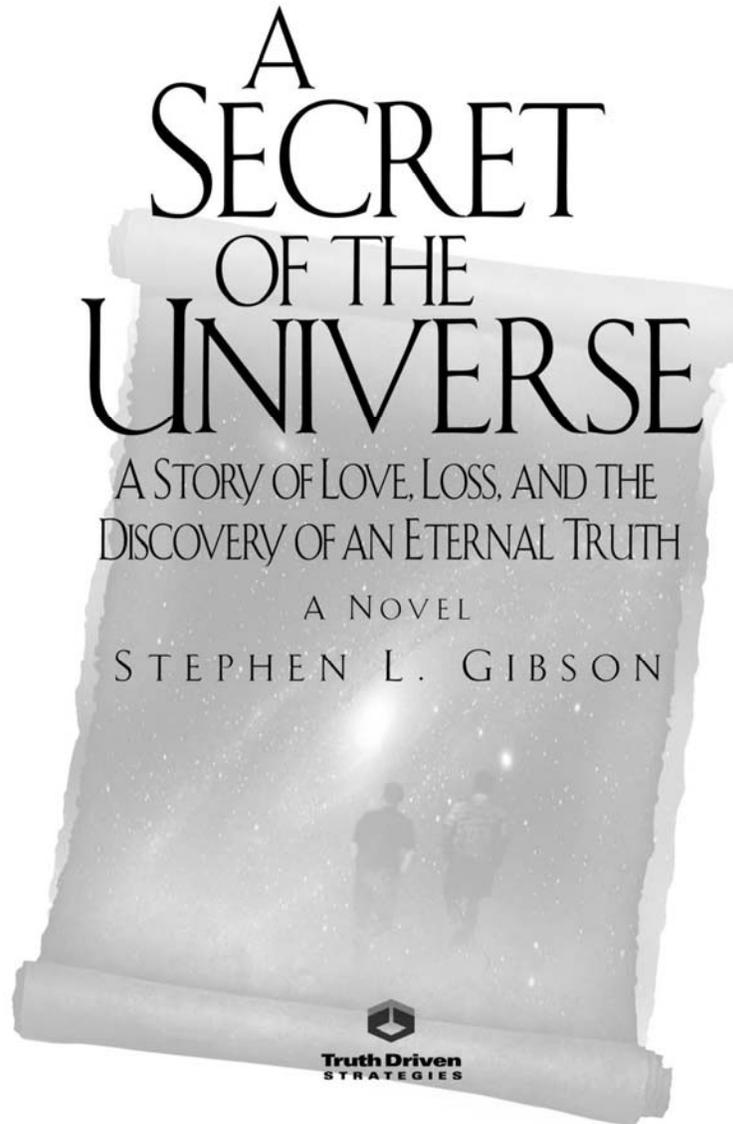


Official Chapter-by-Chapter

Discussion Guide

for



Discussion Guide written by
Stephen L. Gibson & Reverend Billie Dalton

Note: References to God mirror the context of the chapter, and for the purposes of this discussion guide, certain assumptions are made. For example where Ian and Bill discuss God, even these questions will assume the existence of a Christian God pertinent to that chapter.

[Chapter 1 – The Edge of Belief](#) 1

Sunday, October 11th, 2009—Madison, Wisconsin

We meet Bill and Christina under less than flattering circumstances. The ability of the human mind to see what we want to see, and rationalize it, is powerful. Are there any circumstances on which an affair might be morally justifiable? How does it appear Bill is rationalizing his affair? What other seemingly incomprehensible acts have been rationalized by similar means? How does one come to such beliefs? How do we know for certain that Bill is incorrect? Is there any conceivable circumstance under which his rationalization could be true?

Ian and Mac are piloting a business jet when an emergency announcement is made by air traffic control. Before you gained some information as to the nature of the emergency, from Ian's wife Samantha, what was your first thought? Did you leap to any conclusion about what might have happened, or who might have been involved?

[Chapter 2: Foreign News](#) 9

Twenty-four years earlier, in 1985, Ian Keppler awakes in Madrid to shocking and unexpected news. Have you ever had a similar experience? If so, what was your first reaction? Was it similar to Ian's, turning to prayer and a higher power and concern for others, or was it anger? Denial? Something else?

Ian's best friend, Bill Vanderveen, receives the bad news from his parents, who were close friends of Bob Keppler's. Why do you think Bill cared so much for Mr. Keppler? Why did the prayer rub Bill the wrong way? Have you ever had a similar reaction to prayer in a crisis situation?

What message do you think Mrs. Newman was sending Ian when she left him alone by the sangria cooler? Was she right or wrong to handle the situation the way she did? Would you guess that Bill's parents, the Vanderveens, would agree or disagree with your answer?

[Chapter 3: The Quest for Comfort](#) 23

Kalamazoo, MI—Saturday morning (6 hours behind)

What do you think is going on in Bill's head as his mother cites Romans 8:28? Do all things work together for good?

Bill’s mother then poorly articulates her frustration that her friend Mrs. Keppler had been healed, but that Mr. Keppler might not have had the luxury of time to seek prayer and healing in a formal way. What did Bill hear when she said, “To be honest I’m also struggling a little with where Bob was with his faith?”

