

BEGINNINGS TO ENDINGS

Philosophical Ramblings for Avoiding Global Destruction

by

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Introduction

“He was a seeker of truth.” Those six simple words consisting of 19 alphabetic characters, five spaces, two quotation marks, a single period, and a few unseen subliminal characters are what I want to appear as my epitaph on my tombstone. Why? Because it describes me to a tee. Or maybe it describes one of my T-shirts. I forget now. Anyway, I am indeed a seeker of truth. In other words, I want to know the ultimate nature of the Universe and things that have *actually* happened (as opposed to things that have *unactually* happened). This is a tall order. So tall in fact that I have to climb a ladder just to see its knees. Many people over many years have sought after the same things with only partial success, so I am not deluding myself into believing that I will be completely successful either. Therefore, I will be content if I am only 99.99% successful, something that should be easily accomplished.

To be a seeker of truth, one must be willing to change his or her mind from time to time as new information becomes available. On the other hand, you don't have to be willing to change your mind. (Not really. I just wanted to illustrate how easy it is to change your mind when you really put your mind to it.) People not willing to change their minds cannot be seekers of truth. Rather, they have consigned themselves to a delusional feel-good state (not California, a *mental* state). They have declared that their knowledge is complete and that no new information can possibly alter it unless, of course, this information is accompanied by a large sum of money. This is clearly absurd. “But wait,” you say, “what if people's knowledge is complete in some area? Why would they have to change their minds?” Notice that I did not say they have to *change* their minds, only that they be *willing* to change their minds given compelling new information that conflicts with their current knowledge. By way of illustration, I once thought that *Moby Dick* was a great book. But when I finally got around to actually trying to read it, I changed my mind.

Seeking truth is a full-time job, so only the independently wealthy have enough time to devote to the search, and they are usually tied up doing mundane rich people things like having parties, yachting, traveling to exotic lands, and bungee jumping. Most people, like myself, have to make a living and, if they have any kind of life at all, interact with family and friends. For me, truth seeking is a part-time hobby. Perhaps when I retire from my regular job, I can devote more time to this venture. Then again, I may be among those unfortunate few that win the lottery and have to start engaging in all those mundane rich people things.

When seeking truth, one must refer to diverse sources (e.g. - newspapers, philosophy books, history books, religious writings, MAD magazine, etc.). Otherwise, a priori knowledge of where the truth resides would be required. Although I am aware that it is best to consult many sources, I am also aware that this is clearly impossible, as there are far too many of them. Sometimes an educated guess about a source's importance must be made, hopefully based on a synopsis of the source. For example, rather than reading an entire Playboy magazine (or Playgirl if you prefer), you might want to just scan the photographs as this will give you a quick overview of what the magazine is all about.

Seeking truth is an interesting, even invigorating, experience. The give and take of opposing ideas can be intoxicating. This is especially true if you drink a case of beer while reading Plato.

Of course, this means that the process can give you a severe headache. This is why humor must always play a role in our search. Humor can help carry one through the search when things get tough. Thus, I am a person who is serious about learning the truth, but who also loves jokes and good-natured fun.

As a result of my love for the truth and my love for fun, I decided to write this book. You can view it as a humorous snapshot of where I am in my search. It covers the beginning of the Universe as well as its end and some stuff in between. And unlike many of the dry, dull philosophical writings that are available aplenty, this one is fun to read. At least I hope you find it so. I will be taking pot shots at many ideas, some of which you may hold. Heck, I may have even held these viewpoints at some point in the past. So, don't take it personally. Hopefully we are all ultimately seeking the truth. Let's not let some good-natured fun divide us on our journey.

Randy C. Finch
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1. Beginnings

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. So begins the book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. It does have a certain reassurance to it. The Universe *had* a beginning and an entity much more powerful than human beings was responsible for it. But, is it true?

Before I attempt to answer this question, let me say up front that if God does exist, I do not believe He is a Man. Neither do I believe that She is a Woman. And I also don't believe It is a Thing. So, since the English dictionary lacks pronouns for supernatural androgynous beings, I will just use the traditional male chauvinist ones. If this bothers you, please mentally substitute the pronoun of your choice at the appropriate places throughout the remainder of this book. Now, back to the topic at hand.

