

# Twenty Questions



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Published as a PDF ebook by [simonjcross.com](http://simonjcross.com)

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Although the answers are written by Simon Cross, the questions were submitted by various people, and to them I am grateful.

“Judge a [person] by [their] questions rather than by [their] answers.”

— **Voltaire**

“Quit judging people!”

— **Jesus** (paraphrased)

# Introduction

Questions are important. Perhaps they are more important than answers.

I send out emails to some subscribers five days a week, during October 2020 I asked the people who get those emails if they had any questions. I took the first twenty and wrote answers to them.

I didn't skip any tricky ones.

They're all here for you, some of them will leave you with more questions – that seems right to me.

Enjoy.

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P 71. Apparently in Heaven we will have eternal bliss. How can I have that if I know my daughter who I love dearly has turned off the path and as a result is languishing in darkness for eternity? Will I have all memory of her removed? If that's the case I sure hope so."

## **Does God exist?**

The problem with three-word questions, is that they are deceptively simple looking. Here we have a great example of a very straightforward question, which is actually very complex, in part because it relies on an understanding of two words: ‘God’ and ‘exist’. Only by having a shared understanding of those two words can we begin to have a meaningful discussion about the question itself.

It’s hard to divorce a word from an associated meaning, so what people usually mean when they ask if ‘God’ exists, is whether the ‘God’ that they imagine might be real, is real. The first thing to explore then is who or what that particular God is. For some it’s an amorphous spirit, a life force or a personification of the universe. For others God is a kind of bearded superman on a cloud, as per the

classic Sunday school imagery: busy randomly blessing, smiting and so on, and also getting furious about ultimately rather inconsequential things... There are various other things that the word God might mean, so it's crucial to explore this in some depth. It usually takes a while to explore what people mean when they say the word 'God' and a lot depends upon their background, culture or tradition.

Secondly the word 'exist' is a tricky one. What does it mean, exactly? It doesn't mean 'take a physical form' for instance, because lots of things exist which don't do that. Nor can it easily be defined, as dictionaries would have it, as 'having objective reality' because then we have to define both objectivity and reality, the second of those is a right old rabbit hole. Perhaps we might begin by asking: does love exist? Although we still have the problem of definitions, I think most of us can

somehow agree that in some way or other we know it does, and maybe that helps us to begin to find our way to an answer.

## **Why do I get so exhausted after being with my friends?**

We all have finite amounts of energy to expend, and the amount of this varies from person to person. My view is that besides health issues there are two things which might make us worn out, after spending time with people we love and care about.

In the first place, as we know, some of us are introverts, and some are extroverts. Extroverts tend to draw energy from being with people, for introverts however, it drains them. This can be true no matter how much we like or dislike the people we are with. Introverts need quiet decompression time in order to charge up their batteries and give them the energy to deal with spending time with others, because it just takes a

lot out of them. If you're an introvert you may find you have a smaller circle of close friends, whereas an extrovert will often have a wider circle of friends, many of whom are really only quite shallow friendships. Introverts should be kind to themselves and recognise that they need down time after socialising.

In the second place different personality types have different amounts of energy, people who are of a personality type which finds it natural to be empathetic towards others, for example, may find that their energy levels are drained by interaction regardless of how extroverted they are. This is all the more so if they spend time with people whose personality type is quite different – I find that the enneagram model of personality typing (while far from being perfect) is at least helpful in understanding this. I myself am an extrovert, but I would be classed as a 'nine' on the enneagram

which suggests my energy stocks are not huge, the amount of naps I take is testament to this. If I have to spend much time with someone who is an enneagram 'eight' I get rapidly worn out.

## **Is God ‘omnipotent’ (all powerful)?**

Starting with an assumption that there is indeed some sort of ‘God’, the question of God’s omnipotence is one that bugs a lot of people. It’s just so highly problematic, even though most of us who were raised in ‘traditional’ Christian, Muslim or Jewish households were taught it from a very young age. The problem is this: If God is all powerful, then we’re in a bit of an odd situation, one sometimes known as ‘the babysitter paradox’. If I can trust a teenager to look after my small children, and to ensure that they don’t come to harm for an evening, what does it say about an all powerful God that I couldn’t do the same with God? I can’t trust God to prevent my child from setting the house on fire, or from stepping out in front of a car. The evidence is quite clear: God

does not stop bad things from happening, or at least if God does stop bad things from happening, then God's decision making is arbitrary or random. This leaves some to draw the fairly well justified conclusion that God is some kind of tyrant, allowing unnecessary pain and suffering on some kind of whim.

