

Conversations

David de Bruyn

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Conversations

This is the record of a conversation between two people with very different worldviews. They spoke about matters which all people, even children, think about: good and evil, the meaning of human existence, life after death, and God's existence.

There were six conversations. As you read them, you might find yourself agreeing more with Jon, or more with Jim. We hope you hear something in the conversation that challenges your own views, and gives you reasons to examine your own beliefs about ultimate questions.

Jim is sitting opposite Jon at a table, when he notices Jon shaking his head at an article he is reading.

Jim: What's the matter?

Jon: It just seems there is no limit to how messed up our world will get.

Jim: What are you talking about?

Jon: This article says that there have been more abortions in the United States than all the soldiers killed in all its wars.

Jim: You can't say that's wrong.

Jon: What do you mean?

Jim: Well, maybe it's wrong for you and your beliefs, but it's not wrong for everyone.

Jon: So you're saying something can be wrong for one person and right for another?

Jim: Exactly. It depends on the situation.

Jon: So how do we know when something is right, and when it's wrong?

Jim: I think every person must try to do his best in his or her heart, and not hurt other people. So long as people do what they believe is right, it's good enough.

Jon: How do you know it's *good enough*? Good enough for who?

Jim: Good enough for them. If we try to be good people and find our way in the world in a way that works for each of us without harming others, that's all anyone can ask.

Jon: So each of us must do what we believe is good? Where do we get that standard of goodness from?

Jim: I suppose we all decide that within ourselves. If we're true to our beliefs, and do what we think is right, no one can say that's wrong.

Jon: But that doesn't make sense. You're saying that we must each decide our own standard of goodness. But then you say that this way of living is actually good for everyone. You said that this is "all anyone can ask" or "not wrong". When you say things like that, aren't you saying that such ways are *right* ways to live? Aren't you making a statement that to live that way is the *best* way to live – for *everyone*?

Jim: No, no, not for everyone. It's right for *me*. It works for me. I think it's the best way to live my life, but I don't force my beliefs onto anyone else.

Jon: So what if I don't share your worldview? Do you think it's *wrong* to force your belief system on others?

Jim: Yes.

Jon: Is it wrong just for you in your belief system or everyone else?

Jim: Well...I think it's wrong. No group should force anyone to accept their views. It's mental bullying.

Jon: So you're saying that people should respect your belief system (of doing our best in the world) which doesn't force itself on others.

Jim: Right.

Jon: What if some other religion or belief-system doesn't share your belief? What if they think it's OK to force their beliefs on others? What if their way of being true to themselves and doing what they believe is right means forcing their beliefs on you?

Jim: Well, it would be a sign of immaturity and narrow-mindedness.

Jon: But perhaps their personal belief is to be narrow-minded. Maybe narrow-mindedness is virtuous to them. Maybe that's what it means to them to do their best in their heart and find their way in the world. According to your world-view, that's OK, because that's their personal morality.

Jim: Well, then they need to leave me alone.

Jon: What if they don't? Shouldn't you respect their moral views?

Jim: If they can't tolerate my views, then I won't tolerate their views.

Jon: So, in fact, you're actually very similar. You both have a belief in what is good and evil. They just insist upon it for all men everywhere. You insist that you won't allow someone to interrupt your private moral world. They're aggressive; you're defensive. But you both believe there is a better or worse way to live.

Jim: I suppose that's true enough.

Jon: But you said earlier they were wrong for being that way. What I'm wondering is, upon what do you base your sense of what is better, or what is good? Those people you see as intolerant probably have some Holy Book. Where do you get yours?

Jim: I guess I haven't thought that much about it. Maybe it's the whole Golden Rule thing. Do unto others as you would have them do to you.

Jon: So you believe in the Golden Rule?

Jim: Of course. Live and let live. Seek happiness without hurting other people.

Jon: Do you think people who try to convert others respect the Golden Rule?

Jim: Maybe – but they're inconsistent. They wouldn't like me forcing my views on them.

Jon: Why do you think most most people believe in the Golden Rule?