Did a supernatural being that we call God actually create all that we see in this incredibly large expanse of space we call the *known* Universe? If so, I guess He also created the *unknown* Universe. Unfortunately, I don't know anything about the unknown Universe. Heck, I don't know that much about the *known* Universe. Anyway, a belief in God neatly answers the question "How did the Universe get here?" But it leaves me with yet another one. "How did God get here?" Many people answer like this, "God didn't get here, He's been here." Meaning, of course, that God did not have a beginning, He's just always been here. I then query, "Why not just say that the Universe has always been here?" And the response comes, "Because of the whole entropy thing. You know, the Universe is running down and all that. There is not enough mass in it to generate enough gravity to cause it to collapse back on itself. In other words, the Universe is a one shot deal. It had a beginning and it will have an end. Therefore, something else had to have started it."

So the argument – uh, discussion – goes. A question followed by an answer that only generates more questions. Generally, the discussion is filled with topics that very few, if any, human beings really understand – space, time, forces of nature, unified field theory, the theory of everything, entropy, and how Willie Nelson became a star. Fortunately, I didn't study Willie Nelson in college, but I did study entropy. I didn't really understand it then and, not having thermodynamics as a hobby, I understand it even less now. Oh sure, I have a surface level understanding. But not that deep down understanding like the way a man understands that he will be in the dog house for a month if he forgets his wife's birthday. Even so, I have thought about the mysteries of the Universe frequently. And even though I don't have a thorough understanding of quantum mechanics, relativity theory, or why I have to use SPF 30 sunscreen at the beach, I have come up with what I believe is the definitive view of the mysteries of the Universe. And that view is...

WE DON'T HAVE A CLUE ABOUT THE MYSTERIES OF THE UNIVERSE.

After all, that's why they're called mysteries. If we understood them, they would no longer be mysteries. What I mean, of course, is that when it comes to origins, we only have a small inkling¹ of what happened.

When you think about it, the Universe doesn't make any sense whatsoever. Suppose it has always been here. That means that the time we live in now is an infinite² amount of time from the *beginning*. Of course, you really can't call it a beginning since it never began, but nonetheless we are infinitely far into the future from that beginning thing, whatever you want to call it. So how did we get to our current time? It would have taken forever to get here. And let me tell you, *that's a loooooonnnnnng* time. It just doesn't make sense.

Now suppose that the Universe had a beginning. How did it begin? Was there anything before the beginning? It's easy to understand the beginning of something. Well, I have to admit that most men do not understand how arguments – uh, discussions – with their wives begin. But, generally, we do understand how things begin. We take our first swimming lesson. We start driving. We see our first naked person. However, there are always precursors (not to be confused with the pointers on prehistoric computers). When talking about the beginning of the Universe, we are talking about the beginning of *everything!* In fact, some physicists theorize that not only did all the matter and energy in the Universe begin at the Big Bang, but space and time themselves began. WOW! Try putting together a science project illustrating that one and see how far you get.

So, what was before the Big Bang? Well, supposedly there was *nothing* before it; there was no *before* before the Big Bang. Time did not exist. Any word or phrase that refers to an event on a time line would have no meaning *before* the Big Bang. Well, I don't know about you, but that sounds like poppycock to me, and I don't even know what poppycock is. I am a child of time. I live and breathe time. I move through time with the fluidity of a ballet dancer in *Swan Lake*. Okay, I exaggerate. Sometimes I am a total klutz moving through time. But the point is that I simply cannot think in terms of time not existing. The closest I have come is seeing a watch that has wound down (you do remember wind-up watches, don't you?) or a clock during a power failure (you do remember the kind with a face and hands without a battery backup, don't you?). But I understood that time was still flowing whether the watch or clock was working or not³.

Okay, *now* we are getting *nowhere!* It doesn't seem possible that the Universe has always been here, and it doesn't seem possible that the Universe, including space and time, started at some point from absolutely nothing. So, how did the Universe get here? Many people answer, as I stated above, that God created it. In other words, the Universe got its start from a powerful supernatural being. All righty then, *now* we are getting *somewhere!* The only problem is I don't understand *somewhere* any more than I understand *nowhere*.

