Nicaea. It was agreed that representing Christ's human likeness in icons reinforces the doctrine of Jesus' manifestation as a man. It's not the
same as the idol worship of the Golden Calf in the Old Testament, where the calf was treated as a god."

"Father, with all due respect, when people pray to a statue of a saint, or kiss a crucifix, isn't that the same as idol worship? As a matter of fact, I've heard some people bury a statue of St. Joseph faced down in their backyard in order to sell their home."

"I don't know what some people do with their statues, but I'm sure they didn't hear about planting St. Joseph in the dirt from the pulpit. As for Jesus, I explained before, it's not the same at all since Jesus appeared first as a man. He was not an image, or fabricated symbol of a deity no one had seen. Jesus was visible and walked with men, and if cameras were around, we would have pictures of Him. We don't worship the icon of Jesus; we worship God, who is also Jesus."

Jacob was silent for a moment. He was still perplexed how men justified changes to the earlier commandments of God. Nevertheless, it was two in the morning, and evident that Father Doyle was ready to call it a night. However, he had one more question.

Jacob thought carefully about how to ask his last question. It was hypothetical, but one he hoped someday to have answered by God. He wanted to know whether God is a God of love, or a God of absolute rule with no tolerance for humankind's ignorance.

Finally, Jacob asked, "Let's say some archeologists discover new scriptures and scholars of religion agree they prove Jesus Christ was a great prophet but not the Son of God. Then what?"

Father Doyle's reaction was immediate, and for the first time Jacob sensed irritation from him.
“Jacob, that is a hypothetical question and one not in the realm of my personal belief. But, you know that if it happened, it would crush the foundation of our Christian faith."

"But," Jacob replied, "do you believe in your heart that after the love and devotion you have given to Jesus, the righteous way in which you've led your life, and the absolute love you've given others, that the God of Abraham would turn His back on you, even if you succumbed to human weaknesses? Is that really what a loving God would do?"

In a soft, tired voice the answer came, “Jacob, I have resolved these questions in my heart and have no doubt Jesus Christ is God, and the keeper of the path I will follow. God's Word has been given to us in scripture, and validated through the Catholic Church. Jesus Christ is the way we will enter Heaven and receive God's blessing. There will always be questions; some of them will never be answered to our human satisfaction. At some point in life, however, a person has to decide on their approach to God, and then embrace the authenticity of that belief."

"But Father, isn't that blind faith?"

"Call it what you will, Jacob. I describe it just as faith. I am not blind, nor am I blinded to the fact the Catholic Church has not progressed fast enough toward Christ. We are not God, Jacob. We are human beings and therefore subject to failure. It is how we grow after we fail that you must consider in your search for God.
"That's why I'm confident God will bring you back to me and to the path of Catholicism. We will continue to change as leaders and transform our ideologies as we grow in spirituality. For example, in 2000, Pope John Paul II said that, while there are grave deficiencies between the Catholic Church and other religions, a person who lives in accordance with Jesus' blessings, as described in the eight Beatitudes will enter the Kingdom of God. That, Jacob, was a milestone for the Catholic Church. It meant that other religions do not have to agree Jesus is God to enter Heaven, just follow His teachings."

Jacob found this last statement confusing. It maintained that the Catholic Church was still the way to God, but non-Catholic souls were salvageable, if they lived by Jesus' teachings. Jacob wasn't sure, nor did he ask, if this meant there would be separate groups in Heaven for various categories of believers? Regardless, it was too late to press for the answer, and he was not sure the answer was even relevant at this point. He speculated if everyone, including Christians, lived by the peaceful teachings of Jesus Christ, the world would be a better place.

Both men were tired. As if in silent agreement, they rose from their chairs to embrace in friendship.

After exchanging well wishes and optimism their paths would cross again, they walked to the rectory door. Father Doyle asked Jacob to let him know what decision he made, and Jacob promised he would. As he turned to open the door, Father Doyle placed his hand on Jacob's shoulder, made the sign of the cross, and said, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Peace be with you!”
"And also with you," Jacob replied as he walked down the steps looking toward the next path he would travel.

Exhausted, Jacob rented a room at an inexpensive roadside motel for the night. As always, before going to sleep, he reviewed his notes, and recorded his feelings and daily activities in his journal. His mind was racing trying to recall each conversation, not simply what was said, but also the way Father Doyle, and Cardinal Leopold, responded verbally, and physically. He took notice of the body and facial cues he learned to observe through years of arguing cases in court. He had a keen ability to sense when individuals were reluctant to continue a line of questioning or so steadfast in their viewpoint that there would be no room for compromise or need for further discussion.

His mood turned melancholy as he recognized many of his doubts and unanswered questions still lingered regarding the accuracy of Christian scriptures as the only way to God. He loved Father Doyle as a friend, and respected his and the cardinal's devotion; even so, he did not find proof God wanted him to follow the Path of Roman Catholicism.

Proof! Jacob thought to himself, as if it was the first time the word had entered his mind. Of course, it was proof, not theories he was expecting to find. Yet, he never considered in what manner the proof would come to him. Would God walk up to him and say, "Congratulations Jacob, you found me.” Or, contact him through an angel or burning bush as he did with other men? Jacob
knew the journey through the Kingdom of Religious Confusion would be difficult, but now he feared recognizing the proof may well be more challenging.

Turning his attention back to his journey, he knew to reach the Path of Protestants he had to trek across a few side streets located on the Path of Roman Catholicism. He removed the map from his backpack to verify that the shortest route would be a left onto Born Again Street, followed by a right turn onto Fundamentalist Drive. He shoved the map back into his backpack and began the next part of his journey.

At first sight there did not appear to be a vast difference between the Paths of Roman Catholicism and Protestants. Yet, there were enough divergences between the interpretation of the same scriptures to sponsor centuries of hatred and war between these ideologies. Jacob wondered which ideology held the "missing scripture,” which demonstrated where Jesus taught the apostles that belligerence, mass murder, and religious rivalry were good deeds. He was sure neither group had one.

Nevertheless, to be sure of his assumption, he removed the copy of the New Testament from his backpack and read the beatitudes once more. As he knew, there were not any directives from Jesus to hate or kill not even one's enemy. Jacob tore the page from the book, folded it, and put it in his shirt pocket for future reference. Even if he had doubts about the accuracy and authenticity of the scriptures, Jacob knew Christianity accepted them even if its powerful leaders did not always honor them.

Continuing toward his destination, Jacob was curious as to how many of the beatitudes he remembered from his years of
Catholic education. Pulling the torn page from his pocket, he was pleasantly surprised as he recited from memory almost all of them. He smiled when he realized he had forgotten how powerful these words were to him as a young boy. He read them one more time before putting them back in his pocket.

- Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.
- Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
- Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
- Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.
- Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
- Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.
- Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.
What happened to following the teachings of Jesus? Jacob wondered. He hoped God would tell him. He reached Born Again Street.

Born Again Street was swarming with Christians who had confessed their sins and received a personal revelation from Jesus Christ. Jacob thought it was great for those who were “saved,” but the dilemma he had was that once “born again,” most people on the street wanted everyone else to accept the same zealous commitment to Jesus with no room for compromise. Take Ernie, for instance, the born-again Christian Jacob met during his travels.

“Hello, beautiful day isn't it?” Ernie asked with a warm, friendly smile.

"Absolutely,” Jacob replied, reaching out to shake Ernie's hand. "How long have you lived on Born Again Street?"

"I moved to the neighborhood about two months ago; as soon as I was saved through the Lord Jesus Christ.” Ernie told him, his smile still glowing.

Thinking he already knew how Ernie would answer, Jacob said, "Finding Jesus is wonderful, and I'm glad you've found your path to God. I'm on a quest of my own and trying to locate the right path which will lead me to God."

Ernie interrupted with genuine passion in his voice saying, “Your search is over my friend, and Jesus Christ is the way. Take it from a former sinner. I too have traveled across the paths of religion and found the only path to God is when you willingly accept Jesus Christ into your heart." Jacob smiled, as Ernie's response was exactly how he expected him to respond.

"That's wonderful," Jacob replied, "May, I ask you another
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question?
"Certainly."
"Given there are hundreds, if not thousands, of interpretations of religious scriptures, which shape as many ideologies all proclaiming to be the true path to God, what if Jesus is not the only way to God?"

"What did you ask me?" Ernie asked, appearing confused.
"Let me rephrase my question. What if you discover Jesus Christ is not the only way to God, or in fact is not God?"

"That's a stupid question!" Ernie responded sharply. “All other roads to God are flawed. Jesus is God. There is no way this is the wrong path."

Ernie proceeded to explain that he has read the teachings of Jesus in scriptures repeatedly. More importantly, since accepting Jesus, his pain and burdens were gone and he now loved others more than ever before.

Jacob smiled and thanked Ernie for his time. As he was walking away, he heard Ernie shout, "Jesus loves you, Jacob!"
"And, he also loves you, Ernie!" Jacob yelled back.

Writing later in his daily journal, Jacob thought back on their meeting. He admired Ernie's commitment to his ideology, but at the same time saddened by his unyielding position that all roads to God were false.

As he reached the intersection of Born Again Street and Fundamentalist Drive, Jacob saw a crowd of people kneeling for
mid-day worship services. Yet, as if in unison, they turned and watched him with suspicion. He felt a touch of apprehension as he returned their stares.

He read somewhere those living on Fundamentalist Drive fervently adhered to their interpretations of the scriptures, and do not accept others who do not share their ideology. This meant believing Jesus Christ is the Son of God, no questions asked. Otherwise, you are branded a heretic or infidel, and subject to the consequences the particular religion deems appropriate.

He did not want to stand out more than he already had, or further interrupt the religious service in progress. His goal was to follow Fundamentalist Drive for only several blocks to reach the Path of Protestants. He had previously decided there was no value discussing ideology with fundamentalist clerics, whose position on God was absolute and all other paths sacrilegious.

After a few blocks he saw the Path of Protestants, not more than six to eight blocks away. He was glad to be leaving this area. He never understood why most religions believe they are right, and others wrong. Would a caring God really command the people he created to compose thousands of contradictory scriptures and ideologies? If that is the case, he supposed God must be the one setting us up to fulfill the prophecy of Armageddon.

Jacob's thoughts were interrupted when someone called to him, "Mr. Hinsen, do you have a moment?"

He froze - who on Fundamentalist Drive knew him, and why did they call him “Mr. Hinsen”? Jacob cautiously replied, "Yes, who's there?"

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"Dr. Allan T. Campbell," the spokesman replied, as he emerged from the shadow of the alley onto the lighted path. He was tall and dark, but not handsome. Dr. Campbell extended his hand to Jacob with a reserved smile. Confused, Jacob asked, "How do you know my name; have we met before?"

"No, we've never met, yet I know many things from my travels along the paths of religion. I guess you may say I represent the True Word of God."

"The True Word of God?" Jacob responded skeptically. "I'm not sure I understand?"

Campbell sneered at the question, as two other men joined him from the shadows. Neither man smiled, nor spoke, and appeared to be waiting for instructions. Jacob presumed they were Campbell's bodyguards.

"You have chosen to travel quickly on the Path of Fundamentalists, yet you claim to be 'looking for God.'" Campbell said.

"Yes," Jacob replied, trying to conceal his uneasiness. "I'm heading to the Path of Protestants."

"We know where you're headed, but why does a man questioning God travel upon our sanctified path? You obviously search for God because you question your faith and Holy Scriptures. You are a heretic, am I correct?" Campbell asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.
Jacob tried to ignore the question and made a movement to pass the men standing in front of him - but Campbell and his men stood their ground, blocking Jacob's movements in all directions. Jacob's nervousness escalated into fear.

"No, Dr. Campbell," Jacob managed to answer while gaining some control over his voice. "I'm not an infidel, heretic, or any other name you choose to grant to those who don't share your beliefs." Gaining more confidence, he continued, "I am a man confused by the many interpretations of God's Word as written in the Torah, New Testament, and Quran. I do not know if God is on your side, or one of the other religions'. That is why I'm looking for God - to ask Him."

Campbell was surprised by the firmness of Jacob's defense. Nevertheless, his response was immediate and condescending. "You expect to speak to God if you find Him? But if you must find God, it means you do not believe in Him. Therefore, your disbelief desecrates this sacred path of those who do not need empirical proof God exists. Your disbelief is blasphemous, Mr. Hinsen. Blasphemous!"

"I want to believe in God!" Jacob replied, his voice cracking, "That's why I'm searching until I find Him. I do not doubt God and I do not doubt your beliefs. Yet for now, at least, I do not share your steadfast faith. I am on this quest to find answers that may even lead me back to the same path you travel."

It seemed to Jacob the three men were at least listening. "God, Dr. Campbell, is not who I'm questioning. It's the inconsistencies between religions I'm trying to clarify."

Jacob had a feeling he stated his case well, damn well! He
waited for Campbell to respond.

One of the men handed Campbell some papers and whispered into his ear. Campbell took a few steps back and flipped through the papers before speaking again.

"Mr. Hinsen, we are committed to our faith and nothing you say will make us change those beliefs. Nor, do we accept the feeble rhetoric of others, like you, who trample upon our path for their convenience. This path is our faith and you have ill-used it to shorten your travels to other pagan religions.

Jacob was frightened once more - he did not want to be branded a pagan or heretic by these religious extremists. His left eye muscle began to twitch, the same way it had on the battlefields of Vietnam.

Without warning, Campbell's men grabbed hold of Jacob's arms and held him firmly, as Campbell continued. "Your punishment for the blasphemy of our faith will now be decided, and swiftly executed."

"You have to be kidding," Jacob yelled. "This is the twenty-first century. You can't punish someone because they have different beliefs than you!"

Jacob thought quickly. His plan was simple: escape without killing, unless he absolutely had to. He would knee the guy holding his left arm hard between his legs, at the same time pulling, and pushing the man on his right side into Campbell. The most he
hoped for was to break free and run like hell to the Path of Protestants and safety.

Jacob was about to tell the three men they were lunatics, but before he could, Campbell raised his right hand to silence him. Jacob complied.

Campbell spoke firmly, but not as arrogantly as before, "You say you look for God, and I tell you God is on the path you now travel. Yet, you do not believe God is here because you, in your infinite wisdom, have decided we have interpreted God's Word incorrectly. You are both a hypocrite and a heretic."

"You're wrong!" Jacob said, "I didn't decide not to search on this path because I think you're wrong, or that I couldn't find God here. I assumed there would be no chance for open discussion, since everyone on this path is adamant they are right about God. Not everyone can be right. Isn't that true?"

Campbell hesitated before responding sharply, "You have wasted enough of our time Mr. Hinsen. Nevertheless, I have reviewed our files on you, and it appears you have never made a real commitment to God, never! I'm not sure if you're searching to find God, or looking for reasons not to believe in Him."

Jacob wanted to disagree, but he was not sure Campbell's comments were incorrect. Was he searching for God because he knew He existed, or was his journey to prove he could not find Him, therefore God must not exist? Jacob did not know if he was more upset with Campbell for raising the questions or with himself for not asking them before.

"God is here, Hinsen, and I believe the worst punishment for you is realizing you have lost Him. You are lost in a quagmire
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of disbelief that will haunt you your entire life and punish you in the next. Your punishment therefore is postponed. You are free to go. Nevertheless, remember, to us you remain a heretic. Should you ever travel on our most Holy Path again you will be punished in accordance to the Laws of our God, as we have interpreted them. Go now, before I change my mind.

