

A UNIVERSE CHARGED WITH THE GRANDEUR OF GOD

CHRISTIAN THEISM

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?*

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS, "GOD'S GRANDEUR"

In the Western world up to the end of the seventeenth century, the theistic worldview was clearly dominant. Intellectual squabbles—and there were as many then as now—were mostly family squabbles. Dominicans might disagree with Jesuits, Jesuits with Anglicans, Anglicans with Presbyterians, ad infinitum, but all these parties subscribed to the same set of basic presuppositions. The triune personal God of the Bible existed; he had revealed himself to us and could be known; the universe was his creation; human beings were his special creation. If battles were fought, the lines were drawn within the circle of theism.

How, for example, do we know God? By reason, by revelation, by faith, by contemplation, by proxy, by direct access? This battle was fought on many fronts over a dozen centuries and is still an issue with those remaining on the theistic field. Or take another issue: Is the basic stuff of the universe matter only, form only or a combination? Theists have dif-

fered on this too. What role does human freedom play in a universe where God is sovereign? Again, a family squabble.

During the period from the early Middle Ages to the end of the seventeenth century, very few challenged the existence of God or held that ultimate reality was impersonal or that death meant individual extinction. The reason is obvious. Christianity had so penetrated the Western world that whether or not people believed in Christ or acted as Christians should, they all lived in a context of ideas influenced and informed by the Christian faith. Even those who rejected the faith often lived in fear of hellfire or the pangs of purgatory. Bad people may have rejected Christian goodness, but they knew themselves to be bad by basically Christian standards—crudely understood, no doubt, but Christian in essence. The theistic presuppositions that lay behind their values came with their mother's milk.

This, of course, is no longer true. Being born in the Western world now guarantees nothing. Worldviews have proliferated. Walk down a street of any major city in Europe or North America and the next person you meet could adhere to any one of a dozen distinctly different patterns of understanding what life is all about. Little seems bizarre to us, which makes it more and more difficult for talk-show hosts to get good ratings by shocking their television audiences.

Consider the problem of growing up today. Baby Jane, a twentieth- and twenty-first-century child of the Western world, often gets reality defined in two widely divergent forms—her mother's and father's. Then if the family breaks apart, the court may enter with a third definition of human reality. This poses a distinct problem for deciding what the shape of the world actually is.

Baby John, a child of the seventeenth century, was cradled in a cultural consensus that gave a sense of place. The world around was really there—created to be there by God. As God's vice regent, young John sensed that he and other human beings had been given dominion over the world. He was required to worship God, but God was eminently worthy of worship. He was required to obey God, but then obedience to God was true freedom since that was what people were made for. Besides, God's yoke was easy and his burden light. Furthermore, God's rules were seen as primarily moral, and people were free to be creative over the external universe, free to learn its secrets, free to shape and fashion it as God's stewards

cultivating God's garden and offering up their work as true worship before a God who honors his creation with freedom and dignity.

There was a basis for both meaning and morality and also for the question of identity. The apostles of absurdity were yet to arrive. Even Shakespeare's *King Lear* (perhaps the English Renaissance's most "troubled" hero) does not end in total despair. And Shakespeare's later plays suggest that he himself had passed well beyond the moment of despair and found the world to be ultimately meaningful.

It is fitting, therefore, that we begin a study of worldviews with theism. It is the foundational view, the one from which all others developing between 1700 and 1900 essentially derive. It would be possible to go behind theism to Greco-Roman classicism, but even this as it was reborn in the Renaissance was seen almost solely within the framework of theism.¹

BASIC CHRISTIAN THEISM

As the core of each chapter I will try to express the essence of each worldview in a minimum number of succinct propositions. Each worldview considers the following basic issues: the nature and character of God or ultimate reality, the nature of the universe, the nature of humanity, the question of what happens to a person at death, the basis of human knowing, the basis of ethics and the meaning of history.² In the case of theism, the prime proposition concerns the nature of God. Since this first proposition is so important, we will spend more time with it than with any other.

¹One of the most fascinating studies of this is Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), which argues that the Greek gods became "Christianized"; that, as Julian the Apostate said, "Thou hast conquered, O Pale Galilean."

²Several books on the Christian worldview have been published since the earlier editions of the present book. Especially notable are Arthur F. Holmes, *Contours of a Christian World View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); Arthur F. Holmes, ed., *The Making of a Christian Mind* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1985); W. Gary Phillips and William E. Brown, *Making Sense of Your World from a Biblical Viewpoint* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991); Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984); and Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995). My own *Discipleship of the Mind* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990) elaborates themes from the present chapter. Most recent are David Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004); J. Mark Bertrand, *(Re)thinking Worldview: Learning to Think, Live and Speak in This World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2007); Charles H. Kraft, *Worldview for Christian Witness* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library Publishers, 2008); and Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

1. Worldview Question 1: *Prime reality is the infinite, personal God revealed in the Holy Scriptures. This God is triune, transcendent and immanent, omniscient, sovereign, and good.*³

Let's break this proposition down into its parts.