Jim: Well, because we don't like being harmed. Who does?

Jon: True, but if we're all just making up the rules in our own minds, why do we get offended if others don't obey our personalised rules?

Jim: What do you mean?

Jon: Well, for example, if we all just decide our own moral paths, maybe in my personal world I decide that stealing is OK. When my personal world bumps into your personal world, I steal your stuff. You get angry. Let's say you get your stuff back. You're still angry with me that I stole.

Jim: Sure.

Jon: But how can you get angry at me? I'm just obeying the rules of my personal world. In your personal world, it's bad to steal. In my personal world, it's good to steal.

Jim: But your personal world hurts others.

Jon: Ah! So there's another rule, a third, bigger rule, which must govern us both – that we must not hurt each other.

Jim: Yes.

Jon: If my rule, which says that stealing is okay, and your rule, which says that it is not, must both submit to some Bigger Rule that we must not harm each other, where does that Bigger Rule come from? Because if I don't have the Bigger Rule in my personal world, I don't have to respect it. I can rob you and feel no remorse. You must be robbed and be fine with it, because you know the Bigger Rule is not part of my personal world.

Jim: Well...that's just weird. I've never thought of it that way.

Jon: You think tolerance and open mindedness are good things. And in fact, you think they are good enough for *everyone* to practise, because you get angry if others don't practise it. You think everyone should include tolerance and open mindedness in their private moral worlds.

Jim: I suppose so.

Jon: So in fact, you *don't* believe that we must each make up the rules. You don't believe we each have private, moral worlds. You believe that some rules are bigger than private morality, and must govern more than one person.

Jim: In some areas, yes.

Jon: So where do these Bigger Rules come from, which govern more than one private moral universe? And who decides what they are?

Jim: I don't know. I'll have to think about it.

II.

Jim walks up to Jon, who's paging through a magazine.

Jim: I've been thinking about your question, and I think I know the answer.

Jon: About where the Bigger Rules comes from?

Jim: Yes. I think it has to do with survival. Instinct. Survival of the fittest. Man has been on this earth for millions of years, and he has survived as a species by dwelling in groups, in tribes.

Jon: Okay.

Jim: Well, to make a tribe work, people have to think of the needs of others before their own. By looking out for the Tribe, each human ensures his or her own survival.

Jon: So, you're saying the Golden Rule comes from the instinct for survival?

Jim: Exactly. Over millions of years, it's become hard-wired into us. If the tribe is harmed, we might suffer. So my neighbour's good becomes my own. I hate being robbed, but over time, I hate the Tribe being robbed too. Over thousands of years, these things become a kind of impulse within us. Religious types call it the conscience. But it's really an evolved survival instinct.

Jon: So when we practise the morality of the Golden Rule, it's a kind of biological instinct?

Jim: Yes.

Jon: As far as I know, when we talk about instinct in animals, we mean an impulse in them which they always obey. Birds always migrate, they don't need to be trained to do so.

Jim: I know that.

Jon: Well, if right and wrong is really just a hard-wired, biological instinct, why do we need to be *told* to obey it? Why are we always exhorted to do the 'right thing', if, in fact, the right thing is a natural survival instinct?

Jim: Well...we're more evolved than those animals. We need reasons.

Jon: OK. Let's say we give people reasons. We tell them they *ought* to obey this survival instinct for certain reasons. Why *should* they obey the survival instinct?

Jim: Because it's better to live than to die.

Jon: "Better"? That's a value judgement. Why is the human race's survival a good thing? Who decides that?

Jim: Well, it's instinctual, genius.

Jon: Wait – you're including way too much in your

definition of instinct. It's one thing to have the sense that drinking water is needful to stay alive. This is the instinct – you feel thirsty. But why I *ought* to obey that instinct, why I *ought* to want to listen to its promptings to keep me alive is something else. Being thirsty is one thing, wanting to keep living is another. Are you saying that blind instinct tells me it is *better* to live than to die?

Jim: No, we just know that.

