

Answers to Twenty-Five Questions

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Introduction

The following are responses to twenty-five questions *Christian Materialism* can expect to encounter from anyone familiar with traditional Christianity. While it is true that these responses were written for a person who is already familiar with the text—within which it is to be found as an appendix—I believe that they should still prove instructive to a person reading from apart from text and might, perhaps, allow a person to become acquainted with the text as if this were a summary. In any case, my mission here was to answer good questions, and to show that Christianity has nothing to fear from Christian Materialism. and very much to gain.

Answers to Twenty-Five Questions

1. *Don't you deny that man has a soul?*

What is denied, unequivocally, is that man is a ghost in a machine. What is denied is that the soul is a spiritual thing inside the body. But Christian Materialism implies not denial of spirituality. Rather, spirituality was explained in terms of the creative organization of matter. This explanation was recommended by the fact that everything else in the world is so easily explained in terms of the organization of parts. This and the principle of economy recommended our new view. By providing a basis for a new view of personal responsibility, it renders itself not only compatible with Christianity but helpful to faith.

Those who would say “I still believe in the soul” are reminiscent of those who said “I still believe the Bible” when faced with evolution. Sometimes people cannot move beyond a certain way of conceiving a more basic belief. Nonetheless, just as creation does not need to be a six-day miracle, spirituality does not require that we believe in something that was always problematic and has now been replaced by an idea that is part of a whole system which well answers numerous questions which were hitherto mysteries.

One more point: By invalidating anything so simplistic as reincarnation, our new view of the soul clearly establishes the superiority of Christianity as a system of belief.

2. Denying free will, don't you deny that we are personally responsible for who we are and what we do?

First of all, never denied was the reality of free, i.e., uncompelled, deliberate choice that is truly mine. What was denied was the idea of uncaused choice. And this was never a proper basis for belief in personal responsibility. What is a proper basis for belief in personal responsibility is our recognition that a person as a person—as the person that he is—is involved in his response to everything that happens to him. Since this response changes him, a lifetime of this process results in personal responsibility.¹

Those who would say “I still believe in the free will” are reminiscent of those who said “I still believe the Bible” when faced with evolution. Sometimes people cannot move beyond a certain way of conceiving a more basic belief. Nonetheless, just as creation does not need to be a six-day miracle, freedom does not require that we believe in something that was always problematic and has now been replaced by an idea that is part of a whole system which well answers numerous questions which were hitherto mysteries.

3. Denying free will, don't you deny that we can sin?

First of all, it never made sense to speak of sin as choosing evil—choosing evil because it is evil. Man has no motive to choose evil. (This is what we implicitly acknowledge when we speak of the especially bad person

¹ *Don't you still deny that a person can overcome his past?*

If you are asking whether an individual can overcome a bad background—a background whose general characteristics generally lead to bad results—the answer, obviously, is yes. Experience also teaches that, in individual instances, a person can learn a lot from a little and make it to extraordinary accomplishments or even holiness.

as “sick.”) Man, however, has lots of motive to choose selfishly. This is sin. It is ungodly. It is not good. Our job is to grow out of it.

To those who might fear that their ongoing examination of conscience, frequent repentance, and constant conversion, is somehow now depreciated: In no way. We are here to grow, to grow out of ignorance and selfishness, and this means that we are called to avoid bad acts and habits. The most deliberate way we do this is to examine our conscience, to repent of our sins and other mistakes, and to seek to go forward embracing our faith ever more firmly sometimes by big steps.

4. Doesn't determinism make a victim out of any evil-doer?

In a sense, yes. But this does not mean that he should not be punished. Without punishment, society would suffer. Without punishment, few of us would grow. Determinism is just another reason not to hate.

5. Asserting divine determinism, how can you still insist that we are responsible?

As we have seen, personal responsibility comes from the fact that a person as a person—as the person he is—is involved in his response to everything that happens to him. Since his response changes him, a lifetime of this process results in personal responsibility. Nonetheless, since the events to which he responds were ordered by God, he still becomes the person that God wanted him to be.