¹ Perhaps enough to make the period at the end of this sentence, which supposedly is bigger than what the entire Universe was at the time of the Big Bang. It is hard for me to believe that the whole Universe could fit inside a period. I can't even get my waist to fit inside size 34 pants.

² For math-challenged Southerners, this means "much larger than a football field."

³ Perhaps you saw the old Twilight Zone where a man is given a stopwatch. He discovers that when he stops the watch, the entire world stops except for him. He begins using this for robbing banks and so forth. Then, during a heist, he drops the watch and can't get it started again. Time had stopped for everyone except, unfortunately, the man owning the stopwatch. Bummer! I hate it when that happens!

We have now shifted the discussion of origins from the Universe to God. Has God always existed? If so, how did we get to this point in time? Did God have a beginning? Then how did he begin? Some say that since God is supernatural and thus beyond the natural realm, He is not confined by space and time. But if He is beyond the natural, how can a person know He exists other than through a revelation? And for someone to just make up this supernatural explanation is what I call really thinking outside the box (the box here being the entire Universe). However, most people don't have to make it up. They can just listen to or read the writings of someone else, living or dead, who just made it up. Thus, only a few people have to think outside the box, everyone else just has to believe those few.

Okay, calm down. I hear your question. "But what if those few people are not thinking outside the box, but have genuinely had a revelation?" Well, even if they did, it is not something I can just accept without further corroboration. You know, if someone told me he owns a dog that can speak English, Spanish, Russian, and Pig Latin, I would not believe him. "Why?" you ask. Oh, come on now, you wouldn't believe him either, would you? So, why ask why? Well, for those who really want an answer, it's because I don't believe a dog can learn a language spoken by pigs, especially foreign ones. Actually, it's because I have not had any experience wherein I have observed a dog speaking a human language, let alone four (well, three plus an oddball one). And until I observed such a phenomenon, I would continue to disbelieve. Likewise, until I experience a revelation myself, I cannot allow myself to believe in supernatural revelation.

So, what do I believe about the origins of the Universe? I have stated the most important one, which I will state again.

WE DON'T HAVE A CLUE ABOUT THE MYSTERIES OF THE UNIVERSE.

But in addition to that, I will say this: I do believe the Universe exists. I believe I exist. And, unfortunately, I believe Willie Nelson exists. In other words, there is such a thing as existence and I believe it exists. Of course, there are the few skeptics that will ask, "How can one know that anything exists?" To which I respond, "What, are you nuts?" Hey, perhaps we are just the figments of our own imagination⁴. Perhaps our brains have minds of their own. Or, perhaps we are just gray matter in a mad scientist's lab, and he is feeding us sensory information⁵ that just makes us think we are who we think we are. I think that those who believe this are madder than the alleged scientist. But, even if it were true, what are we to do? We don't have much choice other than to respond to the sensory information we get, real or not (unless the movie *The Matrix* is correct, in which case we may be able to fight back in slow motion).

⁴ If this is true then I have serious doubts about my imagination. Why does my figment struggle with bench-pressing 50 pounds, huff and puff after three flights of stairs, have a balding head, an inner tube gut, and eyeglasses, when I could have figmented being any hunk I wanted to be? Is my imagination STARK RAVING MAD?

⁵ This includes sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. Our psychic friends will want to add ESP. And sports fanatics will include ESPN. I personally would like to add the sense-that-someone-is-watching-you-while-you-are-minding-your-own-business sense.

Therefore, as for beginnings, I accept the existence of the Universe, however it got here. To accept more as fact will require more evidence. 'Nuff said. So, let's continue on with a discussion of religion, which is closely related to the discussion just concluded.