Jon: In other words, there is something that comes *before* or *outside* instinct, which tells us to *obey* instinct. There is some Law inside us which tells us it is *better* to live than to die, that it is a *good* thing to survive, that life is *worth* preserving. And because of this Law, we obey the survival instinct.

Jim: I guess that's true.

Jon: For that matter, if the Golden Rule is really an instinct, why is it that we have to choose *between* instincts? If you hear a man being mugged, you have to choose between the instinct for self-protection, and the instinct to help. If you are being urged to choose between instincts, that can't be the instinct itself. You're judging which is *better*.

Jim: Fair enough.

Jon: In which case, we're back to where we were. Why do human beings have this thing inside them which tells them certain things are *right*, certain things are *better*, certain things are *good*, including preserving the human

race and obeying the survival instinct?

Jim: I don't know. Maybe there are many instincts?

Jon: In that case, you'd end up with an infinite regress of instincts, each telling you to obey the next. This doesn't seem plausible. In your worldview, how do you explain morality? It's not merely personal preference. It's not a survival instinct. So what is it?

Jim: Maybe it's an evolved kind of consciousness. We're aware of ourselves.

Jon: What do we you mean by *evolved consciousness*?

Jim's cell begins bleating out a tune, and he mouths "Later".

III.

Jon approaches Jim at the bus stop. Jim sighs.

Jim: Oh boy, here comes the Moral Authority.

Jon: (*grins*). Funny, I haven't told you to do anything...yet! . So, have you thought about what 'evolved higher consciousness' is?

Jim: Sure. We're not greater than the other animals. It's just one of the flukes of the evolution of our species. Probably has to do with having opposable thumbs. You think we have this ghostly stuff inside us. The truth is, we're just very smart primates.

Jon: The last time we spoke you admitted that the sense of the Golden Rule within us can't be a part of our biological instincts. It tells us we ought to obey certain things, which means it can't be one of the instincts itself. It's before and outside it.

Jim: Sure, but maybe it's a part of an evolved consciousness.

Jon: If by evolved consciousness you mean a physical brain, made up of molecules and chemicals, you've just given another term for *instinct*. Evolved consciousness cannot be the same thing as instinct, because there is something that prompts us to choose between our instincts. That can't be one of the instincts. In other words, there must be a difference between consciousness and brain.

Jim: So where does that leave us?

Jon: It leaves us to face the truth that there is a moral reality outside of us. Whether or not it's convenient to admit it, we all know it's there. We excuse ourselves when we break it. We judge some moral systems to be better than others. We get angry at others when they don't keep the Golden Rule. As surely as you and I are seeing material reality in front of us now, there is a moral reality that we humans keep coming back to, like a law of gravity.

Jim: Okay. What then?

Jon: If there really is a moral reality, how did it get there?

What is it?

Jim: Well, you tell me. You say it isn't an instinct or evolved consciousness.

Jon: Morality cannot be simply part of our biology. It doesn't deal with material reality. Morality has to do with people and relationships and fair treatment of each other. So if moral reality is all about people, what should we conclude about where it came from?

Jim: It must originate from people.

Jon: That's right. But we've already eliminated all human minds as possible sources, because we all *submit* to or refer to or excuse ourselves based on our ideas of moral reality. That doesn't sound like creators of morality, but participants or subjects of it.

Jim: Alright, I know where this is going. God, right?

Jon: I didn't say that. But by process of elimination, what is left? Morality is real. It is not a preference. It is not an instinct. It is not mere consciousness.

Jim: Come on, science has pretty much eliminated God as the creator of the universe.

Jon: It has? How?

Jim: Well, the Big Bang is proven fact. So is evolution. We don't need a God to explain it all.

Jon: Well, in the first place, facts are always interpreted. No fact stands by itself. It belongs to a huge web of other facts, which together make up the truth. If you take one fact, and don't see it rightly, you might not be seeing a fact, but a lie.

Jim: What are you on about?

Jon: Science has certainly catalogued a number of facts about the material universe. But we don't know if it has gained the correct interpretation of those facts, because it hasn't collected all possible facts.

Jim: But that's impossible!