Bill’s mother then mentions Luke 8:50, where Jesus says to Jairus that he should just believe and he will be healed. How might she be interpreting that passage incorrectly? Or is she correct?

What’s your reaction to what happened between Bill and Kim? What was going on with each of them emotionally? Is their behavior consistent with their pledge? What do you know about the scriptures Pastor Mike provided at the youth retreat? Are they clear?

Kim has vicariously experienced the potential negative consequences of sexual relations through her sister’s experience. How has this affected her behavior?

[Chapter 4: Divine Intervention](#) 33

Madrid, Spain—Sunday morning

As Ian travels home, he has two profound experiences. The first is with Daniel from South Africa. What is Daniel’s message to Ian? What was your reaction to Daniel’s message?

Ian experiences what he describes as a time shift, almost feeling as if time has come to a stop. Have you ever experienced such a thing during a traumatic event?

With Catalina and with Daniel, Ian finds such depth of experience and comfort that he reflects upon the possibility that they were sent by God to comfort him? Is that a possibility, in your mind? Are there such things as angels?

[Chapter 5: Big Questions](#) 51

Ian’s grueling journey culminates in a mysterious and powerful religious experience. Have you ever had such a powerful religious experience? Do you believe such experiences can really be a message from God, or was it Ian’s imagination? Explain.

Ian reflects with perplexed guilt over having masturbated the night before the funeral, during the height of such a sad, non-sexual, traumatic event. He and his friends know of Matthew’s words in 5:28, that even looking at a woman lustfully means you have sinned in your heart. As with Bill’s situation, how can one reconcile these behaviors with these beliefs? Is Ian correct to feel guilty?

Ian struggles with visions and dreams of his father. Are the visions real or imagined? Is it possible to see dead people in spirit form? Have you ever seen or experienced such a thing after the loss of loved one?

As the friends talk by the pool, they ask some pretty tough questions. Did God want Mr. K dead? Did God “kill” Mr. K as Bill suggests? Is God omniscient (all-knowing and all-seeing)? Does God have to allow bad things to happen in order that we have the “free will” required to choose? If so, does that mean this life is just a big test in God’s petri dish as Bill mentions?

Kim and Ian jump in and answer Bill’s question about how God can be all-good (omnibenevolent) and also be all-powerful (omnipotent). What did you think of their explanation? What did Bill think of it? Some say that omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and omniscience are impossible traits to possess at the same time. They say that if one can see the future, and can change it, but chooses not to, she either lacks the power to do so (isn’t omnipotent), doesn’t want to and is therefore is not benevolent and good, or can’t really see the future in the first place (omniscient). What do you think?

Chapter 6: The Seeds of Fallibility 63

Bill and Ian develop a movie-going tradition that transcends their recurrent “Back to the Future” experiences, and provides opportunities for quality time, sharing, and trying to make sense of the big questions they face. Amidst the laughter over their recollection of finding men’s magazines in the 6th grade, Bill discloses a new twist. Bill’s father, Don Vanderveen, humiliated him when he found the stash. Was the garbage plate on the table an effective teaching tool, given the circumstances? Why?

When it comes to rationalizations, how does Flaco rationalize his semi-destructive behavior, or taking \$5 of change that didn’t belong to him? Have you ever crossed into an ethical gray area in business or life, rationalized at least in part by your idea of how corrupt or unlikable is the person or company “paying the stupid tax?”

For Ian, why were the women about whom he cared most, usually absent from the list of girls after whom he lusted?

Bill is obviously still struggling with what he believes. He expresses frustration with a fellow volunteer at church who lost her pencil; she believed God was testing her patience by moving the pencil. What do you think? Does God arbitrarily move pencils to test one’s faith? Might he use your absentmindedness to teach you a lesson? Or is this all a self-delusional explanation of very earthly forgetfulness?

Have you ever heard the phrase, “God will not give you more than you can handle?” Do you agree with that? How do you explain suicides?

In his conversation with Ian, Bill questions the sexual ethics he’s been taught. Is he rationalizing his “anything but” approach with Kim? Is the act of intercourse sacred and distinct from other sex acts? If so, why?

Bill is still struggling with one question in particular: Does God influence the times and places of people's deaths through physical interaction with the world? Was Bob K's number up? Was it really part of a meaningful plan?

[Chapter 7: Earthly Answers](#)..... 73

On Ian's advice, Bill decides to consult Pastor Mike. The young pastor provides him a copy of the book by C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.

C.S. Lewis and Pastor Mike argue that free will allows us NOT to choose to do good. We need that freedom, and some will take it. Evil, is a lack of goodness, they argue. Lewis said, "Goodness is, so to speak, itself: badness is only spoiled goodness." Do you agree with Lewis?

How did Bill read and respond to C.S. Lewis' comments about sexuality? What impact did it have on his immediate perspective and behavior? How do you feel about "ventilation?" Does prudishness hinder or help improve behavior?

Becky and her family were of great comfort to Ian that summer of '85. Once again, is someone like that—who patiently and lovingly nurses your soul in a time of need—sent by God? Was Becky a "Godsend," or a coincidental human relationship—a "nice person."

It's been said that most purchases have an emotional payoff that is only later justified by the rational mind. What was the emotional payoff Janet received by helping Ian purchase his little truck? What grief-related need did that fulfill? What emotional payoff did you get from the last big purchase you made?

