

MBS TEXTE 177



10. Jahrgang
2013

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**The First Step in Missions
Training: How our Neigh-
bors are Wrestling with God's
General Revelation (Part 4)**



Theological Accents
Theologische Akzente

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The First Step in Missions Training: How our Neighbors are Wrestling with God’s General Revelation (Part 4)¹

Thomas K. Johnson

General Revelation and the Human Quest

Chapter summary: In light of God’s general revelation, we can understand the relation between the biblical message and the human quest, the deep drive to understand the universe and our place in it. The human quest arises from the questioning nature of God’s general revelation, while God’s general revelation both prevents people from completely believing many of the answers that are offered and also contains implied answers so some questions. But the full answer to the human quest is ultimately found in the Bible.

I walk into the fitness center where I am a member in the city of Prague,² and I hear the Bloodhound Gang belting out at high decibels over the sound system, “You and me Baby ain’t nothin but mammals, so let’s do it like they do on the Discovery Channel.”³ At the other end of the room I see new art work on the walls which depicts a sitting Buddha in the midst of scenes that portray the search for a balanced way of life in which the different dimensions of life come into harmony. People are sweating on a treadmill or grunting with heavy weights while they are also wrestling with God in the middle of

the human quest; from opposite ends of the room two different answers (the Bloodhound Gang versus the Buddha) are being preached to the questions we all face, one message via music and the other via visual art. And I observe that God is still asking the questions that force people to look for answers, while most do not seem to totally believe the answers they hear coming from the different traditions (hedonistic evolutionism and Buddhism) represented in the room.

Ever since God asked Adam and Eve, “Where are you?” God’s general voice in the universe includes questions that seem to unavoidably arise in human experience and cry out for answers. The very fact of human existence forces us to consider the big questions—Who am I? What am I? What is my place in the world?—while we *also* look for courage in the face of unavoidable Angst. These big questions, which we can call the “Universal Questions,” are obviously intertwined with the deepest levels of Angst, yet they are different. These questions are a search for truth, even if the answers found might not sufficiently address our Angst. Our ability

to both appreciate the biblical message and communicate that message to our neighbors will increase if we distinguish the universal questions from Angst. These questions are more cognitive, whereas Angst is more existential, though, of course, our answers to these questions form the building blocks for an entire worldview or philosophy of life which both answers our questions and addresses our Ängste.

Consider this: we are born into the world, or we might say we are thrown into the world,⁴ and from our youngest years we find ourselves compelled to try to understand ourselves and our world. We hear answers to our questions offered during our childhood and youth, answers coming from family, neighbors, religions, schools, music, movies, art, and TV.

We wonder if we can truly accept the answers offered by our own religion or culture, if we can accept the answers offered by some other religion and culture, or if we must remain confused and uncertain about the universe and ourselves. Because of globalization, like everyone else, we hear answers offered by many different religions and worldviews; each of us has to personally face the big questions that are raised by the experience of existence, and even the decision to hide behind the answers of our own religious or cultural tradition has become a personal decision. This is the human quest in the twenty-first century. Our situation drives us toward spiritual authenticity. There is always a question/answer relationship between

the human quest, our search for answers to life's ultimate questions, and the many particular historical/cultural/religious traditions. Each of the religious, intellectual, and cultural traditions we encounter offers a set of answers to our questions, the Bloodhound Gang versus the Buddha versus many others. This relation between the human quest and history mirrors the relation between Angst and history which was discussed in the previous chapter. This is the question/answer relation between being and history or between existence and history. Life, being, and existence raise questions, and the various historically given religious or secular traditions are always the main source of potential answers to our questions. When we begin to ponder the big questions, most of us listen to the many voices around us, listening for possible answers. And those many potential answers usually come in the form of a narrative or a meta-story which attempts to interpret all of human experience and give direction to all of life. This is why communism, cultural Marxism, Islam, New Age, consumerism, and atheistic evolution are attractive to many. Each offers a big story or a meta-narrative which attempts to answer life's ultimate questions and place one's personal life inside a universal story. And yet, even if people largely accept a story that attempts to answer their quest, they often remain of two minds, deeply uncertain about the narratives they hear. Whether it is the lyrics of Bloodhound Gang or the principles of the Buddha that people

“accept,” there is always a difference between professed beliefs and practiced beliefs. God’s general revelation pushes people to simultaneously presuppose transcendental beliefs about human dignity, the creation order, and the moral law which contradict the lyrics of any other song they sing, so that most cannot fully believe their own words.

