

Hello seekers and welcome to the Church of Inquiry. Life is short and the universe is practically infinite; there is much to do, so let's begin. I'll start with a simple invocation, an attunement towards our goal, a prayer, if you like:

Thank you, Creator, for all that is possible and your abundant gifts.

Thank you, Nature, for the forces that formed us and shape our reality.

Thank you, Science, for the path and the tools we use to explore and understand both nature and the divine.

Thank you, friends and fellow humans, for choosing to walk this path.

My friends, this is a place of compassion, love, caring, and inquiry, devoted to the pursuit of the Divine. If that is what you're seeking, you've found a place you can call home and a family of fellow seekers. If your questions about life, death, or your place in the universe are still unanswered, this is where your answers will be found. If you seek a deeper connection with God/Jesus/Allah/Yahweh, the eternal, the great unknown, the mystery, or however you frame it, this is the place to deepen that connection. If you're already a seeker, yet still are in conflict, confusion, or pain and want answers, this is the beginning of the path that will provide them.

Thank you for being here at the beginning of what I hope is a superb journey. What you are watching might be called a "sermon," but is more of an invitation to collaborate on an undertaking of utmost importance, perhaps even urgency. What I preach or teach or just share is not intended as dogma, but rather a process, an attunement that allows us to focus more clearly on the divine and the relationship we can create with it.

The Church of Inquiry believes that the universe has a Creator, that we exist for a purpose, and that there's a path of accessible evidence to suggest the Creator is knowable to us using the methods and practice of science. We believe our purpose is to follow that path, understanding it as a gift, and believe that it is within our power to achieve a direct, verifiable, repeatable experience with the Creator.

Some obvious questions flow from this, such as: What is God; what is our relationship to the Creator; what is our purpose as spiritual beings? If we're looking for a direct experience of the Creator, then our starting point should be to ask what the Creator is and how can we know we're actually having a direct experience? Sure, one may have a deep-seated feeling or belief, and scripture lists voices or visitations, but those are hard to substantiate. Now, we're not trying to erase the mystery, but in order to pursue the answer, we'll first have to take the Creator out of the supernatural realm in order to form and test our hypotheses.

Is the Creator a white-bearded man as Christianity depicts? Is it the Hindu aggregation of thirty-three divine manifestations? Maybe it is some impersonal force or universal intelligence? Muslims believe God is beyond all form, quality, quantity, and human conception or reasoning, which is not unreasonable considering we're talking about that which ostensibly created all of time and space. The more interesting ideas are now coming from physics, which is showing us things more wondrous than imaginable and has reached a point where science has truly earned the right to weigh in on the nature of God.

The truth, my friends, is that no one actually knows what the Creator is. I'll repeat that: *No one actually knows what the Creator is.* Religions have tried to codify what is meant, assigning an image as well as thoughts, feelings, and motivations, but is it hubris to do so? If we're to believe in a god that created all there is, then the Creator is beyond our current understanding of time and space, and possibly beyond the capacity of the human mind to comprehend. Ironically, most religions agree that God is unknowable despite all that is in the holy books, which are generally understood to be written in parable and metaphor.

In seeking the Creator, we could begin by saying that, as the being or force that gave rise to everything as we know it, the Creator is the observable organizing principle of the universe. That definition is a little sterile for exploring the greater power and mystery of the divine, especially for those who already feel connected to or in some way hear the voice of the divine that can come from within. Just remember that we can only describe the Creator in terms or in stories that make sense to *us*, and part of that becomes a function of language, which is notoriously easy to misuse and misunderstand. Science offers things like math and molecules, whose fixed definitions become vocabulary words to reveal a different "language" of the Creator. It is a language that cannot be misunderstood, which is more than exciting, it's unprecedented.

Our question as to the nature of the Creator immediately begs a corollary question because there exists a notion across Judaism, Christianity and parts of Islam that we were created in the "image of God" — although no one clearly understands what is meant by "image." Genesis says we are "*as* gods."¹ It would be a curious contradiction to believe an all-knowing, all-powerful Creator shares humanity's limitations or weaknesses. Bi-lateral symmetry and this form is necessary for physical beings, not infinite ones, so is a less likely contender for image than the notion that we are endowed by the Creator with a special gift, a taste of "god-ness." We have the capacity to follow a path of systematic and rational inquiry and use the methods and practice of science to literally challenge death and to see into the very structure of creation, which certainly makes us "God-like," no matter how limited that is.