2. Religion

I believe in God. Well, at least I tend to believe in Him. I know, I know. How can I say this based on what I said in the previous chapter? I say it because I too have a difficult time believing that the Universe, which consists of space, time, matter, and energy, could have existed forever or come into existence of its own accord. Therefore, I appeal to a higher power that is beyond the physical to explain the existence of the physical. However, I don't *know* He exists, I'm just guessing based on my current level of knowledge, which isn't much. Therefore, I like to refer to myself as a "theistic-leaning agnostic"⁶. Ah, forget that footnote. You're not going to find this combination of terms in the dictionary, and I know you don't want to tear yourself away from this fascinating book to look up words anyway. Therefore, in plain language, I am a person who doesn't know if God exists (agnostic), but who tends (leaning) to believe in God (theistic). Now that I think about it, I've already said this at the beginning of the paragraph. Oh well, repetition will help hammer it home.

Before we go any further, I need to define what I mean by *religion*. Here in the South, religion is defined as "the relentless pursuit of football." However, this is not the kind of religion I am talking about. My definition, give or take a few words, is "a belief in supernatural being(s) based on personal revelation(s) or others' revelation(s) that in turn leads to certain actions that are thought to be the will of the supernatural being(s)⁷." Based on this definition, I am *not* a religious person. Although I have a semi-belief in a supernatural being, I have had no personal revelations. Neither have I been convinced that anyone else has had a revelation. Also, I do not purport to have any special insights from this being as to how I should live my life. I have only those insights available to all people, which we usually call "lessons of life."

We learn many lessons in our lifetimes. Some come through experience; others are taught us by our parents, teachers, peers, authors, and comic strip characters. The ones we learn through experience are usually pretty vivid and teach us lessons the *hard way*. Below is a table illustrating actions we might take and the lessons we learn from them.

| Action | Lesson Learned |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Stick your hand in a raging fire. | Yikes! That hurt like hell ⁸ . I'll never do that again. |
| Slam a door against your toe. | Yikes! That hurt like hell ⁹ . I'll never do that again. |
| Listen to a Willie Nelson record. | Yikes! That hurt like hell ¹⁰ . I'll never do that again. |

Luckily, we usually have parents that want to teach us the consequences of our actions so we do not have to suffer in the learning process. When I was a kid, parents used to say things like:

⁶ Look it up in the dictionary. I don't have time to explain it here.

⁷ (S)orry for all the (s)'(s) in parenthe(s)e(s), but I wanted to be clear that the(s)e item(s) could be (s)ingular or plural.

⁸ Be aware that until one is 18 years old, it only hurts like heck. When 18 or older, it can legally hurt like hell.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

1. Don't run with those scissors, you might fall and stab yourself.
2. Don't get too close to the popgun, it can put your eye out.
3. Don't say those words in this house, or I will wash your mouth out with soap.
4. If you play with your wee-wee, you will go blind¹¹.

Of course, kids in this generation hear different things, like:

1. Don't run with that switchblade, you might fall and stab yourself.
2. No, you can't take your Uzi to school because all the other second graders will want one.
3. Keep saying those words in this house. Maybe we'll have a shot at being on the Jerry Springer show.
4. If you play with your wee-wee, you will go blind¹².

Proverb Interlude

I have heard it said that a stupid person is one who *does not* learn from his mistakes, a smart person is one who *does* learn from his mistakes, and a wise person is one who learns from *other* people's mistakes. I would like to add a fourth. A genius is a person who makes mistakes, but is able to convince others that his actions were absolutely right.

Many people think that the lessons of life aren't sufficient to keep people in line. They want more. The lessons of life are just a bit too vague for them. Everybody learns different lessons and interprets their experiences differently. This leads to relativism (which has nothing to do with the rash you get when family members come to visit). Many people don't like relativism because it leads to no one being able to state with certainty what is right and what is wrong or what is good and what is evil (*bad* can no longer be used, as it now means *good*). I can understand where these people are coming from because, under relativism, I cannot state with certainty that the latest Willie Nelson CD is dog dung. After all, someone else may think it is cow dung. So, these people believe that a more absolute standard *must* exist, such as the Old Testament, New Testament, Apocrypha, Book of Mormon, Koran, and many others. People believe their holy book(s) were written by God (usually through a human being). And since God is Absolute, His writings must represent an absolute standard by which all men should live.

Okay, let's suppose God did write down a guide by which man should live. How are we to decide which one it is?

Question: Is it the longest one?