Jacob did not wait around to argue, and for hours after his release he shuddered each time he recalled his encounter with Campbell and his men. His doubts and unanswered questions left him more confused than ever.

After his incident with Campbell he once again questioned himself; what do I believe, who the hell is right, and how will I know if I do not speak with God? As his anxiety subsided, Jacob was able to accept that he did not have all the answers, and finding them was the essential reason for his journey.

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The Path of Protestants has over 800 million travelers on it, almost as many as the Path of Roman Catholicism. Glancing down the Path, Jacob saw many smaller paths twisting off in different directions. Symbols indicated the followers of each path: Pentecostals, Baptists, Methodists, Anglicans, Lutherans, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mennonites, Church of Christ, Church of England, Amish, Episcopal, Mormons, Presbyterians, Seventh-Day Adventists, Quakers, Apostolic, and many more.

Jacob was overwhelmed by the number of paths and decided to take a breather at a local restaurant to review his maps, observations, and notes. He found a small eatery on the corner of the Path of Protestants, and Mormon Way. When he entered, he was surprised when the front door closed and locked behind him. No! He thought, not a fundamentalist restaurant!

"Don't be alarmed," a soft voice said. "There's no need to go back in the direction you came in. When you leave you will exit through the far door, to the only path a person needs to follow."

"Is that right?" Jacob replied.

"Yes," she said. "Will you be joining us for lunch in our dining area, or on the patio?" Jacob explained he would not be eating, and only wanted a cold glass of water with a twist of lemon. "No problem at all," the waitress said, as she introduced herself as Abigail (Abby) Penny. "Why don't you take a seat at a table, and I will bring you a pitcher of cold water."

"Thanks," Jacob responded, and took his seat. When she returned, he asked her to explain her earlier statement, "Only path a person needs to follow."

With a sweet smile, which seemed to indicate, 'I got ya,' she
explained.

“Like you, many who come by way of the Path of Protestants have a bulging and dusty backpack. Usually, this means the person is in search of God. I presumed you are one of those travelers.”

"And where does the door you mentioned lead?”

"Oh! It will put you on Mormon Way, which is the true path to finding God.”

He smiled, “Well, you are right on your first point, I'm a traveler on a quest to find God.”

Jacob asked, "Abby is your faith strong enough for me to ask you questions without making you doubt your beliefs?”

"It is." Abby replied. “Nothing you ask will change my beliefs.”

"Great!" Without wasting any time, Jacob said. "One of the troubles I have with religion is the adamant belief in the authenticity and accuracy of their scriptures, many transcribed over a thousand years ago, or in the case of Mormons, only a century ago.

I understand the Mormon faith was founded on the visions of a fourteen-year-old teenager in upstate New York, who claimed to find hieroglyphic type messages from God written on golden tablets. Then, with the assistance of the Angel Moroni, he translated the messages into the Book of Mormon. Soon
thereafter, the tablets were lost forever and the Book of Mormon superseded all earlier Christian scriptures. Is that right?"

"To some extent." Abby answered without discussion. Although he did not want to pass judgment on any religion, he wondered how she accepted these beliefs. After all, the idea of a teenager getting a call from God, secret tablets, angels and then the mysterious loss of the secret tablets, seemed far-fetched to him.

He continued.

"The initial writings of Mormon scripture, including the Book of Mormon, are attributed to Joseph Smith and his brother, Hyrum. Both were killed by a mob of non-Mormons who thought polygamy and other Mormon beliefs were sacrilegious."

"Right." Abby said softly, and continued.

"Jacob, Mormons believe the New Testament Bibles were full of errors, and these errors were corrected by Joseph Smith in the Book of Mormon. We also follow the teachings and direction of Brigham Young, Ezra Taft Benson, and others, as well as additional revelations and teachings later included in the Book."

"So, the Book of Mormon does supersede previous Christian scripture?"

"Not all of them. We believe the Bible is the Word of God, except those parts translated incorrectly. We also believe the corrected interpretations were entered into the Book of Mormon, which is the True Word of God."

"You mean the parts of the Bible which Mormon men determined were translated incorrectly are corrected in the Book?"

"I guess you could put it that way." Abby replied.

"Out of millions of Christians worldwide, why did God
select Joseph Smith as his messenger?” Jacob asked.

“That's a great question, but one you'll have to ask God to answer. Seriously, I think it is similar to God's selection of Abraham, Moses, John the Baptist and others. It was based on his integrity, faith, love, and total commitment to God.

It is true Jacob, we have different ideologies than other Christian faiths, but we do share essential beliefs. We believe in the same organization that existed in the first church - apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, and evangelists. We believe in the gifts of tongues, prophecy, revelation, visions, healing, and the interpretation of tongues. And, of course, we believe and place our love in God, the Eternal Father, in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost."

“What's different?” Jacob asked.

“Well, we claim the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of our conscience and allow everyone else the same privilege. We believe others may worship how they please." 

“You mean you don't scorn or kill people because they have a different view? Mormons are really tolerant of all other religions?” Jacob suspiciously asked.

“Absolutely! Why would we kill someone because they do not believe as we do? Don't get me wrong, we believe our faith is the only way to God, but it's not up to me to tell you how God handles those who have chosen different paths."
"Will the others go to a separate section of Heaven, or to Hell?"

"I really don't know, Jacob. That is another question for God to answer. Although we tolerate other religions, it does not mean we believe God will treat them all equally. The Book of Mormon 24:19 says: 'And we know, that all men must repent and believe in the name of Jesus Christ, and worship the Father in his name, and endure in faith on his name to the end, or they cannot be saved in the kingdom of God.'

"Thanks," Jacob smiled and responded. "Are there any other major differences between Mormons and other Christian groups?"

"Yes, the most extreme difference is that we believe there are many Gods, that each of us has the ability to achieve Godhood, and we can have spirit children who will pray to us, as we pray to Jesus. This is similar to what Jesus, who we think of as a brother, and God the Father have done before us."

"Wow! That's radical!" Jacob said in disbelief. Could Abby be right? Could we all be God?

Abby noticed the surprise in Jacob's response, and replied with a broad smile, which lit up her face.

"To some, it appears radical Jacob. Nevertheless, think about it. If Jesus Christ is our paradigm and brother, and we live our lives striving to transcend our human faults until we achieve His Holiness, then why wouldn't we be rewarded by the Father as Jesus was?"

"I guess?" Jacob said, as he tried to rationalize the idea. After all, who is he to question someone's belief?
"I've got to get back to work, but please, do me a favor. Do not prejudge my church based only on what I have told you today. Think about what we've discussed and let God lead you."

"Can't we have five more minutes, please?" Jacob was almost pleading with her.

"Okay, five minutes, Jacob."

“How do you know so much about the components of the Mormon faith?"

“My part-time role is restaurant owner, but my full-time obligation is as a teacher and student of Mormonism."

"I should have known. So, why aren't you Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, or something else?"

"I too have traveled across the roads you now travel. I found the Mormon Church more tolerant to other faiths and recognized God alone will make the final decision on each of us. This, along with the ability for me to transcend to God the Father as Jesus did, opened my heart to the Mormon Church. It is my belief, Jacob, and only God will decide if I have chosen correctly."

"But how can you be certain?"

"Oh, Jacob of little faith. You travel because you have not found God in your heart. When your heart tells you God is found, as mine has, you must believe the commandments God has left you. The rest will become evident by the unconditional love you receive from others, the tolerance you feel for others, and the acceptance of who you are as you journey to be as Jesus."
"The short answer is because it is written, Jacob."
"It is written." She repeated softly, as if she knew Jacob had heard those words many times before.

After he finished his last gulp of water, Abby led him to the door in the rear of the restaurant. Jacob thanked her for her time as they parted with a hug of friendship. He stepped through the door onto the sunlit path of Mormon Way.

The awe-inspiring Mormon Tabernacle towered before him. Jacob knew it had taken forty years to build and included six towers - each well over 200 feet high. It was also the home of the renowned Mormon Tabernacle Choir, a magnificent blend of voices singing harmoniously with a single purpose - to praise a loving God.

He smiled, as he began walking back toward the Path of Protestants, wondering how great it would be if all religions were as harmonious.

Up to now, it appears each religion - Jacob wrote in his journal that night - shares a similar sequence of events of how it originated. That is a man received a vision or direct message from God through an Angel. The message is always that existing religions have screwed up God's commandments, and He selected a new human messenger to correct the mistakes. Once corrected, previous interpretations of God's Word become obsolete or inaccurate.

I am sure I will find similar origin messages within other religions, but I will not know for sure until my journey is complete. The one constant seems to be an accord with how these religions began: God, to Noah, to Abraham, and others, as outlined in the
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Hebrew Scriptures.

Journal note: When I travel across the Road of Judaism, remember to ask that since these three religions of Abraham base their beliefs on scripture from the Hebrew Bible, why have Christians and Muslims persecuted the Jews, who were the first people to communicate with God.

I am troubled, however, that while I am learning a great deal about different religions, the origin narrative of these faiths remains the same. Should this continue, how will I ever find God, or proof of his existence?

Jacob traveled for many days along the abundant Paths of Protestants. He spoke to countless ordained clerics and devoted parishioners who graciously shared their counsel and candid opinions about their faith.

He continued on the Path of Protestants until he came to the well-marked Junction of the Majority. Other travelers had told him it existed, but he had never seen it himself. He was in awe of the colossal crossroads where clerics from the many mainline Protestant denominations flocked.

The Junction of the Majority was where Baptists, Anglicans, Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Disciples of Christ, Presbyterians and other factions acknowledged each other's presence, but worked independently to assimilate their unique point of view.
Each cleric worked diligently to assemble an ideology to transport by loyal messengers to senior members of their respective congregations. Each senior member added unique emphasis points for their flocks and forwarded the modifications to pastors, deacons, and other laymen, who preached the tailored message to millions of devoted parishioners around the world.

It did not end there, Jacob observed, as the motivated parishioners transported the message, after adding a few tweaks of their own, to family, friends, and any sinner who they believed needed Jesus Christ for their salvation. Jacob was amazed as he watched the process unfold.

Nevertheless, he had to keep moving toward the final Protestant path left to travel, the Path of Lutherans. This was the path where Martin Luther broke from the Roman Catholic Church over a dispute about the infallibility of the Pope. Jacob was not sure why, but he felt optimistic about this path. After all, Martin Luther challenged the hypocrisy of the Roman Catholic Church and millions considered him correct and followed. Maybe this was the path to God?

Jacob thought, with a broad smile on his face, it looked as if he was off to see a Lutheran - an ordained Lutheran, of course. As he walked, he began to sing a tune he remembered from one of his favorite movies, the Wizard of Oz: ‘I'm off to see a Lutheran, a wonderful Lutheran of course, because, because, because, because of the wonderful things they do.' He continued singing and whistling the tune for several blocks while skipping to the tempo as Dorothy, the Tin Man and the Munchkins had done in the movie.
Located at 2342 Thoroughfare of Lutherans is a massive cathedral that beckons lost souls and loyal parishioners, to enter its magnificent house of God. Jacob was astonished as he beheld the ancient edifice prominently reaching towards the Heavens. It was comparable in grandeur to any of the opulent cathedrals he had noticed along the Path of Roman Catholicism.

The cathedral was also the parish of Reverend William Gillette, a prominent Lutheran spiritual leader. Millions of parishioners, Jacob's notes reminded him, see Gillette's Sunday sermons on live television stations each week. Jacob felt honored the renowned Protestant leader had readily agreed to meet with him. He saw this as either a tremendous stroke of luck or divine intervention. Either way, he thanked God for the opportunity, and began fumbling through his notes for the relevant questions he needed to ask.

Damn! Jacob said to himself, as he suddenly began to feel overwhelmed. He was not sure if his anxiety was because Reverend Gillette was a well-known celebrity, or because he had the power to influence millions of people through his teachings. He made a mental note not to surrender to the Reverend's charisma or ideology.

Facing the massive oak doors of the cathedral, Jacob extended his finger and depressed the gold filigree doorbell.

He immediately heard the beautiful harmony of the chimes and took the moment to absorb the feelings of tranquility. He did
not wait long for his feelings of tranquility to be replaced by the thrill of anticipation.

William Gillette stood before him dressed in casual, albeit expensive, clothes. He extended his hand in welcome. “Come in, young man,” he said with a cheerful voice. "You must be the traveler I have heard about? Come in! I believe we have a great deal to talk about.”

Within minutes, it was obvious to Jacob that the charismatic champion of God knew how to captivate his guests. Reverend Gillette exuded confidence, so much that Jacob wondered if he might be hesitant to ask him questions, for fear of appearing dumb. On the other hand, the honesty and sincerity radiating from Gillette's eyes revealed his unconditional love for people, God, and his religion. As Jacob would later learn, he also had an inherent patience for answering repetitive questions.

As they settled themselves in Reverend Gillette's office, which to Jacob felt more like the decorative lobby of a grand hotel, Gillette asked him to begin when he was ready. "No rush," the Reverend added, "I've left plenty of time for our meeting."

Jacob wasted no time starting. "Reverend Gillette, seeing your magnificent office makes me wonder, how do you feel about the notion that the rich will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven? Sir, how do you respond to that question? Obviously, you and your church are extremely rich."

Gillette laughed politely, indicating he heard the inquiry many times. "Jacob," he said, "I believe that only happens when people put the power of money and material riches, before their love for God and others."
"And," he continued, "why would God want any person to be without the wonders He gave to man the remarkable capacity to create? For instance, take the magnificent discoveries in modern medicine, education, science, and technology. Many people living in poverty are not able to take advantage of these great achievements. Therefore, Jacob, I do not believe God desires any of His people to live in poverty, surrender to illiteracy, suffer famine, or be dependent on others.

"No, Jacob, in my humble belief, God's plan for humankind does not endorse a poverty philosophy. Yet, people must work towards improving themselves, their love for others, their environment, and most of all their love for Jesus Christ. When they do, God will give them all the rewards in this life they will ever need."

"But, what about those who are rich?"

"Those who believe in the Lord and have gained wealth are obligated through their love as Christians to help those who are less fortunate. They will enter Heaven. Those who are rich without the Lord and neglect those in need for selfish or prejudiced reasons, will not.

"My belief is that if everyone had access to the great advancements God has provided man, then jealousy, contempt for other's faiths, hatred, and the divisions between rich and poor would be minimized. Does this answer your question?"
"I understand, thank you," Jacob graciously replied, switching the conversation to a different topic. "Would you be kind enough to explain a little about Martin Luther and his split from the Catholic Church?"

"My pleasure. The condensed version is this: "Martin Luther was ordained in 1507 as an Augustinian Monk, and in 1521 was excommunicated for teachings that were contradictory to Roman Catholic doctrine. His famous Ninety-five Theses challenged the supremacy of the Pope to bestow indulgences."

"Indulgences?" Jacob asked, "I'm not sure I understand the meaning."

"Indulgences were when a rich person paid a fee to the Pope to forgive the sins of someone who died, so that person's soul could ascend to Heaven from Purgatory."

"Purgatory," Jacob interrupted, "is the holding space between Heaven and Hell for sinners, who must repent, and do good works before they ascend to Heaven or descend to Hell." Jacob hoped purgatory existed. He figured his confusion with religion, and the number of journeys he initiated to find God, could be considered sacrilege. Or, if he screwed up by not choosing the correct faith to follow, at least he would have a second chance.