Not only does the biblical message, carried by believers, provide real and better answers to the big questions that are raised by existence. The Bible goes much further. It explains why there is this God-given question/answer relation between the human quest and the historically offered answers; it begins to correct the questions; the biblical account explains why the answers to some of our big questions are implicit in God’s general revelation which everyone has to use to remain human but which Angst causes people to repress; and, as already emphasized, the Bible explains why people do not fully believe the many inadequate answers.

Remember again that in the opening chapters of the Bible, God’s question to Adam and Eve came before the answer. And the answer was the promise of redemption, that the offspring of a woman would crush the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15). At first this answer was vague and probably poorly understood, but it showed that the promise of redemption, and really most of the Bible, is the ultimate answer to the problem identified by God’s question. God asked a question, “Where are you?” before he offered an answer,

showing God’s desire for people to be conscious and aware of both their need and the solution which God provides. God is interested in a conscious interaction with us that fully engages our subjectivity. This is part of what God is continuing to do in his general revelation, so that God’s pre-missionary work of question-asking comes before our missionary work of giving biblical answers. (Of course, we should recognize that God is the ultimate missionary; we are only secondary missionaries.) And for this reason it is wise for missionaries to both consider how the Bible answers the universal questions and become comfortable discussing these questions at length. In the process of discussing these questions with people who do not yet believe in Christ, their awareness of their status as questioned (by God’s general revelation) and their need for answers can be strengthened, while we also offer biblical answers.

For the sake of missionary analysis, as suggested, we will distinguish between Angst-driven questions, such as “Does my life have any meaning?” or “How do I face my guilt and shame?” and question-driven questions, such as “What is the origin of the world and of human life?” “Why are we all so religious?” “Why do we know more than we want to know about right and wrong?” and “What is a human being?” But we must keep in mind that God’s general revelation forms the background for both Angst and for the universal questions. And God’s general revelation constantly impinges on the answers to these ques-

tions that people consider, because some answers are implied by general revelation, if people dare to consider them. Angst often prevents people from acknowledging truths they know, with a result that people may need to experience the biblical message addressing their Ängste in order to be able to fully acknowledge the truths they know because of general revelation.

In a secular university situation I have used the following list of ten ultimate questions as an illustration of the matters thoughtful people should consider, as illustrations of the human quest. This list is surely neither complete nor perfect, but considering these questions will enable us, as missionaries, to become comfortable discussing these and similar questions.⁵

- What has always existed? Is it one or is it many? Is it spirit or matter? Is it God or the gods? Is it time and chance? Is it dialectical matter? Is it energy?
- What does it mean that we are human? What is the morally significant difference between a dog and a human?
- Why do we know so much about right and wrong? How can it be that people in so many times and places have somewhat similar ideas about right and wrong?
- How do we know we can usually trust our five senses, even before we have asked if we can trust our senses?
- How do we know that truth is unified, so that the truths of chemistry do not contradict the truths of biology or mathematics, even before we consider the question?
- How do we know that other people have minds, even though most of us have never seen a proof of the existence of the minds of other people?
- Is there something terribly wrong with the world or with human nature? If so, what?
- Why do we find ourselves alienated from ourselves and each other? Is there a solution?
- Is being male and female more than an accident of anatomy?
- Does history have a meaning, direction, or shape? Is it a line, a circle, or something else?