Answer: No, God is not necessarily more wordy than men.

Question: How about the oldest one?

¹¹ Recent scientific studies have shown that this is only partially true, as attested by the fact that there are many more people that wear glasses or contacts than are blind. Today, many people try to hide their sordid past by having laser surgery.

¹² Of course, most parents now know about the conclusive evidence from the recent scientific studies, but they still tell their kids this to give them more incentive to stop. Of course, the kids also know about the studies and thus think their parents are ignoramuses.

Answer: There's no reason to believe that God wrote anything down early on as opposed to later on.

Question: How about the one reporting the most miracles?

Answer: God didn't have to perform miracles at all if He didn't want to.

Question: How about the one with the most Thee's and Thou's?

Answer: Why should we assume that God uses religious terminology?

Question: What about the one our parents believed in?

Answer: Our parents could have been wrong!

Question: Oh, I've got it. What about the one that best represents our conception of God and what is right and what is wrong?

Answer: Hey, I thought you were opposed to relativism.

Question: What about the one that allows us to drink the most, cuss the most, carouse the most, and know¹³ (wink, wink) the opposite sex the most?

Answer: Shut up, you pervert!

So you see, there really is no way to ensure a correct selection when there are many competing maybe-God-wrote-this books. Oh sure, you can do a lot of historical research to determine how accurate a particular book is in this respect, but if the book proclaims divine inspiration and the occurrence of miracles, there is no way to verify these except by a personal revelation. Lacking this, the book has to be accepted purely on faith. So, what do we end up with? Competing major religions¹⁴. In other words, relativism. You may say, "But that's only because men introduced false religions. If we only had the one true Word of God, relativism would go away." Oh, really!?!

Let's suppose that Christianity, the one I am most familiar with, was the one true religion. I have one question. Is it moral for an unmarried man and woman to dance together? "Yes! No! yEs! nO! yeS! no!" Hey, slow down, don't everyone speak at once! I asked a simple question. Why so many different answers¹⁵? Well, every denomination calling itself Christian interprets the Bible differently. Heck (or hell, as the case may be), it's not just different denominations. These same differences occur within different churches within the same denomination. But hey, why stop there? Differences occur within the same church. The preacher may say dancing is a sin, but a member of that church might say that dancing is not a sin, regardless of what the preacher says. (Can you spell *excommunication*? Whoops, sorry, I gave it away.) So, relativism is running

¹³ It's fortunate that the word *know* no longer has the same secondary meaning it had in the Bible. This has saved many a man from being slapped on the face when approaching a woman with the line, "Hey, didn't I used to *know* you?"

¹⁴ There are also some general religions and some private religions, but no corporal, sergeant, lieutenant, or colonel religions. Of course, the KFC Church of the Holy Chicken would disagree with the latter, but until the IRS recognizes them as a religion, I will not either.

¹⁵ Note that there is a slight difference between Yes, yEs, and yeS, as well as between No, nO, and no. (Hint: It has something to do with capitalization.)

rampant within an organization that claims as its spiritual guide a set of absolute rules. And it's not just about minor issues such as dancing, it's also about major issues such as killing.

Questioner: Is there ever moral justification for one person to kill another person?

Parishioner #1: Absolutely not. All life is precious in God's eyes. Man does not have the right to take even one of these precious lives.

Parishioner #2: Well, I think it's wrong to murder someone, but if I kill someone in self-defense, it's unfortunate, but acceptable.

Parishioner #3: I think it's wrong to take the life of an innocent human being. However, if someone has committed murder, I think it is appropriate to execute that person as a punishment. You know, eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth.

Parishioner #4: I disagree. The person we punish might become a convert if we let him live.

Parishioner #5: But what about times of war? We may have to kill innocent people just to get to the bad guys. They say war is hell. (Reminder: for minors, war is heck.) I agree, but I don't think God will hold it against us if we have to take innocent lives in the process of eliminating evil.

Parishioner #6: Hey, while you guys are talking, could you tell me where the beer is?