Jon: Exactly. It's only arrogance that believes we'd ever be able to collect enough facts to know all of reality. That's the difference between real science and scientism. Science collects a certain number of facts, and is modest in its claims about those facts. *Scientism* gains a certain number of facts and starts claiming that it understands how the universe originated, why man is here, and the meaning of life. In other words, it goes from fact-collecting to philosophy.

Jim: Are you saying science has got it all wrong?

Jon: I'm saying science can legitimately collect data about the world. But it is humans who interpret that data. And once we interpret, all kinds of things are in play. We're not the objective observers we'd like to think we are.

Jim: So you don't trust science.

Jon: I didn't say that. I'm very thankful for much that genuine science has brought to our lives. I'm saying science must not boast that it can answer all questions, because it can't.

Jim: What can't science answer?

Jon: Well, to begin with, the very thing we've been talking about – morality. Science cannot provide a basis for or an explanation for our sense of good and evil. Science cannot account for or explain beauty either. These are value judgements. They can be true or false, but science can't speak to either.

Jim: Well, those things are very subjective. Science can prove anything objective.

Jon: Actually not. Science simply assumes the correctness of things like logic, or even its own method, but it cannot *prove* those things. It has to assume those things in order to work. In fact, science cannot *prove* that you or I actually exist right now, or that this isn't someone's dream, or that the past wasn't all created 5 minutes ago.

Jim: If science is as useless as you make it sound, how do you explain all the technological advances we've made? Do you want to go back to the Dark Ages?

Jon: I didn't dismiss science as useless. I said it is as useful as far as it goes. Science cannot speak to the ultimate questions. Science collects facts about physical phenomena. It cannot speak with authority on the

existence of God, life after death, value judgements or morality.

Jim: I'd think that if God had really made the universe, we'd be able to see him.

Jon: C.S. Lewis said, "The power that made the universe would not be observed as one of the facts of the universe. An architect would not show up as one of the walls in a house. "

Jim: So what evidence is there for God?

Jon: *Evidence?* You sound like a detective. God is not one of many facts we find under a microscope or observe in a test tube. God is the ultimate reality which comprehends all the facts. He is the reason for the facts, the explanation of the facts, the interpretation of the facts!

Jim: Because you say so?

Jon: Because he said so! But even though you say you don't believe that, you have shown you do believe in moral reality. We all sense that truth, goodness and beauty exist. We spot it, we call for it, we rely on it. We don't look to science to verify it. We just know it. God is the same. He is the first Person on which everything else depends.

Jim: I don't know. It sounds like blind faith to me.

Jon: It is faith, but it's not blind.

(Jon looks at his watch.)

Jon: I'm sorry, but I'm late for a meeting. Give me a shout if you want to follow up.

IV.

Jim ambles up to the table where Jon is sitting.

Jim: I can't believe I'm doing this, but I think I'm a glutton for punishment. I'm back for more of your 'moral philosophy'.

Jon: *(laughs)*. Well, what area of my philosophy do you want to argue with today?

Jim: I'm not satisfied with your case for God.

Jon: What did you find unsatisfying?

Jim: It seems like you're telling me I need to believe that you're right, and then I'll know you are. How convenient.

Jon: No, what I'm saying that if God is the fundamental reality of the universe, you need to start with him as your first truth to examine all others.

Jim: I don't even believe in God!

Jon: I think you do. In fact, I know you do, because God says that men suppress the truth of him in their hearts. You tell yourself and others that you don't believe in God, but everything about you says you do.

Jim: How?

Jon: You have a sense of right and wrong, and you get angry when others violate it. You reason logically, and expect a lot of predictable, logical things in your life, which would only make sense of the universe were an ordered, meaningful place. You love other persons, and know that persons are not simply biological entities. You know that life is a gift, and you expect gratitude from others when you give them gifts, but you have never thanked whoever gave you the gift of life.

Jim: You want me to accept your view on blind faith.

Jon. No, I want you to be honest that God's existence is self-evident. If nothing is self-evident, nothing can be proved. God's existence is not established by evidence. It is only confirmed by responding to the self-evident truth that He exists.

