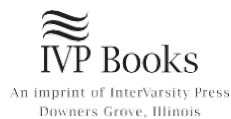


Discussion Guide to
Abdu Murray's
GRAND CENTRAL QUESTION

from InterVarsity Press

SINGLE-SESSION AND MULTI-SESSION GUIDES
FOR INDIVIDUALS OR GROUPS
BY ABDU MURRAY



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A Single-Session Study Guide to *Grand Central Question*

This study guide is meant to be used for a single-session discussion of sixty to ninety minutes. A longer, multi-session study guide is also available.

Why and How You Should Use This Study Guide

It will make the material in Grand Central Question easier to remember and apply.

My goal is to provide you with a resource that will help you read *Grand Central Question* in a more focused and memorable way. While this study guide can be used for individual study of the material in the book, it's also ideal to use for a small group study or a class at your church.

It's my prayer that the study guide will help you to make the material in *Grand Central Question* a part of your walk with Christ. And if you're not a Christian but you're curious about how Christianity answers life's important questions, I hope these materials will encourage you to think critically and sincerely about the credibility of the Christian message.

With you on the ride,
Abdu Murray

STUDY GUIDE

Prologue: What Truth Costs—What Truth Is Worth

- Pilate asked “What is truth?” and then walked out on Jesus (John 18:38) If someone asked you the same question, how would you answer?

Chapter 1: Grand Central Questions

- Look at the four fundamental questions that every worldview must answer (**page 32**; page numbers refer to the print edition) How do the answers to these questions affect a person’s daily life?

PART I: SECULAR HUMANISM OR THE GOSPEL: WHICH PROVIDES US WITH INTRINSIC VALUE AND OBJECTIVE PURPOSE?

Chapter 2: Secular Humanism—The Secular Search

- Do you believe that God’s existence is *necessary* to *objectively* affirm that humans have inherent dignity, purpose and moral value? Why or why not?

Chapter 3: Saying Nothing as Loud as We Can

- How do theists and secular humanists differ in their answers regarding the *source* of the sacredness and value of race, gender and ethnicity?
- Atheist philosopher Julian Baggini has said that atheism is about facing up to the fact that life without God can be bleak, nihilistic and miserable (**page 74**) Do you agree with Baggini’s claim that without God there is no reason to believe that life *should* be meaningful and moral?

Chapter 4: Will the Real Humanism Please Stand Up?

- Consider my friend’s statement that his mother’s death was a “life-shaping moment ” What are some life-shaping moments from your own life, and did they draw you closer to God or push you further away?
- In the end, does secular humanism or does the gospel provide the true humanism—a worldview that truly affirms human existence and dignity—that is worthy of embracing? Why?

PART II: EASTERN AND WESTERN SPIRITUALITY OR THE GOSPEL: WHICH GIVES REAL ANSWERS TO SUFFERING?

Chapter 5: Pantheism and Pain

- Pantheism teaches that the divine is all there really is We are simply mistaken to think that

there is a difference between anything, because everything is part of the divine. Does this seem true to you? Why or why not?

Chapter 6: Escaping the Escapism

- After examining the evidence, which of these two alternatives—pantheism or the gospel—would you say provides a better and more coherent answer to the question of how to deal with pain and suffering?

PART III: ISLAM OR THE GOSPEL: WHICH TELLS US ABOUT GOD'S GREATNESS?

Chapter 7: From Whence Comes God's Greatness?

- Are the similarities between Islam and Christianity deep, or are they superficial in nature?
- While Christians and Muslims share the conviction that God is the greatest possible being, how is this important point of agreement—God's greatness—also a big point of departure between the two faiths (see **pages 166-172**)?

Chapter 8: God's Greatness and the Preservation of the Gospel

- Can a Muslim who fully believes that God is great also believe that the Bible has been so badly corrupted that it contains damnable blasphemies about God? Why or why not?
- Refer to **table 8.1 on page 186**. Based on the content of Paul's letters as compared with the content of the four canonical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), does it appear that Paul was a faithful messenger of Jesus, or was he a hijacker of that message?