"Good enough, Jacob." Reverend Gillette continued. "Through indulgences, the Pope authorized himself to forgive sins, but Martin Luther believed this was an abuse of authority since only Jesus can forgive sins. Many believe priests and other clergy can forgive sins in Jesus's name."

Reverend Gillette went on to explain how Luther's
challenges led to the great schism between Protestants, and Roman Catholics, later known as the Reformation. The main differences between ideologies as outlined by Martin Luther are that Protestants believe salvation comes through faith and not good works alone. Jesus Christ alone can forgive sins - not the Pope, priest, or any other man. There are but two sacraments, not seven - baptism and the Eucharist. Jesus is symbolic in the Eucharist. Finally, the Bible, and not the Pope, is the final Word of God."

"So, who's right Catholics, or Protestants?" Jacob asked, genuinely inquisitive.

"I like that Jacob - direct questions." Gillette paused for a moment before continuing, "My short answer, of course, would be the Protestants are. That is why I am a Lutheran. Nevertheless, as we further discuss our differences, it will also help to explain my position."

"Makes sense to me." Jacob said.

Over the next several hours Jacob probed Gillette's convictions on many of the same topics he discussed with Father Doyle, Cardinal Leopold, Abby, and other clerics: the Bible's authenticity and scriptural fallibility. Although Gillette shared new details and opinions, overall his final explanation for his personal belief was the same – “It is written.”

As he became more comfortable with his new understanding of Lutheran faith, Jacob moved from questions regarding interpretations of scripture and who is right, to specific
questions about Christian leadership, which had long lingered in his mind.

"Reverend Gillette," Jacob asked. "You said Martin Luther had valid reasons for being disenchanted with the Pope and the direction the Roman Catholic Church was taking. Nevertheless, in Luther's Ninety-five Theses he mentioned no compelling disagreements with the direction Christianity had taken since the teachings, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ."

"So, let us agree that the New Testament, as translated from Greek to German, by Martin Luther was factual. That is, no person ever changed a word or phrase."

Reverend Gillette nodded.

"Let's also agree all Christians acknowledge Jesus Christ as the Savior, and His teachings were of love, kindness, and tolerance for all mankind - not murder, world domination, or spreading the Good News through wars, or condemnation."

"Agreed." Reverend Gillette replied.

"My questions are: Why didn't Luther or other prominent leaders demand a change to the way Christianity digressed from Jesus' teachings of love, peace, and tolerance to the destructive supremacy of the Christian religion through wars and personal persecutions?

Why did reformers focus more on indulgences, then changing the Christian philosophies that sanctioned the Crusades, ordered the horrific Inquisitions, and controlled people with an iron-fist? Of course, all justified in the name of Jesus."

"For my benefit, Jacob, please let me stop you to clarify your complex set of questions." Reverend Gillette interjected,
before Jacob continued. “Your concerns pertain to why Christian reformers seemed more interested in debating the essence of Jesus, the inconsistencies of scriptures, and the differences of ideologies, instead of simply following the peaceful teachings of Jesus?”

"Yes!" Jacob replied. "It appears the scriptures which teach the peaceful messages of Jesus are for hard working people to follow. While the brutality of God's Word, as drawn from ancient Hebrew Scriptures, provided the Church and other religions, authorization to justify wars, control parishioners, perpetuate ethnic cleansing, and initiate unjust punishments on individuals for superficial crimes against the Church.”

"Let it all out, Jacob. You have anger in your heart that needs to be released.”

"I guess I do, Reverend.” Jacob replied firmly. “I don't understand why Catholics slaughter Protestants, Protestants murder Catholics, Christians destroy Muslims, Muslims hate and massacre Christians and Jews, Jews eliminate Muslims and probably Christians. Then each religion rationalizes the success of the carnage and devastation to the same God!”

“'I understand the anguish in your heart Jacob, and it's not unjustified in many cases.” Reverend Gillette sympathetically responded. “Let me try to answer your questions the same way I've helped others to understand why our actions so often conflict with the teachings of Jesus. I will tell you what is in my heart instead of
directing you to specific scriptures, since I understand you have
read all the scripture you believe you need.”

Jacob nodded in agreement.

"The first thing you need to understand is that no one has the answers to all of your questions, except God. Nevertheless, I will try to help you with your inner struggle. Jesus Christ is perfect and humankind is not. Period! As hard as we may try, none of us is close to the perfection of Jesus. No human is immune to the temptation of sin or evil acts. Jesus understood we would fall, thrash about, and succumb to human biases. Unfortunately, we have not disappointed Him.”

"Let me rephrase that, we have disappointed Him. Yet, Jesus knew we would require time to grow from the Old Biblical teachings to those of the New Testament. Hell! The Apostles had doubts, and some walked, talked, and even touched Jesus. Thank goodness God has more patience than man,” he said, chuckling.

“Jacob, I will not attempt to justify the atrocities you referenced. Many people were, and are today, corrupt, and lust for power. Men succumb to evil - even religious men with the best intentions. Nevertheless, do not discount the many Christians who have devoted themselves to Jesus with a mission to elevate ancient tribal mentalities, to a Jesus-way of thinking. We have a long way to go before we walk the walk of Jesus, but we cannot let mistakes of our past, present, and future allow us to languish in our efforts to achieve peace and salvation through the teachings of Jesus Christ.”

Jacob was moved by the reverend’s strong convictions. His mastery of vocalization made every comment thought provoking or accepted as truth. He felt how easy it was to be drawn to the
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Reverend's convictions.

Gillette spoke again, "I promise Jacob, this is not a sermon!"

Jacob laughed, as Reverend Gillette continued.

“Since the beginning of time mankind has rebelled against God, and influenced by worldly self-indulgence. As humankind strayed further from God, church leaders, as Martin Luther, stepped forward in an effort to bring them back. The Reformation was successful because Luther's message was accepted by many Christians, now called Protestants, who believed the drastic changes he called for would return Christianity to the true Path of God."

"But I still don't understand. If the new message doesn't bring you back to the kindness taught by Jesus, how do you separate the old from the new?" Jacob asked.

"Good question. I believe ideologies develop in the same way we grow as individuals. That is, our beliefs grow through our personal trials and errors, not because we simply say we accept Jesus in our hearts. We are bombarded each day with outside influences, good and bad, which we must learn to overcome. We fail more times than we succeed, but we will eventually win if our efforts are pure and focused towards one objective - God.

The same is true of religion. The people struggling to understand and reach God are the same people reforming religion. Many great religious leaders were not pure, kind hearted, or as
enlightened as Jesus would have wanted. For all the good teachings of Martin Luther, he was regarded as a difficult person to get along with and didn't always lecture in accordance with how Jesus instructed."

"What do you mean?" Jacob asked.

"For instance, he preached fierce anti-Semitism. It's deplorable how hate became a part of religious ideology by good people, and then went on to fuel territorial and tribal disputes for thousands of years."

"We tend not to turn the other cheek, as Jesus taught." Jacob added. "Therefore, champions of religious wars determined how the scriptures were interpreted and the ideology people must accept and follow."

“Well," Gillette replied cautiously, "it's not as simple as that, but when you look at religions' history, it has happened. In addition, keep in mind, change of this magnitude is a long journey. We can only strive to change what we are able to in our short lifetime. God alone will judge each of us accordingly."

It was late and Jacob had taken a great deal of the reverend's time. “Reverend Gillette, you've given me a wonderful day of conversation, which I will not forget. Your sincerity, candor, and patience in answering my questions have been tremendously helpful.”

“Thank you, Jacob,” he replied warmly. “I've enjoyed myself too. But, I am not sure I answered all your questions. I will tell you my belief in Jesus Christ is what guides me, even when I am unable to understand His reasons for tragic events. We all struggle. We all have dark sides. Even so, through our faith, we
endeavor to reach God's realm of kindness, love, and acceptance. We are not there yet, Jacob, but do not give up on humankind. We will make it. All of us will,” he emphasized.

Jacob believed him.

As they made their way to the entry, Jacob reminded Reverend Gillette that he had almost forgotten his final question. The Reverend paused for a moment and said, "Ah, yes, whose ideologies are correct, the Catholics or Protestants?"

"Great memory," Jacob said smiling.

"First, both doctrines believe in Jesus Christ, which is Christianity's most important building block. The remaining building blocks I give to the Lutherans, though I know not all Protestants or Catholics would agree with me. That's my final answer, Jacob."

"Logical," Jacob replied, "and diplomatic for sure. But how are you sure?"

Smiling, and staring deeply into Jacob's eyes, he replied, “Because it is written, Jacob - because it is written.”

They bid each other farewell. As the great doors closed behind him, Jacob marveled at hearing the same motivating force within each of these religions - “It is written.”

As he stood on the Thoroughfare of Lutherans, Jacob knew he had to leave the Road of Christianity. He could not help feeling apprehensive, as God had not revealed Himself along the great Road of Christianity. For the first time, he was aware of the
possibility that he may never return to this great Road - the Road he and Jessica had spent their life's traveling.
CONFRONTATION WITH DOUBT

Time's a wasting, Jacob said to himself as he pulled the compass from his backpack to confirm his directions. He would soon be traveling on the Road of Islam.

The Road of Islam presented a significant challenge to Jacob. It was as large as Christianity's, but he was not as familiar with the Islamic faith. What little he did know concerned him. As experienced by millions of others, Islamic Fundamentalism had been thrust upon him on September 11, 2001, when three thousand people were killed in New York City by a group of Islamic terrorists who flew two commercial planes into the World Trade Center.

The event continued to haunt him. He remained baffled as to why religious fanatics believe Allah, the same God worshiped by Christians and Jews, blessed the atrocity that killed innocent Muslims, Jews, Christians, and countless others. He had to find God for the answer.

Several hours passed before Jacob felt comfortable on the path he now traveled toward Islam. The people were cordial in passing, some waved, but for the most part they remained focused on whatever it was they were doing. He was relieved that it did not seem to be another path of Fundamentalism.
In spite of the pleasant atmosphere, Jacob had a bizarre feeling that something was different. There was nothing specific he could put his finger on, just one of those intuitive feelings he guessed
But, why? He knew he was heading in the right direction, but then realized he had not seen a name for the path he was traveling. He decided it was a good time to stop to get something to eat. Then he could verify the name of the path, and determine if it was one of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or all three.

The tavern was similar to many others. Inside was a large bar encircled by high backed stools, where a few noticeably loyal patrons sat, with a small dining room adjacent to the bar. Jacob chose a stool at the bar that gave him the best view of the tavern, and the capability to keep his back to the wall - an old combat habit he learned in the Marines to ensure no one could sneak up behind him.

He ordered a draft beer from the melancholy bartender and looked around to see if anyone appeared as if they wanted to talk. One man appeared friendly and approachable. He was dressed in a blue suit, sitting alone at a table, and reading a financial newspaper.

“Excuse me, Sir, I don't mean to interrupt you, but I've been traveling east from The Road of Christianity toward The Road of Islam, and I was wondering if you had a few minutes to answer a few questions? I'm looking to verify I'm on the right path, as well determine the beliefs of the people along this passage.”

“Beliefs?” the man replied, folding his paper and putting it on the far end of the table. “What kind of beliefs? Regardless, I have time to talk about anything you'd like. I'm not sure, however,
‘belief’ is the operative word here.” Jacob did not know what the man's remark was leading to, but he had obviously selected a person who wanted to talk.

The man motioned to Jacob to join him. As he did, the man removed his suit jacket and placed it on the back of the chair beside him. Great, Jacob thought, this is going to be an interesting conversation. He hoped, however, what appeared to be the man's fascination with his own intelligence, would not interfere with them having an open conversation.

Jacob learned the man's name was Arnold Robust and he enjoyed talking to travelers. Jacob summarized his quest to find God. Arnold did not seem surprised, which made Jacob wonder if he may have made the same journey or heard the same story many times before.

“You're heading in the right direction to reach The Road of Islam. It's about two days from here." Damn, Jacob thought, it looked closer than that. Arnold continued, and asked; “When you reach the Road, what are you expecting to find?”

“I want to know if it's the road to finding God,” Jacob answered. Thinking he had already explained this to Arnold.

“What if it is not the road to travel? What if there is no God?” Arnold asked, carefully emphasizing each word, and Jacob's expressions.

Jacob told him, 'no God' was not an option for him. He wanted to believe God existed and needed to find the true path to reach Him.

“But what if there is no God?” Arnold repeated. “What if you find there is no evidence God exists anywhere and the only life
you have is the one you are living today? What if…?”

“What if what, Arnold?” Jacob interrupted. "What if there is no God, and I find the only life we have begins at birth, and ends with death? I've told you I have chosen to assume there is a God."

“Why?”

“I told you. I'm on a quest to find Him to answer my questions. Until I find otherwise, my belief is God exists.”

“No, no Jacob,” Arnold responded firmly. “What you are telling me is that you have no doubt there is a God, you simply need to know which path will eventually take you to Him. Nevertheless, my question to you has been, how do you know there is a God? Because, if there is no God, then it doesn't matter which path you take, does it?”

Jacob knew Arnold was attempting to control the direction of the conversation, and responded, “I'm short on time, so may I please ask you something else, before we get sidetracked by the mysteries of life?”

“Please tell me the name of the path I am on? I've seen no road signs, it's not on my maps, and frankly, I'm not sure it path pertains to my quest at all.”

Arnold paused before answering Jacob's question.

“Jacob, I've challenged you with my questions about God, because I've traveled across the same roads you travel now. The majority of people you meet on this path have also traveled many
of the same roads, and each of them became lost within the chaos of religion.

You asked me several times for the name of the path you now travel, but those of us who reside here have decided it does not really need a name. This is not because it is less of a path than the others are. More accurately, it is a dynamic characteristic within all of them. It often appears less traveled than most other paths, yet more and more travelers join us every day, because we accept only the practical truth."

Jacob still did not know where Arnold was heading with his comments, but he let him continue without interruption.

“If we named the path Jacob, chances are you and others would not travel here for fear of being tainted by the logic of our beliefs. Like you, we were burdened by the same unanswered questions, doubt, and confusion as to what is the truth. The difference between us is that we do not share your belief in God. This does not make us bad people, since no group is all good or all bad. To this end, we are like believers of any religious denomination.”

“So you do have some sort of religious belief?” Jacob asked, a little impatiently. After all, he still had no straight answer about the name of the path.

Arnold sensed the agitation in Jacob's voice, and answered calmly.

“Our belief, Jacob, is in today and in pure reason. That is, each day is lived with the realization there may not be a tomorrow. If I had to name the path you are traveling, I guess I would call it The Path of…”
“Wait!” Jacob interrupted. "Am I on The Path of Atheists? Is that why you didn't tell me its name sooner?" Jacob was not mad at Arnold, he was furious with himself for not recognizing the path before he participated in a discussion.

“I understand the situation you're in,” Arnold said; "and, as I mentioned to you earlier, many of us have traveled the same roads you travel now and have reached the conclusion our path is as good, if not better, than those of religion.

We believe it is the Road of Existence and Reality, not the 'Road of Disbelief.' Our belief is in today, and through random chance, tomorrow. We do not believe in life after death or God. What happens to us in this life is purely by chance and subject to the laws of logic. Our tiny world is in constant chaos, and the happenstances of our lives are random, not planned by supernatural intervention.”

“How can you believe that?” Jacob asked, sarcastically. “Just hearing you talk makes me feel of a lonely and sad existence. How are you so sure there's no God or afterlife?”