Such universal questions are at the heart of the human quest for truth which we see in literature and philosophy, in religions and ideologies. They occur to thoughtful people who are not too afraid to look for truth. It seems like these questions are asked of us by the universe, but only humans seem to consider these questions. My children raised some of these questions already when they were small; my dog and my computer never discuss these matters with me. Whenever education takes the smallest step beyond basic skills and simple information, which it must do in order to be education suitable for humans, it has to engage such big questions. Even if they are not aware of it, school teachers and university professors are inevitably and significantly influenced by the answers they expect or assume. Just as there is hardly a television show, movie, or popular song in which we do not hear people wrestling

with the Angst-laden issues of guilt, forgiveness, meaning, and duty, so also there is hardly a cultural event or educational institution which can avoid considering the big questions that lie in, under, and behind all our Ängste.⁶ And because God is the one who asks life's big questions via general revelation as a way of driving people to the answers in special revelation, we see a profound correlation between serious human questions and biblical answers.

During my career teaching religions, ethics, and philosophy in secular universities, largely with students who have not been Christians, I have chosen to emphasize questions of this type, hopefully with flexibility and creativity, as they arise in the many different fields of university study. Such questions have come naturally into the classroom discussion whether the theme of the course has been philosophy of religion, political theory, medical ethics, the history of ethics, or the history of Christianity. I have chosen to emphasize questions of this sort because I believe God is asking such questions through his general revelation, with which most people have a very complicated relationship; discussing such questions has been my attempt to follow God's example in the Garden of Eden (and to build on what I believe God is already doing) by leading with questions before talking about answers. I have tried to use a Socratic method of classroom teaching similar to what I believe the apostle Paul utilized in Romans 2:1–5. While discussing these questions in a university classroom, I

remember that students (like all people) are not only asked these questions by God's general revelation; they already know the answers to many of the questions because of the rich content of general revelation, but they hold that knowledge in a rejected or repressed status in their minds and hearts. For this reason I have chosen to move very slowly from life questions to biblical answers, allowing wrestling time, so students can quietly consider why they know some of the answers but do not want to recognize that they know the answers.⁷ These questions merit further consideration in this light.

What has always existed? Is it one or is it many? Is it spirit or matter? Is it God or the gods? Is it time and chance? Is it dialectical matter? Is it energy? When I have asked students, "What has always existed?" I then go on to mention some of the possible answers that normally occur to people in different cultures, emphasizing that whatever answer one believes, that answer has to truly explain the world and our experience of the world. Depending on the pattern of classroom discussion, I have pointed out that it is difficult to imagine that our experience of knowledge, hope, love, personality, and concern for justice is fully explained either by an impersonal source of the universe (such as matter, energy, and chance) or by polytheism (which lacks an explanation for the unity of the universe and the unity of knowledge). Sometimes I say that the claim that matter, energy, and chance are the three entities that

have always existed is very similar to polytheism, because this view posits multiple eternal entities. During the discussion, I assume that all people know, but may pretend not to know, about God's eternal power and divine nature, so that this discussion would prompt serious spiritual discomfort. Of course, my Christian answer to the question is centered in the doctrine of the Trinity, that the unity of God as the source of all that exists explains the unified nature of the universe and truth, while the eternal relationships among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit explain the way in which relationships (and relational values like love, justice, and honesty) have an ultimate source and place of existence. On occasion in a university classroom, I have pointed out that the doctrine of the Trinity is the solution to the question about the relation between the "One" and the "Many," which shows that both unity and multiplicity have equal ultimacy.⁸

But in a university classroom I sometimes choose not to answer the question, "What has always existed?" because I want the students to wrestle further with the truths which they know but cannot admit to knowing. According to the apostle Paul, my students already know the answer to the question. I have also discovered that some university students become curious about me personally and Google me, with a result that they have a printed version of a Christian article I had written in their backpacks while they are discussing philosophy with me in a secular

university classroom. After class they have felt free to talk more openly about their questions.