Some people say that because God wants humans to have free will, God voluntarily restricts God's self from intervening in things, except perhaps on special occasions. It's not entirely clear however what constitutes a special occasion, or how one can ensure that special occasions come along at the right time. Pious people who pray fervently are, it transpires, as susceptible to losing loved ones or dying unpleasant deaths as the rest of us. Likewise people who live rather selfishly may enjoy long, happy, and contented lives in their mansions. The 'good' do not always get rewarded,

nor do the ‘wicked’ always reap their punishment. There is a further problem though, if God is voluntarily restricting God’s self from using God’s power, then we don’t ‘really’ have free will, we actually have the illusion of free will. In this scenario, God could at any point revoke the voluntary non intervention strategy and where would we be then?

A third way is to say that God is not in fact all powerful, all ‘mighty’ or “omnipotent” at all, except in a way that is quite different to the way we’d normally think. God is in fact not able to intervene, to coerce us or ‘things’ into doing what God wants, and this is because God is love. God’s nature is love, and love is ultimately weak in that it cannot coerce. Love cannot force others to do its will. What makes love powerful is that it can remain consistently persistent, it doesn’t give up. Because it never stops trying, love can persuade,

or to use a technical piece of language love can 'lure' us towards living well and caring for one another. This reading deals with the problem of the babysitter paradox, and it says that we do indeed have (in a technical sense at least) free will. It says that God as a never unloving deity keeps calling, luring, persuading us to walk in the way of love, but can never coerce anything or anyone to do God's will. I personally think that this idea of the weakness of God is ultimately the most persuasive idea about God's power I've heard.

## **To what extent is it ‘ok’ to protect myself during a pandemic?**

This is a question which has been going through the minds of hundreds or thousands of community workers, religious people and others who find themselves torn between a necessary instinct for self preservation and a vocational desire to help and serve others. “Should I be the one to re-open the much needed community project, when other (younger) people won’t?” Wonders the questioner.

There are all kinds of issues at play here, and of course we must all make our own minds up about these things. Perhaps key to getting to the bottom of it is working out our motivations. In seeking to protect myself, which is a very normal and natural (and healthy) human motivation, how much am I

motivated by fear? Fear can also be helpful and healthy, it was fear that kept many a troglodyte alive by motivating them to bank up the fire and scare off the wolves. Similarly anxiety, understood rightly, can be helpful too, it prepares us for action in a life or death situation. But both fear and anxiety can easily get too much of a hold on us, particularly in a situation where messages of fear are being pumped out left right and centre. Only by careful self examination can we begin to recognise to what extent we are fearful or anxious, at that point we must make a judgement about the extent to which those fears are justified.

Secondly though, it's important to recognise that feelings of 'responsibility' are full of complexity. Why do we feel responsible for things when others don't? I came to recognise that my sense of responsibility to make things happen was partly motivated by my sense of self – the internal desire

to be the person who doesn't let others down, who is worthy of trust. This is exacerbated by the inner reality that at times I do let others down, and am not worthy of trust. By learning to let go of this a bit, I came to find that I feel less 'responsible' to make things happen. The flip side is of course that this means some things don't happen! But as the graveyard I often walk past reminds me, there are a lot of dead people who believed they were indispensable. People will often find a way to get what they need without me. Living in this truth enabled me to live in a way that was much less exhausting, and much more life giving to all around me.

## **If a tree falls in a forest, does anybody hear?**

I like Zen koans, little apparently nonsensical sayings or questions which leave one scratching one's head puzzling over possible answers. "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Goes a famous example. Mark's question is a modified version of the longer question – 'if a tree falls and there's nobody to hear it, does it make a sound?' But his question is perhaps better, more open, more intriguing.

One of the things this question opens up is the idea of 'anybody' and who/what this refers to. We might automatically think that it means humans, but there's a growing awareness that some sort of consciousness is not restricted to bipedal hominids. Trees are interconnected beings, communicating with one another using unseen

means, including networks of fungi, warning each other of dangers such as disease or water shortage, and even sending each other resources. I think that if a tree falls in a forest, the other trees certainly get to hear about it.

But that's to think of trees as single entities, whereas the deeper truth is that trees like all other 'beings' are made up of countless smaller entities, each of which might be said to have a level of consciousness. This is the theory of 'panpsychism' which some people erroneously think means that a stone has consciousness. Panpsychists don't think a pebble is conscious, rather what they suggest is that the pebble is made up of individual entities which in themselves may have some limited form of consciousness. The fact that we understand so little about our own consciousness lends some weight to the possibility that this is true. Of course a simpler answer might be apparent: If a tree falls

in the forest, does anyone hear? Yes, the person who is holding the axe.

**How can we learn from the past in order to make a new future, particularly when it comes to being ‘church’ post pandemic?**

This question relates to the way that the early (first century) church was actually developed by the cataclysms of the time, that the destruction of their ‘normal’ birthed something vibrantly new which developed into the Christianity some of us are part of today.

The answer draws from the same source, because what the early Christians found was that they couldn’t manage or control the situation they were in. Perhaps they weren’t so addicted to certainty and control in the way that we are, or maybe they were – it’s quite a human thing. But what they were forced to do by the circumstances they were in, was to let go. My feeling is that we all need to

learn to do that a bit more, but of course its one thing doing that at a personal level, it's quite another learning to do it at an institutional one.

The brightest and best of the institutional leaders will recognise in all this, the opportunity to allow change to occur naturally. The most defensive, insecure and worried leaders will desperately try to control the situation to bring things back to normality. That's not a criticism, they are under huge pressures. It's a recognition of reality. What history really teaches us is that history is really useful. In other words we need space to look back at it. The natural urge to rush forward and 'clean up the mess' should be avoided or at least restricted, as we look to see what emerges from the rubble.

**“Is there any kind of judgement at the end of this life?”**

Lots of religious systems have a sense of an afterlife, which seems to tap into a human intuition that there is more than this physical existence. At one level these serve a rather useful social control purpose – do good things, or live the way that you should, so that you can go to the good place when you die. Viking warriors fought bravely on the battlefield in the belief that to do so meant they would spend their afterlife in the warrior’s hall, handy that! Manichean ideas of heaven and hell which have found their way into Christianity have served a similar purpose, rewards for the good, punishment for the bad.

At another level, there seems to be a sense of natural human justice – if you’re an evil blighter

then why should you have a happy afterlife? It was 'just deserts' time. It was enough to satisfy my mind for a while. But then I started to wonder exactly how evil one would have to be to deserve an ETERNITY of conscious torment. Most people live something less than one hundred years, and in that time they might manage lets say a maximum of eighty five years being really evil (and that's pushing it). Is there really any sense of justice in suggesting that eighty five years of being really bad for lets say sixteen hours a day (that's allowing no time for days off, playing with kittens, looking at clouds, enjoying a piece of nice music or even having a leisurely breakfast) deserves eternal torture?

Some say that rather than consigning people to an eternal hell, a just God would just annihilate those who were bad, perhaps after doing a bit of much more moderate torturing before hand. This too

feels like something of a logical fallacy to me, a God whose nature is love hardly seems likely to ‘give up’ on someone just because they’re physically dead. “I love you but you deserve to be tortured; tortured then annihilated; or just annihilated” doesn’t sound like the words of a loving deity to me. If there is any sense in which we would be ‘judged’ after death, it will surely have to be through the lens of unrelenting, all consuming, love.

## Who is in charge?

I happen to know the person who sent in this question – I suspect they’re teasing me a little. They also asked what ‘liking marmite’ tells you about a person. That answer is obvious: that they are of good character, I can’t get three paragraphs out of that. ‘Who is in charge?’ however, is a deeper question than it sounds. In the first place it relies on an assumption, that someone is in fact in charge.

What if nobody is in charge? What if there is no reason for the things that happen, other than they just happen? What if the truth is, that in our own limited capacities, we are in fact in charge. If the American President blows up the world, it’s on him, not some kind of external power. There’s nobody pulling his strings, there’s no demon at the

controls of his brain, or his thumbs. Unless you count Vlad. Allegedly.

That idea though is simultaneously terrifying and empowering, if nobody is in charge then we are truly free to the extent of our natural limitations which is – for those of us with at least some of the multiple privileges of living in 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe – extraordinarily free. Free to live how we want to live. The flipside of that of course is that we are free to do lots of damage, to live selfishly, to dominate others and to try and take away their freedom, and never to make the most of the extraordinary privilege of being alive now. That I think is the role of healthy religion, I know it's an unfashionable word and sentiment, but healthy religion should help us to live in a way that makes the most of things, not descend to our selfish worst. Healthy religion should help us recognise that our freedom should not be used to oppress

and dominate others, but to lift them up, support and encourage them, if and when necessary to give up our own freedom on their behalf because this is about us more than it's about me.

**Why, in the face of incontrovertible evidence of potentially catastrophic climate change, do most people seem blithely to carry on with life as usual, as if it has nothing to do with them?**

I'm a vegetarian, but I'm told that the way to cook lobsters is to boil them alive – which seems particularly cruel. Apparently though, the way to boil a lobster is to put them in cool water and then heat it up, that way they don't jump out because they don't spot what's happening until it's too late. The problem is that we're a bit like lobsters and we're basically doing the same thing to ourselves.

If I hold my hand in front of a flame, the nerves send signals to my brain telling me that I'm in pain, and I instinctively withdraw my hand from the heat. It's immediate, it's visceral, it's simple. However, as soon as you take away one of these

three things, the immediacy; the physicality; the simplicity; my reactions are different. A problem like climate change, which is of course far more catastrophic than a small burn on my finger, suffers from the problem that at first it is none of these three things. Broadly speaking it is not immediate, for most of us it requires some intellectual assent rather than being a present physical reaction, and of course the issue is clouded by misinformation from lobby groups and deniers or sceptics. The great problem we face is that by the time this particular issue becomes two or more of these things, we are probably already too late to solve it.

The other thing that I think stops people from engaging with the very real issue of climate change is the sense that they are powerless against it.

“What’s the point? What can I do that will change anything?” And the trouble is of course that this

has some truth to it, until or unless bigger interests really engage with the issue, it won't be solved.

People see this and feel disempowered, the disempowerment can lead to inertia, people feel unable to act and therefore unwilling to even engage in thinking about it, as to do so can seem utterly pointless and overwhelming.

**Jesus appeared on Earth at a particular time and in a particular place. Where does this leave all the people who lived before this?**

This question touches on a problem within a certain school of Christian theology, which teaches that it's necessary to have had a 'come to Jesus' moment in order to be saved from God's fiery furnaces, which leaves those born before Jesus' time, and all those who have never heard of Jesus, in a bit of a sticky situation. It's important to recognise of course that this exclusivist doctrine isn't the fullness of Christian teaching, there are many theories and understandings which don't follow this line of thought. Christian orthodoxy is far more broad and complex than certain schools would have us believe. You might even say that heresy is the only real orthodoxy.

For those who do believe that it's necessary to 'become a Christian' before death, there are some well worked 'get out of jail' cards available. The patriarch Abraham, they point out, had righteousness credited to him, and other "Old Testament believers" similarly managed to get on the right side of judgement by their relationship with God. Similarly there are some exceptions to the rules touted around, babies for example are generally thought to be given an opt out by God, because they haven't managed to act on their originally sinful nature, there are then disputed ideas about how old one has to be before God considers you to be responsible for your actions. Others say that those who 'have never heard' will be given a chance when they die to choose – it's not generally made clear why someone would choose not to at that point (Hi, welcome to the afterlife. Would you like to believe in God and go

to heaven, or..."). CS Lewis had one of his characters who followed the false God Tash transferred to Aslan's side because of the sincerity of his belief, similarly the theologian Carl Rahner wrote about 'anonymous Christians' – proposing that while Christianity remains the exclusive route to God, others may be Christians without knowing it.

When we see a piece of doctrine that is so riddled with legitimate problems that people have to undertake elaborate theological gymnastics to try and justify it, I would suggest that it means the doctrine itself needs to be re-thought. This is particularly so in the light of the fact that most of us now recognise or believe that humans didn't really emerge fully formed as some Biblical literalists argue, rather as a species we emerged in to the mix of the planet's life over the course of millions of years. The answer then has to be that

the idea that everyone needs a literal ‘come to Jesus’ moment before being admitted to a post physical paradise is erroneous. “But the bible says...” splutter offended readers whipping out a so called ‘clobber passage’ from their biblical arsenal, and of course John’s gospel does record Jesus as saying “nobody comes to the Father but through me” a simplistic reading of which is to say that ‘you must become a Christian if you want to get to God.’ This is a naïve reading though, and needs to be understood through a much more subtle lens if it’s to make sense. Some will continue to demand that it represents a key claim to Christian exclusivity, to which Jesus replies (also in John's gospel) that there are other sheep, “not of this fold”.

## What is the enneagram?

I mentioned the enneagram previously, when talking about personality types. The enneagram is something that I teach on at times, it's a personality typing system which for some time has been used to great effect in a spiritual direction context. Back in the 1970s when it was gaining popularity among a certain group of Catholics, there was a code of silence about it, as those who used it didn't want it to become a parlour game or a kind of horoscope. However, books were written, and it 'got out' – cue the immediate commercialisation of the enneagram.

Like any personality typing system it is both kind of useful, and kind of wrong. Some people use it as a kind of badge, proudly declaring "I am a... (insert number here)" but this rather misses the

point in my opinion. When I teach it, I say that of course it's too unsubtle, and we have to take account of individuals and their formative experiences, but we can use the enneagram as a kind of pattern recognition device to help us understand why we act and think the way we do. The point is not, however, to become comfortable in your 'number' rather it's to show you what to let go of. Just as in meditation we must learn to let go of thoughts rather than hold on to them, the same is true in life. We use certain meditative techniques to help us identify the thoughts that are in our minds, so that we can then let go of them. We can use the enneagram similarly to identify the preoccupations we have in our lives, and learn to let go of them.

Used well, the enneagram can be a powerful and helpful tool in helping us discern the places we get stuck in our lives, the reasons we harm ourselves

and others, and the warning signs that we are under stress. Used badly it becomes just another ‘trick’, a ‘Christian horoscope’ as my friend Eddie calls it. Sometimes I wish it was still a secret.

## **Do you think people are more or less selfish in 2020?**

I've written and rewritten this answer a number of times, as I've pondered the question. One of the big brouhahas in the early part of the pandemic was the hoarding of loo roll. Evidently there is a deep seated memory of having to use squares of newspaper tucked away in the collective British psyche which reacted with horror at the idea of running out of quilted Andrex (or whatever). This 'panic buying' or 'hoarding' was seized upon with fury by the media who lambasted people for their selfish behaviour. I still wonder though, whether this really was selfishness as such, or if what we're witnessing is something more fundamental going wrong with our economic system. Someone said to me the other day, 'people have been panic buying decorating equipment!' They had been to a

shop to get some equipment for a planned decorating project, and found that all the stuff they needed was gone. Normally I suppose the shop probably has about 50 of the items required in stock at any time. There are thousands of people who live in my town, and it only requires a small proportion of them to think ‘I will do some decorating if we get locked down again’ for the shelves to empty. Likewise supermarkets have a relatively small amount of loo roll considering the population size, it’s not too surprising that people would want to be able to feel they have enough to last for a while. Of course some people are greedy – that’s always been the case, I’m just not convinced it’s unusual.

The problem is that our economy doesn’t allow for this sort of behaviour. We’ve been taught, conditioned you might say, to shop regularly. Retailers work on a ‘just in time’ stocking model

which uses our data to anticipate how many loo rolls any given shop should have in its warehouse at any one time. When we fail to act as the algorithm predicts, the stocking levels fail too, and suddenly people spot that stocks are running low and start to panic. I have a suspicion that this is not really selfishness, it's a result of living in an economic situation which is based on the idea of shortage. It doesn't take much to tip us into panic mode because fundamentally we believe that we're about to run out of everything. Even when there is no real shortage or need, clever marketing will make us think there is. And keep us coming back for more.

So I suspect that actually we're neither more nor less selfish than we ever were, rather our system has been exposed as flawed. It's not inherently selfish to lay up provisions against an uncertain future – humans have been doing that for

millennia. It's not even particularly selfish to panic if we think supplies are running low, that's a form of self-preservation instinct kicking in. Because (and this is key) at the same time as loo roll is flying off the shelves, neighbours are doing their best to help each other out, young people are volunteering at food banks, gardeners are donating their surplus apples to the community store, folk are visiting their elderly neighbours with a parcel of fish and chips. And some of them are the same people who just have panic bought a trolley load of loo roll.

**Where does God's weakness leave us with prayer? If we are to pray through adoration, confession & supplication, as many of us were taught to pray, what is the point of supplication?**

In a previous answer to a question about God's omnipotence I suggested that God is in fact weak, rather than powerful as we usually understand it. The questioner rightly points out one of the key issues with this thinking – if God can't unilaterally make things happen, if God can't coerce, then what's the point in praying for stuff? Perhaps we've all muttered those prayers, desperate to find the lost key so that you can get back in to the house..."pleeeeeeease God, just let me find it!" Or the other classic – the desperate prayer for the elusive parking space. In the sort of tradition I'm

used to, this is called ‘petitionary prayer’, the questioner refers to it instead as ‘supplication’ a word that means to humbly beg.

Supplication puts me in mind of a word that I’m familiar with from combat sports: suplex. In wrestling, suplex is a move in which one opponent grabs the other around the waist and then arches their back to throw the other one in an arc over their head and on to the ground. Crucially it’s a move carried out ‘from below’. The idea of supplication has a similar root – it is a prayer ‘from below’ it’s an acknowledgement of the humility of humanity in the face of God. Here is perhaps a way of understanding the point of such prayer – it’s a means of consciously putting our priorities to one side in the face of the altogether different priorities of love. It’s a means of aligning oneself with those priorities by putting ours to one side.

Is there really any point in praying to find the lost key? I've seen no evidence apart from the occasional anecdote which shows those who pray are more likely to find a lost key than those who don't. Same goes with parking spaces (healing however – well that's a bit different, there are some fascinating studies out there about healing and prayer, but that should be a separate question really). There are similar problems with prayers for those who are dying – because ultimately everyone dies. If this sort of prayer was really effective there would surely be at least some extraordinarily long lived religious folk around. Spoiler – there aren't. So no, I don't think that praying for a lost key will make it appear, no matter how pious you are. However, while studies have shown that belief in the 'causal efficacy' of petitionary prayer decreases with age, suggesting that most people become disillusioned with prayer as technique for 'getting

what they want' as the evidence of its inefficiency as a technique mounts up, other studies show the numerous positive benefits of prayer in terms of what it does in our minds. I believe that this is because when we pray, we are challenged to put our personal priorities below the higher priorities of love. We must actively choose to go with the flow of love and against the tide of human selfishness. It reorders and reorients our universe at a cellular level. Looked at from this perspective we can recognise that supplicatory prayer can (does) literally change the world.

**In what way can we 'feel compassion/pray' for an enemy when they are doing harm to many and ultimately themselves?**

When Donald Trump caught Corona Virus, there was bit of a flap. In the first place American politicians from all sides of the political spectrum fell over themselves to wish him a full and speedy recovery, and then some commentators began to wonder why. “On the one hand you say Donald Trump is trying to destroy democracy and turn America in to a fascist state, and on the other you wish him a full and speedy recovery? Shurely shome mishtake...” They pondered.

It's somewhat conflicting to try and express heartfelt sympathies for someone who you have been building up as an 'enemy' for goodness knows how long. I feel the same every time the England Rugby team suffer some catastrophic

setback in their world domination ambitions. “Oh dear... how... awful.” I say in my most sympathetic sounding voice, while rejoicing internally. But of course the Jesus tradition, along with many other spiritual and wisdom traditions calls for a different approach, one which not only feels compassion for an enemy but actively seeks their good, a galling prospect particularly when that enemy seems bent on harming many others and perhaps even me.

There are two things to say about this, I think: firstly feeling compassion for someone doesn't equate to supporting or endorsing their problematic behaviour. I can learn to feel compassion for the neglected child who grows up to be a criminal without ever having to endorse their difficult behaviour. All of us are shaped by our life experiences, and recognising this can help us feel compassion without having to say that

behaviour or thinking is in any way 'ok'. The second thing is that what I find most difficult in others, is often the thing I hate or fear most in myself. I am my own worst enemy in so many ways. I dislike pompous grandiosity, I fear narcissistic certainty, and I'm alive to the fact that these things are present in my mind. We must learn to love our enemy, even our most implacable enemy, and we must learn to recognise that this enemy is within us.

## **I don't believe in Hell but how do I square that with all the references to it in the Bible?**

One of the problems with the Bible is that we expect it to behave like a cohesive piece of literature. After all it's one book, isn't it. But of course the Bible isn't a book, it's a collection of books, a library if you like. Like any library it has a variety of genres in it; in this case that includes 'fiction', 'history', poetry, wisdom literature, humour, erotica and some politically charged apocalyptica. The latter at least is a more or less extinct type of writing these days. To further complicate matters the books themselves are not necessarily simple 'units', many are written by numerous authors, heavily edited and translated (sometimes multiply). This is to say that from my perspective it rarely makes sense to say 'the Bible says...' because, quite frankly you can make the

Bible say almost anything you like with a bit of work. Understanding the Bible as an incredible piece of literature full of spiritual truth takes a more subtle approach than simply proof texting our favourite ideas.

The Bible does indeed contain a range of references to 'Hell' which are translated from a number of words including "Gehenna" (a physical place where human sacrifices were carried out) and "Sheol" (also translated as 'the grave' or 'death'.) "Abaddon" is another word sometimes associated with Hell, and it is usually translated as 'destruction'. If you take an approach which genuinely attempts to take the Bible reasonably literally, then I think to be consistent you would have to say that various Bible writers believed that some people would be going to one of these 'Hells' after their death, it wouldn't be inconsistent, I think, to say that this could be

understood as destruction, or annihilation.

However, to take the Bible literally in this way is to say the least, problematic.

I think that to take the Bible literally is reductive, theologically and philosophically weak, and that it ultimately diminishes its impact. Part of what makes it such a rich set of texts is that it invites such a range of interpretative and reflective reading, a literal approach doesn't allow much scope for that. Moreover a literal approach asks that we read back in to the text, ideas that weren't there at the time. Hell is a good example of this, because when we read about Hell we do so through eyes that have discarded its fundamental cosmological underpinning: the 'three tier universe'. Biblical writers understood the earth to sit between an upper tier (heaven) and a lower tier (the grave), we don't see things that way anymore. At least most of us don't. So instead we try to read

Hell into our own vision of cosmology, and find that it doesn't fit. Surprise! Our understanding of the cosmos is more subtle than that, so should our understanding of the Bible be. Just because various Bible writers refer to an after life of torment or destruction, doesn't mean that we must or indeed should.

**Is it possible to be fully part of two different religious traditions simultaneously? For instance; Christianity and Buddhism.**

There is a substantial history of people belonging to two different religious traditions at the same time, one of the most common of these being Christianity and Buddhism. For some people of course, this just cannot be possible, because they see irreconcilable conflict between what they understand as competing claims in the two traditions. That there are those who say they can and do belong without any sense of dissonance means that these differences aren't evident to everyone. Of course all traditions have a spectrum of understandings within them, some people understand the central point of Christianity to be that it is a monotheistic religion which venerates Jesus as the human incarnation of a deity, and

prioritises acts of worship and the keeping of the sacraments. Others see Christianity as a way of life, which prioritises enemy love and understands worship as a lifestyle. Likewise, while Buddhism is a philosophy more than a religion, there are Buddhists who undertake specific religious acts as the core part of their practise – Soka Gakkai Buddhists for instance repeatedly chant the Lotus Sutra, in the belief that doing so somehow aligns them with the universe.

So, all that is to say that I don't think it's possible to be an SGI Buddhist and an evangelical Christian – for example. I do however think it's possible to be a liberal Christian who follows a Buddhist philosophy – again for example. And it doesn't stop there, Thomas Merton and Bede Griffiths both showed they could be faithful to their own Catholic traditions while also engaging positively with Buddhist and Hindu philosophies

respectively. Both of them were part of supportive Christian traditions, and that's surely part of it.

Not all communities are willing or able to accept what appears to be a move away from the established boundaries of an institution.

There clearly are, however, traditions which do certainly have competing truth claims, and I don't think it's possible to be part of two of them while remaining psychologically 'whole'.

## **Why did Jesus have to die?**

Funnily enough I was asked more or less this exact question in person by someone the other day, it's evidently an issue that continues to bother people. The trouble with it is, that like so many short and apparently simple questions, it is horrendously complicated. It's the sort of question you can read a whole book or two about, and still not get a satisfactory answer.

So, because I don't think anyone wants a book from me on this subject, I'm going to answer the question rather simply, while also pointing out that there are other possible questions which perhaps the questioner is really asking.

The simple answer: Jesus had to die because he was human. If it hadn't been this sort of death, other options potentially open to him were

catching a communicable disease, dying of old age, or perhaps getting run over by a chariot. But that wasn't his trajectory. One reading of Jesus' life is that he was effectively always provoking the authorities towards this. He was a radical prophet – deeply provocative and troublesome, and gathering a substantial following. He was an agitator who believed that Israel was heading in the wrong direction, and needed to change course sharpish – and wasn't afraid to make that very clear. So on two human levels, he had to die. On a purely physical level, his body would have worn out at some point, and on a political level he was too much of a threat. Putin would have poisoned him, perhaps, goodness knows what the British government would have done, rendered him perhaps. Perhaps, though, the questioner already fully grasps this, and is really asking 'why did Jesus have to die such a horrible, painful death?' Again

there is a simple answer: because of the threat he represented to the political establishment of the time. This kind of ignominious, tortuous, public execution was designed to put off others from following in his footsteps. But the questioner probably understands this too, and is really getting at a supplementary question such as: “what about at a metaphysical or theological level?” Or: “Did Jesus have to die to appease God’s wrath, as some would have it?” Or perhaps: “What did Jesus’ death achieve that his life couldn’t?” There are so many ways of answering these questions I can’t even try, but I will say this, that what Jesus’ death reveals to us is that God is not immune, nor is God even necessarily safe. God is vulnerable, God suffers, not just “for us” but God suffers WITH us. God’s engagement with the ‘world’ is not as some voyeuristic remote controller, it is intimate,

and it is painful. Oh and God doesn't back down  
from love. Not ever.

## **Is there a difference between hopelessness and helplessness?**

The small group of Navaho merchants were trapped, the cliff walls were steep and inaccessible, and at either end of the gully was a group of McGraw's goons, their cruel leers just about visible as the sun glinted off their rifles and six shooters. The Navaho knew their situation was hopeless, and the one who called himself their leader knew that the only way to die a noble death was to charge into a hail of bullets. Their cause was lost.

Slowly McGraw's posse began to trot their horses forward, pinning their victims into a tight spot. McGraw himself took the lead, his ham like face creased into a mocking smile. He had them now, and all their precious cargo, he would get a fine

price at the market. Looking at one another, the Navaho readied themselves for what they knew would be the last ride of their lives.

But then an echoing yell cut through the dusty silence of the ravine, a sound of a gunshot, and suddenly the goons were in disarray. Although they had ridden hard through the night from their camp, the townspeople and their sheriff (himself half Navaho) were canny enough to have spotted McGraw's plan and to have anticipated the ambush location. They had split into two groups, each timing their approach perfectly to coincide with the other. McGraw, having failed to prepare for this surprise assault struggled to control his rearing horse. Meanwhile his men, unwilling to face their new foes, did their best to escape with their lives. Some of them choosing to simply raise their hands up in abject surrender. They hadn't signed up for a battle. The merchants watched the

scene unfold open mouthed, their feelings of hopelessness suddenly vanishing now that help had arrived. After the brief skirmish was over, and McGraw and his band of villains were firmly trussed up by the sheriff's men, the sheriff himself greeted the merchants. "Your situation must have seemed hopeless!" He said. The leader of the Navaho merchants nodded. "But thanks be to the Great Spirit, we were not helpless," he said. With the advent of help, hope may soon return.