“For one reason, the biblical stories are not logical!” Arnold snapped. “Come on Jacob, you're a smart guy. Is there really any logic to the myths and contradictions religions expect you to accept?"

"Arnold," Jacob argued; “you're looking at the world from what you believe is logical. Do you really assume humans are the most intelligent essence in the universe? Today's logic is
superseded by tomorrow's discoveries. Why do you think you have the power to understand what life and the universe hold for us?"

“That was a religious answer, Jacob. Yes, our way can seem lonely to outsiders, but do you believe in God and Heaven because you don't want to be alone, or because you fear the alternative - life on earth is absolute, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, period!"

Arnold was on a roll, but Jacob began to block out what he was saying. Nothing Arnold said was new to Jacob. The doubt, confusion, and inability to prove empirically the foundation of his beliefs had been an internal conflict throughout his life. More confusing were the answers he'd been given – ‘because it is written,' or ‘I believe there is a God, therefore you should believe in God.' The best of all, especially after a tragedy as Jessica's death, ‘God works in mysterious ways.' Jacob never accepted these ambiguous answers, nor was he going to use them to debate Arnold's logic.

Jacob went on the offensive. "You speak against religion, but as an Atheist you hold your ideology as sacred as any religions'. Your religion simply does not believe in God!"

Arnold snapped back again, "We are not a religion."

Jacob did not back down. "As an Atheist you can't deny your mission. It is not to live peacefully within your own beliefs; it is to convert people to your way of believing. You consider those who do not share your theories ignorant. You pursue conversion to logic the same way Christians and Muslims pursue converts to God."

"But you never hear us attributing senseless wars and murder to a God!" Arnold assertively said.

Jacob considered the discussion was reaching a dead-end,
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as all arguments of religion and politics usually do. He decided to move the conversation towards a conclusion.

"I don't try to answer for everyone Arnold, but I choose to believe there is a higher essence than mankind. The problem I have with atheists and religious fundamentalists is their absolute conviction they are right, and everyone else is wrong."

In his own way, Jacob felt Arnold was searching for answers to the same questions. Both were searching for the truth and absolute proof. Without proof, the only position they had was what they had chosen to believe.

Jacob was frustrated and tired of arguing about questions no one had the answers to. Arnold or science cannot explain from where the atom of energy came that created the ‘Big Bang’. Or, for that matter, what created the empty void we call space, the ‘Big Bang' exploded into. More speculation, he thought. He had to find God. Only then would he have the true answers.

Jacob rose slowly from his seat, politely interrupted Arnold, shook his hand, thanked him for his time and perspective, and said good-bye. As he started to leave Arnold spoke in a loud, yet surprisingly sincere voice.

“Thank you, Jacob. If you do find proof God exists, please come back and tell me!” The other Atheists at the bar chuckled, but Jacob had a feeling Arnold was not joking.

Outside, Jacob headed directly toward The Road of Islam, determined he would not stop until he reached it.
Reflecting back on their conversation, Jacob hoped he hadn't been too rude to Arnold. After all, he was a man of convictions who tried to convey why his beliefs were the logical truth.

Jacob wondered again, is there really only one way to believe?

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THE ROAD OF ISLAM

After two days of almost non-stop traveling, Jacob finally reached the Road of Islam. As he had done before beginning his journeys on previous Roads, he stopped and reviewed his notes so not to be totally ignorant of what to expect.

Let me see, he said to himself. Muslims believe the Quran is the last testament given to mankind by God. It represents God's new directives, in Arabic, as given to the Prophet Muhammad over a twenty-three year period. It is said that Muhammad recorded every word exactly as God told him, through the Angel Gabriel. Therefore, Muslims believe the Quran is infallible.

Unlike Christian believers, Muslims recognize no intermediate divine beings as Jesus. They do recognize great prophets, which they believe Jesus and Muhammad to be.

The Road of Islam was almost as massive as the Road of Christianity, having 1.4 billion devoted followers. It too, was picturesque and inspiring. Yet, as with Christianity, there were different paths visible for Muslims to follow, each differing based on their interpretation of Allah's Word as written in the Quran.

From his vantage point Jacob could see many of these paths - those of the Sunni and Shi'a (or Shi'ite), and ancillary paths of Wahhabis, Sufis, Fakir, Druze, Zaidis, Black Muslims, Muslim Brotherhood, Marabouts, and more.
The grandeur of Islam was evident from the magnificent palaces of the rich to the beautiful mosques - Islam's Holy places of worship. The most celebrated Mosques, Mashed al-Hiram, Mashed Malawi, and Cordoba, where some of the most sacred of Islamic sites, as were those of Medina, Micah and The Dome of the Rock.

Jacob knew mosques were significant to Muslims' daily lives, especially for the mandatory five daily prayers. He recognized the prayer halls held no seats, images, sculptures, or ritual objects. All of them faced east towards Mecca.

He would soon learn Mosques' are nondenominational - a Muslim adherent, regardless of sect, may pray in any mosque. Mosques also serve as community centers for religious events, education, and courts of law. Many have parade grounds, libraries, hospitals or other facilities.

Also visible, however, was the poverty, illiteracy, disease, prejudice, and bondage of people confined to a strict religious standard of living, unchanged for thousands of years. Standards enforced by religious and secular leaders.

“Excuse me sir!” Jacob called out to a man nearby. “I'm looking for The Path of the Sunni, can you help me?” Jacob decided to follow this path first, because it was the largest in Islam. The man nodded his head, smiled, and pointed to the wide road that veered off to Jacob's left.

The Path of Sunni was as large, if not larger, then the Path of Roman Catholicism. Of the 1.4 billion Muslims around the world, Sunni Muslims' accounted for almost eighty-five percent.

He was anxious to begin. First, he located in his backpack
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an envelope given to him by an old college friend, Jerry Staffer. Staffer was a professor of International Affairs at the University of New York and had provided Jacob with background information on a few people he should contact as he traveled across the Road of Islam.

Having received the information just before he left home, Jacob had put it in his backpack without reading it. Looking at it for the first time he was surprised, knowing Jerry's thoroughness, it only included the name of one scholar, Muhja.

There was nothing to indicate if Muhja was the first or last name, or perhaps even the full name? Luckily, Jerry noted Muhja would probably be found in a small mosque, located at the corner of Hasher and Wahid Lanes. Most likely, diligently studying religions' of the world.

After a short walk, Jacob was standing before the small mosque as Jerry instructed. There were a few people talking outside the main entrance and he decided to ask them where he might locate Muhja.

“Excuse me.” Jacob said to three men sitting at a small table. “I apologize for interrupting you, but I am searching for Mr. Muhja.”

One replied chuckling, "Good evening, my name is Rasool Ra'ahah. I know Muhja, whom you should certainly find in the library inside our mosque."
“Thank you,” Jacob responded, “do I need to remove my shoes?”

“It's obvious to us that you are a traveler and know little about the path you now travel. But, that is not a problem; we are all travelers in our own way. As for your question, you may enter and pray in shoes, but it would show respect if you removed them to avoid soiling the carpet.”

As Jacob turned and proceeded toward the library, he wondered why the men chuckled when he asked for Mr. Muhja. He assumed it was his incorrect pronunciation.

Upon entering a mosque for the first time, Jacob was impressed with the simple, natural elegance of its interior. Verses of the Quran were eloquently written on the corridor walls in Arabic, and to his surprise, English translations underneath. He noticed people gathered throughout the building, some in small discussion groups and several others in deep meditation or prayer.

As he entered the library, Jacob noticed almost all the books had worn bindings or protruding page markers, suggesting they had been well read. He looked around for a librarian who might help him locate Muhja, but saw no one.

As he was about to ask a few of the people he saw reading, he noticed a man shelving books. He walked quietly toward him. The man told him he would find Muhja behind a stack of books and pointed to the far corner table.

Jacob thanked him and made his way to the table. No one was there, so he decided to wait.

For the next twenty-five minutes several men passed by the table, yet none took a seat. Eventually, a mature Asian woman of
fair appearance stepped from behind one of the large bookracks holding an armful of manuscripts.

“Excuse me,” Jacob said smiling, “I am looking for Muhja and was told he usually works at this table.”

The woman set the manuscripts down on the table, and replied softly, “Yes, I am familiar with Muhja, who I understand is a great scholar of the laws and traditions of Islam and many other religions. Actually, I believe Muhja is one of the unique scholars in the world. If you are privileged to spend time with Muhja, I suggest you listen carefully and take many notes.”

“Wonderful!” Jacob said quietly, so not to interrupt the others in the library. “Thank you. I'll wait here for as long as it takes him to return.”

The woman laughed, and extended her hand to Jacob saying, “Good evening, I am Muhja.”

After the hot flash of embarrassment drained from his face, Jacob laughed and thought to himself, so much for first impressions.

“You know Muhja,” he said. "I have never been set up as perfectly, nor felt so ill prepared. I was referred to you by Jerry Staffert - a name she quickly acknowledged - and he never told me to look for a woman scholar. Please forgive me for assuming you would be a man, but I believed all Islamic scholars were men?"
"Most are, but as you see, not all. As you say in the West, "we've come a long way, baby!" She smiled and said to Jacob, “Please, sit down.”

“Thank you.”

Muhja piled her paperwork neatly on the table, closed her books, and then turned to Jacob. “Jacob, I am now devoted to our conversation and will offer you whatever assistance I can. I do use the word “God” interchangeably with “Allah,” so do not be confused. As a small bit of information, Islam has over ninety glorious names with which we refer to Allah.”

Without hesitation she continued. “First, why don't you bring me up to date on what you've learned on your travels and where you believe I may best help you?”

Muhja struck him as a woman who would enjoy a good debate. He admired the way she got to the heart of the discussion. Even more, he liked her non-confrontational manner and sense of humor.

“Agreed!” Jacob responded, and began to talk non-stop about his quest, the individuals he had talked to, and the paths he still had to travel. He also explained his dilemma with scripture, the conflicting roads of religion, and his difficulty in understanding the true meaning of a loving God.

Muhja sat silently, jotting notes, nodding her head occasionally, offering a few smiles and frowns in response to his remarks.

Jacob did not believe how much he babbled. It was as if his mind was a dam holding back knowledge and someone suddenly opened the flow gates. When he finally finished, Muhja set down
her pen, folded her arms, and looked him straight in the eye.

“I am proud of you, Jacob. Not many people would endure the journey you have undertaken. Some are committed to the doctrine they have been taught to accept or find comfort in uniting with how the majority believe. Others do not care, while many find solace in whichever path is easiest for them to travel. You have ventured upon this Path in search of truth, but I must tell you with all sincerity, I may only have the truth as I perceive and interpret it.”

“Muhja, I'm not sure I understand what you mean by your last statement.”

"What I mean is the knowledge I give to you tonight is from the information I have acquired over years of intense study and deliberation with scholars of Islam and many other religions. Nevertheless, even with this knowledge, it is possible I may not have the answers to your questions. Do you understand?"

"Absolutely!" “And, before I forget, I would like to mention that I am grateful to you for meeting with me unannounced. I respect your hospitality, credentials, and above all your honesty and integrity. So, where do we begin?"

Before she could answer, he continued enthusiastically.

"I have a lot of questions."

Muhja smiled, and put up her hand, indicating for him to slow down.
"I would suggest," She said, “I begin by clarifying a few of the false impressions of Islam. This has worked well in conversations with other travelers, and I think it will work for us too. Okay?"

Jacob nodded his head in agreement.

“I am sure you have found in your travels Jacob, that the religions of Abraham have different scriptures, opinions, biases, and interpretations of God's Word."

Jacob nodded and thought to himself, that is an understatement.

"Even with the phenomenal advancements in technology, especially communications, people do not always get the entire story. The advent of the Internet is proof in point - individuals with minimal knowledge post information as if they were scholars on the topic. In addition, people do not take the time to validate these messages and half-truths, so false beliefs are spread."

Like religion? Jacob thought - knowing it was all about the message; how it's interpreted, communicated, and enforced, which often determined peoples' acceptance.

"For that matter," Muhja was saying, "media information is similar. News is conveyed to boost ratings or give one-sided views. More malicious is when the media decides on the message they want people to hear."

Jacob wondered if Muhja was an independent thinker, or about to extol the virtues of Islam versus the corruption of the West. After all, he was on The Road of Islam where most news is suppressed and often one-sided.

He decided to interrupt her. "But Muhja that is exactly
what is happening in countries around the world. Religious or secular leaders control the news so people believe only what they want them to. This is happening today in Iraq, Iran, North Korea, and many other countries.”

Jacob was confused, Muhja was a scholar, and she should know this.

“Don't get me wrong, Jacob.” She interjected. "I'm not condemning technology, and I oppose governments, religious leaders, and profiteers who manipulate the worldwide media for personal reasons - showing the worst of man's behavior, especially as it pertains to Islam.”

Okay, Jacob thought. He understood the connection Muhja was making between media and the spread of misconceptions about Islam. Yet, this was not what he had traveled so far to hear.

“With this in mind,” Muhja was saying, “let me tell you of one misconception about Islam and Muslims in general. We are not all extremists, fundamentalists, or terrorists.”

“But wouldn't you agree Muhja, the greatest portion of violence against non-Muslims and Muslims, is committed by Muslims. Not only rogue splinter groups, but also state-sponsored killers? They claim to do it in the name of Allah, because they are taught at a young age that Allah will reward them in Paradise with virgins no less."
Although he was asking Muhja the question, in his heart he knew only God could answer it. As older religions' have done, Islam converted non-Muslims to Islam by the sword. Either tribes or countries converted to Islam, or they were destroyed – presumably, as the loving Allah commanded. The same way God commanded Christians to convert the so-called infidels.

"My point is whether the media reports it accurately or not, Muslims' have been committing these atrocities under the auspices of Allah for over a thousand years."

"Unfortunately much of what you say is true." Muhja admitted. "But it's not representative of all Muslims."

"Of course it isn't," Jacob said, still wondering where she was going with the discussion, "as all Christians are not Crusaders, or Jews, haters of Jesus Christ. I also agree communications are manipulated. Yet in all fairness Muhja there has been little counter-response by good Muslims to condemn those who use Allah to justify violence. Where is the counter-revolt against these fanatics by the peaceful followers of Islam?"

"You have valid points Jacob," Muhja replied, "and as Muslims, we must do more to demonstrate the kindness of the majority. Think about this though, when Irish Catholics kill Protestants, or innocent Muslims are killed by Orthodox Jews, or Christians massacre thousands of Muslims in the Balkans, the world doesn't condemn all their parishioners and rightfully so!"

"Jacob, Islam is a religion of peace. The majority of us live according to the peaceful teachings of Allah. The Quran clearly states, ‘[...if anyone slew a person … it would be as if he slew a whole people … (5.32)]' yet, because of a minority of
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fundamentalists, the majority of us must live in fear of retribution."

“I'm not disagreeing with you,” Jacob said. He was ready to move the conversation to another topic, but could not resist asking one more question.

“Muhja, I respect your thoughts on the image of Islam and Muslims in general. On the other hand, it's hard for me to understand how Islam calls itself a peaceful way of living or religion. How do you account for the Taliban taking control of Afghanistan, then killing, brutalizing and suppressing a nation of fellow Muslims? They claimed their actions were righteous and punishments distributed as Allah commanded in the Quran.”

“One moment!” Muhja interrupted sharply. “Your understanding of the Taliban is not complete. This is an excellent example of people only knowing half the story - the half that made the news.