What does it mean that we are human? What is the morally significant difference between a dog and a human? When I have asked students what it means to be human and how are they different from my dog (My wife and I have had a series of boxers for many years.), only very rarely has any student said that there is no morally significant difference between humans and animals. As a result of being created in God's image, and as a part of God's ongoing general revelation, people have a direct intuition and knowledge that humans are distinct in the universe and carry a special type of dignity which deserves respect. This God-given direct intuition stands in tension with what many people in secular universities are taught to believe about human nature (which is often related to atheistic versions of evolutionary theory), while at the same time, this God-given intuition stands behind the concerns for human rights which are affirmed by so many people. If people affirm human dignity, then one cannot avoid the question of the source of that dignity; if people deny human dignity, then why should we not devour each other like animals? When lecturing on human nature and human rights, I have sometimes chosen to make the prayer from Psalm 8:3–8 one of my first references to the Bible as the answer to the human quest: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which

you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor.⁶ You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet:⁷ all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild,⁸ the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.” These words provide a beautiful answer to the longing to understand oneself which many people feel but cannot explain without the biblical message. I strongly affirm the common Christian observation that knowing God leads to truly knowing ourselves (and other humans) and that truly knowing ourselves truly can also lead to knowing God. Sometimes the first step toward accepting the Christian faith is for a person to begin to put into words his previously unformulated intuitions that humans are distinct in the universe and that the Bible gives an explanation of this distinctiveness.

Why do we know so much about right and wrong? How can it be that people in so many times and places have had somewhat similar ideas about right and wrong? When I raise the question of why we know so much about right and wrong I sometimes phrase the question, “Why do we know more about right and wrong than we want to know?” In light of what we learn from Romans 1, we know that people are not ignorant about right and wrong; the problem in ethics is

that people do not like what they know about right and wrong because of God’s general revelation, and therefore people cannot fully explain what they know about right and wrong without explicitly mentioning God. And once we mention God as the source of our moral knowledge, all the reactions related to moral Angst become more prominent. The most common responses about the source of moral knowledge I have heard in university classrooms have been some variety of culturally based moral relativism which claims moral rules only arise from a particular culture and do not have global validity. Of course, there are some morally important matters that are culturally relative, meaning that it is morally required of us to learn the local rules and to follow them. (A good example is whether one has to drive on the right or the left hand side of the road; there is no absolute and universal rule about which side of the road to drive, but it is obviously immoral not to know and follow the local rules since one might kill someone if he does not follow the culturally relative rules.) One must recognize this area of moral relativity, even though it is often strongly overemphasized, to have an honest conversation. But in the secular universities where I have taught, students tend to say everything is morally relative, meaning that right and wrong depend entirely on local expectations, and then, without recognizing the self-contradiction, they go on to assume that everyone knows he must not break a short list of rules, such as not murdering, not

stealing, not raping, not committing cannibalism, and perhaps not deceiving other people. (Only once did I meet a student who seriously claimed it is morally acceptable for a culture to practice cannibalism. I have heard much more uncertainty about whether or not truth telling is morally required.) Then one can ask, “Why do people say everything is morally relative, even though they do not really think everything is morally relative?” and “What does this internal contradiction tell us about human nature and about the universe?” At this point in the discussion, I think it is sometimes best to let people wrestle with the questions, not giving answers too quickly, because I believe such people are wrestling directly with God.

How do we know we can usually trust our five senses, even before we have asked if we can trust our senses? Most of the students I have taught have had little doubt that they can trust their five senses under normal circumstances, but only rarely have students had any explanation of why they think their senses give them truth about the universe or how it is that the human race has come to trust its five senses. (If I remember correctly, every answer to this question I have heard from students in a philosophy classroom has involved students telling a story about the origins and development of the human race as a part of evolution.)

Though the topic merits further explanation, I believe, very briefly stated, that we can trust our senses because God created us so that there is

a three-way natural correlation among our senses, the categories of understanding in our minds, and the universe outside our minds; and God gives us direct awareness of this correlation as part of his general revelation, so much that many people never even consider why they trust their senses. Once the question becomes explicit, it pushes people to begin to recognize the role that God plays in our lives, even if we try to deny or ignore him. God’s continuing general revelation is the ultimate condition (behind several secondary conditions) that enables our normal human experience of knowing we can usually trust our senses.

I have known a few students who were inclined to say they were skeptics in regard to their five senses, an inclination which leads a few people into deep personal problems. Therefore, I have not usually asked students, “Can you trust your five senses?” Instead I usually phrase the question in terms something like, “Why is it that you know you can trust your senses?” This phrasing tends to point people toward the hidden theological assumptions in their daily process of knowing the world around them.