It appears that you can't get away from relativism. People may interpret the "lessons of life" differently, but they will also interpret supposed absolute rules differently. This is true of the Bible as well as other religious books. So, if indeed the Bible is the absolute Word of God, how is it that people can interpret it in so many different ways? Well, in some cases, people are simply trying to trash it and may willfully misinterpret it. However, in many cases people are confused by its contradictions and inconsistencies and therefore emphasize some parts to the exclusion of others. Additionally, there are sometimes just plain old honest disagreements over what is meant by certain passages. And occasionally a drunk will wander into the middle of a Biblical argument – uh, discussion – and start making stuff up just to be arguing. There is not much God can do – except a lightning bolt or two – about the person who willfully misinterprets the Bible or only emphasizes certain parts (if He wants us to have free will, that is. Of course, the drunk is more interested in free swill than free will). But He should have easily been able to eliminate the contradictions and inconsistencies as well as the honest disagreements. After all, He is God. He is all-powerful. Having good grammar and presentation skills should be second nature to Him¹⁶. And making sure no one changed anything once it was written should have been a breeze. Of course, it would have been easier if the Bible were originally written on a computer and the file marked as read-only.

Many of you may be upset that a "theistic-leaning agnostic" would have the gall to question the Bible, or some other maybe-God-wrote-this book. Well, I do have quite a bit of experience with the Christian religion and I have read about other religions. In fact, I *was* a Christian for several

¹⁶ Although I have to admit that it would have been more difficult back then since Microsoft did not exist. God would have to have gotten by without a grammar checker and without PowerPoint. However, there is always the possibility that Bill Gates *is* God (although the Department of Justice thinks he is the devil) and that he used these tools without letting anyone else know about them (yet another antitrust violation?). Maybe the problem was due to God using a buggy beta version of Office 2000 B.C. The Bible says, "In the beginning was the Word..." So, we know for sure Microsoft's word processor has been around a long time. Perhaps the rest of the Office suite has been also.

years and believed the Bible to be inerrant, even though I hardly knew anything about it. I have since discovered that there are many other people in this same boat, and it is sinking rapidly.

Proverb Interlude

A wise man once said, “It is much better to believe a sweet lie than a bitter truth.” Another wise man once said, “Sweet lies bring forth bitter character; bitter truths bring forth sweet character.” Actually, both statements were made by the same wise man, the latter after he came to his senses.

It all started with my attending church with some friends, which led to meeting with a professor at a local Bible college, which led to studying the Bible, which led me to fearing that I would go to hell if I did not become a Christian. (Had I been under 18, I would have feared going to heck, as the law requires.) So I joined the church. It was exhilarating. I made many new friends. I also did door knocking to pass out literature, attended worship services and Bible studies religiously (no pun intended¹⁷), spoke to others about my faith, and other churchy type things.

All that changed two years later. My wife and I began a detailed study of the Bible starting in Genesis. I had always heard that the best way to strengthen one’s faith was to study the Bible. Well, for me, that wasn’t true. I began seeing so many things that didn’t make sense, I could hardly stand reading the Bible anymore. It was quite a depressing experience seeing my faith slip away. In fact, Dr. Kevorkian approached me twice to offer his assistance. I declined as I wanted to see where my new beliefs would lead me and thought this would be difficult to do if I were dead. Some of you will say they will lead me to hell (or heck maybe?), but I beg to differ. I cannot go to a nonexistent place.

I really did try to understand the Bible. I approached Bible professors, church elders, preachers, and so forth. To my dismay, none had sufficient answers to my questions. What I eventually discovered was that Bible believers, even the most entrenched students of it, just simply believed the Bible by faith. Whenever they were approached with a difficult question about the Bible, the typical response was, “I don’t understand everything about the Bible. Some of it doesn’t make sense to me either. But you have to understand that God’s ways are higher than our ways. We just have to step out on faith and trust Him whether we understand what He says or not.” Yeah, right! Anybody could say that about any maybe-God-wrote-this book.