It is also to be remembered that, thanks to the theology of grace, Christianity already holds that all good—and therefore the good we *don't* get—is ultimately owed to God. And this was already a problem. We have offered a solution. If it is unacceptable, we need another solution, and also a solution to the historical problem of providence.

One more point: Our new theology of human action spares us from endlessly making allowances for the variety of circumstances in which people are raised and/or find themselves.

6. So, you don't believe in miracles?

Let us clarify the essential issue: The issue is not whether God *can* do miracles (of course, He can), the issue is whether we believe *in* miracles; in other words, does having faith require us to believe in miracles? The answer here is no.

First of all, as one-of-a-kind, utterly mysterious events, miracles, and even less so miracle stories, are not something a person could ever judge for himself. Thus, miracles stories could never be a matter of faith, i.e., our most mature judgment.

Secondly, aside from the resurrection, there is nothing that has actually happened in this world that God could not have brought about according to His plan. Thus, miracles presume an extraordinary that is not necessary. This does not respect our God-given reason.

Rather, respect for reason clearly suggests skepticism. It is fact of human nature that people presume the super-natural for everything they cannot explain. It is a fact of human history that the presumption of miracles has declined as humanity has progressed (and people are better educated). And it is everyone's experience that the world acts as expected, except in rare cases, most of which are later explained.

Moreover, progress in faith has provided to us a grand vision of God's work through creation, and of the rightness of faith in His plan at all times. Isn't this faith, and nothing less, the rightful goal of every believer?

A pastoral answer to the question, Do miracles happen? If you mean, Does God's plan often surprise us? the answer is "of course." Of course, often we are surprised because we—or doctors—think we knew what was bound to happen naturally and we were wrong. In any case, surprises happen and they are not wrong to hope for, even to pray for since a relationship with God, as with anyone, requires us to express what we feel. But, from the point of view of mature faith, what is the goal of our ongoing relationship with God, get a miracle or grow in confidence in His plan?

7. If God's plan always brings about the best thing that can happen, why bother?

Notably, this is never the attitude of those who do believe that everything that happens follows God's plan. Such people know that their lives too have followed God's plan; they love themselves, and this always inspires in them a sincere love for others.

Besides, God's plan may bring about the best thing that can happen, but it does not work apart from what we do. And, until we act, and things have happened that cannot be changed, the future is ours to make. Therefore, our job is to try to see things as they are and to work for what we think is best.

Two more reasons that faith in God's plan does not call for complacency:

We cannot outguess God. We do not know why His plan calls for what it does. The fact that it is raining does not necessarily mean that God does not want us to go on a picnic. Maybe He wants us to go and get wet.

We are here to grow. The fact that we did something does not mean that God wants us to continue doing it. Maybe He wants us to learn from our mistake and try harder to do better.

8. If everything that happens is bound to follow God's plan, why pray?

First of all, let us be clear. We do not pray in order to change God's mind. We pray because, in order to have a relationship with God, we need to be able to tell Him how we feel.

To have a relationship with anyone, we need to tell this person how we feel. If something is on our mind and we do not express it to our friend, we fail to connect. But, if we do express it, even if it has nothing to do with our friend, we feel more connected than ever.

This is the reason to pray, even to pray for something. To feel connected. To know that God is there. To know that God is God, and, according to His plan, everything will be all right.

This is the reason to pray, even to pray for something. We need to express to God what we feel. But then we say: "But *Thy* will be done."

“Please, God; but *Thy* will be done.”²

9. *Are you saying that God planned the hard things that happen?*

Point One: To understand the hard things that happen according to God’s plan, we must first recognize the reason hard things are possible:

We are here to participate in our creation. If we had been made perfect, we would already be all that we could be. We could not grow. We could not do the one thing we are here for.