At first, Afghans perceived the Taliban as a group of warriors who offered change from the country's raging tribal lawlessness. The Taliban achieved success by eliminating corruption and restoring peace between tribal warlords. They were also instrumental in jump-starting Afghanistan's unstable economy. I'm not telling you this to justify their methods; I tell you this to demonstrate the half-truths the world is led to believe.”

It was obvious Muhja was a proud Muslim, and the misconceptions about her religion were a personal and emotional
subject for her. Yet, as much as he wanted to agree with her and move on, Jacob felt he had to express his personal views.

“Does it bother you, Muhja, to see a strict interpretation of religious law used to control people of the same faith? Is that what a loving Allah, or God, truly intended?”

“Yes, it bothers me when the codes of law are manipulated. And no, I do not believe it is what Allah had in mind for us.” Muhja answered.

“Then with all due respect,” Jacob responded, “The twenty-first century was ushered in with the image of Muslim suicide bombers, targeted terrorist atrocities, and Islamic brutality.”

“Fundamentalists,” Muhja interrupted; “We are back to fundamentalists.”

“No, we're back to the world's perception of Islam! More importantly, what the world would be like under the rule of a strict Islamic ideology. My true fear is not the bombers themselves, but the religious leaders who teach and guide them. Raising killers who they call martyrs to do Allah's destruction.”

“Jacob,” she said calmly, “you make some good observations, not all of which I agree with, but enough to know we will not resolve the answers tonight. I suggested starting our conversation on the misconceptions of Islam first, because it is important to me as a Muslim. Also, most travelers do not have the knowledge you have shown and this method saved me a lot of time and need to answer pointless questions.

We are not here to debate, nor try to convince each other to change our judgments. We are together tonight to exchange ideas, transfer knowledge, build a friendship, and provide you with
the knowledge of Islam you require to make your decision.

“Nevertheless,” she continued; "for my own personal pride and satisfaction, please allow me close this part of our conversation with a few items I truly want you to understand about Islam.”

Jacob had no objections.

"As you know, Islam originated in Arabia and spread through the ancient Middle East, primarily through war and bloodshed. This is similar to the expansion of other ancient religions as Judaism and Christianity. What many people do not understand is as Islam developed over time, it prospered throughout the world by the teaching of peace and religious tolerance - not war.

Furthermore, many people do not realize the majority of the world's Muslims live peacefully outside the Middle East. I am including outside what was formerly known as the Ottoman Empire. There are around 200 million Muslims in Indonesia alone. Over 70 million live in Russia and millions in Africa, China, and the West.”

“More importantly,” she emphasized, “Islam is not a religion in the same sense as Christianity - Islam is a complete way of life - a total submission to Allah and His word.”

“I'm not sure I understand?” Jacob said.

“My apologies. I may be getting ahead of myself,” she replied. “Let me give you an example. Many Western countries have a clear separation of church and state. Islam, however,
primarily follows Allah's Laws and secular laws as appropriate. True Muslims live their daily lives devoted to the Word of Allah, as instructed in the Quran, Sunnahs', and complementing scriptures.”

“What are the Sunnahs?

“We'll get to that in more detail later." She replied. "For now, let me simply say Islamic law is made up of four principle sources which together are called Sharia. First, of course, is the Quran, the infallible Word of God. Next is the Sunnah, the traditions and examples set forth by the Prophet Muhammad. Third is ijma, which are the decisions of the community, and fourth is qiyas, or legal analogy.

"The Islamic system of law provides guidance for every endeavor a Muslim undertakes, as marriage, obligations to Allah, ownership of property, family planning, and the raising of children are a few examples. Islam is not political in the Western sense, as the Sharia is the complete social, economical, political, and spiritual way of life. In Islam, there is no dispute between secular laws and Allah's Laws. There is no law that supersedes the Word of Allah as commanded in the Quran.”

"But, why Muhja?" Jacob asked confused.

"Why?" She responded, puzzled by the question.

"Why do people have to be led by the hand and limited to one ideology? Why must their lives be governed by men?"

"They are governed by the Word of God, Jacob,” she replied softly.

"Yes." He responded. "But the Word of God has been interpreted so differently by clerics of all religions. Most often, strict limitations are deployed which dictate how people must
believe, adhere to restrictions of personal property, restraints on discovering the principles of other faiths, and ancient rituals - which in many instances were implemented to control the mass of uneducated peoples' thousands of years ago."

Muhja interrupted, "I do not agree they hinder freedom of thought or personal discovery. Especially, as you view the wonderful advancements in knowledge and technology throughout Muslim cultures around the world. I understand how strict some of these laws may appear to non-Muslims, but the teaching of the Quran, adhered to by the majority of Muslims, do not limit our ability to expand our knowledge or interact with different faiths."

Jacob knew he had a lot to learn about Islam. Nevertheless, he was not sure Islam was unlike Christianity in controlling the faithful. He remembered as a young boy the Catholic Church taught him Jesus was the only way to God. It was a cardinal sin, punishable by a trip to Hell, to think of believing otherwise.

Jacob again wondered if the discussion was going in the right direction. It seemed they were simply stating their views, instead of getting to the evidence that Islam might be the path God wants him to follow.

As if reading his mind, Muhja said. "Jacob, your confusion and skepticism to the laws of Islam, and other religions, is well noted. There are many questions inherent within your conversation, and I fear the broad format we have been following will not provide you with your answers. I would like to take a step
back from my original approach and answer your questions one at a time. I would be saddened if you left without the answers you seek.”

"Excellent!" Jacob quickly responded, pleased with her decision. Without a moment’s hesitation, he asked his first direct question.

“In my search for God, my confusion with religion has deepened. Each religion has multiple paths, all of which proclaim the same God provided their distinctive scriptural foundation. With these vast differences of interpretations of fundamentally the same scriptures, how is anyone supposed to know who is right? Why are mankind's religions so confusing, Muhja?”

“I understand the confusion you have in your heart.” She said, with a warm smile. She continued in a soft voice.

“Jacob, the scriptures are the only true source of God's Word we have. Granted, there is a great deal of confusion with so many interpretations. All too often we spend so much time debating the differences, we lose focus of the features they have in common.”

“Actually, Muhja, as I think more about how religions interpreted or misinterpreted the scriptures, it really becomes the second part of my bewilderment.”

“And what is the first?”

“First, why would a loving and compassionate God include horrendous violence and brutality within the scriptures in the first place? I have read many scriptures where God has obliterated entire civilizations to punish those who did not keep His Laws. Many of them were ruthless laws originated thousands of years
ago, then passed down through ‘oral tradition', or word of mouth, and then recorded in scriptures decades later. Ambiguous laws Muhja, which permitted men to interpret them differently.”

“What is ambiguous to you Jacob is clear and acceptable to others. Some scholars believe Allah intended mankind to have the flexibility to interpret His Word and adapt them to the dynamics of a changing world.”

“If that's true, then I guess I really am confused.”

"Why is that?" She asked.

"Because I don't believe a loving God wants me to show the wrath and revenge He displayed in scriptures. It doesn't make sense to me that children or animals were sacrificed to feed God's ego or obtain his blessing. Nor do I believe a benevolent God wants me, or others, to live in poverty or remain in the same ancient way of life Moses did."

Muhja patiently waited for Jacob to continue.

“I know somewhere in my notes," he said, as he rummaged through his backpack, "if I can find them, are passages from scriptures that direct men to annihilate non-believers. Wait! I found a couple. For instance; ‘And the Lord said to Moses, take all the heads of the people, and hang them up before the Lord against the Sun.' (Num 25:4.9)

"Here's another!” he continued excitedly as though it was new news to Muhja. “This one is from the Book of Joshua; ‘And Joshua's army killed everyone in Jericho, both men and women,
young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys … Joshua defeated the whole land … He left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded.' (Joshua, 6:21 and 10:40)

"And in the Quran,” Jacob went on without pausing, “There are similar instructions about killing and defeating Islam's enemies; ‘But as for those who disbelieve, garments of fire will be cut out for them; boiling fluid will be poured down on their heads…' (Quran, 22.019)

"More confusing to me,” he continued, "is that throughout these atrocities Allah is said to reward individuals and armies who die as martyrs; ‘On couches with linings of brocade shall they recline, and therein shall be the damsels with retiring glances, who no man or jinn hath touched before them.' (Sura 55:56)

“Can you explain to me why a loving God would command one group of his people to murder helpless others, and then reward the killers with pleasure in Paradise? Is killing required? If I do not kill people who worship differently does that mean I do not love God, or He will not allow me to enter Heaven?

“Muhja, how can God be so cruel and expect unconditional love in return?”

“You have many questions and doubts Jacob. Unfortunately, I am only a scholar, a person who validates her position based on the scriptures you struggle to understand. I can explain the reasons for events of the past through scripture and man's interpretation of how God wishes us to live. I can confirm that wars happened and certain groups of people existed, but there is nothing empirical outside the scriptures to explain why Allah
Even if I was a prophet, Jacob, Allah may not deem it necessary to explain to me His reasons for doing things, or why they are allowed to happen. I can interpret the Word of Allah, as given to us in the scriptures, but I cannot read His mind. Because you don't have faith in the scriptures, the only answers you'll ever be satisfied with are those directly answered by God."

"You're right," Jacobs said. "But until I speak to God, how do I know which scriptures have been interpreted correctly and not changed by mankind to control people of their faith?"

Muhja smiled. "I will tell you why I believe Allah's Word is accurate in the Quran, Sunnahs', and how they are enacted in the Community and Schools of Law. But, I cannot explain to you why Allah's Word conflicts with your expectations of how His laws and commandments should be."

"Fair enough," Jacob responded, "but tell me why Muslims believe the Islamic scriptures are absolute and not those of Christianity or Judaism? For that matter, why is the Path of Sunni the right path to Allah, instead of the Path of Shi'a or one of the other Islamic paths? Who is right, Muhja? Which road do I take? I have traveled so far, yet feel in my heart that I am still lost. Do you know what I mean?"

"I will answer what I can Jacob, but you must have patience with yourself, mankind and Allah. First, as I told you earlier, we would eventually come back to the misconceptions of
Islam. We have come upon one that many people do not understand. That is Muslims, or should I say Islam, does not judge a person on the path of religion they travel. Allah alone will make the final decision as to who will enter Paradise - not any man, prophet or angel. As Muslims we are taught to have tolerance for all religions."

"Tolerance of all religions? How is that?" Jacob responded with skepticism. "When sects as the Wahhabis teach children to wipe out Judaism, Christianity, and others God has supposedly labeled infidels - which even include other Muslims."

"Those are fundamentalists, Jacob." Muhja replied calmly, sensing his frustration. "Moderate Islam makes no claim to being the only road one can travel to reach Allah. We do believe, however, it is the only road a Muslim must travel. This of course differs from your travels on the Road of Christianity, where total submission to Jesus is the only way."

"Do you mean Muslims don't submit themselves to Muhammad, as Christians do to Jesus Christ?"

"No. Muslims believe in total submission only to Allah. We hold Muhammad, the ‘Final Prophet', in the highest regard. Yet, we do not raise him or any of the other great prophets, like Jesus, to the level of the divine. They were mortal men, messengers chosen by God to do God's work on earth."

"But wait," Jacob asked, "you say you don't worship Muhammad, yet after saying or writing his name Muslims always recite something which sounds like ‘salla allahu wa sal. Isn't that a form of worship?"

"Absolutely not!" Muhja replied, laughing. "The phrase we
use, and the one you so eloquently butchered, is ‘salla allahu 'alaihi wa sallam,' which basically means ‘peace be upon him.’ This is an expression of the love and admiration Muslims show to Allah's last chosen prophet."

“Thanks for the clarification.” Jacob replied, then immediately asked, “If you don't mind, I want to get back to your comment about Muhammad being the final prophet.

This confuses me, because God has always used prophets, from Abraham to Moses, Jesus to Muhammad, to teach Mankind His Word and Laws. Why would he stop at Muhammad?”

“That's a good question,” Muhja said, "please allow me to answer in sufficient detail so that you understand how we know this is true.

Foremost, Islam does not claim to be a ‘new’ religion. Instead, it is the continuation of the powerful messages from God first given to the Hebrew and Christian people. In the Quran, Christians and Jews are noted as the ‘People of the Book,' meaning of course, the Hebrew Torah and segments of the Christian New Testament. Islam reveres Jesus Christ for His love of the one true God, His teachings, and the examples for mankind he set forth while spreading his messages of love and peace.”

"Too bad nobody seems to follow them." Jacob interjected with a mild sneer.

"Nonetheless," she continued, "as I mentioned earlier, Islam doesn't believe any of Allah's prophets were divine. We
never endeavored to become a new or separate religion. On the contrary, the Quran is a correction to Allah's messages in the original Hebrew Scriptures. In the Quran, Allah tells Christians and Jews of his decision:

‘People of the Book! Our Messenger (Muhammad) has come to you, making clear to you many things you have been concealing of the Book and forgiving you of much. A light has come to you from Allah and a glorious Book, with which He will guide whoever follows His pleasure in the way of peace, and brings them forth from darkness into the light by His will.”' (Quran 5:15-16)

"So then," Jacob asked, "Do Muslims find the Christian belief in Jesus Christ blasphemous?"

"There is a significant amount of contention between Christians and Muslims over the divinity of Christ. This isn't only because it took Christians hundreds of years to establish Jesus Christ as God in the collective imagination, but also because it contradicts the law Allah gave Moses in the Ten Commandments thousands of years before, ‘Thou shalt have no other Gods before me.'

To answer your question Jacob, Muslims for the most part believe the Christian interpretation of the divinity of Jesus is blasphemy. We believe Jesus was transformed from a prophet to God by early Christian clerics. Even today there are some Christian scholars that believe Jesus never claimed to be God, as supported in the passage - ‘And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is God.' (Mark 10:18)"

Muslims are taught to believe only Allah will make the final
determination of a person's acceptance into Paradise.”

“Now, going back to where I left off, Islam is not a new religion, it is the final culmination of God's Word from the Hebrew scripture, or Old Testament, and the Gospels of the New Testament. Now, before you ask another question, let me explain how Islam began, and why Muslims believe Muhammad is the last prophet of God.

Around 600 years after the death of Jesus the Angel Gabriel summoned Muhammad, at the ripe old age of forty, to Allah. Through Gabriel, Allah told Muhammad that He had given His original Code of Laws to the Jews through Moses, and later to Christians, through Jesus Christ. However, after the death of these great prophets' humanity continued to deviate from His Word. To correct the deviations for the last time Allah selected Muhammad, an honest and moral man, to be his final prophet and record Allah's final Words correctly in the Quran.

Over a period of twenty-three years Allah provided His Word to Muhammad, who immediately dictated them to scribes, word for word. Thereby, making certain the Quran was infallible.

Why was Muhammad Allah's last prophet, you asked? Since the Quran is the accurate restoration of Allah's Word, and final plan for mankind, there is no need for more prophets. Nor is there anything more to teach man, since each phrase in the Quran is exactly how God gave it to Muhammad through the Angel
Gabriel. The words of Allah in the Quran have remained the same for over a thousand years.”

“But, Muhja,” Jacob quickly responded, “without exception every religious path I've traveled, and every religious person I've talked to told me a similar story. What makes the Quran different? And, didn't Muhammad's unfolding of the Quran shut the door to future communications with God?”