By the end of that summer of '69, Bill successfully survives the challenges to his faith brought by Bob Keppler's death, and by his struggles with sexual morality. Why do you think Ian was strengthened in his faith, and why didn't he react with disgust and question God, as Bill initially did?

[Chapter 8: Love in the Winds of Change](#)..... 89

Seven Years Later—June 1992, Chicago, IL

Like Ian, have you ever believed that if you believed a little more, all things are possible? How about now, could you walk on air if you had enough faith?

What did Ian feel when The Amazing Randi debunked the young man's claim of paranormal activities?

Why did Samantha have such a fatalistic view? Why do you think she didn't feel good things could happen for her, and how did that view affect her behavior with Ian? Have you ever decided just to go with something, live, and enjoy it, even when you thought it would end painfully?

What are your impressions about Bill and Meggan’s relationship at this point?

Why do you think Bill is so bothered by Flaco’s adoption of religion?

[Chapter 9: Prophetic Connections](#) 107

What are your impressions of Representative Huxley? Would you vote for him?

Bill relishes in his private time with the increasingly powerful Representative Huxley—drinking brandy and talking politics. Bill is convinced, if more people could just see the interplay of faith, hard work, and dedication, everyone would have exactly what he has—and is going to have. To what degree do you believe everyone is created equal? Does everyone have equal opportunity in the US today?

[Chapter 10: Faith and Fate](#) 119

After receiving sad news earlier that evening, Ian is awakened in the middle of the night to co-pilot a volunteer flight with Roger Crenshaw. Given what happens, how do you see the relationship between fate and faith? Does faith play a role in plane crashes? Does God protect those who are literally in the act of serving him?

Do you ever take risks for which you feel a supernatural force will protect you? Given the choice, would you rather have an atheist pilot, or one who believes God is his co-pilot and mechanic?

[Chapter 11: One Flesh, One Weekend](#) 137

What’s going on in Bill’s mind on the night of the bachelor party?

What are your thoughts about traditional wedding vows that include “honor and obey?”

Ian privately ponders the entire concept of a covenant with God in which two people promise to love one another exclusively for nearly a century—at least with today’s life expectancies. So what do you think? Are we capable of consenting to such a commitment?

If you believe in God, how do you think he views all those broken covenants of marriage until death?

How do you think Megan’s chastity affected her wedding-night experience with Bill? If you had it to do again (or if you are unmarried), would you wait? Why?

Ian and Samantha close out Bill and Megan’s wedding day by reinforcing their commitment to a game-free, honest relationship, come what may. Have you ever been totally honest with another human being? Is there anyone from whom you don’t withhold at least some small secret, an

embarrassing admission, or some little guilty pleasure of the mind? How do you think most people would answer that question?

The final, pivotal event of that all-important weekend is the sowing of seeds that will blossom into a deep and meaningful friendship between Sammy and Janet—one that with one profound exception, will never be paralleled in Sammy’s entire life. Have you ever had a profound interpersonal experience like that, where you connected instantly with someone (in a non-romantic relationship)?

[Chapter 12: The Breath of Life](#)..... 157

Have you ever believed in a “miracle cure” that seemed too good to be true? Have you ever used “unproven” health aids, remedies, or alternative therapies? Did they work? How can we know whether these things are worth our money, or if they really work? Is there ever any harm in such last-ditch efforts to cure cancer, or is it worth it even if it keeps hope alive?

The incident with the deer begs a question: Do animals have souls? Do you think they are conscious of the world? Do they ever ponder their existence or future? Have fears? Or do they live only in the present?

Finally, the four friends arrive at the restaurant and the dinner conversation eventually turns to Janet’s illness. Bill argues passionately that God can, and does, intercede in people’s lives, and illustrates his point by asking Ian if Samantha and he were meant to be together. Samantha believes that it was more than mere coincidence, and admits she considers Ian’s father a possible agent that brought them together. Do you believe that someone who has passed away can directly influence human relationships here on earth? How about indirectly?

[Chapter 13: Where One Door Closes](#)..... 171

The following morning, Ian is powerfully moved at church as he basks in spiritual time and lets flow his appreciation for his many blessings. Among them is his belief that his mother will - if not be saved - be gloriously reunited with his father. The power of the hymns and the pipe organ deeply stir his emotions. Have you ever been emotionally moved by a certain faith that something so good can come in life after death?

After church, the family discusses the expensive treatment option in Mexico. Was Matt right to cross the line of dashing his mother’s hopes? Why do you think Janet appeared to be so easily talked out of the option?

Ian takes solace in believing that a perfect, heavenly gate has just opened to welcome his mother. Is that what you believe happens when we die? How well do you understand the views of those who may hold views very different from yours in this regard?

[Chapter 14: Testing Authority](#)..... 181

Four years later, Ian and his boss Mac, Michael Alan Conklin, are in Washington D.C. with a charter client, and Ian gets to see Dan Huxley speak on the floor of the House. Do you agree or disagree with Huxley’s comments from the floor? Should employment discrimination against homosexuals be explicitly forbidden as a matter of Federal employment policy?

A friendship is emerging between Ian and his wealthy and complex boss. Why has Mac grown intolerant of military metaphors among the “ambitious young turks”? Are they wrong to be ambitious and take work so seriously?