Therefore, we—and the world of which we are part—had to have been made imperfect. This is the reason that we are born as babies, unformed, ignorant and utterly selfish. This is the reason that we can fail; we can make mistakes; we can be misguided; we can become “sick.” This is the reason we can be hurt; and when we *are* hurt we suffer.

Point Two: Hard things lead to good things that could not have happened as well otherwise. Though faith says this is always the case, it can be seen happening in terms of:

the bad breaks that lead to good fortune,

the greater appreciation we gain when we overcome something difficult,

and the growth that so often comes through pain and other problems.

(Who doesn’t have many stories along these lines?)

² *If everything that happens follows God’s plan, doesn’t this mean that even our ongoing thoughts are following His plan? If so, what is prayer?*

Even though our ongoing thoughts follow God’s plan, they are still our thoughts; they are still expressions of our-selves to God. They are heard; they drive and direct our growth; they are a most direct participation in the purpose of life.

Point Three: We are here, not for a good time, but rather to prepare for our eternal life with God. Actually, we are here, not to become the people that we will be with God, but rather the seeds of the people that we will be with God. These are seeds that God will complete at the moment of our death, raising us up to the full life of heaven. Only then will the “why” of many of our experiences come to light. In many cases, we will find that things we went through will help us to understand God as otherwise we would not.

Point Four: We affect each other. Indeed, we owe each other for who we are.

We owe people who help us; we owe people who cause us problems. (Without problems, what would we have to work on? Without people who need help, how could we love?)

We also owe people we never meet—who built my car or wrote that book.

We owe the present; we profoundly owe the past—we owe our parents, our parents’ parents, their parents’ parents, and all the people who affected them—for bad as well as good.

Behold the subtlety of God’s plan. After all, we would never have been born were it not for countless events which, at the time that they happened, seemed to make no sense. Nonetheless, God was using them, in part, in making us. In part, in what is happening to us, He is at work in the making of our brothers and sisters yet to be born.

Point Five: We are here to participate in our creation as the family we will be in heaven. And how does the human family grow? The answer—slowly, generation by generation, as more and more people do better and better. Nonetheless, this means that at any given time many people will still be far from what some want the world to be. This is the right answer to those who look at the state of things in society and ask whether, “God wants this?”

10. Isn’t your idea that “imperfection is the pre-requisite of growing” too quick a response to the horror of human suffering?

Perhaps the problem lies in the fact that the elements of our response to the problem of evil were developed at different points in our argument; perhaps they will make more sense if they are summarized in one place.

First of all, imperfection *is* the pre-requisite of growing. And growing is the way in which we participate in our creation, acquiring the creature's version of the self-sufficiency that is the essence of God's life. Shouldn't we expect such a project to involve the greatest difficulties that we might imagine?

Secondly, imperfection means imperfection; if it does not involve things we really don't want, it is not really imperfection.

Thirdly, since life in this world prepares us for life with God, life in this world must be in some way like life with God; otherwise how could our experience here prepare us to see God? Thus, when it is heading in the right direction, it is experienced as good. When it is headed in the wrong direction, it is experienced as bad—sometimes very bad.

Even were the above not true, were nothing experienced as bad, we would have no motive to give ourselves to the project of our life. Indeed, when one looks at the actual experience of people in this regard, we can see that it is precisely in the struggle with pain that we are doing the work of creating ourselves. When we consider the suffering of innocents, we can see that we *were* made to be a family—that “we” were made to create “us.”

And it is not glib to point out that once we get to heaven we will discover that what we gained for our suffering was far more precious than what we paid—and would gladly pay again.

Nonetheless, suffering is still horrible right now. And God knows it. He knows that He has asked a lot of us in order to give us the fullest possible sharing in His life, and He goes through all of it with us. As we have concluded, God knows our thoughts better than we do, and He knows our feelings for all that they are. He bears the pain of each of us at every second.