**I struggle with the whole concept of worship. Why do we do it? Why do we appear (as Christians) to worship Jesus when I don't believe [that's what] he wanted people to do. What are we worshipping? What's the point? Is it a basic human need or an excuse for a good sing?**

Worship of one sort or another seems to be a fairly universal human experience, people have been worshipping things and other people since Mr and Mrs Troglodyte first discussed, in grunts and rather crude gestures, the power of the moon in the reproductive cycle. A lot of this early impulse to worship seems to have been motivated by fear, and I strongly suspect that fear is a fairly substantial part of the motivation of many humans of various religious persuasions to worship today.

Worship as a ritual however also serves an important social purpose, it binds people together, it creates a common frame of reference, and it serves to create a commonality of experience around which culture is built. It helps us to corporately reaffirm our beliefs too – reminding us that religion is a shared experience, not an individual one, even in our atomised society.

Worship is also about dealing with the sense of awe that one experiences in the face of great beauty – it’s about systematising and sharing a response to that moment when the jaw drops and the word ‘wow’ pops out.

But is there any need to prescribe ‘how’ to worship? I don’t see why there should be. Because ultimately worship is a lifestyle not a way of singing or any of that stuff. It’s about treating things and people with the respect that they are due, about the ‘acknowledgement of worth’ which

is the root of the English word. Why do we sing (or not) on a Sunday? Fundamentally I think we do that because it's a ritual that we've chosen to engage in together for some or all of the reasons given above. Individuals engage in these corporate acts for their own complicated reasons, if I'm honest, sometimes I do it just because everyone else is, and I don't think that altogether devalues it.

**Apparently in Heaven we will have eternal bliss. How can I have that if I know my daughter who I love dearly has turned off the path and as a result is languishing in darkness for eternity? Will I have all memory of her removed? If that's the case I sure hope so.**

I heard the wonderful Richard Holloway speak some little time ago, and he mentioned heaven, I think in answer to a question. “If there is a heaven, I don’t think I want to go there” he said (I’m paraphrasing) “because all of the versions of Heaven I’ve heard about over the years sound awful.” Evidently Holloway didn’t fancy taking part in what is often touted as a non-stop church service where everyone tells God how great God is for the rest of infinity. Surely even God’s going to get bored of that at some point or other.

There are of course all sorts of other logical problems with a conventional understanding of heaven, one of which is the one mentioned here – how can we hope to bask in eternal bliss if we know that our loved ones are enduring eternal torment, or whatever fiery fate we conceive for them? The problem again is that our understanding of the afterlife is still mired in some very old and problematic concepts which have only partially been updated for contemporary times. Don't forget that Heaven, much like Hell, was promoted as a way of encouraging people to live the right way. Do the right thing and you'll get your reward in Heaven. It's a social control measure which is mirrored in life with 'rewards' for doing good, and punishment for doing bad.

My personal view would be that whatever comes after death, (assuming as I currently do that something does indeed come after death), that

would have to involve a removal of the false notion of separation between us and God. However you might want to think of God, whether as a verb, as a force, as a dimension of reality, as reality itself, as a person, as a community, or whatever you might think – our ultimate destination must be some sort of union with God, a removal of the false idea of separation. It can be useful to use picture language about Heaven and Hell when we discuss ideas of how to behave in society, but when it comes to talking about life beyond death I think we need to set those aside for more subtle and more mystical ways of thinking. Have I answered the question? Perhaps not, but I can't personally conceive of anything that would be 'heavenly' that didn't include those with whom we have an intense bond of love.

## End note

The problem with answering question is that it makes it sound as if I have all the answers, which of course I haven't. I have some partial thoughts, some of which make more sense than others, and all of which represent where I am 'now' or at least where I was when I wrote the answer.

My overall view is that questions are good, they are important, and they are helpful. I've seen too many instances of people being shut down for asking perfectly good questions, or being fobbed off with answers that don't cut the mustard.

People with or without a faith should be asking questions, its important if you want to keep things alive and making sense to you. Every experience, encounter and conversation you have changes the

way you understand the world. Some of my most formative moments have come from discussions with children, and they have literally changed the way I see things. The same is true of books and things I listen to.

Questions are important, let's keep asking them together.

## About the author



Simon Cross is a writer and journalist who was born in Scotland and raised in rural Northumberland. He went on to study Politics and Sociology before beginning a career in news journalism. He spent a number of years working as a full-time journalist before becoming more involved in community work. He continues to write news and features for a variety of publications, as well as working on a PhD in theology. He is married to Kelly and together they have two children.



**Is there any judgement  
when we die?**

**Does God exist?**

**If a tree falls in a forest, does  
anyone hear?**

**Simon Cross offers some  
short answers to some very  
big questions.**

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