After they depart D.C., Ian and Mac discuss James Randi’s book about faith healers. What do you think, are there legitimate faith healers out there? Illegitimate ones? Can we ever know for certain?

Still early in their personal relationship, Mac is an imposing and authoritative figure. As he and Ian fly their clients home from D.C., the flight ends in near catastrophe and profoundly illustrates to Ian how blind submission to authority can be a dangerous thing.

Share one time in your life where you bowed to authority and didn’t do the “right thing,” or at least didn’t handle the situation as well as you would today.

[Chapter 15: More Than Meets the Eye](#) 199

A week later Bill enjoys a strip club with some of his clients—a fairly regular part of the job that he’s come to enjoy. How do you view the morality of that situation? How does Bill view the morality of going to strip clubs?

In a “boys night out” with Ian, Bill says something that catches Ian’s attention - about sexual abuse in Megan’s history. Why do you think Bill has never realized that Megan was sexually abused? Bill says she isn’t the type who would “play the victim.” What do you think he means by that? How have such mentalities shaped their marital relationship?

[Chapter 16: Fueling the fire](#)..... 207

A volunteer Compassion Flight has Ian and Mac flying burn victim Danny Merrill to Florida on the following day and the duo kills time on the golf course. Mac antagonizes Ian with banter about the history of baptism and the non-Christian founding fathers. Do you believe Mac is right or wrong about these things? Does it matter? If so, how? Should we stop circumcision? Why or why not?

If you could gather a group to study any question, what question would you study? If you had the greatest experts on earth at your disposal, and they could study this question for you, do you think their answers would affirm what you already believe about the topic, or lead you to startling new knowledge?

[Chapter 17: A Higher Question](#) 221

In celebration of the baptism of Bill and Megan’s precious Hanna, a relaxing Sunday at the Huxley home follows. The lovely afternoon, however, is not without some pointed conversation. Representative Huxley engages Bill and Ian in conversation about homosexuality. Whose points are stronger? Do you think the net effect of more openness about homosexuality is a net positive to society, neutral, or a net drain—as suggested by Huxley and Bill?

Ian and Samantha put the kids in bed early that night, in hopes of enjoying some intimate time together after they fall asleep. As they wait, they summarize the day and wander into their own playful banter about various beliefs, and why they—or others—hold such beliefs.

What do you think of the comparison of natural childbirth to natural tooth extraction? Why do you think people seek to have children naturally, and is there merit to the practice?

Would you sign the “pledge for truth” if given the opportunity? Is it possible for truth and God to wind up in conflict? If so, to which choice would you defer? Which is a higher virtue?

Why does Ian feel uneasy after signing the pledge?

[Chapter 18: The Desoterica](#) 241

Have you ever felt religious pressure to remain ignorant on an issue? Have you ever feared that God thinks there are areas of knowledge that should not be investigated?

Theists: Which scripture do you think best describes God’s general desires regarding human knowledge? Why?

I Corinthians 3:18–19

Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.

Matthew has Jesus say in verse 11:2

I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.

I Peter 3:1

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and [be] ready always to [give] an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you . . .

Isaiah 1:18 said

Come now, and let us reason together . . .

Atheists: Are there limits to what science can explain?

If you believe in God, do you think He would want you to read works of critical scholarship about His word?

Ian ponders the prejudices of many who adhere to mainstream religions, including his own, Christianity. David Kurtz shares with Ian the incredulity and condescension directed at him from his “good friends,” who cannot understand how his Jewish eyes can miss the truth of Jesus’ Messiahship.

Have you ever had someone—perhaps a good friend—express dismay that you are ignorant enough to believe in the religion that you do? How did (how would) that make you feel?

Are you confident enough in your religion that you have ever approached other people to tell them their religion, or lack thereof, is incorrect?

Have you ever publicly worn a t-shirt in support of a particular religion or belief system? Is that the same as telling others that they are wrong, or different? Would your answer change if the shirt demonstrates the wearer is, “proud to be an atheist”?

[Chapter 19: In the Twinkling of an Eye](#)..... 249

Even before the accident, some would describe Bill and Megan’s relationship as a tragedy at this point. What do they mean by describing it that way?

Given that Bill is described as an “all-American, pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstrap guy,” how does that affect his view of the sexual relationship between him and Megan? How do you think he would handle or try to assist a loved one with a drug or alcohol problem? Anorexia?

Surely Bill didn’t foresee the tragic turn in his life—this sad event. Based on what you know of him, how do you see this tragedy affecting Bill? Megan?

If you see news reports of an accident, and learn that alcohol was involved, what preliminary conclusions are you likely to draw? Is alcohol always the cause of alcohol-related accidents? If not, what percent of the time would you guess it is?

[Chapter 20: The Hope of Faith](#)..... 259

Bill says, “I cannot even begin to imagine someone going through this kind of event without the faith and knowledge that there is a good and loving God Almighty who will make everything right in the end. Much though we may hurt, there isn’t a single doubt in my mind, or Megan’s, that someday we’ll be reunited with ... little Hanna.”

Does faith provide you hope in such situations? Comfort? If so, how do you think people with other belief systems—say, atheists—get through such times if they don’t believe in an afterlife? Buddhist? Who is right?