Two more points:

Compared to the eternal happiness of heaven, the duration and pain of our preparation here on earth is infinitesimal. In other words, we will see that it is virtually zero but still accomplished its purpose.

Suffering is not “cumulative.” In other words, the world’s pain is no greater than the pain one person feels. In other words, no one suffers any more than one person’s pain—except for God.

11. *Does all this mean that people who cause suffering don’t pay for it.?*

First, let us notice that the person who leads a bad life gets a bad life. Faith is its own reward, and a person with little faith has received little of the gifts of faith. These, if we understand them, are worth so much more than money, etc. Thus, point one: Let us not think that a sinner has gotten away with anything. He has not. He has lost a lot for his lack of faith.

If only for this very reason, we might realize that deep-down this is not what a person would have done if he had known better. If he had known better, or had better control of his feelings, he would have done better. As Jesus said from the cross looking at those who put them there, who were mocking him at the time: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” On this basis God forgives all of us for all our many failures to love.

In cases where people have hurt *us*, and it seems impossible that we will be able to forgive them, let us remember that death will be the transformation of us all, us in our ability to see and love the truth, and others such that whatever evil that was in them will be gone completely. This transformation of others will also involve a deep desire for forgiveness that will change how we see them, even as dramatic change in people and a deep desire for forgiveness changes how we see them now.

12. *So, you’re saying that a killer goes to heaven the same as me?*

No, we are not saying that a killer goes to heaven the same as the holiest of people. Since he goes with less holiness, he goes less like God, and less able to share God’s life. But since even his mistakes were part of God’s plan—maybe they made possible other people’s goodness, they will surely lead to countless good things yet to happen—we will, as we should,

share with him what we will get from God, and he with us however little that may be.

13. *Does this mean that God's plan wanted this person, and the rest of us, to have less in heaven?*

No, God planned for us to grow as well as we might—as a family. This means that at any one time some will do better than others until the some can teach the others how to do better. All of this happens according to God's plan for our whole human family, and for history.

14. *If it is already God's plan that all of us share equally in everything, what's the point of my sacrifice?*

To answer this question, we begin by pointing out—once more—that God's plan does not work apart from what we do. And, until we act, and things have happened that cannot be changed, the future is ours to make. Therefore, *your* sacrifice will make heaven better for everyone—and therefore also for you. Of course, this raises another question:

15. *If all of us will ultimately share equally in everything, where's the justice?*

First of all, love surpasses justice—and love is not love if its object was *my* reward.

Secondly, people do the best they can with what they are given.

Thirdly, in the grand scheme of God's plan, people play the part that they were meant to play. The success of God's plan requires them to play this part. If they would be forever less because this was the part God gave them, where is the justice?

More importantly, let us notice that the family view of salvation makes sense of the struggle of human history. It makes sense of the fact that we, the people of today, are the product of much progress—and the lives and deaths of those who came before us, people who themselves achieved little

but paved the way for what we could achieve. The family view of salvation makes sense of death of infants, and of the lives of other people who never had a chance. Dealing with the problems that limited their lives *is* our growth as a family. (And, so often, dealing with other people’s limitations *is* the holiness of those who do it.) The family view of salvation also makes sense because, in the idea that every person’s life will be greater for what everyone will do and share, it corresponds to what already happens here.

One more thought: The family view of salvation makes sense of self-sacrifice—something which would not make sense if salvation is all about me growing as much as I can.

16. Departing so dramatically from the historical understanding of basic ideas, don’t you deny infallibility?

History, especially the reform of the teaching “Outside the Church No Salvation,” has already demonstrated the “Indeducibility of Doctrinal Developments” and, in particular, the fact that the “Essence is Determined Only in Retrospect” and, when it does, it involves the “Abandonment of Elements Once Believed Essential.”³ An honest look at what Christian Materialism has suggested will reveal precisely this process.