How do we know that truth is unified, so that the truths of chemistry do not contradict the truths of biology or mathematics, even before we consider the question? In the developed world, everyone seems to assume there are real truths in realms such as chemistry, biology, physics, and mathematics; further, everyone seems to assume that

the truths in these areas are unified, meaning that the truths in chemistry do not contradict the truths in biology, nor the truths of physics, nor the truths of mathematics. This assumption about the unity of truth makes technological development possible.

While everyone makes these normal academic assumptions, at the very same time, some people deny we can know true truth about the universe. And on serious reflection, almost everyone has to admit that normal people do not learn about this unity of truth in the natural sciences by means of scientific experimentation or other uses of their five senses. The unity of truth in natural science is an expectation that we bring to the process of science.

There is much about the existence, nature, and unity of truth that people very commonly assume (even if a few claim to deny these truths), and I believe this is right to do because these truths are part of God's general revelation which makes normal human experience possible. At first, some people have difficulty grasping these questions because they seem very theoretical, and some people resist asking such questions because they secretly want to suppress their knowledge of God. But these questions arise to thoughtful people because God is questioning us in a manner that drives us to recognize his role in human life.

Many Christians can learn to discuss these questions in a manner that makes the questions more explicit and helps people to consider the biblical answers.

How do we know that other people have minds, even though most of us have never seen a proof of the existence of the minds of other people? I have used the question about proving the existence of the minds of other people for a specific purpose within western universities: to illustrate the need to reform some models of what knowledge is, which dominate our educational systems, that have been inappropriately used in relation to God. Since the time of the Enlightenment (starting around 1650), educational systems following the western model have used models of proving knowledge that are very good in relation to knowing physical things, whether building a bridge that is safe or curing medical problems. Whether in a school or a scientific laboratory, we commonly think we know something either on the basis of empirical evidence or on the basis of logical/mathematical proof. The relevant question inside this perspective is whether we are using inductive or deductive reasoning. This approach to knowing is very beneficial for everyday knowledge, reducing the amount of dangerous nonsense that people believe, thereby contributing massively to scientific and technological development. However, this method of knowing has been inappropriately applied to knowing about the non-physical realm. Thereby it easily becomes an important way in which people suppress their direct knowledge of God, making it easier for people to say that they do not know God even though they really do know God. (In

a philosophy class, I describe this problem as classical or narrow foundationalism.) One step toward showing that this valuable model of knowledge is commonly used in an inappropriate manner is to show that we do not, cannot, and should not use this model of knowing in relation to other people. There may not be any totally satisfactory inductive or deductive proof that the important people in our lives in fact have minds, but we all know that our loved ones (and even people we do not like) really have minds much like our own. And if someone invents a real proof for the existence of the minds of other people, that proof may be too complex for us ordinary people to understand. The problem here is in the model of what we describe as real knowledge within our educational systems, not with any real uncertainty that my wife, children, or grandchildren have minds. It is our certainty about the reality of the minds of other people that makes it possible to reevaluate the way we claim to gain certainty of knowledge in education and scientific research. Every day everyone uses methods of knowing other people that do not fit into our Enlightenment models of knowledge, and we all think this is perfectly proper because it is necessary for our daily lives, because we assume that the method of knowing has to correspond to the area of knowledge. So, too, I have argued in university classes, we should not use Enlightenment models of scientific knowing in order to claim we cannot know God. While discussing this philosophi-

cal argument that sounds technical, I assume my students are really wrestling with God, so that my role is to simply take away one of the educational tools some have been using to defend against God's direct claim on their lives.⁹