That metaphor, however, offers an important pathway: if we can possess even a child's Playskool version, the most limited embodiment of the perfect and infinite attributes of the Creator, then likely we can follow that pathway into something substantial. It is entirely possible that we, as *children* of the Creator, have not yet begun to use our gifts as if they were tools of "adulthood." Mark this: if we have been so endowed by our Creator, then **know yourself, and you begin a journey to knowing the Creator.** We are all part of the creation; we are all "star stuff," as Carl Sagan said². When we explore inward, we are looking not just at part of the creation, but likely at the most complicated thing within it. What better place to start?

¹ Genesis 3:22— "And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil:..."

² "The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of starstuff." — Carl Sagan, *Cosmos*

Consider what it means to contemplate, let alone seek, a being that could create the infinite... It's easy to understand why we're still puzzling this out and why it's so exciting to have an abundance of new scientific and technological tools. We still don't exactly know how one fertilized egg becomes the astonishing collaboration of 40 trillion human cells and 40 trillion bacterial cells that creates us. We certainly don't know what consciousness is. We don't understand the mechanism of gravity or why time moves only forward, and those are the easier questions. However, we have a toolkit in the methods and practice of science that can help us on our path of inquiry. We have discovered amazing patterns of a deep and complex harmony that exist in the creation. That certainly seems more than random, so let's follow the path...

My friends, this is why the Church of Inquiry exists, so that we can work — together, as members of the human family — to make progress on these important questions. We believe our spiritual purpose is to seek the Creator and better understand the divine. We want a true, unquestionable, personal relationship with it and so will seek the spirit of guidance wherever it exists as we walk our path.

All children of the Creator can be united in this task. All people of faith can add these tools to their practices. Understanding the Creator is possibly our most important task and likely our biological purpose. It is beyond any individual's attainment, so cooperation is an essential requirement of the process. But cooperation is more than that. We have created tools to see down to the subatomic level and have observed that there is nothing in the creation that exists as a singular entity. **Cooperate** effectively is a Commandment woven into the fabric of nature — a topic I'll explore with you more.

There are things being shown to us beyond the confines of books — far more than any one person could explore. We should work together, as children of the Creator living in this time of technological wonder because, quite possibly, God awaits. And I say “children of the Creator” because that metaphor gets repeated in holy books. Children are not adults but develop into them, learning first how to play and then to collaborate with others. As we grow into our spiritual adulthood, what should our roles be?

It's important to remember that each of us are needed for an undertaking of this magnitude. Each of us is a unique, organic processing machine, experiencing the world in a way no one else does. Even identical twins are not actually identical. Since no two people experience the world exactly the same, we each can make a unique contribution to the collective body of human knowledge. Each of us can ask a vital question that opens a path of inquiry for ourselves or for another that can take us closer to our goal. When we accept our place as seekers, employing our distinctiveness in pursuit of the divine, it becomes part of our practice and a gift of thanks to the Creator. We give thanks that we have been given the capability to observe, question, and fundamentally modify the fabric of our reality based on what has been learned, and each of us get to do that in a unique way. How will *you* honor the gift?

Now, in seeking the Creator, it's hard to reconcile the many different understandings of a creator put forward by religions, especially while science is still puzzling out many

foundational questions about our reality. What are we to make of ascribing human form and motivations to something that is so completely *other*? We are limited beings trying to understand the unlimited. To the extent we can understand at all, it is certainly beyond the capacity of any individual, which is why the Church of Inquiry sees this as something we must all undertake collectively.

Life is short, the universe is nearly infinite, and we are very limited, so we must work together.

Fortunately we're a collaborative species, and collectively humans have done tremendous things in trying to understand the world around us. The massive body of human knowledge was created by countless people, building on a base of prior knowledge, experience, and experimentation. Those people lived, died, struggled, and sacrificed; a lot of this knowledge was hard-won, involved suffering and, sometimes, was at the expense of life itself. It has been handed down as our birthright and inheritance and, to the extent that it can be used to unlock a pathway to the Creator, it is a sacred responsibility. There is much to know and much to unlock, so ignoring what has been aggregated for us is not a spiritually reasonable choice. *Thou shalt not reinvent the wheel.* The Creator speaks to us through the creation so to ignore the transmission is to turn your back to the Creator. It is to say you're interested in neither the Creator nor the message.