Jim: I need proof.

Jon: What kind of proof? What kind of evidence would suffice to satisfy you?

Jim: I don't know. If an all-powerful good God existed, he could stop all the suffering in the world. That would convince me. He could write his name in the sky so we would all know he exists. He could just make some massive appearance and remove all doubt.

Jon: If you set the standard of proof for God to exist, doesn't that make *you* God?

Jim: Well, I'm just saying proof would make it easier to believe.

Jon: When it comes to things like this, we don't need *proof*, we need honest responses to the person we know is behind all of reality. I've given you self-evident reasons to believe in God. We've talked about your acceptance of such things as what is good and true. You believe in these things, without 'scientific evidence'. They are part of your makeup. You know there is moral reality, which means there is a moral Creator.

Jim: Why? Why should God care if I look at hot girls on the Internet or swear at my boss? Doesn't he have bigger things to keep him busy?

Jon: Maybe you are more important to him than you realise.

Jim: What's that supposed to mean?

Jon: God might bless you or curse you, but he will never dismiss you. You are too important for that.

Jim: Why? Why should he bother with our tiny speck of a planet in the universe?

Jon: What if this tiny speck in the universe contains mirrors of himself? What if he chose to invest every human with something of himself? Would that make the Earth a rather important place?

Jim: If it were true, I suppose it would.

Jon: What if every human becomes either a reflection or a parody of God? What should God do?

Jim: I guess he'd keep the reflections and get rid of the parodies.

Jon: Sounds about right.

Jim: So the moral of the story is that we must try to be as good as we can so we don't insult God?

Jon: Not exactly.

Jim: So now you're going to tell me to keep the 10 commandments so I can play harps when I die.

Jon: No, but since you brought them up, have you kept the Ten Commandments?

Jim: Pretty much.

Jon: Have you ever lied?

Jim: Sure. Not often.

Jon: Have you ever stolen?

Jim: Nothing big. Maybe a sweet from the shop when I was a child.

Jon: By your own admission, are you guilty or innocent

when it comes to the Ten Commandments?

Jim: Well, guilty when you put it that way. But I can't accept the idea that these things would get me in trouble with God, whoever he is. I'm no Hitler or serial rapist. If God judges me because I like to have fun, then that's not the sort of God I can believe in.

Jon: Why do you think God must be the way you say he is?

Jim: Why do *you* think I think that way?

Jon: Honestly? I think it's because it enables you to avoid dealing with the idea of God as your Judge. You hate the idea of being accountable to God, because you've embraced the idea of absolute autonomy. Your whole life experience has taught you that you own yourself, you're your own boss, you can do what you want, how you want, when you want, and no one ought to tell you otherwise. And that's pretty much worked for you. And it's how you'd like to keep on living. So when you're confronted with the idea that at the end of the road, you will meet up with God who will judge you, you find that both unbelievable and repulsive.

Jim: I agree. Why should some man in the sky give a hoot if I lust or kick the dog? I just can't accept that.

Jon: Maybe you *won't* accept it. *Won't* goes before *can't*.

Jim: What do you mean?

Jon: You *won't* believe it because how it might turn your life upside down. You just told me that if, in reality, God is a judge, then you are repelled by that truth. With that prior commitment, your intellect will always find reasons to claim it *can't* believe. *Won't* goes before *can't*. Until you are willing to accept that the idea of God as your judge could be true, you're not being intellectually honest.

Jim: I'm being perfectly honest. You're the one calling me a liar.

Jon: All right, let's put it this way. Listen to the description of the God I believe in, and then answer my question. I believe the true God is the sum of all Beauty, the very essence of all moral goodness, and the consummation of everything we hope for, aspire to, or desire, in our best moments. He is not only beautiful for himself, but desires to share this beauty with others – his own creation. This is his love. He wants people to enter fullness of joy, by knowing and loving Him. Now, do you believe such a God exists?

Jim: No.

Jon: But don't you wish such a God did exist?

Jim: Well...no. No, I don't.