Is there something terribly wrong with the world or with human nature? If so, what? When discussing this question in secular university classrooms, it is my impression from student reactions that many have considered the question, though the question itself is in tension with much of secular thought. It is commonly said today that we cannot learn or derive "ought" from "is," or, conversely, that we cannot learn "ought not" from "is." This is one of the principles of modern and postmodern culture that everyone is supposed to know and follow which is consistent with believing in atheistic evolution and with any worldview that does not see any purpose in the universe. But very few people (if any) honestly follow this principle. Most people think there is something terribly wrong with the world or with human nature or that something must be done to make the world a better place. We all see or read reports of suffering, oppression, and the inhumanity of man against man and immediately feel that something is wrong or that something must be changed. Everyone seems to know that what is ought not to be, thereby denying a cardinal principle of secular education in the western world that few people really believe. (This reminds me of the situation in the communist coun-

tries of Eastern Europe during the last decades of communism. Everyone was supposed to believe the communist ideology, but many people knew that few people honestly believed the required ideology.) And once we begin to discuss this question sensitively, people are again driven to quietly ponder why they ask this question and how they know important truths that are inconsistent with unbelief. God is continuously and quietly asking, "Adam and Eve, what is wrong with you?" By openly raising the question in an educational situation, we push people to consider the question more vigorously. And the people with whom we are working will probably soon discover what we believe is the answer.

Why do we find ourselves alienated from ourselves and each other? Is there a solution? I find it amazing that so many people are able to describe alienation so brilliantly. Students often describe truly horrible conflicts between their mother and their father, and then they describe a deep separation of themselves from their parents. I have sat and listened to reports in which the student talking with me thought a murder in the family was a real and present danger. What is amazing is that, in the process, almost everyone communicates an overwhelming sense that this is not the way things should be, often mixed with hope for improvements or even for reconciliation, even though his sense that there is a such a thing as healthy relationships and his hope for reconciliation contradicts his

entire worldview. What is important for our mission philosophical purposes is to notice that everyone assumes, usually without any qualifications, that conflict and alienation are bad and present a problem to be solved, not that conflict and alienation simply are. If, as the Bloodhound Gang claims, we are nothing but mammals, the most we could very seriously claim is that one does not like conflict and alienation, while our social scientists investigate whether alienation helps or hurts the economy.¹⁰ But almost no one ever says that conflict and alienation simply are. Everyone I have ever heard describe conflict and alienation assumes we all know something significant about what peaceful, wholesome relationships look like, even if he has not seen peaceful relationships and his basic worldview would say that conflict simply is, not that conflict is bad. I believe there is still an echo in the human heart of the time in the Garden of Eden (before Adam and Eve were alienated from God, from themselves, from each other, and from the rest of creation), which gives significant hints about what non-alienated relationships with each other, with God, and with the environment should look like. Part of being human is to not only know what alienation and conflict are but also to sense, perhaps vaguely, that conflict and alienation should not exist. By phrasing the question "Why do we find ourselves alienated from ourselves and each other?" we can easily move to the question of why we are able to recognize alienation as alienation and to know

that alienation and conflict should not exist. Phrasing the question in this manner also allows us to very easily enter into dialogue with the descriptions of alienation coming from many philosophers, sociologists, and journalists. Some of my students in Eastern Europe know the penetrating sociological descriptions of alienation that Karl Marx penned as a young man, descriptions which moved Marx to look for something better for society as a whole, really a type of redemption, though few of my students have believed that the revolution of the proletariat that Marx prophesied would provide that redemption.¹¹ Talking about alienation is a way to remind people of something they know but may have pushed from their minds. In looking at Romans 1:27, we notice that a theme in God's general revelation is the creation order or scheme of life that refers back to the mandates given in creation and thereby to the conditions in the Garden of Eden before the fall of the human race. Talking about alienation is a step toward people seeing themselves as questioned by God, "Adam and Eve, why are you separated from everything?" This can lead to seeing their need for redemption in Christ, not only reconciliation in relation to each other and in relation to the rest of creation.

Is being male and female more than an accident of anatomy? The university students I have taught in the post-communist world have generally come from a background which has included a partial definition of gender roles and

identity but that has been marked by a huge amount of family dysfunction and frequent divorce. At the same time, the educational system is increasingly marked by an understanding of humanness with a very problematic understanding of the relation between a person's body and a person's self. Whereas at one time many held the opinion that one is his body, assuming our bodies are the entirety of our humanness, more now seem to think that one's real self (usually meaning what was called the soul or the spirit in previous generations) exists in total independence from the body. Within this recent way of thinking, a female self might accidentally be born with a male body, or a male self might accidentally be born with a female body. Though I find this way of thinking very strange, it fits with (and may result from) ways of understanding human nature in our cultural and religious history that describe the distinction of the soul from the body as too large. I believe God created me as a male soul and a male body, though I do not understand how God weaves a body and soul together to make the complete whole we call a person. But some of the alienation from the self that people experience exists at this level; it is part of our alienation from the entirety of God's creation order. I believe people are questioned by God's general revelation in this realm. Obviously one has to be very careful while discussing this theme, since it can be far more personal than a question such as "How do we know that truth is unified?" For some

people, questions about gender identity are closely tied with both moral and existential Angst; guilt, shame, and a loss of personal meaning can overshadow both the question and possible answers. Some people appear to look for meaning by means of saying something about themselves that may be intended to shock others. Because of the subjects I have taught at the university level, this question has arisen less frequently in the classroom than have some other universal questions. However, it is one of the questions for which people need biblical answers combined with a reconciling relationship with other people and with God.

Does history have a meaning, direction, or shape? Is it a line, a circle, or something else? Existential Angst, the sense that life might not have any meaning, leads people to wonder if the history of the human race or the history of the universe is coming from somewhere or going somewhere. In some form or another, every worldview, religion, and ideology presents a big story which tries to shed light and meaning on one's personal, small story. Many from the past and the present think the world goes through a circular process that is repeated many times, perhaps an infinite number of times, in a process of millions or billions of years. The communists claimed that history moves from feudalism through capitalism into socialism by means of the class struggle, giving meaning to the life of the individual according to the person's place in the inevitable flow of history. Jews

and Christians, influenced by the Bible, think of history as a finite line from creation to final judgment; of course, we should say that the fall accomplished by Adam and Eve and the redemption accomplished by Christ are also decisive steps in the process of history. In my years teaching in secular universities, I found that most students have been very comfortable talking about views of history (without high levels of Angst), and most understood that it is a fundamental question that everyone should answer. Curiously, most of the North American and European students I have taught have openly acknowledged that their views of history are linear and shaped by the Bible, even if they were atheists. Most have simply accepted a linear view of history as being as much a part of the western cultural inheritance as democracy is and have recognized the communist view of history as a heresy based on the western view. Yet the biblical answer, which sees God as the Creator and Sustainer of history and Judge at the end of history, is an answer which produces overwhelming Angst if one does not know the biblical gospel of salvation in Christ. The real answer to the direction and shape of history is the biblical account of creation, fall, redemption, and final return of Christ; the question occurs for many thoughtful people.

The human quest is closely associated with Angst, our awareness of our fallenness. We find ourselves threatened by life in the world (ontologically, morally, and existentially), while we are

also questioned by the universe. While there will be many secondary causes in the life of each person and culture, it is important that we understand that God's general revelation is the ultimate cause behind this entire consciously threatened and questioned nature of human life. Even if some aspects of my interpretation of Angst and being questioned need significant improvement, we can see an overview of one important relationship of the biblical message to human experience: the Bible stands in an answering relationship to fallen life, with all its Ängste and questions. Knowing this should help equip us for bringing the biblical message to our neighbors who need it.

Questions for study and discussion:

1. What are the similarities between the Bloodhound Gang and the Buddha?
2. What the most common answers to the human quest in your community or culture? How are they competing for the loyalty of adherents?
3. What is the relation between the questions (and quest) that arise from human existence and historical narratives? How is this both similar to and different from the relation between Angst and history?
4. How has globalization influenced the process of the human quest? How should the globalization of the human quest inform our approach to missions and the education of people who grow up within a Christian church?
5. What are the advantages and disadvantages of distinguishing between Angst and the human quest? Should the two themes be merged together?
6. When should we quickly give biblical answers to the questions that people ask? When should we decide to let people wrestle with their questions (and continue wrestling with God)?
7. Why do people seem not to fully believe their own beliefs? Why is there such a pronounced tension between professed beliefs and practiced beliefs for so many people?
8. Look at each of the ten questions listed above. With each question describe the extent to which the question is already answered by God's general revelation and the extent to which the question is only answered by God's special revelation in the Bible.
9. What questions would you add to this list of ten questions? Why?

Annotation

Anmerkungen

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²The fitness centered described is Svět pod palmovkou, in Prague, Czech Republic. The name translates into English as “The world below a palm tree,” an example of Czech humor. URL: <http://www.svetpodpalmovkou.cz>

³In the meantime, things have changed so that one would no longer see frequent mammal mating on the Discovery Channel.

⁴I am borrowing some terms from Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) without endorsing all of his philosophy.

⁵I developed this list of questions in response to a university situation that was very consciously secular with elements from communism in the background. University students today seem to be progressively more influenced by various types of mysticism, which may require some further work on questions of this type.

⁶We are probably all aware that religions and worldviews shape education in schools and universities. In 1986 I became aware of the extent to which worldviews influence museums by visiting the Museum of Modern European History in East Berlin (then under communism). The small displays of artifacts seemed to be overwhelmed by long ideological explanations of the importance of the artifacts in class warfare prior to the time of communism. In the museum I learned a lot about the ideology of East German communism but very little about European history.

⁷Much of my university teaching has been in the countries that were under communism. Some of the popular resentment toward communists arose because many people felt like the communists always told people what to think and what to do, consistently based on the communist ideology, robbing people of the opportunity to think for themselves, thereby treating people as

less than fully human. Students have reported to me in strong language that university professors, regardless of their philosophy of life, tend to tell students what to think, not how to think, thereby also treating students as less than fully human. This stands in stark contrast with the method of education that God uses, as described in Genesis and Romans. I have found it very satisfying when students have reported that I have taught them how to think, not what to think, while also communicating the Christian faith in a manner that shows its relevance for the widest range of questions.

⁸Solutions to the question of the “One” and the “Many” which say the “One” is truly ultimate tend to correspond with totalitarian or collectivist social/political theories, whereas solutions that say the “Many” are truly ultimate tend to correspond with individualistic social/political theories. A Trinitarian solution corresponds with saying both the collective and the individual are real but emphasizes our relations with each other in multiple social organizations and institutions.

⁹For a good introduction to the problems of narrow foundationalism, see Ronald H. Nash. *Faith & Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988. pp. 69–92.

¹⁰I am convinced that family conflict and the breakup of marriages contribute to many other social problems, including economic problems at the level of entire national economies, but that is a theme for another study.

¹¹I am thinking here of Karl Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* in which he described four types of alienation: the alienation of a worker from the product of his labor, from the act of producing, from himself as a worker, and from his fellow workers. Many have observed that Marx was both influenced by and alienated from the Jewish and Christian religions. I believe his theory of alienation was possible because of an echo of the Garden of Eden in the human heart which is maintained by God’s continuing general revelation.

The Author

Über den Autor



Thomas K. Johnson received his Ph.D. in ethics from the University of Iowa (1987) after being a research scholar at Eberhard Karls Universität (Tübingen). He has an ACPE from Missouri Baptist Hospital (St. Louis, 1981), a Master of Divinity (Magna Cum Laude) from Covenant Theological Seminary (St. Louis, 1981), and a BA (Cum Laude) from Hope College (Michigan, 1977). He is a pastor of the Presbyterian Church in America. Since 1994 he has served the International Institute for Christian Studies and is now IICS Professor of Theology, Philosophy, and Public Policy. He was a visiting professor at the European Humanities University in Minsk, Belarus, 1994–1996. (UHU is a dissident, anti-Communist university, forced into exile by the Belarusian dictator in 2004.) Since 1996 he and his wife have lived in Prague, where he taught philosophy at Anglo-American University (4 years) and at Charles University (8 1/2 years). He is MBS Professor of Apologetics and Ethics (2003) and Vice President for Research (2007). He is also Academic Council for the International Institute for Religious Freedom. His wife, Leslie P. Johnson, is director of the Christian International School of Prague.

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Thomas Schirmmacher, Prof. Dr. phil.
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