Now, I've repeatedly said we believe the Creator is knowable to us through the "methods and practice of science..." so we should take a moment to unpack that thought. Clearly, we're not suggesting that *only* scientists can commune with the Creator. It's also not assumed that "the methods and practice of science" are known to everyone innately. They involve techniques, yet one starts by simply being inquisitive. Employing these techniques also involves adopting a baseline posture of malleability and being committed to truth — and not just to being right — of being open to seeing with new eyes and understanding that **"being wrong" is a gift that frees you to continue your search someplace new.**

Part of the methods and practice of science is scientific thinking, which has to be taught and nurtured, as it isn't strictly intuitive. That's really curious because it appears that the foundations of scientific thinking are woven into our very being, which would make it a gift from the Creator. There is a growing body of evidence to support that what *is* intuitive in humans is the *structure* of scientific thinking³. It seems to be natural for very young children, who use it as a technique to learn and understand their environment.

Children naturally create models, just as scientists do, and you can see they play and behave in ways that lets them ascertain cause and effect. What you perceive as your child making a mess on the floor is likely one of many experiments in understanding gravity, and perhaps the patience of the parents. Children continually test their environment to make sense of things and to make predictions of what would happen in other situations.

³ Cook, C., Goodman, N., and Schulz, L. (2011). Where science starts: Spontaneous experiments in preschoolers' exploratory play. *Cognition*, 120 (3), 341-349 DOI: 10.1016/j.cognition.2011.03.003

When one begins to understand reality as connected causes and effects, one is actually beginning to construct models of the world that have predictive value. That will inform and thus guide our thoughts, feelings, and decisions on everything in our world. The fascinating thing is that, with regard to children, they don't know that what they're doing is model-building and creating a foundation for scientific thinking and for inquiry. It is an operating system built into the human brain by the Creator. As humans grow, it unfolds.

So if scientific thinking is woven into our beings, then as we grow and develop, what happens? Why does magical thinking often supplant scientific thinking? I've seen various polls that as much as half the US population doesn't believe in evolution, despite 150 years of evidence. On the other hand, multiple polls show that 40 percent or more of Americans believe in ghosts — yet don't require a single shred of evidence. A 2021 Pew Research Center report claims that nearly three-quarters of U.S. adults say they believe in heaven. Clearly the tendency towards scientific thinking isn't always carried into adolescence and beyond. Why?

Now, certainly the “science” of children isn't rigorous. Children aren't isolating variables to test independently — a key technique of experimental science. That's okay. One would expect children to use tools less skillfully than adults. While we're technically all born scientists, we're certainly not saying that everyone should earn a living as one, but only to remember that these tools are available to all when seeking to understanding the world. And if this is an innate tendency that unfolds in the young, then each of us should look inward at potential that may be unrealized. It also makes it incumbent upon parents to teach or to seek outside instruction to help their children begin to use and desire mastery of the innate tools provided by the Creator.

It's fascinating that there's a natural coordination of theory and evidence in children and that it seems to occur implicitly and effortlessly. No kids are writing in their coloring books: “revise theory, model doesn't explain new data.” They don't seem to have a conscious awareness of the process. They are innately malleable and not tied to a specific outcome. The way to develop scientific thinking is to *consciously* question and make **theory revisions**, make it something you do with intention rather than something that happens outside of awareness and without intention.

This equally applies in matters of faith. Faith is something one *does*, not just something one has, particularly by having been born into it. No one has answered the big questions and humanity does not live in communion with the Creator, so clearly there is more work to be done. Remember, I started this sermon by asking what is the Creator and how can we know we're having a direct experience with It?

Scripture says “...Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.” [Matt. 18:3] Think about that metaphor and what it means to be “as children.” Embrace malleability and fearless curiosity. Seek it in others. Keep your heart open. Also be mindful to instruct the young well and prepare them for their role as seekers. Otherwise we are not just denying the Creator, we're denying our children the most foundational relationship in existence, their relationship *to* existence, to

the creation, and to the gifts from the divine that can lead us to the Creator. Remember, each person has a unique contribution to make in our search and that contribution is tied to how one embraces the Creator's gifts.

Life is short, we are limited, and the universe, well, it feels infinite. Fortunately, we're equipped with tools and with each other. Whatever else you do in your spiritual life, brothers and sisters, join us on this path as well. Together we will learn how to ask better questions, to seek clearer answers, and to reveal all that the Creator has given us and may yet have in store for us.

Keep seeking, my friends. Honor the Creator, honor the creation.