God is infinite. This means that he is beyond scope, beyond measure, as far as we are concerned. No other being in the universe can challenge him in his nature. All else is secondary. He has no twin but is alone the be-all and end-all of existence. He is, in fact, the only self-existent being,⁴ as he spoke to Moses out of the burning bush: "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex 3:14). He *is* in a way that none else is. As Moses proclaimed, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD" (Deut 6:4 KJV). So God is the one prime existent, the one prime reality and, as will be discussed at some length later, the one source of all other reality.

God is personal. This means God is not mere force or energy or existent "substance." God is personal. Personality requires two basic characteristics: self-reflection and self-determination. In other words, God is personal in that he knows himself to be (he is self-conscious) and he possesses the characteristics of self-determination (he "thinks" and "acts").

One implication of the personality of God is that he is like us. In a way, this puts the cart before the horse. Actually, we are like him, but it is helpful to put it the other way around at least for a brief comment. He is like us. That means there is Someone ultimate who is there to ground our highest aspirations, our most precious possession—personality. But more on this under proposition 3.

Another implication of the personality of God is that God is not a simple unity, an integer. He has attributes, characteristics. He is a unity, yes, but a unity of complexity.

Actually, in Christian theism (not Judaism or Islam) *God is not only personal but triune*. That is, "within the one essence of the Godhead we

³One classic Protestant definition of God is found in the Westminster Confession 2.1.

⁴For a consideration of the theistic concept of God from the standpoint of academic philosophy, see Étienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941); E. L. Mascall, *He Who Is: A Study in Traditional Theism* (London: Libra, 1943); H. P. Owen, *Concepts of Deity* (London: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 1-48. Other metaphysical issues dealt with here are discussed in William Hasker, *Metaphysics* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1983); C. Stephen Evans, *Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1985); Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1991); J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

have to distinguish three ‘persons’ who are neither three gods on the one side, not three parts or modes of God on the other, but coequally and coeternally God.”⁵ The Trinity is certainly a great mystery, and I cannot even begin to elucidate it now. What is important here is to note that the

There is but one living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty; most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal most just and terrible in his judgments; hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty.

WESTMINSTER CONFESSON 2.1

Trinity confirms the communal, “personal” nature of ultimate being. God is not only there—an actually existent being; he is personal and we can relate to him in a personal way. To know God, therefore, means knowing more than that he exists. It means knowing him as we know a brother or, better, our own father.

God is transcendent. This means God is beyond us and our world. He is *otherly*. Look at a stone: God is not it; God is beyond it. Look at a man: God is not he; God is beyond him. Yet God is not so beyond that he bears no relation to us and our world. It is likewise true that *God is immanent*, and this means that he is with us. Look at a stone: God is present. Look at a person: God is present. Is this, then, a contradiction? Is theism nonsense at this point? I think not.

My daughter Carol, when she was five years old, taught me a lot here. She and her mother were in the kitchen, and her mother was teaching her about God’s being everywhere. So Carol asked, “Is God in the living room?”

“Yes,” her mother replied.

“Is he in the kitchen?”

⁵Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “The Trinity,” in *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), p. 531.

“Yes,” she said.

“Am I stepping on God?”

My wife was speechless. But look at the point that was raised. Is God *here* in the same way a stone or a chair or a kitchen is here? No, not quite. God is immanent, here, everywhere, in a sense completely in line with his transcendence. For God is not matter like you and me, but Spirit. And yet he is here. In the New Testament book of Hebrews Jesus Christ is said to be “sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:3). That is, God is beyond all, yet in all and sustaining all.

God is omniscient. This means that God is all-knowing. He is the alpha and the omega and knows the beginning from the end (Rev 22:13). He is the ultimate source of all knowledge and all intelligence. He is *He Who Knows*. The author of Psalm 139 expresses beautifully his amazement at God’s being everywhere, preempting him—knowing him even as he was being formed in his mother’s womb.

God is sovereign. This is really a further ramification of God’s infiniteness, but it expresses more fully his concern to rule, to pay attention, as it were, to all the actions of his universe. It expresses the fact that nothing is beyond God’s ultimate interest, control and authority.

God is good. This is the prime statement about God’s character.⁶ From it flow all others. To be good means to *be* good. God *is* goodness. That is, *what* he is is good. There is no sense in which goodness surpasses God or God surpasses goodness. As being is the essence of his nature, goodness is the essence of his character.