Jon: Why would you not want a God like that?

Jim: Because I don't need him. Why must I worship someone else? I'm perfectly content on my own.

Jon: In other words, your real issue is not with evidence for God, or the rationality of God's existing, it is with your own desires. You've admitted that you don't *want* him to exist, whether or not he does. With that desire in your heart, your mind will always find reasons for him to not exist. As one man said, the atheist has two creeds: 1) There is no god. 2) I hate him.

Jim: So what does your religion prescribe I do? Light incense? Chant? Walk up stairs on my knees?

Jon: My religion makes no prescriptions except that the person who wants to know God must accept God's verdict on him, and accept God's provisions for him.

Jim: What's that mean?

Jon: God's verdict on man is that he has broken God's laws. He has violated the sense of right and wrong God placed in his heart. He has deliberately rejected the witness of creation and conscience. Man is not a confused wanderer, but a stubborn rebel. He lives in God's world, by God's permission, but pretends it isn't so, so that he can go on living under his own authority.

Jim: Why does God want that?

Jon: Because it's the truth, and no real relationship can take place between two people until the erring party faces up to the truth. God can't become part of our self-protective lies. If we have offended God, no progress will be made until we realize that and want to turn back to

him.

Jim: And then?

Jon: Man has to understand what God has provided so that the relationship can be restored.

Jim: And what's that?

Jon: It's not a *what*, it's a *who*. Jesus Christ.

Jim: I knew you were going to slip Jesus in at some point.

Jon: Call me sometime if you want to talk about him.

V.

(Jon looks up from a book he is reading to see Jim approaching.)

Jim: Hello, preacher. I'm here for my daily dose of fire-'n-brimstone teaching.

Jon *(laughs)* Well, are you ready for it?

Jim: Yup, I know where this is all going. I'm supposed to pray some prayer, admit I'm a bad guy, and start paying money to your church at some point.

Jon: No. You can give your money to me right now, if you want to.

Jim: *(laughs)* Do I look that dumb?

Jon: No, the opposite actually.

Jim: Well, tell me why some guy who died in Israel two thousand years ago is actually the *only* way to God?

Jon: It's funny you start out that way, because your objection is actually one of the arguments Christians make.

Jim: What do you mean?

Jon: I'm talking about something called *particularism*. Historical Christianity has taught that God has centred his revelation on one man, and made him the particular, exclusive means of knowing God.

Jim: That's what I think is so childish about Christianity: imagining that one man – Jesus – should be the only way for everyone to get to God.

Jon: Yes, that is the boldest claim that a religion can make. But then, we Christians make that bold claim humbly.

Jim: Ha! That's a laugh! You say your arrogant things in a meek way, do you?

Jon: No, I mean we make that bold statement with humility, because we are simply reporting the bold statement of another.

Jim: And who's that?

Jon: Jesus himself. Jesus made the boldest claim of all. He claimed to be God.

Jim: So Christians can claim to have the only true religion in the world because Jesus claimed to be God?

Jon: Right. If God truly did become man, it is the most important religious event in history. Everything else pales in comparison. If Jesus was God, then all he said was true, and the call for faith in him alone is justified.

Jim: And if he wasn't?

Jon: Then no one should be a Christian. It's what one man called the Liar-Lunatic-Lord trilemma. If Jesus knew he wasn't God and told others he was, then he was a liar, and should not be worshipped. If Jesus mistakenly thought he was God and told others, then he was a lunatic, and should not be worshipped. The only other alternative was that he was, and should be believed.

Jim: So what if he said that? Plenty of people have claimed to be God.

Jon: Sure. Not many of them staked their credibility on rising from the dead afterwards, as Jesus did.

Jim: We don't know for sure that Jesus rose from the dead.

Jon: What we know is that those timid men who had followed him experienced a sudden change, and began preaching that Jesus had risen from the dead. We know

that the early enemies of Christianity could not produce the body of Jesus to squash the new movement.

Jim: The disciples probably stole the body and hid it.