Actually, an honest look at what traditional Christianity has proposed will reveal that this process has already operated in the Church’s look back at Jesus’ birth as that of a messiah, and his death as our redemption, etc.

Nonetheless, to develop doctrine is a difficult business. Someone has to decide whether or not we have moved in the right direction—and whether the new ideas should now become the official faith. This is the job of the Church. Its decisions are guided by God’s plan. This is infallibility.

17. Departing so dramatically from the historical understanding of basic ideas, don’t you deny that the Bible is the Word of God?

³ These last three quoted phrases are section headings in *Christian Materialism*.

As our foundational text, the Bible is most definitely the Word of God as other books are not. As the historical basis of the Christian faith, its words were selected by God's plan with special care. But its human authors were still human. Their job was to put God's truth into terms that they and their fellows could understand. Having progressed much since they wrote, we need to interpret their writings from the perspective of our ideas today. The alternative is....

18. *Don't you deny the divinity of Christ?*

Here is a question that deserves a complete response.

We begin by noting that the popular view of the divinity of Christ—that Jesus was God—involves the idea that God encapsulated Himself in the form of Jesus. This, however, is the old and oft condemned heresy of “monarchism.” The idea was rejected because: It ignored the idea that Jesus was most of all God's *son*. It did not deal with the question Who was being God while God was being Jesus? (Who did Jesus pray to?) And, it did not do justice to the vast recollection that Jesus was human.

For these reasons, orthodox Christianity has always insisted that Jesus was absolutely human, and that Jesus was God but not the Father. His divinity concerned the fact that he had come from God's own being. This idea is maintained in Christian Materialism. In Jesus, and in all humanity, God became man. (Jesus is the place where this is seen.) This new view of the incarnation is an obvious implication of our new view of creation. It requires no “extra” faith and yet it bespeaks even more love than was implied by the traditional doctrine of the incarnation.

It is also to noted that conceiving the incarnation in larger terms as a certain parallel in the way the Church has learned to see itself in larger terms. In other words, once being a son or daughter of God was seen in narrow, exclusive terms. Now it is seen in everyone.

One last point: The difficulties in accepting new ideas are sure to diminish once it is no longer necessary to unteach the old ideas. In other words, taught only the new formulas, the next generation will be able to take them at face value and not critique them against old formulas (like “Jesus is God”) which previous generations never really understood. (It will be really

wonderful when people are no longer taught biblical-era theology—about devils, angels, apocalypses, hell, etc.—that has to be qualified on the very day we would teach it today.)

19. *Don't you deny the Trinity?*

What we have done is make sense of it. In effect, much as we did with the incarnation, presenting the teaching in a two-tiered way—offering both a simple and deeper meaning of the idea that Jesus is God's Son—we have offered simple reasons to speak of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit while at the same time made sense of the deeper idea that God is more than one person (as we are persons). This idea was then used to make utter sense of the doctrine of Church.

20. *Don't you deny that sacraments give grace?*

What we say is that sacraments are acts of God by commission. This way they do work *ex opere operato*. They give help inasmuch as they inspire those who know what they are saying.

21. *Don't you deny that the Eucharist is the body of Christ?*

Quite the contrary. What we have done is to allow our theology of the Eucharist to grow with our theology of the incarnation. What we have done is to demonstrate that the gift of self which God proclaimed in Jesus' body and blood on the cross is naturally, unmistakably to be seen in what we bless when we repeat the last supper. What we have done is to make sense of the Church's teaching that the Eucharist really is the body and blood of Christ. What we have done is to make contact with God through the Eucharist something that anyone will feel.

A final thought: The Eucharist was meant to help people live their faith; it was not meant to make faith harder.

22. *Don't you deny the need for faith?*

No. What we have denied is that the truth of faith cannot be demonstrated. (In this, we have affirmed the Church's constant teaching.) And we have affirmed that faith is knowledge gained from life. We have demonstrated that faith is the highest stage of human development.