So, what do I mean by *faith*? In the South, faith is the belief that your football team will win even if they have lost the last 3,478 games in a row. This is similar to the way I define faith, which is “the belief that something is true regardless of the evidence.” In some cases, a faith is held without sufficient evidence. In other cases, a faith is held even in light of evidence to the contrary. For instance, there are some people who really believe that Willie Nelson is a good singer despite the overwhelming evidence (his records) to the contrary. The problem is that if faith is used to choose a religion, then all religions are equally valid. After all, I can believe the Koran without any evidence just as easily as I can believe the Bible without any evidence. There has to be some way of distinguishing the two to determine which, if either, is true. Well, indeed,

¹⁷ NOT!

there is such a way. It is the way of *reason*. Reason is the opposite of faith. Reason requires evidence before believing something. The process by which reason is applied is known as logic, or non-contradictory identification. In other words, a reasoned approach to our beliefs does not allow us to hold any contradictory beliefs. Of course, there is one well known exception to this rule. It is perfectly acceptable to believe that having children is both the best and the worst decision you ever made.

Reason has been a great benefactor of man in that it has been a part of the scientific method for years. Men from around the world with diverse backgrounds have been able to look at evidence objectively and draw the exact same conclusions. Faith, however, divides men¹⁸ rather than brings them together. Oh sure, it can draw together people of the same faith, but not people from divergent faiths. After all, if the basis of your beliefs is faith and the basis of another person's beliefs is faith, then there is no common ground on which persuasion can be used for one to convince the other that his beliefs are the true ones. Witness the number of wars that have been fought between people of different faiths¹⁹, each side believing it had a corner on truth and worshipped the *true* God. However, reason *can* accomplish unity between diverse groups, if they will look at the evidence and appropriately apply logic to it.

Please don't get me wrong. I do not believe that reason is a panacea for all the world's ills. This is because, in many circumstances, it takes a lot of data in order for logic to be used to draw appropriate conclusions. Mankind, being limited by space and time, cannot always collect as much data as is needed. Therefore, we sometimes have to make decisions with incomplete knowledge. This is when faith becomes an appropriate tool. It acts as a bridge to span the gap in our knowledge. We sometimes call this type of faith "a gut feeling"²⁰, "a hunch," "going with our instincts," or, in Star Wars terminology, "stretching out with our feelings." Sometimes this faith stems from deeply ingrained knowledge that was originally based on reason, but which could not be pulled to the mental surface in sufficient time to make a decision. Other times, this faith is based on pure speculation (like picking 00 on a roulette wheel 6,000 times in a row).

Anyway, there is a place for both reason and faith in our decision making, however reason must be primary as it is the most reliable method of ascertaining truth. Faith should only be used to supplement reason when a decision has to be made before a reasoned conclusion can be reached. If a decision is not really necessary, then an opinion can be reserved for the future when more information may be available.

So, you must think that I hate religion and anyone associated with it. Oh, contraire, mon frère (pardon my French). The two most important people in my life, my wife and son, are both Christians. Many of my friends are Christians. One of my favorite styles of music is Contemporary Christian. (God forbid that Willie Nelson should ever start playing this type of music.) My experience is that most religious people are good and honest people, which are the kind of people I like to hang with. And, besides, men and women of faith generally do not live their lives totally by faith. They understand that this is impossible and thus use reason to a great extent. What I don't like is when religion influences people to hold irrational beliefs that lead to

¹⁸ During the dark ages, this was literally true as men of faith divided heathens' limbs from their bodies on a rack.

¹⁹ As attested by the number of dead bodies after the Alabama-Auburn football game each year.

²⁰ Sometimes this is just those burritos working on you, so be careful.

harming themselves or other people. This can be something as simple as not marrying the right person because he or she has a different religion. Or it can be as devastating as going to war with a group of people because they are *infidels* while your group is God's chosen people.

In conclusion, I am not religious and do not believe there is a *true* religion²¹. However, I do not have a big problem with people being religious as long as they temper their faith with enough reason to avoid doing dumb stuff, especially to other people, and even more especially to me. You may be wondering how people should determine the appropriate way to live if there is no religion to tell them. That is the job of philosophy, which I will cover next.

²¹ I have a friend who visualizes judgment day as being like the Oscars. God will step forth and say, "May I have the envelope please?" He will then open it and state, "And the winner in the One True Religion category is..."

3. Philosophy

Why?

Because.