“Even as a religious scholar, I too have asked these same questions. Until I understood it was not Muhammad that shut the door on future communications - it was Allah.

Now, allow me to focus on why the validity and infallibility of the Quran differs from the older scriptures.”

“Up to this point, I've spoken in general terms, but be assured for all Muslims the Quran is the final Word to mankind - period! Scribes recorded each word immediately, exactly as Muhammad enlightened them. This differs considerably from scriptures written by unidentified men, decades or centuries after the prophets, as Jesus, had died. This alone, helps us to validate the accuracy and infallibility of the Quran."

Muhja's last statement seized Jacob's interest. Yes! He thought. She had proof of God's existence and final teachings. His journey may well end on the Road of Islam.

He had to ensure this was true. “Are you saying Muhja, the Quran has remained unchanged by man for over a thousand years - word for word?”

“Most spectacular,” she responded enthusiastically, “is that during the last century scholars from the University of Munich collected over forty thousand copies of the Quran from different
cultures and various periods of antiquity. For over half a century they compared these manuscripts to the original two and guess what?"

“They found no discrepancies?” Jacob responded.

“None!” Muhja proudly stated.

“That is fantastic,” Jacob said, “and I don't want to appear a bull-headed pessimist, but even with the great care Islam has taken to preserve the Quran, like other scriptures, individual words and phrases may have several meanings. The word ‘Ayn, for example, can mean an organ of sight, running water, gold, or spy. As a scholar, don't you have trouble determining which meaning is accurate? The problem I have is people have interpreted these verses the way they want others to hear and follow them – and without question.”

For the first time, Jacob noticed Muhja seemed displeased with him, as though she resented his doubts.

He continued, “I realize my comments sound as if I don't believe any scriptures, but I am sincerely confused about who is right. I've never been able to verify that God has ever spoken to anyone."

“Jacob,” she said, “earlier in our conversation I explained I would not have all the answers you are looking for. Your last question is one of those that I, nor anyone besides Allah, will have the response you seek. I cannot explain in any detail the extreme
care Muslims' have taken to assure the final word of Allah is accurate in the Quran.

“Jacob, you aren't looking for knowledge or suggestions regarding the path you should travel. You are seeking proof - physical, untainted, and indisputable proof God exists.”

“Wanting to believe in God," she continued; “and believing in God are two different things. The former is no more than a wish. Jacob, in the absence of a ‘one-on-one' conversation with God, why do you believe you will find the facts on any of the paths you will travel? Your comments and questions extend beyond the uncertainty of whether the translated Word of God is accurate. If you don't believe in the scriptures, be they Christian, Jew, Muslim, or any others, then most certainly your real question must be; ‘Does God truly exist?’"

“No!” Jacob interrupted. “I want to believe God exists.” Jacob paused to reflect on his ambiguous answer. I think God exists, he said to himself. But what did he mean by ‘thinking’ God exists? Before his journey, he would have told anyone that God existed. Why was it so hard to commit to that now? What changed? Was it the repeated contradictions that made it difficult to commit to his belief in God? Or, that the answers were the same regardless of the path he traveled?

Jacob wondered if he would ever find God and escape from his quandary. He thought of how easy it would be to stop trying to find God and commit to one religion, no questions asked. However, what if he selected the wrong one?

“Are you sure your dilemma is only whether God's Word is correct?” Muhja asked, interrupting his thoughts.
“Yes, I mean, no.” Jacob stammered. “Yes, I think God exists, but I’m not sure His Word is accurate in any of the religious scriptures written by men.”

“Personally,” Muhja replied, “I would find it difficult to believe in God, if I did not believe what those who have been in contact with God have taught me through scripture.”

“But you already said the Gospels and Bible are incorrect. Doesn't that mean the teachings of Jesus, Moses and other prophets before Muhammad are invalid too? If those scriptures aren't true, then who has God been talking to?”

“That is not what I said, Jacob,” Muhja sharply responded. “What I said was that many, not all, of the original laws of the Hebrew Scriptures and Christian Gospels have been distorted, through generations of human intervention, making it difficult for anyone to determine the truth. The Quran corrected the errors and returned the original laws of Allah to mankind.”

“Jacob,” she continued in a sincere tone, “You are on the threshold of resolving your faith. It is not so much about finding the physical presence of God, but whether you believe in Him. If you do believe, even if He doesn't jump up and greet you, then eventually you will select a path to travel which is most in line with the beliefs in your heart.”

"The final counsel I will give you is from deep within my heart. On whichever road you decide to follow, do not expect it to be free of man-made potholes. Trust the goodness in yourself and
others. Someday you will make your decision, and tonight I believe you understand why I made mine. May Allah bless and guide you through the love in His heart.” She rose from her chair and grasped Jacobs's hands in a sign of friendship.

"Thank you, Muhja, for your time, knowledge, and compassion for me, and my quest. Most of all, thank you for being a friend. May our paths cross many times again and Allah never leaves your heart.”

Muhja smiled as she tenderly tapped Jacob on his shoulder – then turned and left the library.

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Jacob woke before dawn to the melodious Muezzin's voice calling the Muslim faithful to Morning Prayer. As he watched the procession of believers entering the mosque, he was deeply inspired by their adherence to the traditions of Islam and devotion to God. He knew Muslims around the world, regardless of their sect, would be facing east to Mecca worshiping Allah and giving thanks to the Prophet Muhammad.

As he watched the crowds, he wondered how many of them prayed to Allah to thank Him for His love and blessings and not merely to satisfy an ancient religious commandment.

It was time to move on.

For many captivating, yet exhausting days, Jacob traveled from one path of Islam to the next. On each path he asked clerics and nonprofessionals questions similar to those he had asked of Muhja and the others. The responses he received varied from...
cordial, informational, to antagonistic.

As his travels on the Road of Islam ended, a Bedouin tribal leader invited Jacob to stay at his Oasis, as his guest. Privileged, he spent the next few days summarizing his observations and opinions in his journal:

Upon leaving Muhja and the Path of the Sunni, I continued traveling until I came to the Path of the Shi'a, which accounts for about fifteen percent of all Muslims. There I had the opportunity to speak to many Shi'a clerics in an effort to understand why they had separated from the Sunni beliefs and why they believe their path is the one, which leads to Allah.

The Shi'a, as the Sunni, believe the Quran is Allah's final Word and embrace a devout love for the Prophet Muhammad. Nevertheless, the common love for Allah and Muhammad is overshadowed by the hatred between these two groups.

The hatred is rooted in the Shi'a belief that the succession of Muhammad, 'his God given authority', was passed down through Muhammad's family, beginning with his nephew, Ali. They do not believe Caliphs selected by the community should govern Islam as the Sunni do.

The disparity in methods for choosing a successor significantly influences Islamic society, laws, religious ideology, and how Muslims live their day-to-day lives.

For example, Shi'a believe Allah anoints an Imam through Muhammad's family succession. The Imam is not only the spiritual
leader of the community or state, but also the sole author of infallible Hadiths and other Muslim laws.

I do not comprehend how a man's word is infallible or he is void of all sin. To me, it gives a man God-like powers to interpret scripture, justify jihads, and maintain absolute power through the implementation of strict laws. More confusing, there is more than one Imam, so which one is right?

The more I learned, the more I understood the scope of this schism. The Sunnis elect their caliphs from the community. They do not have to be descendants of Muhammad, and their Hadiths are not infallible. Sunni caliphs are also capable of sin unlike the Imams of Shi'a.

From the Path of Shi'a I traveled on several smaller paths, crisscrossing the Road of Islam. Some too small to mention, yet others were of particular interest, as the Path of the Sufi. Sufism integrates a belief in mysticism within Islam. Sufis believe personal experiences with Allah are achieved through self-discipline and meditation. Although this was not a large path, it had been influential in the development of many of the traditions that built the foundations of Muslim communities.

After the Path of the Sufi, I spent a short time crossing the constricted Path of Wahhabis. Recalling my experience with Dr. Campbell, I followed this path with a great sense of apprehension, not knowing what to expect from the fundamentalist Wahhabis leaders, or their followers. I was aware immediately that I was being observed with an unsettling skepticism, and through brief conversations able to confirm what other Muslims had told me: Wahhabis are fundamentalists, primarily Sunni, who are adamant
their strict interpretation of the Quran, is the true Path of Islam - all other interpretations and religions are false.

Wahhabis' reject all luxuries as dancing, gambling, music, drugs, drinking and tobacco. This was surprising to me, since the lavish lifestyle of the Saudi Royal family, who are said to be Wahhabis, is far from one of poverty, piety, seclusion, or remotely adhered to Wahhabis fundamentalism.

As I traveled, I gained considerable knowledge about the agreements and differences found among Islam's sects. With this new insight, I feel I am better able to appreciate that a Muslims' commitment to Allah is as strong as a Christians' devotion to Jesus Christ.

I remain discouraged, however, that all religions seems to hold fast to their personal principles, while declaring all other faiths are wrong or misguided. To this end, I feel that in spite of the thousands of miles I have traveled, I have barely moved at all. I can only hope God knows I remain committed to finding Him.
Jacob knew the only way to triumph over his despair was to focus on the road ahead. Not all was lost, he told himself. After all, he still had the Road of Judaism before him. This was the ancient road where God selected Abraham as the first patriarch and sealed his new covenant with humankind.

Nevertheless, soon after selecting Abraham, all hell broke loose. As noted in Hebrew scripture, Abraham had two sons; Ishmael was his first son, born by his wife Sara's Egyptian handmaiden, Hager. He became the patriarch of Arabs or Islam. Isaac, born with God's blessing to Abraham's once infertile wife Sara would later, along with his son Jacob, became the patriarchs of Judaism and Christianity.

Jacob frowned as he recalled the hatred and quest for power between these two brothers long before Judaism, Christianity, and Islam developed into a religion. Yet it has been through these three religions, Isaac, Jacob and Ishmael's feud for the ‘promised land' has continued for over 5000 years. No wonder there is so much hate between these religions, Jacob muttered to himself in disbelief.
Nevertheless, more important to him, he declared to himself, was that God had been on this path! Moreover, maybe, just maybe, He never left.

As he continued down the Road of Judaism, he was still struggling with Muhja's question: ‘If you don't believe in the scriptures, be they Christian, Jew, Muslim, or others, then most certainly your next question must be - Does God truly exist?'

However, what if Muhja had been mistaken, and the scriptures were wrong. And God stayed on one of these paths, waiting for each of us to find Him? What if the reason people do not find God is because they give up their search too soon, as he had done many times before. What if they didn't find God because they selected a religion for convenience to avoid too many complicated questions?

What if Muhja had given up too soon? What if? What if? What if?

Many paths along the Roads of Christianity and Islam intertwined with many of the same places located on the Road of Judaism. Jerusalem was a perfect example. There the three religions battled each another for ownership of the city for thousands of years. For the Jews, Jerusalem is their Holiest city - King David's capital and the home to Solomon's Temple. For Christians it is the holy city where Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, then three days later resurrected from the dead. For Islam, it is the blessed city where Muhammad ascended to Paradise from the Dome of the Rock.

He remembered the Jewish Bible was the Tanakh. The Tanakh includes the Torah, the teachings of the Prophets, and the
rabbinical interpretations of the texts. He set off to find a rabbi to help him navigate the paths of Judaism.

As he asked those he met whom he should seek out for guidance, Rabbi Benjamin Golden was recommended repeatedly. He was told the rabbi was a man of sincerity, progressive ideas, and always willing to help a traveler navigate through the maze of Judaism.

Rabbi Golden radiated friendliness and was eager to help Jacob find the answers he sought, but he gave no guarantee he would be able to introduce him to God. The portly rabbi even volunteered to accompany him across as many of the ancient Hebrew paths he wished. Jacob graciously accepted his offer and later found the rabbi’s charisma and intellect gave invaluable credibility to Jacob’s quest.

"Rabbi Golden," Jacob asked, "the Road of Judaism is the most ancient of the three religions. Nevertheless, in the twenty-first century there are only fourteen million Jews. Is it a lost religion?"

Rabbi Golden replied, “Yes, the numbers are small, but Judaism is not lost."

"Really?" Jacob asked.

"Yes, I'm sure." the rabbi responded with a broad smile on his face. "Judaism isn't a religion which solicits and converts new followers in horde. Nevertheless, this does not mean our beliefs are wrong or others are correct. You see Jacob, converting to Judaism requires a total commitment by the individual. One cannot
automatically become Jewish; it is only possible by birthright or after a lot of hard work. If your mother was Jewish, you are Jewish. If not, then you must convert to Judaism by way of many rituals and tests.

“Generally speaking," he continued; "Jews do not try to convert others to Judaism. One reason is that we do not see a need for mass conversion, since God alone will decide who will enter Heaven based on their actions in this life. Contrary to what others may think, Jews do not believe they get a guaranteed piece of Heaven simply because they are a Jew.”

Jacob was intrigued by the idea of putting the onus on the person to be accountable for his actions.

"An individual may become a Jew,” Rabbi continued, "if they chose to do so. Nevertheless, once they are converted, they must live their life by the laws of Judaism. If you don't like the rules, then don't convert."

Jacob liked what he was hearing so far. Maybe he would actually find God on this ancient Road.

“So Jacob, if you wish to convert to Judaism,” the rabbi was saying, “you must complete a year of education on the Jewish religion, Halakhah, and Jewish Law. Be prepared, by Jewish tradition you will be rejected from starting your formal education no fewer than three times over a several-month span - we want to make sure you are serious.

"Upon completion of your education, you are brought before a rabbinical court, a Beit Din, for oral testing on the laws, including the 613 commandments you are agreeing to live by. If you pass, you are almost a Jew.”
“What do you mean, almost a Jew?” Jacob asked with surprise.

“Well, for one thing if you've not been circumcised, you will be.”

“Ouch!” Jacob responded. He was glad his parents had taken care of that when he was a baby.

“The good news, however, is that once you have completed these requirements, you are as much a Jew as anyone else. You see, Jacob, Judaism is not just a list of traditions relating to God and the universe - it is a comprehensive way of life.

“But isn't Judaism a race of people as well as a religion?” Jacob asked, feeling a bit confused.

“To someone who doesn't understand Judaism, what I'm about to say may confuse you more. Nevertheless, if you let go of any preconceived opinions you may have, I think you will find this very interesting. Remember though, depending on the path of Judaism you travel, the idea may differ. I am almost always speaking of the majority.”

“I understand!” Jacob responded.

“Good.” Said Rabbi Golden as he continued, “First, we do not consider ourselves a 'race' of people - because, as I mentioned earlier, anyone can become a Jew by converting. It does not matter if you are black, white, Asian, Hispanic, or some other race. If you convert and are accepted, you are a Jew.”
“But isn't that the same as Christianity or Islam?” Jacob asked.

“That's my exact point, Jacob. There is no race of Christians or Muslims. They come from many cultures and races. The same is true of Judaism.”

“But Judaism is a religion?”

Rabbi Golden paused as he considered his response. “That's an interesting question, Jacob.” He replied, “And one that has a different answer depending on the path you travel. Let me explain it this way. Judaism is a religion as it pertains to a group of people believing in God and a set of Hebrew laws. But, if it was solely a religion, then I am afraid we might be failing it.”

“You see, there are many people who are Jews that do not believe in the religious aspects of Judaism. More than half the Jews in Israel classify themselves, as secular, and many do not believe in God at all. They remain Jews, however, and see Judaism as a culture of people who share similar traits as in any family.”