Prior to this discovery, the idea that faith is a choice inspired by grace served to defend faith from those who were troubled by the lack of "proof." It also explained away disagreement. (Unbelievers were simply stubborn.) Thanks to our new view of human knowing, these services are no longer needed.

23. *Don't you suggest that Christianity teach materialism, a philosophy?*

No. As we have seen, faith is an explanation of reality, not its description. Faith is how we explain the meaning of life, not the mechanism of life. Though it is true that materialism "pushed" faith in the direction of the doctrines which we have articulated, these doctrines will not be accepted unless they strike people as consistent with their experience of God, and of the truth of faith *per se*.

We might also note that materialism hardly brought these developments out of the blue. Rather, it provided icing on the cake, confirmation of conclusions long in the offing. For example, history had long had problems with the classical ideas of freedom and grace. Materialism made clear that what we suspected was true—that God is the ultimate cause of everything, that freedom has to do with us at work with Him. (Evolution provided this same service to modern biblical criticism.) The results: New ways to explain the ultimate "why," new views of the basic truths about life and death that bear directly upon the human spirit. This is the matter for doctrine. And doctrine can be framed without resort to specific scientific or philosophical positions.

24. *Hasn't materialism, and with it, mechanistic determinism, been discredited?*

What have been discredited are the straw men which say that matter is a billiard ball, and that physics could predict my annoyance at having the need to answer this question. In philosophy, matter has never been

understood as anything other than the underlying stuff out of which everything else is made—however it might look or act. In this author’s philosophy, explanation involves organization; all the sciences are respected; and prediction is never promised, nor can we imagine it—except as God can do it.

To those who might hope to discredit materialism by talking about the size of the universe—which contains trillions of stars each of which is made up of unnamed numbers of sub-atomic units constantly involved in a virtually infinite number of interactions most of which take place at the speed of light: We would respond by asking, And who made all these things, and who sustains them, allowing them to be what and where they are at every moment? Let’s get back to basics. We know that God exists because we experience that everything has its origin in Him. It is our experience that this everything includes everything we might imagine. God is not some great thing in the universe or alongside it; He is greater than everything in every way and cannot be less than anything we can imagine. Surely, then, the fact that we could not begin to do what we can barely imagine being done hardly means that God could not do it. And it is our definition of God that He can.

It is especially “inconsistent” when religious thinkers hope to discredit materialism by talking about the size of the universe because these same thinkers have no problem preaching about a God who is simultaneously giving His entire attention to every person who is currently praying, and who loves with all His heart all the billions (or maybe many more) He has already made.

Likewise, those who would “spiritualize” creation, i.e., talk about it as somehow having a mind of its own, to which God somehow relates with love—*not* answering the questions, What, then, is matter? or There is matter and what?—will still preach that God has a reason for every hard thing that happens, and that God has made them who they are right down to their very genes.

One suspects that some religious thinkers try to delimit God to something less than we can imagine because they have not really figured out how to reconcile science with faith. But this, of course, was the purpose of *Christian Materialism*.

25. *Aren't you asking for just too much?*

No, I don't think so. I think, first of all, we have to face the facts. Human progress has revealed to us certain things about how reality works and these things do not support some of our traditional ideas about God. We do not have the option of not facing the facts. But, as long as we notice that our deeper ideas about reality ask us to see *everything* differently, we can see that we are not being asked to acknowledge that we were "wrong" about any particular thing. What is better, our new ideas take away the menace of science and other aspects of modern thinking. Where once certain ideas could not be admitted because to admit them would be to bring down the whole religious system or, at the very least, to deny certain very basic things we just knew were true—sin is bad, for example, or when you see Jesus you see God—now we have ways of explaining these things that will make sense to everyone and which require us to deny nothing we need to believe, especially as progress is deepening our way of seeing everything, including God. This was the purpose of *Christian Materialism*.