[Chapter 21: True Myth](#) 267

The following Tuesday Ian and Mac fly Bishop Spong to the Atlanta Desoterica. Ian is thrilled by the opportunity to talk to the man whose books have profoundly shaken his traditional

understanding of Biblical “truth.” Right away, however, Ian is thrown a curve ball when he asks Bishop Spong why so many people interpret the Bible in ways that can’t possibly be true, based upon the scholarly analysis and evidence.

Bishop Spong replies, “Well Ian, if I may, I think the place where you have to start is to recognize that there is a difference between saying something is not so, and that something is mythologically presented.”

What does the Bishop mean by this statement?

How do you feel as the Bishop rattles off so many seeming impossible contradictions in the Christian Bible? What reaction do you have?

The Bishop talks a great deal about seeing Christianity through the eyes of the Jewish faith. Why does he think this is so important?

The Bishop says most people fall prey to an either/or fallacy. “I’ve only got two alternatives. I’ve got to take it literally, and then I become a fundamentalist; or, I’ve got to dismiss it as impossible and then I become a member of what I call the Church Alumni Association.”

What does the Bishop say is the third alternative that is so often overlooked?

[Chapter 22: Musical Closets](#) 293

By November of 2002, three years have passed since Hanna’s death and Ian’s introduction to Bishop Spong, and Ian has continued his fascination with discovering the fallibility of human reasoning. He has studied paranormal beliefs; Dr. Barry Glassner’s work about irrational fears in society; the psychology of the now-burst “tech bubble”; and certainly continued to study Christianity in more detail. As a result, Ian has arrived at Mac’s position of atheistic agnosticism, and is growing weary of others’ assumptions that he is still a Christian.

How does Mac define atheistic agnosticism? Is this different from your definitions of either of the words, or the combination thereof?

Ian has a conversation with Samantha about what he feels is a need to “come out” in the interest of authenticity, explicitly communicating his lack of belief to friends and loved ones. Samantha is not so sure. Why did Ian feel so strongly? Was he right to send the email? Have you ever proactively communicated a conversion, new belief system, new religion, or similar news to friends and loved ones? If so, why?

Why was Ian so concerned after he’d hit the “send” button? How would you react to a friend who sent you such an announcement?

Simultaneously, we learn that Bill has found a safe and warm closet in which he can hide, and we discover the full context of Bill’s relationship with Christina. She suggests that the solution to

their personal needs for love and affection lies in the mature, caring reprieve they can find in one another's arms. She gently and lovingly provides him the kind of caring, physical human contact each of them has so badly craved.

In your opinion, is this relationship moral or immoral? Why? What should Bill be doing differently? Why doesn't he behave differently?

Back in Kalamazoo, Ian and Samantha enjoy a "date night" —a chance to catch their breath, and even to reflect upon their relationship. They have continued a long tradition of candid and open dialogue about thoughts and feelings, and even admit to sometimes mourning the loss of the fire and excitement that a first kiss, or new romance, can provide.

Is it inevitable that fire, passion and romance will wane in a relationship? Is it possible to have the sparks of passion, the twittering stomach, and the excitement of a new relationship after decades of being together?

Is there such thing as talking about too much, or being too open in a relationship?

[Chapter 23: An Old Testament of Icy Hell](#) 315

David Kurtz and Ian discuss David Klinghoffer's book *Why the Jews Rejected Jesus*.

Prior to this chapter, what were your perceptions of predictions about "the Messiah" in the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible)? Did this information challenge your understanding, affirm it, or neither?

A life-and-death, harrowing experience prompts Ian to consider why his life is spared. Why do you believe his life is spared when so many similar situations have ended in tragedy? Is it possible that God still has work for Ian to accomplish? Is it simply some combination of luck and decision-making?

Ian feels great stress and a "fight-or-flight" response when reading email reactions to his "coming out" statement. Two are particularly troubling. In reading the responses, do you believe either of the friends was justified in ending the relationship? Is that a reasonable response?

Ian is pleased to find Bill supportive and tolerant of his explicit statement on religion; Bill is nonetheless concerned, and testifies to the evidence he sees for God, and the powerful role his faith has played in sustaining him through the ordeal of Hanna's death. What did you think of Bill's statement of defense for his Christian beliefs? What would you add or change on that list?

Despite the differences that are highlighted by the lively discussion, Bill is intrigued by one element of Ian's criticism of Biblical history: the assertion that the sexual ethics of the Bible are grossly misunderstood. Have you ever heard this argument before? If so, do you buy it? If not,

why do you think it is that you have not heard Biblical ethics surrounding sexuality discussed in this manner?

Why do you think Bill won't share anything with Ian about his relationship with Christina?

Why do you think Bill isn't angrier with Ian? In your experiences, do you think most people can "agree to disagree" about such differences? Can you have open and honest discussions about faith—where no question is out of bounds? With whom?

[Chapter 25: Prelude to a Kiss](#) 351

Ian and Samantha settle into an evening conversation that moves to Samantha's relationship with Megan. How does Sammy feel about Megan? Have you ever had a similar relationship that is profoundly important to you, but somehow unfulfilling? Explain.

Ian and Samantha's long tradition of unfettered honesty allows a revealing conversation that questions conventional monogamy and sexual ethics. Do you believe that "love is a zero-sum game"? Assuming a non-sexual relationship, does loving one person reduce the amount of love you have to give another? How about when the relationship is sexual?