“So to clarify, Rabbi, you can be a Jew, but not believe in God?”

“Actually, Jacob” Rabbi replied. “I believe your confusion comes from your Christian background. Should you as a Christian decide not to believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, you would no longer be a Christian. Islam works the same way. A Muslim must accept Muhammad as the final prophet, or they are not a Muslim. Do you see the distinction I am trying to make?”

“Yes. I think I understand.” Jacob replied.

“But, the world knows Judaism and Jews as a religion, so let us leave it that way for now. Nevertheless, understand that
Judaism has no formal set of laws one must adhere to in order to remain a Jew. While there is a place for belief, Jews focus more on their actions today than on how to get into Heaven. We believe the way we live in this life will determine where we will be in the afterlife, but I'll get to that later.”

“Unlike some religions, Jacob, Judaism doesn't focus on abstract concepts, as what God looks like, or where Heaven and Hell are located. Yes, there are debates and disagreements between scholars regarding the nature of God, the afterlife and even the universe, but there are no official edicts that people must believe.”

“This seems like a very open way to believe?” Jacob commented. “But isn't there a list of basic beliefs that must be followed? I think it's called ….”

“Rambam’s Thirteen Principles of Faith,” Rabbi Golden finished the sentence for him.

“Yes, that's it.”

“You don't give yourself enough credit Jacob, there are many Jews who don't know of the list.

“Rambam’s list is probably the closest anyone has come to listing a standard set of beliefs for Judaism. Nevertheless, there are still many topics of disagreement and debate. But the list,” Rabbi said as he pulled a small card from his wallet, “demonstrates the simplicity of our beliefs. It states:

- God exists
God is one and unique
God is spiritual
God is eternal
Prayer is directed to God alone
Words of the Prophets are true
Moses' words and prophecies are true
The written Torah and oral teachings in the Talmud were given to Moses
There will be no other Torah
God knows the thoughts and deeds of men
God will reward the good and punish the bad
The Messiah will come
The dead will be resurrected

“They do appear simple, as the Ten Commandments.” Jacob replied. “But aren't they still dissected, debated, and followed through different interpretations?”

“Yes my friend, and ‘debated' is an understatement!” the Rabbi chuckled.

“Rabbi, if I may interrupt?” Jacob asked.

“Absolutely.”

“I'm impressed with the openness and apparent flexibility of thought and beliefs you have told me about. I am also ashamed to admit that except for reading several books and articles, I have limited knowledge of Judaism. However, in addition to the things on that list, aren't there daily laws that provide instructions for every aspect of Jewish life? Don't these laws, by which people must
live, contradict what you've said about free will to believe as you wish?"

“Good observation.” Rabbi Golden replied. “Let me answer it as simply as I can. Jewish law collectively provides guidance to ‘devout Jews' for building their spiritual life. It addresses what to eat, what to wear, how to worship God, how to treat other Jews and non-Jews, hygiene, prayers and much more."

“Jewish Law ‘collectively’?” Jacob asked.

”Right! The Jewish law is collectively known as Hadaka, and consists of the Torah, the teachings of the prophets, and the Ketosis or writings, which include various books of the Bible you know as the Psalms, Proverbs, Chronicles, and so forth.”

Before Jacob could ask another question, Rabbi Golden continued. "As for the timing of our laws and traditions, you must remember that Judaism received God's laws before Christianity or Islam existed. Had you begun your journey with Judaism, the origination point for scriptures and laws, the timeline of events and several of the topics we discussed earlier, might have been easier for you to understand."

“But, Rabbi Golden,” Jacob said, “regardless of which laws or scriptures were first; Judaism still has a comprehensive set of laws which dictate the lives of its people. Why, if God gave man free will, must men adhere to laws written thousands of years after God's covenant with Abraham and Moses?”
Furthermore, if God gave humanity the aptitude to reason, the desire to enhance wisdom, and the capacity to make choices, why would He put laws in place that limit mankind's freedom to discover? As well as establish parameters for how a believer may question His scriptures and be bound to a specific ideology?

Rabbi Golden smiled and replied. “Jacob, let me try to explain why God has provided a complete guide for mankind. "For arguments sake, accept the events I mention as proven Biblical accounts, even though you may not agree with them in total. If you recall, God provided Adam and Eve with all the gifts you have indicated. What did they do? They lost their lease to Paradise.

"God generously gave mankind more chances for growth and the use of free will through Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, Ishmael and others long before the Prophets Jesus and Muhammad emerged. On each occasion, humanity screwed things up. So if you were God, Jacob, what would you do?"

Jacob knew he had been set up, but smiled and answered; "Write instructions for everything that had to be done."

"I rest my case!" Rabbi Golden crowed, as a broad smile crossed his face.

Jacob grinned and put the question on hold, and unanswered. He knew the good rabbi had given him the short answer. Anyhow, he was searching for God, not a debate of how others believe. Nevertheless, it still troubled him why God would limit man's creativity, curiosity, or abilities with a set of ancient explicit laws. He smiled, as he considered God probably wonders why it has taken humankind so long to grasp the wisdom He has
provided them.

"If I may," Rabbi asked, bringing Jacob back to the conversation, "let me continue with a bit more background on Jewish law and how it developed."

"Sure."

"The scriptures included in the laws of Judaism are found foremost in the Torah, the written word of God. The Talmud, or Oral Torah, was brought forward through the centuries, verbatim, by scholars who memorized it in its entirety."

"Wasn't this similar to how laws were carried forward in Christianity and Islam?" Jacob asked.

"Yes," Rabbi responded, "and as I recall from our initial conversations you are concerned with the accuracy and authenticity of scriptures. You will be pleased to know many Jews feel the same way and look to the Torah and other laws as guides that should be adaptable to life over time."

Jacob smiled as he thought to himself; yes, maybe I am not alone after all?

"The Halakhah is the written law we are taught to obey. It includes 613 mitzvot, or commandments, from the Torah. It also offers teaching and guidance from the prophets and rabbis who have the responsibility of interpreting scripture."

"613 commandments? I thought there were only ten?"

"Yes!" Rabbi responded laughing, "You Christians have a lot of catching up to do."
“You've got that right, but what are they all about?”

“Of the 613 there are 248 that describe the rewards from God for obeying His laws and 365 punishments for disobeying them.”

“So they stress God's wrath more than His kindness?” Jacob asked.

“Actually it's about even, since 24 of the commandments focus on avoiding forbidden sexual relations, ranging from incest to sodomy and to sex with beasts.”

“Or sex with your third cousin three times removed.” Jacob said, lightheartedly.

“Other commandments,” Rabbi continued, paying no heed to Jacob's last comment, "cover everything from marriage and divorce to business transactions, prayers, the treatment of Jews, non-Jews, and more."

As he listened, Jacob realized how similar the stories of these three religions are. He wondered if this may be the one condition, all of them could agree on.

“Rabbi,” Jacob asked; “are Jews God's chosen people?”

Rabbi Golden smiled; “I hope so, Jacob.” He replied jovially, and then continued. “Seriously my friend, Jews, and remember we are speaking of the majority of Jews,” Rabbi emphasized, “do not believe they are more special to God than Christians, Muslims, or others. I laugh each time I reply to this subject because most people do not know the story which states that Yahweh…”

“You mean God?” Jacob interrupted.

“Yes.” Rabbi Golden replied and continued, “Yahweh
offered the Torah to the Jews last of all Peoples, and basically threatened them into accepting it. They eventually did but it came with a big responsibility. For instance, as a Christian, you adhere to Ten Commandments, while we obey 613. No, Jacob, we do not believe we are God's 'chosen people' or are first in line to Heaven.

Nevertheless, as Jews we do believe we were chosen by God to teach all Peoples His laws as they were given to us in His covenant with Abraham. I believe this has created some of the schism with other religions and Peoples of the world. Since 'chosen' was interpreted to mean Jewish people believed, they had more rights to God. It's not so, not at all.” Rabbi concluded, in a somber voice.

“Thank you, Rabbi Golden,” Jacob said sincerely, as he recognized the sadness the Rabbi felt for this misunderstanding.

“Heaven!” Jacob said, moving the rabbi to another topic. “What is Judaism's position on Heaven and the afterlife?”

“Whew!” Rabbi Golden said laughing. “That was a quick transition from God's chosen people, to Heaven and the afterlife!”

Jacob smiled as Golden continued. “Let me see, Heaven and the afterlife, Olam Ha-Ba.”

“Olam what?”

“Olam Ha-Ba is our view of the afterlife. Because Judaism is focused on our life here and now, there is not a great deal in scriptures on the afterlife. We are left with a great deal of freedoms for personal views on this event. As I have mentioned, the Torah
and Talmud focus on life on earth and each person's responsibility to fulfill their duties to God and fellow man – including women of course.

The spiritual afterlife we refer to as Olam Ha-Ba is ‘the world to come.' Christians and traditional Jews call it Heaven, while Muslims refer to it as ‘Paradise'. Nevertheless, to each of us it is the place where we will be rewarded as a result of our adherence to God's commandments, and in proportion to the way we lived by His laws in this life.”

“In proportion to the number of the 613 mitzvots, or commandments you abide by?” Jacob asked.

“Jacob, I enjoy your cross-examination style of questioning.” Rabbi Golden said.

“I'm not sure what you mean?”

“The way you ask the same question more than once, but within different contexts to confirm or disprove previous answers,” the rabbi explained.

“Honest, Rabbi Golden,” Jacob said apologetically, “I never intended to trap you, it's just an old habit of mine from years of jury trials. I guess I was seeing if God's rewards were dependent on how strictly you followed his rules.”

Rabbi Golden chuckled as he assured Jacob he was not offended, just intrigued.

“As I said, most Jews believe the ancient texts are a guide, not an absolute set of inflexible laws, established by God for His people. As humanity continues to advance and societies change, so must God's guide. It is hard for many of us to believe God wanted us to remain in sandals, living off goat milk, and sleeping in tents.
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No, Jacob, it's not the number of mitzvots we perform daily that will bring us rewards in the world to come; it's the way we lived and treated others in this life.”

“Thank you for explaining a little about Olam Ha-Ba, but how are you sure it will come to be?”

“That, my friend, will happen when we enter the Messianic Age or the ‘end of the world' as we know it today.”

“You mean the end of the world as St. John described in Revelation?” Jacob asked.

“Not exactly. It is a time when the Moshiach or Messiah will come and return the one God of Abraham to all Peoples of the world.

As you know, Jews do not believe Jesus was the Messiah. Traditional Jews believe the Moshiach will not be divine or a savior in the biblical sense. These characteristics are Christian-based and not recorded anywhere in the Torah. Nonetheless, we do believe the Messiah will be a great political and military leader, descended from King David, who will redeem the Jewish people and restore peace under the one God of Abraham.”

“Do you believe this will happen?”

“Yes, because I believe God exists. Furthermore, if I believe God exists, then the set of laws He provided us must also be real.”
Jacob understood the rabbi’s situation, and did not intend to debate his theories. After all, no one had proof. Changing the subject Jacob asked:

“Why have Jews been hated and persecuted by countries, religions, and governments since the time of Abraham and Jacob?”

“That's a question we've been trying to understand since time began.” Rabbi Golden replied, with a slightly frustrated tone. “We have assumed,” he continued, “it pertains to several factors, as the confusion over the term ‘God's chosen people.' Another reason is the misconception that Jews control the world's economic and financial powers. Even in the 17th century, when Jews in Russia and Poland were dirt poor, they were hated for these reasons.

It was also proclaimed that the hatred is because Jews killed Jesus. Although we were exonerated during the Second Vatican Council in 1963, we are still persecuted for the same hateful allegations. Toss in racial theories and ancient territorial disputes and you have a bitter recipe for anti-Semitism."

“Rabbi, you have taught me a great deal, and I truly appreciate our new friendship. Nevertheless, I must find God. Do you believe I will find Him on one of the paths of Judaism we have yet to travel?”

“Will you find God on a route we have yet to travel?” the Rabbi repeated. “If you mean the physical God you so desperately seek Jacob, the answer is most likely no. Unless of course, God decides to manifest himself to you personally. It is God alone who is all-powerful and all-knowing, who will decide when you will see Him.”
“But Rabbi, if God is truly all-powerful and all-knowing then He knows when an accident, natural disaster, or evil scheme by men, as genocide, is going to happen. Why does He choose not to stop it?”

The rabbi paused momentarily, as if uncertain how to respond. “Your question is well beyond my aptitude to answer, my friend. I believe God is all knowing, I would be glad to show you scriptures that justifies this attribute. However, due to your skepticism of scriptures, I am sure that would not satisfy you. Unfortunately, beyond what I have told you, I cannot provide you with new revelations as to why God acts as He does.”

“Our belief is simple, Jacob. We accept God exists. No empirical proof is required. Further, we believe in the basic teachings of the Torah - there is only one God, and He created mankind and everything in the universe. We do not spend time trying to define Him, as Christians do. We believe God transcends all time, is always among us, and knows all things past, present and future. This includes when the Moshiach will return. We believe God is merciful, just, and eternal, and, there are punishments and rewards for our actions – even if there are some punishments we may not agree with.”

“Blind faith?” Jacob spoke in a soft voice, not intending the rabbi to hear him.

“It has been called worse things, Jacob. Nevertheless, if accepting God's Word is ‘blind faith,' then I am guilty.”
“We still have several paths to cross before you decide on the road you will travel. Give yourself time, Jacob; time to absorb the profound knowledge you have obtained. Then, when you feel in your heart you are ready, there will be many opportunities to reach your decision. Most important, give yourself to God and allow Him to reconcile the troubles within your heart.”

Jacob promised he would try to make the effort.

As the first road chosen by God, the Road of Judaism, as did the Roads of Christianity and Islam, included many divergent paths. Each meandered endlessly into the distance, confident it alone led to the true interpretation of God's Word.

Jacob and Rabbi Golden traveled across the paths of Orthodox, Ultra, Reformed, Conservative, Zionist, and Reconstructionist Jews. Jacob was appreciative of this new knowledge, but remained saddened to the commonality with other paths he had traveled. Here too, he discovered, was no empirical proof of God's presence. Yet, each sect claimed to be faithfully pursuing God's commandments.

In spite of his concerns, Jacob found his time on the paths of Judaism invaluable. He learned that Jews are typically more tolerant to other religions. As a result, it seemed these paths attracted many diverse spiritual travelers, many of whom were not associated with Judaism, Christianity, or Islam.

Some travelers were seeking new perspectives of God, and His relationship to the Universe. Many sought higher levels of spirituality through understanding and comparison of faiths. While others made passage to validate their personal beliefs.

Jacob valued the conversations they shared with these
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spiritual travelers. He learned about Eastern philosophies as Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, and many more. However, the vast differences of spiritual beliefs also triggered a sense of despair. He recognized the insurmountable number of paths leading to abundant interpretations of God's Word, alternate paths of Spiritual enlightenment, as well as final salvation in places like Nirvana, Heaven, and Paradise.

But why? Jacob asked himself. Why were there so many philosophies and paths of enlightenment? Did God create them so we would not find Him? Or, did God allow the maze of religious and non-religious philosophies because it did not matter which path we selected, as long as it is toward an ethical objective?

Maybe the good rabbi was right when he told him that God provided man with free will, and the confusion in this world is the result of the decisions we made, those of others we desired to follow, or were forced to accept. What is true? Why was it all so damn confusing? Where is God? These questions and more overwhelmed Jacob, until he finally fell into a restless sleep.