Jon: And then were willing to die for that lie? People will die for what they know to be true, and people will die for what they think to be true even if it is actually false. But no one dies for what they know to be false. Whatever you decide about the body of Jesus, there is no doubt that those early disciples believed he had risen from the dead.

Jim: It was probably a kind of hallucination – wishful thinking gone wild.

Jon: Hallucinations shared by hundreds of people? Hallucinations that involved eating fish and honey, and asked doubting Thomas to touch him?

Jim: How do we even know that Jesus claimed to be God? How do we know that the church claimed he had risen? Our only source is the New Testament which was written by the people who wanted to grow the myth of Jesus. Those books were edited and changed to suit the church.

Jon: How do you know that? Have you studied New Testament origins or textual criticism?

Jim: No, it's just obvious. People edit religious books to suit themselves.

Jon: They certainly do. But you might want to check your

facts about the New Testament.

Jim: Enlighten me.

Jon: Both Christian and non-Christian scholars would agree that the documents that are called the New Testament were written close to the time of Jesus, and that the text we have to day is fundamentally the text which the early church knew. Large scale changes in documents spread over the whole Roman empire were simply not possible. It would be like trying to edit something which has gone viral on the Internet.

Jim: Even if Jesus said those things, it doesn't mean they're true.

Jon: What it does mean is that you cannot just dismiss him as a good man or moral teacher. If you disbelieve his claims, he was either insane or very dangerous. If his person has merit, then you must take his claims seriously.

Jim: And do what with them?

Jon: Believe them. He claimed that God was his Father, and that he had come to die to reconcile people back to God. He claimed that sin against God has a punishment, and that he had come to be a substitute for those that believe in him.

Jim: Well, interesting as always, preacher. I think I'll head out before you start passing the plate.

Jon: (*Laughs*) You'd better.

VI.

(Jon approaches Jim, who's sitting on the couch at the coffee shop.)

Jon: Are religious nuts allowed to sit here?

Jim: *(smiles)* Sure. You know, Jon, you're a nice guy, but I just can't accept your views.

Jon: Why not?

Jim: Because you allow for no other way except Jesus. I think that's very intolerant.

Jon: What do you mean by 'tolerant'?

Jim: Well, same as everyone else. Accepting the views of others, seeing the truth in all religions.

Jon: I do think there is some truth in all religions.

Jim: You do?

Jon: Yes. However, simply because you get some things right does not mean you are a trustworthy overall.

Jim: Well, that's the attitude I'm talking about. Who says you Christians have got the monopoly on the truth? Do you really mean to tell me that billions of people around the world have gone to hell because they haven't had a 'personal relationship with Jesus'? That's just crazy.

Jon: Well, I understand how odd that sounds, particularly in a world where we have thousands of equally legitimate choices in products, services and entertainments. But let me ask you a question: do you believe in the law of non-contradiction?

Jim: What do you mean?

Jon: Do you believe that one plus one cannot equal both two and three at the same time? One answer would contradict another, and that is not possible. Do you believe that is true at all times for all people?

Jim: I suppose.

Jon: If the universe was really created by an reasoning Being, is it that hard to imagine that knowing him might be the same? That you cannot know him in the way he prescribes, and simultaneously know him in a way that contradicts that way?

Jim: I don't think you can compare logic to the spiritual issues of religion.

Jon: Why not?

Jim: Because spiritual issues are far more complex. Only the immature think of such complex things in terms of black and white, right and wrong. They allow for no shades of grey, no differing paths to reach the same destination.

Jon: How do you know that spiritual issues are as you say they are? What's your basis of authority for that view?

Jim: My observations. There are too many people in the world, and too many beliefs, for just one group to be right. If God really is accessed by only one way, and all the rest go to hell, I think God is as intolerant as his followers. How could he play that kind of game?

Jon: So what you're saying is that even if reality corresponds to the Christian claim to exclusive access to God, you refuse to accept that?

Jim: Yes, that's repulsive to me.

Jon: Doesn't that make you intolerant of Christians?

Jim: Frankly, yes. Born-again Christianity is the one pest that can't live and let live in our society. Oh, and radical Islam.

Jon: In other words, you're either a hypocrite or satisfied with being incoherent.

Jim: Look, I don't come here to get insulted.

Jon: And I don't come here to insult. But you just told me that you are intolerant of intolerance, which is like saying you hate hatred, or as logically incomprehensible as a man saying, "Don't believe me!"

Jim: What's your point?

Jon: You say you can't stand intolerance, but in fact, you practise it yourself, which shows your problem is with only a certain *kind* of intolerance. You dislike exclusive claims in religion. You prefer matters of religion to be ambiguous, open-ended, even agnostic.

Jim: I do.

Jon: Why do you think you do?

Jim: I think if we could get religious loonies to stop trying to change everyone around them, we'd have a happier society.

Jon: So the greatest good in life is a happy society?

Jim: Well, happiness is. If every man has his own thing that makes him happy, and he can do it without making others unhappy, that's the best possible situation.

Jon: So we live, eat, drink, find some happiness, and then die.

Jim: Well, yes. No need to be morbid about it. Eat, drink and be merry, and all that.

Jon: "For tomorrow we die."

Jim: What?

Jon: "For tomorrow we die." That's the rest of the saying you quoted "Eat, drink and be merry – *for tomorrow we*

die." It was a saying that the hedonistic Epicureans used. Paul quoted it ironically in one of his letters in the New Testament to teach the emptiness of that kind of life.

Jim: Paul was probably a frustrated, unhappy bigot.

Jon: Actually, he spoke more about joy than you'd think. I think he was aiming for maximum joy, not minimum.

Jim: That doesn't sound like any religion I know.

Jon: The faith of the Bible calls man to fulfilment and satisfaction. It's just that man's fulfilment isn't found inside himself. It isn't found in just pleasuring himself. It isn't found in food, sex, entertainment, sports, hobbies, holidays, or any other realm of human life. Those things can be good and enjoyable in their place, but they were never meant to provide total fulfilment. Even in combination, they can't fulfil. The Bible speaks of knowing God in such a way, that the relationship between him and the soul provides the satisfaction and fulfilment that nothing else can bring.

Jim: So God is the ultimate happy-pill?

Jon: No, no – God is not made for us, we are made for him! But when we accept that – when we submit to that, and take our place as his worshippers, we find a fulfilment, a joy, a completion of ourselves that is found nowhere else. We were made to know and love God. Everything else will fall short.

Jim: Why do I need to take your religion to be happy? I have lots of things that make me happy. My girlfriend, my job, my phone, my dog, my coffee-maker, my trips to the coast. I'm not constantly grinning like some happy-clappy, but I'm not chronically depressed. I have up-days and down-days. I think I'm pretty happy.

Jon: Maybe you are. Maybe you've learned to keep yourself distracted enough so that you don't notice the emptiness and the darkness like you used to. Maybe you've come to embrace a certain amount of despair as normal. Maybe you've come to accept meaninglessness, and even delight in it. Perhaps you've just stopped fighting, and enjoy the chaos and randomness of life.

Jim: Maybe.

Jon: You don't have to. You can embrace the things we've talked about: Right and wrong, which reveals a moral, personal God. A God who you owe your existence to. A God who sent Jesus Christ, the most astonishing man who has ever lived, to reconcile you to Himself. You can deal directly with God through Jesus, and ask Him for forgiveness and change.

Jim: Yah, but first I've got to stand before the church and cry and tell everyone how dirty I've been, right? No thanks.

Jon: No. First, you've got to be honest. That means admitting to God where you've broken the sense of right and wrong He placed in your heart. It means accepting your position and wanting it to change. It means deciding you

want to change teams – from self-worshiper and self-follower, to God-worshiper, and God-follower.

Jim: At this point, do you guilt-trip me into some kind of prayer?

Jon: No, at this point, I tell you that I genuinely care about your soul. I tell you that I pray for you. I tell you that what I have said is the truth for all men, everywhere, whether or not they believe it. You need to respond to God, not me. And if you have questions, I'm always around.