God’s goodness is expressed in two ways, through holiness and through love. Holiness emphasizes his absolute righteousness, which brooks no shadow of evil. As the apostle John says, “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all” (1 Jn 1:5). God’s holiness is his separateness from all that smacks of evil. But God’s goodness is also expressed as love. In fact, John says, “God is love” (1 Jn 4:16), and this leads God to self-sacrifice and the full extension of his favor to his people, called in the Hebrew Scriptures “the sheep of his pasture” (Ps 100:3).

⁶Many people puzzle over the issue of evil. Given both the omniscience and the goodness of God, what is evil and why does it exist? For an extended analysis of the issue, see Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense out of Suffering* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant, 1986), and Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994). I have addressed this issue in chapters 12 and 13 of *Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All?* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

God's goodness means then, first, that there is an absolute and personal standard of righteousness (it is found in God's character) and, second, that there is hope for humanity (because God is love and will not abandon his creation). These twin observations will become especially significant as we trace the results of rejecting the theistic worldview.

2. Worldview Question 2: *External reality is the cosmos God created ex nihilo to operate with a uniformity of cause and effect in an open system.*

God created the cosmos ex nihilo. God is He Who Is, and thus he is the source of all else. Still, it is important to understand that God did not make the universe out of himself. Rather, God spoke it into existence. It came into being by his word: "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen 1:3). Theologians thus say God "created" (Gen 1:1) the cosmos ex nihilo—out of nothing, not out of himself or from some preexistent chaos (for if it were really "preexistent," it would be as eternal as God).

Second, God created the cosmos as *a uniformity of cause and effect in an open system*. This phrase is a useful piece of shorthand for two key conceptions.⁷ First, it signifies that the cosmos was not created to be chaotic. Isaiah states this magnificently:

For this is what the LORD says—
 he who created the heavens,
 he is God;
 he who fashioned and made the earth,
 he founded it;
 he did not create it to be empty [a chaos],⁸
 but formed it to be inhabited—
 he says:
 "I am the LORD,
 and there is no other.
 I have not spoken in secret,
 from somewhere in a land of darkness;
 I have not said to Jacob's descendants,

⁷This phrase comes from Francis A. Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1972), p. 43. Chap. 8 of C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (London: Fontana, 1960), p. 18, also contains an excellent description of what an open universe involves. Other issues involving a Christian understanding of science are discussed in Del Ratzsch, *Science and Its Limits* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), and Nancy R. Pearcey and Charles Thaxton, *The Soul of Science* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1994).

⁸NRSV translation.

‘Seek me in vain.’
I, the LORD, speak the truth,
I declare what is right.” (Is 45:18-19)

The universe is orderly, and God does not present us with confusion but with clarity. The nature of God’s universe and God’s character are thus closely related. This world is as it is at least in part because God is who he is. We will see later how the Fall qualifies this observation. Here it is sufficient to note that there is an orderliness, a regularity, to the universe. We can expect the earth to turn so the sun will “rise” every day.

But another important notion is buried in this shorthand phrase. The system is *open*, and that means it is not programmed. God is constantly involved in the unfolding pattern of the ongoing operation of the universe. And so are we human beings! The course of the world’s operation is open to reordering by either. So we find it dramatically reordered in the Fall. Adam and Eve made a choice that had tremendous significance. But God made another choice in redeeming people through Christ.

The world’s operation is also reordered by our continued activity after the Fall. Each action of each of us, each decision to pursue one course rather than another, changes or rather “produces” the future. By dumping pollutants into fresh streams, we kill fish and alter the way we can feed ourselves in years to come. By “cleaning up” our streams, we again alter our future. If the universe were not orderly, our decisions would have no effect. If the course of events were determined, our decisions would have no significance. So theism declares that the universe is orderly but not determined. The implications of this become clearer as we consider humanity’s place in the cosmos.

3. Worldview Question 3: *Human beings are created in the image of God and thus possess personality, self-transcendence, intelligence, morality, gregariousness and creativity.*

The key phrase here is “the image of God,” a conception highlighted by the fact that it occurs three times in the short space of two verses in Genesis:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So God created man in his own image
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.
(Gen 1:26-27; compare Gen 5:3; 9:6)

That people are made in the image of God means we are like God. We have already noted that God is like us. But the Scriptures really say it the other way. “We are like God” puts the emphasis where it belongs—on the primacy of God.

We are personal because God is personal. That is, we know ourselves to be (we are self-conscious), and we make decisions uncoerced (we pos-

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.

You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas. (Ps 8:3-8 NRSV)

sess self-determination). We are capable of acting on our own. We do not merely react to our environment but can act according to our own character, our own nature.

No two people are alike, we say. And this is not just because no two people have shared exactly the same heredity and environment but because each of us possesses a unique character out of which we think, desire, weigh consequences, refuse to weigh consequences, indulge, refuse to indulge—in short, choose to act.

In this each person reflects (as an image) the transcendence of God over his universe. God is totally unconstrained by his environment. God

is limited (we might say) only by his character. God, being good, cannot lie, be deceived, act with evil intent and so forth. But nothing external to God can possibly constrain him. If he chooses to restore a broken universe, it is because he “wants” to, because, for example, he loves it and wants the best for it. But he is free to do as he wills, and his character (*Who He Is*) controls his will.

So we participate *in part* in a transcendence over our environment. Except at the very extremities of existence—in sickness or physical deprivation (utter starvation, cooped up in darkness for days on end, for example)—a person is not forced to any necessary reaction.

Step on my toe. Must I curse? I may. Must I forgive you? I may. Must I yell? I may. Must I smile? I may. What I do will reflect my character, but it is “I” who will act and not just react like a bell ringing when a button is pushed.

In short, people have personality and are capable of transcending the cosmos in which they are placed in the sense that they can know something of that cosmos and can act significantly to change the course of both human and cosmic events. This is another way of saying that the cosmic system God made is *open* to reordering by human beings.

Personality is the chief thing about human beings, as, I think it is fair to say, it is the chief thing about God, who is infinite both in his personality and in his being. Our personality is grounded in the personality of God. That is, we find our true home in God and in being in close relationship with him. “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man,” wrote Pascal.⁹ “Our hearts are restless till they rest in thee,” wrote Augustine.¹⁰

How does God fulfill our ultimate longing? He does so in many ways: by being the perfect fit for our very nature, by satisfying our longing for interpersonal relationship, by being in his omniscience the end to our search for knowledge, by being in his infinite being the refuge from all fear, by being in his holiness the righteous ground of our quest for justice, by being in his infinite love the cause of our hope for salvation, by being in his infinite creativity both the source of our creative imagination and the ultimate beauty we seek to reflect as we ourselves create.

We can summarize this conception of humankind in God’s image by saying that, like God, we have *personality, self-transcendence, intelli-*

⁹Pascal *Pensées* 10.148.

¹⁰Augustine *Confessions* 1.1.1.

gence (the capacity for reason and knowledge), *morality* (the capacity for recognizing and understanding good and evil), *gregariousness* or social capacity (our characteristic and fundamental desire and need for human companionship—community—especially represented by the “male and female” aspect) and *creativity* (the ability to imagine new things or to endow old things with new significance).

We will consider the root of human intelligence below. Here I want to comment on human creativity—a characteristic often lost sight of in popular theism. Human creativity is borne as a reflection of the infinite creativity of God himself. Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) once wrote about the poet who, “lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow, in effect, into another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or quite anew, forms such as never were in nature, . . . freely ranging within the zodiac of his own wit.” To honor human creativity, Sidney argued, is to honor God, for God is the “heavenly Maker of that maker.”¹¹

Artists operating within the theistic worldview have a solid basis for their work. Nothing is more freeing than for them to realize that because they are like God they can really invent. Artistic inventiveness is a reflection of God’s unbounded capacity to create.

In Christian theism human beings are indeed dignified. In the psalmist’s words, they are “a little lower than the heavenly beings,” for God himself has made them that way and has crowned them “with glory and honor” (Ps 8:5). Human dignity is in one way not our own; contrary to Protagoras, humanity is not the measure. Human dignity is derived from God. But though it is derived, people do possess it, even if as a gift. Helmut Thielicke says it well: “His [humankind’s] greatness rests solely on the fact that God in his incomprehensible goodness has bestowed his love upon him. God does not love us because we are so valuable; we are valuable because God loves us.”¹²

So human dignity has two sides. As human beings we are dignified, but we are not to be proud of it, for our dignity is borne as a reflection of the Ultimately Dignified. Yet it *is* a reflection. So people who are theists

¹¹Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesy*. See also Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (New York: Meridian, 1956), and J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1966), p. 37.

¹²Helmut Thielicke, *Nihilism*, trans. John W. Doberstein (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 110.

see themselves as a sort of midpoint—above the rest of creation (for God has given them dominion over it—Gen 1:28-30; Ps 8:6-8) and below God (for people are not autonomous, not on their own).

This is then the ideal balanced human status. It is in failing to remain in that balance that our troubles arose, and the story of how that happened is very much a part of Christian theism. But before we see what tipped the balanced state of humanity, we need to understand a further implication of being created in the image of God.

4. Worldview Question 5: *Human beings can know both the world around them and God himself because God has built into them the capacity to do so and because he takes an active role in communicating with them.*

The foundation of human knowledge is the character of God as Creator. We are made in his image (Gen 1:27). As he is the all-knowing knower of all things, so we can be the sometimes knowing knowers of some things. The Gospel of John puts the concept this way:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men.
(Jn 1:1-4)

The Word (in Greek *Logos*, from which our word *logic* comes) is eternal, an aspect of God himself.¹³ That is, logicity, intelligence, rationality, meaning are all inherent in God. It is out of this intelligence that the world, the universe, came to be. And therefore, because of this source the universe has structure, order and meaning.

Moreover, in the Word—this inherent intelligence—is the “light of men,” light being in the book of John a symbol for both moral capacity and intelligence. Verse 9 adds that the Word, “the true light . . . gives light to every man.” God’s own intelligence is thus the basis of human intelligence. Knowledge is possible because there is something to be known (God and his creation) and someone to know (the omniscient

¹³The word *logos* as used in John and elsewhere has a rich context of meaning. See, for example, J. N. Birdsall, “Logos,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), pp. 744-45.

God and human beings made in his image).¹⁴

Of course, God himself is forever so beyond us that we cannot have anything approaching total comprehension of him. In fact, if God desired, he could remain forever hidden. But God wants us to know him, and he takes the initiative in this transfer of knowledge.

In theological terms, this initiative is called revelation. God reveals, or discloses, himself to us in two basic ways: by general revelation and by special revelation. In general revelation God speaks through the created order of the universe. The apostle Paul wrote, “What may be known about God is plain to them [all people], because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (Rom 1:19-20). Centuries before that the psalmist wrote,

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they display knowledge. (Ps 19:1-2)

In other words, God’s existence and his nature as Creator and powerful sustainer of the universe are revealed in God’s prime “handiwork,” his universe. As we contemplate the magnitude of this—its orderliness and its beauty—we can learn much about God. When we turn from the universe at large to look at humanity, we see something more, for human beings add the dimension of personality. God, therefore, must be at least as personal as we are.

Thus far can general revelation go, but little further. As Thomas Aquinas said, we can know that God exists through general revelation, but we could never know that God is triune except for special revelation.

Special revelation is God’s disclosure of himself in extranatural ways. Not only did he reveal himself by appearing in spectacular forms such as a bush that burns but is not consumed, but he also spoke to people in their own language. To Moses he defined himself as “I AM WHO I AM” and identified himself as the same God who had acted before on behalf of the Hebrew people. He called himself the God of Abraham, Isaac and

¹⁴For more extensive treatments of epistemology from a Christian perspective see Arthur F. Holmes, *All Truth Is God’s Truth* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1977); W. Jay Wood, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998); and chaps. 5-6 in my *Discipleship of the Mind*.

Jacob (Ex 3:1-17). In fact, God carried on a dialogue with Moses in which genuine two-way communication took place. This is one way special revelation occurred.

Later God gave Moses the Ten Commandments and revealed a long code of laws by which the Hebrews were to be ruled. Later yet God revealed himself to prophets from a number of walks of life. His word came to them, and they recorded it for posterity. The New Testament writer of the letter to the Hebrews summed it up this way: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways” (Heb 1:1). In any case, the revelations to Moses, David and the various prophets were, by command of God, written down and kept to be read over and over to the people (Deut 6:4-8; Ps 119). The cumulative writings grew to become the Old Testament, which was affirmed by Jesus himself as an accurate and authoritative revelation of God.¹⁵

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews did not end with the summary of God’s past revelation. He went on to say, “But in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things. . . . The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Heb 1:2-3). Jesus Christ is God’s ultimate special revelation. Because Jesus Christ was very God of very God, he showed us what God is like more fully than any other form of revelation can. Because Jesus was also completely human, he spoke more clearly to us than any other form of revelation can.

Again the opening of the Gospel of John is relevant. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, . . . full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). That is, the Word is Jesus Christ. “We have seen his glory,” John continues, “the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father.” Jesus has made God known to us in very fleshly terms.

The main point for us is that theism declares that God can and has clearly communicated with us. Because of this we can know much about who God is and what he desires for us. That is true for people at all times and all places, but it was especially true before the Fall, to which we now turn.

5. Worldview Question 3: *Human beings were created good, but through the Fall the image of God became defaced, though not so ruined as not to*

¹⁵See John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984).

be capable of restoration; through the work of Christ, God redeemed humanity and began the process of restoring people to goodness, though any given person may choose to reject that redemption.