The next morning, aware their time together was reaching its end; Jacob met Rabbi Golden and embraced him in a gesture of sincere friendship. He thanked the good rabbi for his assistance, education and the guidance he had provided to a lost stranger.

“It was my pleasure, Jacob,” the Rabbi replied. “Foremost, I am thankful for the opportunity God has given me to befriend
you. However, close behind is my appreciation to you for allowing me to rekindle my faith through your eyes.”

“Rekindle, but you're a Rabbi!”

“Deep down inside Jacob, I think you want to be a Jew!” Golden laughed, emitting a broad smile on his face.

“In all seriousness my friend, even those of us who practice our faith diligently, have doubts at times. Being part of your quest has allowed me to re-establish my faith, strengthen my devotion to God and the path of Judaism, I have chosen. Through our dialogues with rabbis of varying sects, I have learned the faith in their heart is real - regardless of how it may differ from the path I follow. God will decide who is right – not any of us. With some luck, we will all be correct in the eyes of God if our efforts are righteous.

Jacob Hinsen, you have helped me more than you can imagine, and the only way I can repay you is to offer you my sincerest counsel.”

“Thank you.” Jacob humbly answered.

“What I have to say Jacob, is not based on my religious preferences. It is that which burns in my heart, as a man who believes in God, and recognizes the pain you hold within you. I am positive you carry a pain deeper than what we have discussed during our conversations along our journey.”

Sadness overcame Jacob as he thought of Jessica. He debated telling Golden about her, but decided to keep it to himself to insure their focus remained on finding God.

Rabbi Golden saw the sadness in Jacob's eyes and knew he had been right.
“Jacob, as your friend, I know you have traveled a long way on many disparate paths of religion. Yet, I believe your journey has added to your confusion instead of providing the resolutions you seek. Remember Jacob, confusion is a component of the world we live in. In many cases, we can work through these challenges to find an acceptable solution. The solution may not be exactly as we wanted, but we have the remarkable capacity to adapt.

God and religion offer similar challenges to those like you who remain uncommitted. You remain frustrated because you do not have control of your situation - God has control. A God whom you can neither define, nor establish physical contact with. A God who does not provide you with the tangible proof you seek, answers your questions directly, or at the moment you want them answered.

Therefore, you live with the agony of uncertainty tearing at your heart. More distressing is that you are losing faith because you did not prove God existed outside your heart, or feelings. You are afraid to acknowledge that it is faith you must accept, in order to find a spiritual path to God.”

“But why must I decide by faith? Why won't God manifest Himself and eliminate this dilemma?” Jacob asked forcefully - clearly agitated by the realization he again had to decipher what God eventually wanted him to do.

Golden sensed Jacob's tension, placed his arm around him and said; “I have no other answers for you, Jacob. Except by giving
us free will, God has decided that we, meaning the human race, must solve our problems by growing closer to Him through faith and honorable actions. We have already amassed technology that extends a person's life. It could be God has also left it in our hands to bring about our spiritual transformation, so desperately needed to overcome centuries of hatred created, even before He formed His covenant with Abraham.

“I am sorry I did not have the proof you so urgently seek. Rabbi Golden continued. “And, I sincerely regret God did not find your situation so grave, that it warranted His personal appearance. But for all we know, we may not have recognized God if He had appeared to us.”

Jacob thought his heart stopped beating. They were simple words, yet they hit him like a ‘ton-of-bricks'; “we may not have recognized God if He had appeared to us.” His mind raced back to the day he was holding Jessica's lifeless body. At no time had he looked at, or spoke to the stranger who comforted him waiting for help to arrive. He realized he never turned to thank him, or thought about him again until now. No, Jacob thought. If the stranger were God, wouldn't He have stopped Jessica's death? Wouldn't He?

"Finally my friend,” the good rabbi was saying as Jacob returned his focus to their conversation, “at this point you must trust in the wisdom God has given you during your marvelous journey. You are a good man Jacob, do not neglect to search deeply within yourself for your answers."

The men bid each other farewell and Rabbi Golden returned to the road where their journey together had begun.
As he watched the good rabbi fade from sight, Jacob knew that regardless of how complex and contradictory World's religions and secular dogmas appeared, there were millions of wonderful people as Rabbi Golden, Muhja, Father Doyle, and others who endeavor to bring forth compassionate and merciful teachings to humanity. Jacob thanked God for the insight he received from each of them, Arnold too.

He had endured the chaos of religion for so long he lost focus on those who not only believe in God, but also apply His message of love to their daily lives. He genuinely believed these were the true leaders of their faith.

As Jacob left the Path of Judaism for his long trip home, he often tried to make sense of the contrasting philosophies he encountered. When not confronting his inner struggle for answers, he called to mind the magnificent places he had visited. He remained in awe as he pondered the vast knowledge he acquired, the people he met, and the shifting paradigms he tried to understand.

Nevertheless, he remained troubled that he had not found proof of God's existence, nor confirmation of the path God wanted him to follow. Without proof, or even a symbolic confirmation from God, how would he know if Jessica is at peace, or if he will ever be with her again?

With so many unanswered questions remaining, Jacob recognized reaching his decisions would be one of the greatest
challenges of his life. If he could not find closure, he told himself, at least he hoped to achieve personal acceptance of his beliefs - or perhaps dis-belief.

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As a very good friend of Jacobs, I have told his fascinating tale as best I could. Now, we have agreed it would be more appropriate that you have access to his final journal entries, which explain how his journey concluded, the decisions he made – and the Road, if any, he has chosen to travel.

In parting, remember to strive to remain on a path(s) towards ‘goodness’, regardless of the failures and obstacles’ along the way, and peace within your inner self will follow.

Forever, a friend!
For several months after returning home, I devoted myself to scrutinizing my notes and journals to insure I recalled the precise responses to my questions, as well as the character of the individual who answered them. No memo, observation, obscure remark, leaflet, symbol, or image was knowingly ignored. My intent was to be as accurate as possible, as if my life depended upon it. Maybe it eventually will?

Reluctantly, I forced myself to probe dark corners of my mind to summon memories I had given up for lost, or deliberately suppressed; as the carnage of war eternally ingrained in a nineteen-year-olds’ mind.

I searched my core principles intensely, in an effort to reassess tragic ordeals, challenges and successes throughout my life to confirm if God had saved me through my prayers. Or, was it as Arnold alluded; I was salvaged by happenstance, within a universe of chaos.

I sat at my desk and removed my tattered journals and copious notes from the cluttered draws. As I gathered my thoughts, I gazed at the portrait of Jessica hanging on the wall in front of me. The agony of her death continues to burn deep within my heart - as I understand, it shall forever be.
However, as I learned from many remarkable people along my journey who endure similar pain, I must keep the memories of happiness and love she brought to me, burning a thousand times brighter than the shadows of torment. It is a struggle I must win every day.

I turned to a blank page in my journal and began to transcribe my thoughts and judgments to reconcile the spiritual and secular discords that have been churning in my mind for decades.

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Journal: November 6th
Summary of my journey within the Kingdom of Religious and Secular Confusion

My journey across the Kingdom of Religious Confusion was bursting with twists and turns, more than anyone should have to experience in their search for the truth. Frankly, the bias, hatred, and contradictions within and between religions often caused me to wonder how a loving God could even exist. Let alone confirm His presence would be found in just one of a thousand religious ideologies.

Equally troubling was the ever-increasing number of genuinely confused travelers I encountered who, like me, are searching for God, Spirituality, or alternative explanations of what has been deemed the exclusive truth.

On the other hand, I took comfort knowing a greater number of people are allowing their minds to unlock as they seek answers to once forbidden questions regarding their embedded faith, or secular theories.

In its entirety, it was far from a journey of despair. It provided me with extensive new insights; unique friendships formed with strangers who freely discussed their religious doctrine,
inspiration to a distinct spiritual passage, as well why others do not to believe in God, Faith, Spirituality, or an afterlife.

For instance, at the onset of my journey, I was unaware of what the outcome would be. Nevertheless, it seemed practical that if my decision was to believe in God, I would eventually need to decide on the path I will follow to one day reach Him. I assumed my options would be limited to one religion, an exclusive spiritual road of enlightenment, or a combination of both. On the other hand, what if none of these alternatives were acceptable?

Knowing this may become a future dilemma, I made it a point to ask many of the people along the roads I traveled why they felt secure within their regimented religion, or particular spiritual ideology.

Many people attributed their beliefs to deep-seated family and community bonds. Others specified it was the powerful principles taught to them early in their childhood by reverent religious educators, and enforced by family members. The most consistent message being, they alone are on the one true road to God. To remain upon it, however, a set of unique laws must be obeyed, or God’s love for them will quickly change to wrath. Most people told me ideologies other than their own are false.

Other reasons are that controlled religious association provides them accepted spiritual ideologies, group recognition, and a roadmap on how to live in this life, in order to reach the next.

More important, it guarantees if they worship God through the rituals and dogma of the one ‘righteous' religion, the one they practice, after death God will bestow to His honorable followers, eternal life and vast luxuries. To some, this includes sexual
pleasures, which they can only dream of possessing in this life.

Having pondered these ideals often, I knew to choose the course to travel will be difficult, yet something I may be forced to resolve at the end of my journey.

While knowledge of these diverse ideals has benefited me greatly, it is essential I continue to recognize my decisions are established on personal speculation, or faith. Therefore, I must never imply my judgments are correct and conflicting beliefs flawed.

Nonetheless, until I come upon new information I will remain with the ideals I have chosen to pursue.

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Foremost, as revealed throughout my story neither God, Saint, nor Guardian Angel chose to materialize to answer my questions, as Rabbi Golden predicted, and I reluctantly had anticipated. After all, worthier people than me have been unsuccessful in pulling off a question and answer session with God.

However, neither did I find a worldly nonbeliever, who could prove where Space originated. Or, how the minuscule bouncing particle that caused the “Big Bang” mysteriously appeared.

Therefore, in my humble thinking, if I accept a God that is not observable, nor readily assessable, I must do so through faith.
alone. On the other hand, should I conclude there is no God, and I originated from a space particle, then I must accept this theory is supported through speculation.

My dilemma is that both faith and speculation are open to boundless interpretations, humankind’s intervention, and vital fundamentals void of proof. Therefore, regardless of my decision, secular or spiritual, there remains a significant commonality of uncertainty.

Nevertheless, by merging my personal ideals with Faith, I have chosen to continue to believe there is a Supreme Being. One whom I will continue to refer to as “God”; a designation I am comfortable with, and somewhat able to grasp.

Yet, there are significant differences in how I have chosen to follow my Faith and relationship with God.

Of utmost importance, I do not believe any religion or ideology owns God, or has empirical proof of His image or qualities; just as I choose not to believe nonbelievers possess greater knowledge of where life began, or proof, there is no afterlife of some nature.

There are countless concepts for God, but for me no one religion or spiritual philosophy encompasses the wisdom, or singular path of righteousness to reach Him. As well, I do not believe our magnificent and endless advancements in science and medicine provide evidence secular assumptions are indisputable.

How God works, where He or She resides, whether He is within or outside of me, I do not begin to comprehend, nor have the knowledge or evidence to clarify.

I do not believe God chooses favorites between
compassionate religions, alternate paths of spirituality, secular beliefs, or one sports team over the other.

I consider the message God wants me to value most is to have faith in a compassionate and greater entity, while ascending to an elevated level of goodness within myself, and outwardly to others.

I believe the wisdom and enormity of God’s essence is more sophisticated than humankind will ever conceive. That the nature of God encompasses more than the infinitesimal existence of humans’ on Earth, or what we perceive is real through logic.

I am no longer satisfied within the confines of an exclusive religion, or spiritual philosophy. Nor, wish to be bound to ancient restrictions and instructions that I am told to perform to reach God. To me, it is within these age-old tribal mindsets where segregation is encouraged, and hatred matures.

I believe any ideology that proliferates the dogma of violence, hatred, supremacy, infallibility of a man or organization, and commands individuals to adhere to ancient rituals, is an ideology designed by men, and not a loving God.

Like many others, I believe I have been given 'free will’ to rationalize, make decisions, fail and try again, as I attempt to ascend to higher levels of personal goodness.

However, exercising ‘free will’ requires making decisions, while often not sure of the outcome. Such as, the most difficult decision for me to embrace is contrary to my Catholic upbringing
and love for the teachings of Jesus Christ. I have chosen not to believe God descended to earth in the form of man, in a secluded sector of an uneducated ancient world thousands of years ago.

Although, I continue to believe Jesus the man was a conduit of a far greater force, and I will continue my human struggle to follow the magnificent messages of Peace, Tolerance and Love attributed to his teachings.

As for an afterlife, I prefer to believe there is eternal life; call it Heaven, Paradise, reincarnation, perpetual energy, or any other name. I admit I am not sure how much of my decision is based on my hope [faith] that humanity's existence is more than our transient life on this planet. Or, my belief Jessica resides in a place of peace and beauty – and not abandoned in a coffin buried deep in the ground.

I will travel across all paths that teach goodness and compassion, including paths of non-believers - where benevolent attributes are also practiced.

There are many paths of spirituality and philosophies without religious prejudices yet to travel. The Path of Pranayama, for instance, is a philosophy of Buddhist Hatha Yoga. It teaches that through breath control and meditation it can improve health, and transcend practitioners to higher levels of spirituality. More important, it encourages questioning ‘that, which is supposed to be', to better understand the true essence of God, and our connection with the universe.

Another path is Unitarian Universalism, which I am told is open to all beliefs and traditions - Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Pagans, Atheists, Agnostics, Humanists, and
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others. There are no official dogmas or creeds, and people are free to question theories, and search for truth across many paths.

Some paths I may revisit - as the Path of Mormon. At first, Abby's comments regarding her ability to ascend to the spiritual nature of a god seemed profane. Yet, the concept intrigued me the more I thought about it. Although I may not become a god, aspiring to the fundamental nature of how I believe God wants me to be will only help me transcend to a higher spiritual level.

I believe my commitment to spiritual and personal growth in this life, will allow me to be with Jessica again in a new realm.

I do not anticipate my beliefs will remain stagnant. Instead, they will adapt to new knowledge and observations I absorb through my experiences, and from those I choose as mentors.

I can only hope this course is acceptable to the entity I recognize as God.

If, however, I have chosen the incorrect course to follow, I believe a compassionate God knows the chaos I am trying to reconcile, and the ease in which a seeker can lose their way. Moreover, understand my journey has been in a righteous direction, not perfect by a long shot, and accept me for trying.

Of course, should I find God is truly the embodiment of wrath, jealousy, and vengeance, and demands strict adherence to chaotic ancient laws of religion, then I am not sure it will matter if I reach Heaven - since it would appear to be the same as Hell to me.
I acknowledge the beliefs I have chosen are founded on speculation and faith, and like most other theories not empirically proven. Yet, they have allowed me to remove the yoke of religious dogma, without the fear of God's reprisal.

I have also reinforced my conviction that reaching God is a journey - a personal progression in the direction of goodness.

When or if my journey will ever end, transcends that which my humble mind is capable of comprehending.

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My final thought for everyone is that they find their personal path(s) to God, Spirituality, or gratification in Secular beliefs.

Even more important, that each of us learns to respect the decisions of others who have chosen dissimilar paths of **goodness** to follow.

**Jacob A. Hinsen**

“Enjoy the journey”
Notes: