The Author

I am a clinical pathologist. I was responsible for quality management in several laboratory sections—making sure every result issued held up. Transfusion medicine is my specialty; for twenty-two years I was medical director of a transfusion service.

Can that result be trusted? That question was my daily work.

In 2021 I was diagnosed with ALS, and retired the same year.

This booklet sets the seven traditions' responses side by side and states what each one costs—my own included.

I am not asking you to believe me.
I am asking you to check for yourself.

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Full discussion: Six Questions · Sources: The Ultimate Questions
If I have described your tradition inaccurately, please write to me:
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SIX QUESTIONS

How Seven Traditions Respond

A BOOKLET

What is real?

Who am I?

Why is there suffering?

Can a person change?

What happens after death?

Put side by side, what do they show?

You don't need it all worked out to ask.

Tak-Shun (Daniel) Choi, MD, FCAP, AASJC

Mutiara Multimedia LLC

SIX QUESTIONS: HOW SEVEN TRADITIONS RESPOND

A Booklet

Tak-Shun (Daniel) Choi, MD, FCAP, AASJC

Mutiara Multimedia LLC

Six Questions: How Seven Traditions Respond — A Booklet

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This booklet is free. You are welcome to copy and share it in full, unchanged and not for sale.

This booklet is a condensed version of *Six Questions: How Seven Traditions Respond*. It takes only the essentials; it does not say everything. For the full discussion, see that book. For the source of every item, see my academic volume *The Ultimate Questions*.

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First edition, October 2026

Credentials

MD: Doctor of Medicine, from the Latin *Medicinae Doctor*, “teacher of medicine.”

FCAP: Fellow of the College of American Pathologists.

AASJC: An Adopted Son in Jesus Christ—“In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.” (Galatians 4:3–7)

- 《生命原是永恆——耶穌認識你嗎？一個寄居者赴永恆之旅》 (Traditional Chinese edition of *Life Is Eternal — Does Jesus Know You? A Sojourner's Journey to Eternity*, 2026)
- 《在黑暗中遇見光——從漸凍症的苦難看神的作為》 (Traditional Chinese edition of *Meeting the Light in the Darkness*, 2026)
- 《記念——神如何教導健忘的子民持守不忘》 (Traditional Chinese edition of *Remembrance*, 2026)
- 《惜緣——佛教的因緣與聖經的帶領》 (Traditional Chinese edition of *Cherish the Encounter*, 2026)
- 《在不確定中作抉擇》 (Traditional Chinese edition of *Making Decisions in the Midst of Uncertainties*, 2026)

Mutiara Multimedia LLC, founded in 2024: writing, music, film, and digital media in the service of the gospel, life education, and cross-cultural exchange.

Disclaimer

The opinions and views expressed in this book are my own. They do not represent the opinions or views of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the VA North Texas Health Care System, any educational institution, professional organization, nonprofit organization, or church, or of any member associated with me.

This book is a comparative study of seven religious and philosophical traditions, written from a Christian standpoint for academic and general educational purposes. It is not financial, legal, medical, or any other professional advice, and it does not replace pastoral counsel. For your own situation, please consult qualified professionals, and your own pastors and elders.

How This Book Was Written

I live with ALS. Today I can use only two fingers on my right hand. So I wrote this book by speaking, with the help of an AI assistant. I dictated my arguments, my questions, and my corrections. The assistant drafted text from them, searched for sources, checked the Bible quotations and the primary texts of each tradition against the sources listed at the back, and laid out the pages. Every conclusion in this book is mine, and every page was read and corrected by me before it was printed.

I am not ashamed of this, and I do not hide it. An AI assistant can give answers. It cannot give judgment. Deciding what is right and what is not belongs to the physician and to the Christian, who must test everything and hold fast to what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Other Works

Descriptions, songs, and where to buy each book: mutiaramultimedia.com

In English

- *Life Is Eternal — Does Jesus Know You? A Sojourner's Journey to Eternity* (2024)
- *Understanding ALS: A Guide to the Biology, the Treatments, and the Decisions Ahead* (2026)
- *Meeting the Light in the Darkness — How God Works Through the Suffering of ALS* (2026)
- *Remembrance: How God Teaches a Forgetful People to Hold On* (2026)
- *Cherish the Encounter: Yuanfen, Buddhist Causes and Conditions, and the Guidance of God* (2026)
- *Making Decisions in the Midst of Uncertainties* (2026)

In Chinese (Traditional)

- 《七言論今世來生－耶穌恩友托我命（第二版）》 (*Seven-Character Verses on This Life and the Life to Come — Jesus, My Gracious Friend, Entrusts My Life to Him*, 2nd edition, 2025)

About the Author

Tak-Shun (Daniel) Choi, MD, FCAP, AASJC, is an American clinical pathologist, medical educator, scholar of comparative religion and philosophy, Christian thought writer, composer, and multimedia creator.

In 1993 he graduated *summa cum laude* with Distinction in Research from the State University of New York Health Science Center at Brooklyn (now SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University), earning his Doctor of Medicine degree. He completed his clinical pathology residency there, and then a fellowship in blood banking and transfusion medicine at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. For twenty-two years he served within the VA North Texas Health Care System as a Clinical Pathologist and Medical Director of Transfusion Medicine, and he also held an appointment as Associate Professor of Pathology at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical School.

After his diagnosis with ALS in October 2021, he retired that December and devoted the second half of his life to faith, family, and creative work. In October 2024 he founded Mutiara Multimedia LLC, dedicated to writing, music, film, and digital media in the service of the gospel, life education, and cross-cultural exchange.

He lives with his wife, Meijarna, and with their two daughters and sons-in-law, Tiara and Stefan, and Trina and David.

The author's full biography is at mutiaramultimedia.com.

Soli Deo Gloria! All glory be to God! The Lord will surely come again! (See 1 Corinthians 16:22.)

Dedication

Elohim —
God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit —
the Triune God

Even before He created the world,
God loved me and chose me in Christ
to be holy and blameless before Him.
(cf. Ephesians 1:4)

My late father, Mr. Ching-Chun Choi (蔡澄春), and
my late mother, Mrs. Kin-Tai Chan Choi (蔡陳見娣),
who taught, motivated, encouraged, and loved me
by their words and deeds.

My six siblings and their families,
who love me and have played important roles in my life.

Meijarna (Mei-Sien 美璇),
my virtuous wife who loves me unconditionally,
and has been faithful to help, support, encourage me,
and pray with and for me throughout the journey.

Tiara Jasmine (Zi-Wai 智慧) & Stefan Stojanoff III,
and Trina Abigail (Ji-Yan 籽恩) & David Olivares,
my two beautiful daughters and filial sons-in-law,
who honor, love, and support me unconditionally.

My children's children for generations,
who will know the only true God, and Jesus Christ,
Whom God has sent. Now this is eternal life!
(cf. John 17:3)

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For the long treatment of the three experiences of suffering, emptiness, and longing: the three volumes of *Emptiness · Suffering · Longing*.

In short

This booklet gives only the essentials. The full discussion—including each of the seven traditions' strengths and difficulties, the test of those two years, how a limited life can hold unlimited meaning, and the dangers of comparing this way—is in *Six Questions: How Seven Traditions Respond*; the source and argument for every item are in *The Ultimate Questions*.

4. Jewish return (*teshuvah*) requires confession, regret, and resolve not to repeat: Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 1:1; for wrongs against another person, restitution and asking forgiveness come first: same work 2:9. Rebirth in the Pure Land by relying on the original vow: *Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra*, fascicle 1, the eighteenth vow. "Decrease and decrease again": *Laozi*, chapter 48.
5. Grieving, but not as those who have no hope: 1 Thessalonians 4:13. The first Adam and the second Adam: 1 Corinthians 15:22; Philippians 2:8. The new heavens and new earth, and the lake of fire: Revelation 21:1–4; 20:14–15. Judaism saying little about details after death: Chabad.org, "Why So Little About Life After Death in the Bible?"; My Jewish Learning, "Is There a Jewish Afterlife?" "Not yet knowing life, how can one know death?": *Analects*, "Xian Jin." "A person's life is the gathering of *qi*; gathered, it is life; dispersed, it is death": *Zhuangzi*, "Knowledge Wandered North."

The following are this booklet's own summaries, not quotations: the "Side by side" and "Cost" sentences in each part; "Of the seven, this is the one least likely to rub salt in a wound"; "No-self does not mean no responsibility"; Daoism's "the loss of what he originally was." These are my judgments; their arguments are in the corresponding chapters of *The Ultimate Questions*.

The "Where I stand" sections: Tak-Shun (Daniel) Choi, *Life Is Eternal—Does Jesus Know You? A Sojourner's Journey to Eternity*, chapters 47 to 49.

Everything else: taken from *Six Questions: How Seven Traditions Respond*; the full arguments and sources are in *The Ultimate Questions*.

Corrections welcome: if you belong to any tradition in this booklet and find that I have stated yours inaccurately, please write to mutiara.multimediallc@gmail.com. Where it checks out, I will correct it in the next printing.

Who I Am, and Why I Wrote This

At a glance

Why would a doctor who reads laboratory results ask these six questions?

Words in this section

ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) A disease in which the motor nerve cells die off. The mind stays clear while speech, swallowing, movement, and breathing are lost one by one. There is no cure. The course varies: some have two years, some have ten.

1. Who I am

I am Tak-Shun Choi; Daniel is my Christian name. I am a clinical pathologist, and my work is quality management in the laboratory — **making sure that every result we release will hold up**. Transfusion medicine is my subspecialty, and I served twenty-two years as medical director of a transfusion service: the same work of quality management, plus consulting with clinicians about particular patients.

A machine produces a number, and a physician decides the next step on the strength of it. **Can that number be trusted?** That was my daily work. So the first question, "What is real?", is not abstract for me: I used to ask what entitles a number to count; now I ask it of the whole of things.

On October 12, 2021, I received my own diagnosis: ALS. That December I retired on medical grounds.

The five letters after my name, AASJC, stand for An Adopted Son in Jesus Christ. That is not an academic title. It is my response to the second question, "Who am I?"

edition quotes Matthew 7:21–23 from the 1919 Mandarin Chinese Union Version (*Shangdi* edition); this edition uses the ESV.

The meaning of *ginōskō*, including "to know" and its use for marital union: Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (1889), entry for Strong's number G1097.

The grounds for each part of this booklet

1. Human beings made in the image of God: Genesis 1:27. Brahman and the two schools: *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "Vedānta, Advaita" (Shankara's school: the world is not ultimately real) and "Rāmānuja" (Rāmānuja's school: the world and the individual are both real). Dependent arising: the formula of dependent arising in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*; Chinese translation, *Saṃyuktāgama* sutra 262, "When this exists, that exists; when this arises, that arises" (CBETA Taishō T02 no. 99; Chuang Chun-chiang's punctuated edition, agama.buddhason.org). "The way that can be spoken is not the constant way": *Laozi*, chapter 1.
2. Islam's "vicegerent": Qur'an 2:30. Hinduism's *ātman*: *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.10, "I am Brahman" (*aham brahmāsmi*; Sanskrit text on the VivekaVani page for that verse). Buddhism's no-self: *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 22:59, *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*; Chinese parallel, *Saṃyuktāgama* sutra 34 (same edition). Confucian names and roles (let the ruler be a ruler, the minister a minister, the father a father, the son a son): *Analects*, "Yan Yuan." "I AM WHO I AM": Exodus 3:14.
3. Jesus weeping at the tomb of Lazarus: John 11:35. Job's friends rebuked: Job 42:7. "We belong to Allah, and to Him we return": Qur'an 2:156 (this booklet's own rendering of its sense, not quoted from a particular translation). The root of suffering in Buddhism: *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 56:11, *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (the Four Noble Truths); Chinese, *Saṃyuktāgama* fascicle 15, "Turning the Wheel of the Dharma" (sutra 379, CBETA Taishō T02 no. 99). Confucian mourning periods: *Book of Rites*, "Questions on the Three-Year Mourning." "It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment": Hebrews 9:27. The man born blind: John 9:1–3.

Verse	Form in the original (all from γινώσκω, *ginōskō*)	What the verse says
John 17:3	γινώσκωσιν (*ginōskōsin*)	To know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent is eternal life

Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 4:13: Jesus knows all things, and all things hold together in Him.

Genesis 1:1; Deuteronomy 29:29; John 14:6: my starting point is revelation (The Six Questions).

Between death and resurrection

Seventh-day Adventist Church: Fundamental Beliefs, no. 26, "Death and Resurrection." Catholic purgatory: Council of Florence (1439); Council of Trent, Session 25 (1563). Eastern Orthodoxy: the dissent of Mark of Ephesus at the Council of Florence (see *The Ultimate Questions*, Chapter 5). Luke 16:19–31; 23:43; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23; Romans 8:34; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–14.

The resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:14, 17. The mainstream Islamic account of Jesus's end: Qur'an 4:157–158 (Sahih International translation); a minority movement (the Ahmadiyya) holds that Jesus did not die on the cross and later died a natural death—see the official website of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, which also acknowledges that most Muslims hold the view that He was raised up. The difference between religion and Christianity: Tak-Shun (Daniel) Choi, *Life Is Eternal—Does Jesus Know You? A Sojourner's Journey to Eternity*, chapter 36, "The Difference Between Religion and Christianity," and chapter 37, "The Necessary Conditions of Christianity."

The context of Matthew 7:21–23 (7:15–20, false prophets; 7:24–27, the parable of the houses): the text of Matthew 7; see also the notes to that chapter in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' *New American Bible, Revised Edition* (bible.usccb.org). The Chinese

2. Where the six questions came from

Not from a study.

The first thing was September 1969. My father was killed in a traffic accident. Two months later I turned six. A child that age does not want an explanation. He wants security.

The second thing was the two years from 2020 to 2022. A pandemic: seven traditions were asked the same thing at the same time, and each one's response is on record. In July 2021 my wife's cousin came to our house for dinner. That week our whole household tested positive, and so did he. When he felt a little better he went home. Two days later his roommate found him in his room. **On the day of the cremation, I was the one who pressed the button.**

The third thing was my own diagnosis. After my diagnosis I asked, "Why me?" Later I turned it around: "Why not me?" In an Indonesian fellowship I came to know a brother who was diagnosed with the same disease and was gone in less than two years. I can still speak, still eat, still breathe. **No one can tell me why.**

So these six questions are not an exercise in speculation for me. I watched a brother with my own disease go first, **and I am waiting.**

3. How I want you to read

This booklet is not asking you to believe me.

I set the seven traditions' responses side by side, and I write out the cost of each one — including my own. The position I state is my position, not the result of the comparison.

What you should do is not ask me. It is go and check, which is why I give sources. When Paul preached in Berea, the people there did not believe a thing because an apostle said it; they searched the

Scriptures daily to see whether it was so. **That is the posture I hope you will read with.**

In short

1. My work was to ask what entitles a result to count; in 2021 I was diagnosed with ALS and retired that same year.
2. The six questions come from three things: losing my father at six, the two pandemic years, and my own diagnosis.
3. I state my position and I state its cost — but I want you to check the evidence, not check with me.

The Vedas as *śruti*, "that which was heard": BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, "Belief in the Revealed Scriptures."

Buddhism

The Buddha answering that he was not a god but one who is awake: *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4.36, *Doṇa Sutta*, translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

Confucianism

"Transmitting, not creating": *Analects* 7.1.

The *Analects* as the record of Confucius and his disciples: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "Confucius."

Daoism

The *Laozi*, also called the *Daodejing*: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "Laozi."

The Greek word for "know"

The table below gives the word used in the Greek original of each verse this booklet mentions. The form changes with person and tense, but **every form comes from the same verb, γινώσκω (*ginōskō*, to know).** You can check this yourself: Bible Hub (biblehub.com) has a "Greek Text Analysis" page for every verse, giving the 1881 Westcott and Hort Greek New Testament.

Verse	Form in the original (all from γινώσκω, *ginōskō*)	What the verse says
Matthew 7:23	ἔγνων (*egnōn*)	Jesus says He never knew those people
Matthew 1:25	ἐγίνωσκεν (*eginōsken*)	Joseph did not lie with Mary until she had given birth
John 10:14	γινώσκω (*ginōskō*)	The good shepherd knows His own sheep, and they know Him

- Matteo Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (天主實義), part 2, 「吾天主乃古經書所稱上帝也」: quoted in Tiziana Lippiello (李集雅), 〈"四書"和"五經"在意大利的歷史和傳統〉, 《國際漢學研究通訊》; not checked against a printed copy of Ricci's book.
- Clement XI, bull *Ex illa die*, 19 March 1715: *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1908), "The Church in China"; English text of Article I in Dun J. Li, *China in Transition, 1517–1911* (1969), pp. 22–24.
- Medhurst and Legge for 上帝, Boone for 神: S. Wells Williams, "The Controversy among the Protestant Missionaries on the Proper Translation of the Words God and Spirit into Chinese," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 35 (1878); Bridgman's version using 神: S. I. J. Schereschewsky, *The Bible, Prayer Book, and Terms in Our China Missions* (1888).
- The 1890 Shanghai conference resolving that each Bible society may publish with the term of its choice: *Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China, Shanghai, May 7–20, 1890*, the original conference record.

Judaism

God's covenant with Abraham: Genesis 15 and 17. Moses receiving the Law at Sinai: Exodus 19–20.

The twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible and their grouping (Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, and Ezra–Nehemiah each one book; the twelve Minor Prophets one book): Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Batra* 14b.

Islam

The Qur'an sent down through the angel Jibrīl: Qur'an 2:97.

Muhammad as "the Seal of the Prophets": Qur'an 33:40.

(English renderings follow the Sahih International translation.)

Hinduism

No single founder: Hindu American Foundation, "12 Things You Need to Know About Hinduism."

The Six Questions

At a glance

"Is there anything behind this world?" "Why me?" You have asked them, though perhaps not in these words.

Words in this section

Tradition In this booklet the word means a whole way of belief and life; I do not separate "religion" from "philosophy." **Cost** What anyone who accepts a response must accept along with it: what it cannot address, what it asks you to give up. **Starting point** What a tradition speaks from: reasoning, or revelation, or an awakening.

These are not academic questions. They are human questions:

The question	What it is really asking
1. What is real?	Is there Someone, or something, behind this world?
2. Who am I?	This body that will fail, these things I have done, these relationships — which of them is me?
3. Why is there suffering?	And why this person, why this time.
4. Can a person change?	And if so, by his own strength or by something else.
5. What happens after death?	Is that the end, another round, or a reckoning.
6. Put side by side, what do these responses show?	Where the seven really part, and where they come near.

Each of the seven traditions responds once:

Tradition	Origin — as the tradition itself tells it	Scriptures
Christianity	Jesus Christ: the Son of God become man; the One the whole Bible points to	The Bible: 39 books of the Old Testament, 27 of the New, 66 in one volume
Judaism	God's covenant with Abraham; the Law received by Moses at Sinai	The Hebrew Bible: 24 books, the same writings as the Christian Old Testament; the New Testament is not included
Islam	Allah sent down the Qur'an to Muhammad through an angel, calling him the Seal of the Prophets — the last of them	The Qur'an
Hinduism	No single founder; the Vedas are regarded as revelation "heard" by ancient seers	The Vedas
Buddhism	The Buddha: asked whether he was a god, he said no, and told the man to remember him as one who is awake	The Buddhist scriptures
Confucianism	Confucius, who said of himself, "I transmit, I do not create" — he passed on the ancients rather than inventing	The *Analects*
Daoism	The writings of Laozi and Zhuangzi	*Laozi* (also called the *Daodejing*), *Zhuangzi*

These two tables are only a map. They are not responses. Think it through yourself first, then read on.

Sources

For the basic facts about the seven traditions that this booklet presents, the sources are as follows. Where I could use a tradition's own scriptures or institutions, I did; where I could not, I used named scholarly references.

Christianity

The sixty-six books of the Bible (thirty-nine Old Testament, twenty-seven New Testament): the list in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646), chapter 1, section 2.

The seventy-three books of the Catholic Bible (forty-six Old Testament, twenty-seven New Testament): *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 120.

Malachi written around the fifth century BC: *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Book of Malachi."

The whole Bible pointing to Jesus Christ: Luke 24:27; John 5:39.

Scripture version: Scripture quotations in this English edition are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. ESV Text Edition: 2025. Used by permission. All rights reserved. The Chinese edition quotes the 1919 Mandarin Chinese Union Version (*Shangdi* edition), which is in the public domain; how that text was obtained and handled is set out in full in the Chinese edition. Where this English edition gives the wording of a Chinese verse, it is the ESV, not a translation of the Chinese.

The note on "God," 上帝, and 神

- *Book of Documents*, "Tang Shi": 「予畏上帝，不敢不正」; *Book of Poetry*, "Zhou Song: Zhi Jing": 「上帝是皇」; *Book of Rites*, "Biao Ji": 「天子親耕，粢盛秬鬯，以事上帝」. Original texts, Wikisource digital edition.

The lake of fire Where, after the judgment, those whose names are not in the book of life go; it is called the second death, and at its core it is complete separation from God. (5)

The cost (of a response) The cost of a response is the difficulty that anyone who accepts it must accept along with it—the place it cannot reach, the thing it asks a person to let go of, the kind of person it cannot help. Every one of the seven traditions' responses has a cost; so does the one I hold. (Throughout)

Personal (a person) Having knowledge, feeling, and will; able to say "I" and to be in relationship with others. To say God is personal means that God is not a force but Someone. (Throughout)

Every question is laid out in the same order: the seven responses, seen side by side, the cost, and where I stand. **This booklet is not asking you to memorize what the seven said. It is showing you how each one gets from its starting point to its conclusion.**

I am a Christian. My starting point is revelation: what God has revealed, I follow; what God has not revealed, I entrust to Him in faith (Deuteronomy 29:29). **But this booklet is not out to prove anyone right** — you look for yourself.

In short

Every question looks at how the seven get from their starting points to their conclusions, and what each one pays.

A note on translation: "God," 上帝, and 神

This section replaces one that appears in the Chinese edition. There it explains a choice of wording that English does not have to make. Here it explains the choice itself, because the history behind it is worth knowing.

In English you write *God* for the God of the Bible and *god* for anyone else's. A capital letter does the whole job. Chinese has no capital letters, so a Chinese writer must choose a word — and the choice has been fought over for two hundred years.

The original languages. The commonest Old Testament word is אֱלֹהִים (*Elohim*). It is not a name. It is an ordinary noun of the class "god" — the same word covers the God of Israel and the gods of the nations. In Exodus 20:3, "You shall have no other gods before me," that is the word. The actual name is another word, יהוה (YHWH), rendered LORD in most English Bibles. The New Testament's θεός (*theos*) is likewise a common noun.

The Chinese problem. Chinese 神 (*shen*) is the general word for a god: the God of the Bible is 神, the Hindu *devas* are 神, the gods of Daoism and of folk religion are 神. Use one word across seven traditions and a reader slides easily from *same word* to *same referent*

— the very step this comparison exists to prevent. The alternative, 上帝 (*Shangdi*), literally "the Lord on high," marks out the God of the Bible.

But 上帝 is an old Chinese word, found in the classics: "I fear *Shangdi*, and dare not but set things right" (*Book of Documents*); "*Shangdi* is sovereign" (*Book of Poetry*). At the end of the Ming dynasty, Matteo Ricci argued from those texts that the *Shangdi* of the Chinese classics is the God the Jesuits preached. In *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* he wrote: "Our Lord of Heaven is the one the ancient classics call *Shangdi*." Rome rejected that in 1715, forbidding missionaries in China to use either 天 (Heaven) or 上帝, and permitting only 天主 (*Tianzhu*, "Lord of Heaven").

More than a century later, Protestant missionaries reopened the same question. The British side — Medhurst, Legge — argued for 上帝; the American side — Boone, Bridgman — argued for 神, on the ground that *theos* is a common noun and should be rendered by a common noun. They fought it out in print without agreement. In 1890 a missionary conference in Shanghai **unanimously resolved** that each Bible society could publish the new translation with the term of its choice, which is why the Chinese Union Version exists in two editions to this day, identical but for that one word.

I write 上帝, and I do not accept Ricci's equation. Ancient people with no revelation could tell that there is Someone above them — **and that recognition is real, not invented.** Ecclesiastes 3:11 says God "has put eternity into man's heart." When Paul reached Athens he found an altar inscribed "To the unknown god," and began there (Acts 17:23). **People can tell that there is Someone. They cannot tell who He is.** It is like hearing footsteps outside the door at night: you are sure someone is coming, but you have to wait for him to speak before you know who it is.

So what is shared is the recognition; what differs is the content. The *Shangdi* of the Confucian classics involves no creation and fall, no incarnation, no cross. Those must be told by the One Himself; no one reasons his way to them. **Treating "there is Someone" as "the same One" is the step this whole series exists to avoid.**

The Vedas Hinduism's oldest scriptures. Hinduism calls them *śruti*, "that which was heard," and believes them to be revelation received by the ancient seers. (Opening pages)

The Buddha The name means "one who has awakened." The Buddhist scriptures record that someone asked the Buddha whether he was a god; he said no, and asked to be remembered as one who is awake. (Opening pages)

The Buddhist scriptures The texts recording the Buddha's teaching. (Opening pages)

"Transmitting, not creating" From *Analects* 7: Confucius says that he only passes on the ancients and does not create. (Opening pages)

The *Analects* The record of the words and deeds of Confucius and his disciples; the foundational text of Confucianism. (Opening pages)

The *Laozi* / the *Zhuangzi* The two classics of Daoism. The *Laozi* is also called the *Daodejing*. (Opening pages)

Brahman Hinduism's name for ultimate reality: unborn and undying, dependent on nothing for its existence. (1)

Own-being The independent, unchanging, self-standing core of a thing; when Buddhism says "emptiness," it means having no own-being. (1)

Karma A person's actions together with the consequences they leave. One's circumstances in this life are seen as the fruit of past actions. (3)

Self-power / other-power Whether change depends on oneself or on a power from outside. (4)

Nirvāṇa The cessation Buddhism points to, no longer being subject to the round of birth and death; not a place. (5)

***Ginōskō* (to know)** A New Testament Greek verb meaning "to know": not merely knowing that a person exists, but having that relationship with him; it is also used of the most intimate knowing between husband and wife. When Jesus says "I never knew you" (Matthew 7:21–23), it is this word; the passage is discussed in section 5. (5)

Glossary

Each entry aims only to be clear, not complete.

Elohim The Hebrew Bible's word for God. It is a common noun, not a name—the same word is also used for the gods of other peoples; God's name is another word (YHWH, rendered "the LORD"). The Dedication of this booklet uses this word. (Dedication)

The Bible The scriptures of Christianity, sixty-six books in all: thirty-nine in the Old Testament, written before the birth of Jesus, and twenty-seven in the New Testament, written after. The last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, was written around the fifth century BC, more than four hundred years before the birth of Jesus. Christianity holds that the two testaments together are one word of God, all pointing to Jesus Christ. The Catholic Old Testament includes seven more books, for seventy-three in all. (Opening pages)

The Hebrew Bible The scriptures of Judaism, in three parts—the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings—twenty-four books in all. The contents are the same as the Christian Old Testament; only the grouping of books differs (for instance, the twelve Minor Prophets form one book), which is why Christianity counts thirty-nine. Judaism's scriptures do not include the New Testament. (Opening pages)

Prophet One who conveys the word of the Most High (God, in Judaism and Christianity; Allah, in Islam). The Qur'an calls Muhammad "the Seal of the Prophets," and on that basis Islam believes he is the last prophet. (Opening pages)

The Qur'an The scripture of Islam. Islam believes it was sent down to Muhammad by the angel Jibrīl (in the Bible, Gabriel) at Allah's command. (Opening pages)

One more question, which I asked myself and you may well ask too: does "God" mean the Father, or the Son, or the Spirit?

All three. **One God, three persons.** The Father is God, the Son is God, the Spirit is God — and the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, the Spirit is not the Father. (These sentences are the church's confession, not words of Scripture; they rest on the passages that follow.) Scripture names all three: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1); Thomas says to the risen Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28); Peter tells Ananias he has lied to the Holy Spirit, and in the next breath, "You have not lied to man but to God" (Acts 5:3–4); and Jesus commands His disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). **So when I write "God," this is who I mean — the One who is three persons, not three gods.**

1

What Is Real

At a glance

Have you ever wondered at night whether, behind all this, there really is Someone? This question comes first because if it changes, the other five change with it.

Words in this section

Brahman Hinduism's ultimate reality: unborn, undying, dependent on nothing. **Own-being** (*svabhāva*) The independent, unchanging core by which a thing stands on its own. When Buddhism says "emptiness," it means no thing has own-being.

Where your first step lands decides the whole road after it. If there is a Creator behind the world with a will, then "why is there suffering" is a question you can put to Him. If the world is only conditions gathering and dispersing, then "why me" cannot even be asked — **there is no one to ask.**

The seven responses:

Christianity, Judaism, Islam — a personal Creator; the world is made, and is real; a human being is of a different order from Him and can deal with Him.

Hinduism — the ultimate is *Brahman*. The non-dual line says the world is appearance (not nothingness, but something people mistake because they do not see clearly) and that a person at his depth is *Brahman*; the theistic line says the world is real and a person may love Him and petition Him. **This tradition has to be divided before it can be discussed.**

One: you do not have to work it out first in order to be allowed to ask. All seven are responding to this question, which shows it is a human question. **That asking needs no license.**

Two: do not use "it will pass anyway" to reduce your investment in advance. Someone who thins out every relationship beforehand has not escaped loss — **he has moved the loss forward to now, and put it on installments.**

Three: tell provision and identity apart. Money, work, health, family truly do provide for you; **but they too will pass, and cannot settle who you are.** Seeing this will not make you love them less. **It will let you love them properly** — because you will stop asking them to do something they cannot do.

In short

The six questions are six faces of one question: who am I. My response is AASJC, and the reason is the resurrection — this tradition has staked everything on an event in history, which also means it can be overturned. You may read to the end and choose a different response.

Then Who Do You Say You Are

At a glance

Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Now that you have read this far, the question comes to you.

Words in this section

AASJC An Adopted Son in Jesus Christ. **Provision and identity** Provision is having something to hold up your days. Identity is who you actually are.

This booklet turns Jesus's question around and puts it to you once: **then who do you say you are?**

My own response is on the cover: the AASJC after my name, **An Adopted Son in Jesus Christ.** That is my response to this question.

Why I believe He is who He said He was. Christianity stands or falls on one thing: Jesus died and rose on the third day. Paul says that if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17). **Christianity alone claims that the One it believes in died and rose from the dead**; so far as this booklet has checked, none of the other six makes such a claim. Islam also honors Jesus as a prophet, but the mainstream account is that He was not crucified but raised up by Allah (Qur'an 4:157–158); a minority, the Ahmadiyya, hold that He only swooned and later died a natural death. This is not preaching. It is a fact that separates the seven: **this tradition has staked everything on an event in history.** I believe Jesus is who He said He was because He rose; and on that point I stand with the Apostle Paul.

Three last sentences:

Buddhism — no ultimate is posited. Everything arises dependent on conditions; nothing has own-being. **"Emptiness" does not mean nothing exists; it means nothing has own-being.** Think of a fist: close the fingers and it is there; open the hand and it is gone. It is not unreal; it simply cannot stand on its own apart from the fingers.

Confucianism — little is said about origins. It holds that the world has a moral direction, and that a person's place is to live it out within human relationships.

Daoism — the *dao*, the one that cannot be spoken. What can be spoken is not the constant *dao*.

Side by side: the dividing line is not "is there a God." It is **whether the world counts as real**. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Confucianism, and Daoism say it is; the Advaita line of Hinduism says appearance; Buddhism says dependently arisen. **This line cuts through the inside of Hinduism.**

Cost: say there is a personal Creator, and you owe an account of suffering. Say the world is appearance, and you owe an account of what this present pain amounts to. Say things are dependently arisen, and you owe an account of what "emptiness" itself amounts to. Say it cannot be spoken, and you owe an account of what your own sentence amounts to. **Every one of them pays.**

Where I stand. There is a personal Creator; the world is real; a human being is of a different order from Him and can deal with Him. **That is my position, not the conclusion of this section.**

In short

The divide is whether the world counts as real, and that line cuts through the inside of Hinduism. My position: a personal Creator, a real world.

2

Who Am I

At a glance

You fall ill, you lose your job, you lose the one closest to you — is what is left still you? First separate provision from identity; then see how the seven respond.

Words in this section

No new words in this section.

The body goes, one function at a time — is this failing body me? **Someone finishes what he set out to do and still feels short** — are the things I have done me? **Someone loses the person closest to him** — am I still who I was?

One thing has to be settled here:

Outward things really do provide for us. Money buys food and medicine. A job gives a person a place and a reason to get up. Family holds you up when you are ill. **Anyone who says these count for nothing is lying.**

But provision is not identity. A job tells you what to do today; it cannot tell you whether your life counts. **And these things will themselves pass** — what is itself still waiting to be settled cannot settle who you are. It is like scaffolding: without it the house cannot be built, but it is not the house, and sooner or later it comes down.

The seven responses:

Christianity — a person is made in the image of God. Worth does not lie in what you have or what you can do, and it cannot be taken away.

6

Put Side by Side, What Do They Show

At a glance

Where do the seven really part? Not where you would think.

Words in this section

No new words in this section.

The real dividing line is not whether there is a God. What separates the seven are other lines: whether the world counts as real; whether a person has a fixed core; whether change comes from oneself or from outside; whether time is a line or a circle.

These lines cut through traditions: Hinduism splits on the first, Buddhism on the third. **Assigning a whole tradition to one side misses this.**

Also: **many people today belong to no tradition at all, and they too respond to these six questions** — what is real is the material world; I am my brain and my experiences; suffering has no why; change is up to me; death is the end; meaning is what people give. **That is a complete set of responses.** Its cost: for those who never received justice, the books are never balanced.

Every one of them pays. That is the one conclusion this booklet dares to call common to all seven.

In short

Those with no tradition respond too, and pay too: every one pays.

Between death and resurrection. Christians differ here. Seventh-day Adventists hold that the dead are unconscious until the resurrection; the Catholic Church holds that those not fully purified pass through purgatory; the Orthodox do not accept purgatory but pray for the dead. My own position: to be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord. Jesus told the criminal on the cross that he would be with Him in paradise that day (Luke 23:43); Paul says to be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8); and in Jesus's account both the rich man and Lazarus are awake after death (Luke 16:19–31). When Scripture says believers have "fallen asleep," it means the body is waiting for resurrection, not that the person is unconscious; and Jesus Himself is not asleep — He is at the right hand of God, interceding for us (Romans 8:34).

What "know" means. The sentence comes from Matthew 7:21–23, at the close of the Sermon on the Mount: on the day of judgment, many who called Him "Lord, Lord" and prophesied and cast out demons and did mighty works in His name will hear Him say, "I never knew you." The Greek is *ginōskō*. Jesus is not short of information about them — all things hold together in Him, and nothing is hidden from Him (Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 4:13). The word means more than knowing that a person exists: the same Gospel uses it of the most intimate knowing between husband and wife (1:25), Jesus uses it of the good shepherd and His sheep (John 10:14), and He says that to know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent is eternal life (John 17:3). **So the question is not whether you know about Jesus. It is whether He has that relationship with you.**

In short

Those who say resurrection and judgment hang everything on that being true. My position: away from the body is at home with the Lord; the body will rise; in the new heaven and new earth God dwells with man; and what separates the two roads is not who did better, but grace through faith.

Judaism — you are a party to a covenant; you are the one who is responsible.

Islam — you are a trustee.

Hinduism — the self you take yourself to be is not the true self; the true self lies beneath it.

Buddhism — there is no fixed self; what we call "I" is an assemblage arising and passing. **No-self does not mean no responsibility.**

Confucianism — a person is unfinished work; you are someone's son, someone's father.

Daoism — a person's trouble is not deficiency but the loss of what he originally was.

Side by side: does a person have a fixed core? Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism say yes; Buddhism says no; Confucianism says a person is an unfinished process; Daoism says there is an original state that can be lost. Where does identity come from? Given by the One (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, the three Abrahamic traditions); already the case (Hinduism); there is no fixed thing to give (Buddhism); formed in relationship and cultivation (Confucianism, Daoism).

Cost: say a person has a fixed core, and you owe an account of why people do monstrous things. Tie identity to the community, and you owe an account of those the community excludes. Say there is no self, and you owe an account of who is practicing and who is liberated. Say a person can accomplish it, and you owe an account of those who cannot — the ill, the old, the displaced. **Every one of them pays.**

Where I stand. Identity is given by the One, because only someone who does not take his identity from elsewhere can give identity — to Moses He called Himself "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14). A person is made in His image, **so identity lies not in what he has accomplished, not in what he has suffered, and not in who is still beside him.**

In short

Provision is not identity. My position: identity is given by the One.

3
Why Is There Suffering

At a glance

Have you ever asked, "Why him, of all people?" Suffering can be asked about in two ways: why there is suffering in the world at all, and why this person, why this time. **All seven have something to say to the first. To the second, none of them responds well.**

Words in this section

Karma A person's actions together with the consequences they leave; the circumstances of this life are seen as the fruit of past action.

Christianity — suffering is bound up with human rebellion. What is most striking here is not the explanation but that the One entered suffering Himself. At Lazarus's tomb He knew the man would walk out within minutes — **and He wept.**

Judaism — you may cry out. Job cried out at God, and the ones rebuked were the friends who spoke handsomely on God's behalf, not the man who cried out.

Islam — suffering is a test, and the saying is: to Allah we belong, and to Him we return. **That person was never yours; he was entrusted to you for a time.**

Hinduism — suffering is the fruit of *karma*. What is suffered now has a history.

Buddhism — suffering is the fact; the trouble is grasping. When grasping stops, suffering stops.

Confucianism — no account of where it came from, only things to do: mourning has its term, sacrifice has its times. The *Book of Rites* is

Confucianism — it does not discuss the hereafter; it discusses continuation: descendants, works, virtue. **The cost is that the line can break** — no one left to sacrifice to, or no one to sacrifice for me.

Daoism — life and death are the gathering and dispersing of *qi*. Death is not a catastrophe; it is a returning.

Side by side: three divides. Is time a line or a circle? The three Abrahamic traditions say a line, with an end and a judgment; Hinduism and Buddhism say a circle, unless one gets out. Is that person still there? Christianity says yes, and will rise; Buddhism says there is no fixed him; Confucianism does not respond, it only keeps the place. Who settles the ending? A judge; one's own deeds (*karma*); or there is no ending to settle (Daoism).

Cost: those who say there is resurrection and judgment (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) hang the whole of it on that being true. Those who say rebirth owe an account of what is reborn if there is no fixed self. Those who say this life is all there is owe an account of the people who never received justice — how their books are ever balanced. **Every one of them pays.**

Where I stand. On this one I do not pretend to be neutral. I believe that it is appointed for man to die once, and after that judgment; **that in eternity there is no second chance to repent.** Jesus spoke of the narrow gate and the wide — **two roads, two destinations.** Those who are in Christ are, at death, with Christ in the third heaven (2 Corinthians 12:1–4; Philippians 1:23). After the judgment this heaven and earth pass away, **the new heaven and new earth come, and God dwells with man**, wiping away every tear, and death is no more. Those whose names are not in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire, the second death — **complete separation from God, without end, without escape.** What separates the two roads is not who did better; it is **Christ alone, by grace, through faith.** So the question is not whether you know Jesus, but **whether Jesus knows you.** This is my position, not a conclusion drawn from the comparison; the full account is in my other book, *Life Is Eternal — Does Jesus Know You? A Sojourner's Journey to Eternity*, chapters 47 to 49.

5

What Happens After Death

At a glance

When a person dies, is that the end? Here the seven are furthest apart, and none of it can be verified in this life.

Words in this section

Nirvāṇa The cessation Buddhism speaks of: not a place, but no longer being subject to birth and death. **The lake of fire** Where, after the judgment, those whose names are not in the book of life belong; called the second death. Its core is complete separation from God. **To know** (*ginōskō*) Not merely knowing that a person exists, but having that relationship with him.

Christianity — death is not the end. The first Adam disobeyed and death entered the world; the second Adam, Jesus Christ, was obedient to the point of death, and rose. After death comes judgment, and the ending is the new heaven and new earth or the lake of fire. And the word about grief is: **do not grieve as those who have no hope** — it does not say do not grieve.

Judaism — the weight is on a future restoration and justice; on the details of the individual after death it says little, and carefully.

Islam — resurrection, judgment, the Garden and the Fire.

Hinduism — death is the start of the next stretch, round after round, until release — getting out of the round of rebirth. **It gives continuation, but not reunion.**

Buddhism — the goal is not a better rebirth but no further becoming — no next life. *Nirvāṇa* is not a place; it is cessation.

honest about it: the term ends not because grief is finished but because life has to go on.

Daoism — stop asking why. **Of the seven, this is the one least likely to rub salt in a wound.**

Side by side: "why does God allow it" can only be asked inside a picture that has a personal, sovereign One in it; in the Buddhist and Daoist pictures the question has no place to stand. The most complete explanation is Hinduism's, and it also costs the most. **As for the second question — why this person, why this time — taking any tradition's doctrine and reading off one person's suffering item by item is overreach.**

Cost: Christianity, to say there is an all-powerful and all-good One, carries that debt permanently; what it offers is presence and an ending, not an explanation. Judaism leaves room to protest, and after the protest there is still no response. Islam's language of testing is strong, but a person who cannot hold up is easily read as short on faith. Hinduism gives the fullest explanation, at the risk of shading into blaming the victim. Buddhism gives the most thorough diagnosis, but the line between letting go and numbness is very hard to draw. Confucianism is workable, but leaves nowhere for the person who cannot do it. Daoism puts no salt in the wound, but it does not respond either. **Every one of them pays.**

Where I stand. After my diagnosis I, too, asked, "Why me?" Later I turned it around. Scripture says **"it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment"** (Hebrews 9:27) — no one is exempt, so what I ask is **why not me**; and then: **what will You do in this.** Jesus said of the man born blind that neither he nor his parents had sinned — **suffering is not the same thing as punishment.**

In short

Reading off any one person's suffering with any tradition's doctrine is overreach. I changed "why me" to "why not me."

4

Can a Person Change

At a glance

Have you ever resolved to change, only to end up back where you started? "Redemption" presumes a debt to be paid and a redeemer to pay it, which does not fit all seven; so this booklet asks instead: **can a person really become a different person?**

Words in this section

Self-power / other-power Whether change comes from oneself or from a power outside oneself.

Christianity — by grace. The order is everything: **you are not put right first and then accepted; you are accepted first, and then you can change.**

Judaism — *teshuvah*, turning: admit the wrong, change the conduct, make restitution. **If you stole, it is not finished until you have given it back.**

Islam — by the daily disciplines: prayer, fasting, almsgiving, pilgrimage. Not by one intense experience, but by repetition.

Hinduism — three paths run side by side: action, knowledge, devotion. **The devotional path is other-power.**

Buddhism — by seeing clearly; and **the Chinese Pure Land path is other-power**, relying on the original vow of Amitābha Buddha and calling on his name for rebirth in that land.

Confucianism — self-cultivation, a little each day.

Daoism — not adding but subtracting. Less, and again less.

Side by side: the grouping is not what you expect. It does not run by religion; it runs by **self-power or other-power**. It is like falling into the water: do you swim to shore yourself, or grab the life ring someone throws you? Christianity and Pure Land are structurally very close — **the same shape, but a different One relied on, and a different end promised.**

Cost: rely on a power outside yourself, and you owe an account of whether that One exists and whether the promise can be trusted. Rely on yourself, and you owe an account of the person who cannot do it — and the one who cannot is often precisely the one who most needs to. **Every one of them pays.**

Where I stand. I stand on the side of grace. In my case this is not theory. All my life I was on the giving side. Illness turned that over; now I need help getting out of bed. What I have had to change is not my temper but **the position of never receiving.** And what the illness took was my hands and feet — **not my praying for others.**

In short

The grouping runs not by religion but by self-power or other-power. I stand on the side of grace: accepted first, and then able to change.