Ian ponders their conversation, and Bill and Megan's marital problems; he creates a late-night articulation of an alternative set of wedding vows. How did those vows make you feel? If there were no legitimate religious foundations for marriage covenants precluding sex outside the marriage, would these vows be better or worse than current traditions and marital expectations?

If humanly possible, would such an honest and open relationship stand a chance at reducing the pain and divorce rate that comes from a high rate of marital infidelity? Are there any circumstances in which you could envision extra-marital sex to be moral?

What percentage of individuals have extra-marital sex at some point in their lives? What are the consequences? What did Ian mean by the term "serial monogamy" (versus true monogamy)?

Even Ian stops to ask himself if he has lost it and become the "wing-nut" others suggest. What do you think? Are such questions part of a mature, legitimate inquiry and re-examination of one's views, or a sign of immoral, wishful thinking and unhealthy challenging of doctrine?

[Chapter 26: Dueling Revelations](#) 363

Did you read Lee Strobel's book "The Case for Christ?" If so, would you read Doherty's response, "Challenging the Verdict"? If not, why? Do you think that it is true that we don't like to read books that challenge what we already believe to be true?

In what ways is Ian primed to believe Doherty's astonishing arguments that Jesus Christ never existed?

In what ways is Bill primed to believe Dr. Stanley Alcott’s astonishing arguments that evolution is false, and that the Bible is literally true?

Can either of the friends truly be objective?

Why is Bill’s revelation so emotionally impactful?

Does either of the revelations seem plausible to you? Which one, and why?

Is either friend more unreasonable or gullible than the other, for buying his “revelation” so completely?

[Chapter 27: A Property Crime](#) 387

The following night, as Ian catches his breath during his one free night in Chicago, Samantha’s blossoming friendship with Brooke takes an unexpectedly emotional turn as together they share stories of love and loss—including Samantha’s poignant relationship with Ian’s mother.

Why is the initial conversation with Brooke so emotionally powerful for Samantha?

Who in your life might be hiding their pain behind a story they tell themselves that nobody really cares?

Does anybody really care about you? Who? If you moved away tomorrow, would anybody really care? Who? If not, do you think others feel similarly disconnected, unworthy, or uncared for?

What prevents us from “being there,” emotionally, for our friends and loved ones?

Here again, we find two people hungry for love, attention, and intimacy. How do you view the moral issues surrounding what happened between Samantha and Brooke? Is the encounter a horrible thing? Immoral? Beautiful? Imprudent? Dishonest? Holy? Unwise? Why?

[Chapter 28: An Evolving God of Creation](#) 399

Having befriended Dr. Sandra Flemming at the previous quarter’s Desoterica, Ian accepts the eccentric Biblical scholar’s offer to supplement his understanding of textual criticism over dinner. A lengthy and somewhat technical conversation ensues.

How would you rate your knowledge of early Christian history? Do you accept the Christian Bible as the literal truth of historic events? Do the political wranglings that produced today’s Bible have any relevance to your worldview or faith, or do you think God steered and directed every aspect of that evolution?

Prior to this story, what would have been your honest answer if someone asked you who wrote the Bible, when, and how it came into existence? Has your answer changed after reading? What might Sandra and Ian be missing in their conversation?

(Advanced question) If Sandra and Ian had known of the Gnostic Gospel of Judas, how might that have changed their conversation?

Is there any legitimacy at all to the argument that talk of a “Savior-anointed-one,” (Jesus Christ) might have preceded the historical person? That it might have been more of an idea—a meme—than it was a reference to a person? Why? What historical evidence, outside the Christian Bible, supports the stories and existence of Jesus Christ as a historical figure? (Recommended study: see Lee Strobel’s *The Case for Christ*, and Earl Doherty’s rebuttal, *Challenging the Verdict*.)

Does it matter to you if Jesus was or was not a historical figure? If so, how and why is that important to you? If not, how and why do you come to that conclusion?

[Chapter 29: The “IT” Epiphany](#) 427

Ian can’t sleep when he returns to his hotel, and after hours of thinking, it suddenly hits him. By 3:00 a.m. it is perfectly clear.

What does Ian mean when he says, “It’ll be incumbent upon us to prove something in the affirmative, not just point out irreconcilable inconsistencies in the literal story?”

Why do Ian and Mac think a massive inquiry by the Desoterica “dream team” would need to be kept secret?

Why would they create a PR campaign of careful leaks as the project unfolded?

[Chapter 30: The Coming Storm](#) 433

October 11th, 2009 has been a long day of flying and waiting for a patient in Missouri, and Ian and Mac are finally piloting the Citation business jet homeward through the black, cloud-filled skies over Illinois. The evening has morphed into a rare respite from the chaos of preparing for the long-awaited Desoterica announcement. “Project Gama” is near completion after two years of debate, and as they fly, Ian and Mac discuss Ian’s frustration with Huxley’s latest legislation.

Agree or disagree with Ian and his source’s case that further restrictions of blood alcohol limits for driving are without evidentiary support, how do you think the death of his granddaughter has shaped Representative Huxley’s mission to pass a second “Hanna’s Law”?

If it is true that people fear irrational threats—plane crashes, child abductions, razors in Halloween candy, internet predators—to a much greater degree than is warranted by the

statistics, why is this the case? Why aren't the headlines filled with stories about bike helmets or health care for kids who have none?