Human “history” can be subsumed under four words—*creation, Fall, redemption, glorification*. We have just seen the essential human characteristics. To these we must add that human beings and all the rest of creation were created good. As Genesis records, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Gen 1:31). Because God by his character sets the standards of righteousness, human goodness consisted in being what God wanted people to be—beings made in the image of God and acting out that nature in their daily life. The tragedy is that we did not stay as we were created.

As we have seen, human beings were created with a capacity for self-determination. God gave them the freedom to remain or not to remain in the close relationship of image to original. As Genesis 3 reports, the original pair, Adam and Eve, chose to disobey their Creator at the only point where the Creator put down limitations. This is the essence of the story of the Fall. Adam and Eve chose to eat the fruit God had forbidden them to eat, and hence they violated the personal relationship they had with their Creator.

In this manner people of all eras have attempted to set themselves up as autonomous beings, arbiters of their own way of life. They have chosen to act as if they had an existence independent from God. But that is precisely what they do not have, for they owe everything—both their origin and their continued existence—to God.

The result of this act of rebellion was death for Adam and Eve. And their death has involved for subsequent generations long centuries of personal, social and natural turmoil. In brief summary, we can say that the image of God in humanity was defaced in all its aspects. In *personality*, we lost our capacity to know ourselves accurately and to determine our own course of action freely in response to our intelligence.

Our *self-transcendence* was impaired by alienation from God, for as Adam and Eve turned from God, God let them go. And as we, humankind, slipped from close fellowship with the ultimately transcendent One, we lost our ability to stand over against the external universe, understand it, judge it accurately and thus make truly “free” decisions. Rather, humanity became more a servant to nature than to God. And our status as God’s vice

regent over nature (an aspect of the image of God) was reversed.

Human *intelligence* also became impaired. Now we can no longer gain a fully accurate knowledge of the world around us, nor are we able to reason without constantly falling into error. *Morally*, we became less able to discern good and evil and less able to live by the standards we do perceive. *Socially*, we began to exploit other people. *Creatively*, our imagination became separated from reality; imagination became illusion, and artists who created gods in their own image led humanity further and further from its origin. The vacuum in each human soul created by this string of consequences is ominous indeed. (The fullest biblical expression of these ideas is Rom 1–2.)

Theologians have summed it up this way: we have become alienated from God, from others, from nature and even from ourselves. This is the essence of *fallen* humanity.¹⁶

But humanity is redeemable and has been redeemed. The story of creation and fall is told in three chapters of Genesis. The story of redemption takes up the rest of the Scriptures. The Bible records God's love for us in searching us out, finding us in our lost, alienated condition, and redeeming us by the sacrifice of his own Son, Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity. God, in unmerited favor and great grace, has granted us the possibility of a new life, a life involving substantial healing of our alienations and restoration to fellowship with God.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray;
 each of us has turned to his own way;
 And the LORD has laid on him
 the iniquity of us all. (Is 53:6)

That God has provided a way back for us does not mean we play no role. Adam and Eve were not forced to fall. We are not forced to return. While it is not the purpose of this description of theism to take sides in a famous family squabble within Christian theism (predestination versus free will), it is necessary to note that Christians disagree on precisely what role God takes and what role he leaves us. Still, most would agree that God is the primary agent in salvation. Our role is to respond by repentance for our wrong attitudes and acts, to accept God's provi-

¹⁶See, for example, the discussion of the Fall and its effects in Francis A. Schaeffer's *Genesis in Space and Time* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1972), pp. 69-101.

sions and to follow Christ as Lord as well as Savior.

Redeemed humanity is humanity on the way to restoration of the defaced image of God, in other words, substantial healing in every area—personality, self-transcendence, intelligence, morality, social capacity and creativity. *Glorified* humanity is humanity totally healed and at peace with God, and individuals at peace with others and themselves. But this happens only on the other side of death and the bodily resurrection, the importance of which is stressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. Individual people are so important that they retain uniqueness—a personal and individual existence—forever. Glorified humanity is humanity transformed into a purified personality in fellowship with God and God’s people. In short, in theism human beings are seen as significant because they are essentially godlike and though fallen can be restored to original dignity.

6. Worldview Question 4: *For each person death is either the gate to life with God and his people or the gate to eternal separation from the only thing that will ultimately fulfill human aspirations.*

The meaning of death is really part of proposition 5, but it is singled out here because attitudes to death are so important in every worldview. What happens when a person dies? Let’s put it personally, for this aspect of one’s worldview is indeed most personal. Do I disappear—personal extinction? Do I hibernate and return in a different form—reincarnation? Do I continue in a transformed existence in heaven or hell?

Christian theism clearly teaches the last of these. At death people are transformed. Either they enter an existence with God and his people—a glorified existence—or they enter an existence forever separated from God, holding their uniqueness in awful loneliness apart from precisely that which would fulfill them.

And that is the essence of hell. G. K. Chesterton once remarked that hell is a monument to human freedom—and, we might add, human dignity. Hell is God’s tribute to the freedom he gave each of us to choose whom we would serve; it is a recognition that our decisions have a significance that extends far down into the reaches of foreverness.¹⁷

Those who respond to God’s offer of salvation, however, people the plains of eternity as glorious creatures of God—completed, fulfilled but

¹⁷To pursue the biblical teaching on this subject see John Wenham, *The Enigma of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), pp. 27-41.

not sated, engaged in the ever-enjoyable communion of the saints. The Scriptures give little detail about this existence, but its glimpses of heaven in Revelation 4–5 and 21, for example, create a longing Christians expect to be fulfilled beyond their fondest desires.

7. Worldview Question 6: *Ethics is transcendent and is based on the character of God as good (holy and loving).*

This proposition has already been considered as an implication of proposition 1. God is the source of the moral world as well as the physical world. God is good and expresses this in the laws and moral principles he has revealed in Scripture.

Made in God's image, we are essentially moral beings, and thus we cannot refuse to bring moral categories to bear on our actions. Of course, our sense of morality has been flawed by the Fall, and now we only brokenly reflect the truly good. Yet even in our moral relativity, we cannot get rid of the sense that some things are "right" or "natural" and others not.

For years homosexual behavior was considered immoral by most of society. Now a large number of people challenge this. But they do so not on the basis that no moral categories exist but that this one area—homosexuality—really ought to have been on the other side of the line dividing the moral from the immoral. Homosexuals do not usually condone incest! So the fact that people differ in their moral judgments does nothing to alter the fact that we continue to make, to live by and to violate moral judgments. Everyone lives in a moral universe, and virtually everyone—if they reflect on it—recognizes this and would have it no other way.

Theism, however, teaches that not only is there a moral universe but there is an absolute standard by which all moral judgments are measured. God himself—his character of goodness (holiness and love)—is the standard. Furthermore, Christians and Jews hold that God has revealed his standard in the various laws and principles expressed in the Bible. The Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, the apostle Paul's ethical teaching—in these and many other ways God has expressed his character to us. There is thus a standard of right and wrong, and people who want to know it can know it.

The fullest embodiment of the good, however, is Jesus Christ. He is the complete man, humanity as God would have it be. Paul calls him the second Adam (1 Cor 15:45-49). And in Jesus we see the good life incar-

nate. Jesus' good life was supremely revealed in his death—an act of infinite love, for as Paul says, "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man. . . . But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:7-8). And the apostle John echoes, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 Jn 4:10).

So ethics, while very much a human domain, is ultimately the business of God. We are not the measure of morality. God is.

8. Worldview Question 7: *History is linear, a meaningful sequence of events leading to the fulfillment of God's purposes for humanity.*

"History is linear" means that the actions of people—as confusing and chaotic as they appear—are part of a meaningful sequence that has a beginning, a middle and an end. History is not reversible, not repeatable, not cyclic; history is not meaningless. Rather, history is teleological, going somewhere, directed toward a known end. The God who knows the end from the beginning is aware of and sovereign over the actions of humankind.

Several basic turning points in the course of history are singled out for special attention by biblical writers, and these form the background for the theistic understanding of human beings in time. These turning points include the creation, the fall into sin, the revelation of God to the Hebrews (which includes the calling of Abraham from Ur to Canaan, the exodus from Egypt, the giving of the law, the witness of the prophets), the incarnation, the life of Jesus, the crucifixion and resurrection, Pentecost, the spread of the good news via the church, the second coming of Christ and the final judgment. This is a slightly more detailed list of events paralleling the pattern of human life: creation, fall, redemption, glorification.

Looked at in this way, history itself is a form of revelation. That is, not only does God reveal himself in history (*here, there, then*), but the very sequence of events is revelation. One can say, therefore, that history (especially as localized in the Jewish people) is the record of the involvement and concern of God in human events. History is the divine purpose of God in concrete form.

This pattern is, of course, dependent on the Christian tradition. It does not at first appear to take into account people other than Jews and Christians. Yet the Old Testament has much to say about the nations sur-

rounding Israel and about God-fearers (non-Jewish people who adopted Jewish beliefs and were considered a part of God's promise). And the New Testament stresses even more the international dimension of God's purposes and his reign.

The revelation of God's design took place primarily through one people—the Jews. And while we may say with William Ewer, “How odd / Of God / To choose / The Jews,” we need not think that doing so indicates favoritism on God's part. Peter once said, “God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:34-35).

Theists look forward, then, to history's being closed by judgment and a new age inaugurated beyond time. But prior to that new age, time is irreversible and history is localized in space. This conception needs to be stressed, since it differs dramatically from the typically Eastern notion. To much of the East, time is an illusion; history is eternally cyclic. Reincarnation brings a soul back into time again and again; progress in the soul's journey is long, arduous, perhaps eternal. But in Christian theism, “man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” (Heb 9:27). An individual's choices have meaning to that person, to others and to God. History is the result of those choices that, under the sovereignty of God, bring about God's purposes for this world.

In short, the most important aspect of the theistic concept of history is that history has meaning because God—the Logos, meaning itself—is behind all events, not only “sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:3) but also “in all things . . . [working] for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). Behind the apparent chaos of events stands the loving God sufficient for all.

CORE COMMITMENT

What then fuels the fire of consistent Christian theists? What provides the driving motive for their lives?

9. Worldview Question 8: *Christian theists live to seek first the kingdom of God, that is, to glorify God and enjoy him forever.*

The Christian worldview is unique in many ways, but not the least of which is the way in which it serves as the focus for the ultimate meaning of life, not just the meaning of human history or human existence in the

abstract, but the meaning of life for each Christian. As God himself is the really real, the ultimate ground of being and the creator of all being other than himself, so devoted Christians live not for themselves but for God. “What is the chief end of man?” asks the Westminster Shorter Catechism.¹⁸ And the answer is “to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” To glorify God is not just to do so in religious worship, singing praise and enacting the traditional rites of the church. To glorify God is to reveal his character by being who we were created to be—the embodiment of the image of God in human form. When we are like him, we glorify him. And what is he like? He is not just the awesome I AM, shaking the heavens and the earth with his thunderous voice and transcendent being. He is Jesus. He is Immanuel, “God with us.” To be like Jesus, then, is to be like God who is himself all the glory there is.

Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God, embodying in his earthly existence the presence of the Father’s kingdom (Mk 1:14). We are to imitate him, to obey his command to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Mt 6:33). Lo and behold, when we do this we both avoid the tragic consequences of selfishness and pride and receive what really fulfills our lives. All the happiness and joy we seek when we substitute our desires for God’s glory comes to us as a result of yielding our will to his. Human flourishing, then, while not being a primary goal, is a result of turning one’s attention toward God and his glory.¹⁹ “All these things will be given to you as well,” Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6:33). To glorify God then, as the catechism says, is to enjoy him forever.

There are, of course, other ways to personalize this core commitment. Some Christians say it is to obey God; or to love God with all their heart, mind, soul and strength and their neighbors as themselves; or to lose their lives for the sake of the gospel. Others may cast their answers in rather unique ways, but if these answers truly reflect a grasp and commitment to the Christian understanding of reality, they will emphasize the centrality of God and his good pleasure in what they say. They will not point first of all to happiness; happiness or joy will be a consequence, not a goal. Life is all about God, they will say, not about themselves.

¹⁸Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 1.

¹⁹*Human flourishing* is a term frequently used today to describe the proper end toward which human life should be directed. Each worldview, however, has a different conception of just what human flourishing involves and whether it is in any way tied to transcendence. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2007), pp. 16-20.

THE GRANDEUR OF GOD

It should by now be obvious that Christian theism is primarily dependent on its concept of God, for theism holds that everything stems from him. Nothing is prior to God or equal to him. He is *He Who Is*. Thus theism has a basis for metaphysics. Since He Who Is also has a worthy character and is thus *The Worthy One*, theism has a basis for ethics. Since He Who Is also is *He Who Knows*, theism has a basis for epistemology. In other words, theism is a complete worldview.

So the greatness of God is the central tenet of Christian theism. When a person recognizes this and consciously accepts and acts on it, this central conception is the rock, the transcendent reference point, that gives life meaning and makes the joys and sorrows of daily existence on planet earth significant moments in an unfolding drama in which one expects to participate forever, not always with sorrows but someday with joy alone. Even now, though, the world is, as Gerard Manley Hopkins once wrote, “charged with the grandeur of God.”²⁰ That there are “God adumbrations in many daily forms” signals to us that God is not just in his heaven but with us—sustaining us, loving us and caring for us.²¹ Fully cognizant Christian theists, therefore, do not just believe and proclaim this view as true. Their first act is toward God—a response of love, obedience and praise to the Lord of the Universe, their maker, sustainer and, through Jesus Christ, their redeemer and friend.

²⁰“God’s Grandeur,” in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th ed., ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 66.

²¹Saul Bellow, *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1970), p. 216.