Given that in this case the actual cause of Hanna's death was Megan's inattention, why is Patti Nelson assumed by the Huxleys, and by the public, to have caused the crash? Is it okay for Representative Huxley to use his interpretation of events to promote his legislation, especially if he believes them to be true? Is it moral for him to do so? Do the ends justify the means?

Can you think of an example where one's desire to find meaning in an inexplicable death, has actually caused harm to others? Are you familiar with the concept of statistical murder? Suppose someone dies of breast cancer and an emotion-filled wave of legislation funnels more funding to breast cancer research, but less to colon and rectal cancer, or heart disease, which kill far more people. Alternatively, suppose we spend billions of dollars to improve already safe air travel, but don't spend that money addressing the 40,000 lives lost on US roads every year. What are the moral ramifications of trusting emotion-driven thinking over logic, truth, and reason?

How does one's particular religion, or interpretation of historical events or sacred texts, affect his or her view of issues?

If condoms could save lives in AIDS-ravaged African nations, would it be moral to burn them and interfere with distribution if doing so because of religious doctrine?

Is it rational or consistent that stem cells can be discarded during the process of in-vitro fertilization—efforts to bring children to families—but that many of the same people who endorse that process consider stem cell research to be murder? Explain.

When agreement is elusive, how do we know to which religion we should turn? The “most valid and correct religion”? A blend? A secular solution that ignores religion?

What other important cultural issues are heavily affected or guided by one's religion and his/her interpretation of history and sacred texts?

Like Ian and Bill, have you ever had a relationship that was important to you, but that was stressed by diametrically opposed views on some important issue like politics or religion? How did you feel when you were around that person—especially if the issue would come up?

Despite acknowledging each other's differences of opinion, would you agree that the “dirty little secret” of such disagreements is that in the recesses of our minds we believe we are slightly smarter—or at least better critical thinkers—than our opponent? That we think we are ... well ... right?

Why is it stressful to be around someone who fundamentally disagrees with you on something you hold dear (religion, political party preference, global warming, [name the issue])?

How does that stress affect our ability to think, reason, and be open to new information?

We now see the context of Bill’s rendezvous with Christina in Madison. Is it possible that he really does love both Christina and his wife, Megan?

“The truth is, however, that if there is one small conduit through which ideas flow between the two compartments, it is God.” How does Bill reconcile his affair with his idea of God’s wishes?

[Chapter 31: Terror Beneath the Skies](#)..... 447

A dramatic national crisis unfolds while the jet is airborne and Bill and Christina consort in Wisconsin.

In what way does the crisis break down the separate compartments of Bill’s life?

Do you feel sorry for Christina, or think she’s getting what she deserves?

As crazy as it all seems, even to Bill, is it possible that God can send us angels like Christina to help us through our darkest years?

[Chapter 32: The Unsettled Dust](#)..... 463

We learn how Ian had responded to Samantha’s “confession” about her sexual experience with Brooke, back in 2002; and we learn that the relationship between Samantha and Brooke has grown into the type of friendship Samantha has always dreamed of, but never thought she’d have. The relationship also remains intimate, and the very non-traditional “family” has become a valued norm to the entire Kepler family.

Is this relationship moral or immoral in your view? Prohibited by Christianity? Why or why not? Would initial reaction to this relationship have been different if were between men?

With the news of a second attack, Bill’s exhausted mind again ponders the great mysteries of belief in an omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent God. Suddenly, however, his answers are beginning to shift. Why?

At this point, if you are a theist, what do you believe about God’s degree of involvement in worldly events such as terrorism? On a sliding scale where Deism (God started everything but is no longer involved) is 10, and extreme theism (my well-defined God is clear about his involvement in daily activities, and I pray regularly for intercession) is one, where do you fall on the scale?

Bill and Ian speak by phone and quickly seek common ground. Why is it that a tragic experience can bring humans together in a way that seems impossible just hours before?

Why does the elephant in the room matter so little when we are broken down to our elemental, authentic humanness?

[Chapter 33: Goodbye My Forever Friend](#)..... 481

Eight days after the bombings, the Bennett family learns that John - Bill and Ian's beloved Chicago pal - perished in the Chicago attacks.

Have you ever experienced a moment of profound "otherness" through death, like Ian and Bill shared on the phone, paying private tribute to the love they shared with their friend John?

How does that experience between Bill and Ian—and the return of Flaco—show that John is still having an early effect on people, even after his death?

Speaking in an earthy, non-supernatural sense, do most people still influence earthly activity and relationships after they die? How? In what ways?

How about supernaturally? Do people directly and intentionally influence earthly events from beyond the grave, in mystical or magical ways? Could Ian's father have really brought Ian and Samantha together after he had died?

The topic of statistical murder is driven home by the debate over how much cleanup of radioactive debris is necessary after the 10/11 events. In few places is irrational thinking more prevalent than in medical and health issues. If you lived in or near Michigan or Chicago, and you developed cancer after 10/11, wouldn't you assume it was related? Even if your cancer risk from the bomb doubled, is it not still possible you would have gotten cancer even if there were no bomb? In what other areas of life do we have to make tough choices about allocating dollars and resources to clean up problems? How does the concept of statistical murder enter into the discussion of such tough choices? What are some examples of similar debates in today's real world? Which methods would be better for making such tough choices about allocating scarce resources: science and reason, or emotion and intuition?

[Chapter 34: A Secret Revealed](#)..... 491

The day of the much-anticipated Desoterica announcement arrives - Tuesday, December 15th, 2009 - and the world is waiting with bated breath. To the surprise of many, Mac uses the platform to make a geopolitical statement before he introduces Dr. Flemming.

What do you think about what Mac had to say?

If you are a Biblical literalist, how to you rationalize not putting children to death for disobeying their parents? What about the other directives from Biblical scripture?

How about Mac’s central point? Does “true, global leadership require that we be willing to look in the mirror—to our beliefs, and our history, and set an example of rational thinking that will speed the learning curve for our human brothers and sisters whose Islamic or other beliefs are butting heads with the civilized world of science, reason, and human decency”?

How would you react to this press conference if it happened tomorrow? How significant would it be if there were actual, indisputable evidence that Jesus Christ didn’t exist? Or that a family tomb, perfectly labeled with generations before and after Jesus of Nazareth—where all the names and DNA prove beyond any doubt that Jesus was not only fully human, but DIED (and physically remained on earth)? Would that affect what you believe? Why, or why not?

With which reporters do you identify most? Was the press conference the public relations coup of the century, or a brilliant rollout of a significant historical finding?

Why do you think Huxley said, “These guys must have a death wish”?

[Chapter 35: Rebirth and Death](#) 511

The Keplers ultimately retreat to the mountains of Colorado to regroup, planning to anonymously slide back into their beloved hometown after the dust settles. Surprisingly, the retreat becomes an unexpected spiritual reawakening for the family, especially on the heels of 10/11.

Are there parallels between the Kepler family and Exodus?

In a way he hasn’t experienced in years, Ian rediscovers the concepts of “divinity,” largely through his family, nature, and deep contemplation, but also through the writings of Tom Harpur, Bishop Spong, Carl Sagan, and others. His definition of divinity no longer includes magic and supernaturalism, but it is no less filled with awe and wonder.

Can that wonder and awe be called “divine”? Why or why not?

What does “supernatural” mean? Is it possible to define that which is beyond all natural understanding? If so, does it not become part of the testable, natural world?

As Bill’s curiosity and research into the *Bible of the Desoterica* lead him down his own path of fascination and enlightenment, what is happening in his head?

In your opinion, why are both Bill and Ian’s views changing? Were they wrong before? Are they wrong now?

Why did Jimmy Johnson feel the need to scare Ian? What drives someone like Jimmy to act?

[Chapter 36: A Secret of the Universe](#)..... 531

Ian’s mind flashes to Daniel, Catalina, and even Becky, and the profound comfort they brought him during a long-ago period of grief. He recalls how deeply all three had touched him that summer after his father’s death—to the point of even having suspected that Daniel and Catalina were supernatural angels sent by God.

How does he view those angels now?

Do you believe angels are real? If so, do you mean that in a supernatural sense, or any earthly and human sense (or both)?

At the funeral, Bill shares his profound epiphany in the process of honoring Samantha.

What does he mean by saying that Samantha was a good Christian? A good Buddhist?

Was she a better Christian than Bill? Did she better “wear the ring”? Explain.

“So whether you become a Bodhissattva, delight in the profound eternal truths of Plato and Aristotle, or see god in music, science or Christianity, we would all do well to live like Samantha Kepler. And in fact we have all done better, for having known her.” What do you think of this statement?

What three things can you do, in your daily life, to better wear the ring?

[Chapter 37: Embracing the Mystery](#) 543

What is the main point of Ian’s subsequent book, *Embracing the Mystery: Where the Desoterica Stopped Short*?

Why does Ian suggest that whether or not Jesus existed is the wrong question?

Why do you think so many of us demand rigid, specific answers to unanswerable questions? What prevents us from “embracing the mystery”?

What do Ian and Bill discover to be the REAL secret of the universe?

What are the dangers of dogmatic literalism?

If you remain a dogmatic literalist, is there any possibility that when you arrive in Heaven, or experience Nirvana, greet Allah, (etc.), that you may find your answers were other than 100% correct? Is it possible that if your god exists, he/she/it will smile, laugh, pat you on the back, and say, “You totally misunderstood. I love you, and it wasn’t completely your fault—humankind bastardized my message—but you totally closed your mind to my real message”?

On the other hand, how would you change the way you live if you genuinely believed this life was a biologically derived, natural fluke of sorts that “ends when it ends,” similar to what your

life was like before you were born? Would you murder people for sport? Hurt people for fun? Re-double your efforts to make the world a better place than you found it? Honestly? How would you live? Is it possible that you would appreciate life *more* if there were no hope of an afterlife? Explain your thoughts.

How do others with other worldviews live?

As asked earlier, how do you now believe those with worldviews different than yours get through life? Should we seek to change their views? Why or why not?

Perhaps if nothing else, we can recognize that life really is both cruel and glorious. On the cruel side, there is immense human suffering in the world, and it is often through no fault of those suffering.

What do you think?

Will we choose to divide ourselves based on dogmatic literalism? Hurt one another? Or will we roll up our sleeves and open our minds to better options than the either/or tyranny of divisiveness, and the self-affirming, self-rationalizing, emotion-driven thinking that divides us and amplifies our suffering?