Chapter 9: God's Triune Greatness

- Do you agree that a concept like the Trinity can be transcendent in the sense that it is not illogical—it is not contradictory—but still be beyond our ability to fully understand? Why or why not?
- Does the Trinity—God in community—solve the mystery of how to understand God's greatness?

Chapter 10: Greatness Incarnate

- Read **pages 215-216**. How is Jesus fully human and not merely human, and how does this fact ensure that the concept of the incarnation is not inherently contradictory?
- The Qur'an agrees with the Bible in recognizing the fundamental importance of love when the Qur'an proclaims that God is Al-Wadud, full of loving kindness. If God is the greatest possible being and love is the greatest ethic, where do we find love expressed in the greatest possible way—in Islam where God doesn't self-sacrifice, or in Christianity where he does?

Epilogue: A Worldview That Views the Whole World

- What is your reaction to the information and the arguments presented in *Grand Central Question*?
- Does the gospel provide the answers to the fundamental questions and to the Grand Central Question that you have asked in your own life? Why or why not?

A Multi-Session Discussion Guide to *Grand Central Question*

This is a multi-session study guide that you or your group can use in sessions organized by the five major sections in *Grand Central Question*, or in sessions organized by chapter. A shorter single-session study guide is also available.

Why and How You Should Use This Study Guide

1. *It will make the material in Grand Central Question easier to remember and apply.*

My goal is to provide you with a resource that will help you read *Grand Central Question* in a more focused and memorable way. While this study guide can be used for individual study of the material in this book, it's also ideal to use for a small group study or a class at your church.

2. *The questions in this study guide are not designed to create busy work.*

Don't think of the questions as creating small group "homework." Instead, I suggest you use these questions to get conversations going or, if you're doing a personal study, to get you to think about material more quickly and with more focus.

It's my prayer that the study guide will help you make the material in *Grand Central Question* a part of your walk with Christ. And if you're not a Christian but you're curious about how Christianity answers life's important questions, I hope these materials will encourage you to think critically and sincerely about the credibility of the Christian message.

With you on the ride,
Abdu Murray

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Prologue: What Truth Costs—What Truth Is Worth

1. What cost, if any, do you think comes with following the truth?
2. What sort of evidence do you find persuasive when you are searching for truth?
3. How much evidence would you need to conclude that a claim or proposition is (or is likely) true?
4. Pilate asked “What is truth?” and then walked out on Jesus (John 18:38) If someone asked you the same question, how would you answer?
5. Thomas Nagel admits that he is an atheist because he does not want God to exist. Aldous Huxley writes that he rejected God so he could freely pursue his own erotic passions. What are some other barriers and biases that cause people to reject God?
6. Which barriers or biases have you encountered in your own life?
7. Why do you think Jesus challenged his followers to reconsider their commitment to him in light of what they would have to lose?
8. Is it loving to challenge someone to confront their own biases and barriers to truth, or is it judgmental or mean?
9. Why is it important to address not only a question’s *content* but also its *intent*?
10. How can follow-up questions help to illuminate the difference between a question’s *content* and its *intent*?

Chapter 1: Grand Central Questions

1. Take a few moments to think about your own worldview—the presuppositions that you hold “about the basic constitution of reality.” Into which of the three major categories—naturalism, pantheism or theism—does your worldview fall?
2. How did you come to hold or accept your current worldview?
3. Why is it essential for a system of belief to address *all* facets of life’s main questions to qualify as a worldview?
4. Look at the four fundamental questions that every worldview must answer (**page 32**; page numbers refer to the print edition). How do the answers to these questions affect a person’s daily life?
5. Regarding the first fundamental question, how do you believe the human species arose? Explain the reasons for your conclusion.
6. Regarding the second fundamental question, do you believe human existence has ob-

jective purpose (independent of human opinion), subjective purpose (relative to the questioner) or no purpose at all? Why?

7. Regarding the third fundamental question, do you believe that moral values are objective or subjective in nature?
8. What ramifications could the answer to the third fundamental question have for societies, governments, courts and lawmakers?
9. Regarding the fourth fundamental question, do you think there is a better way of life or salvation? What is the basis for your conclusion?

PART I: SECULAR HUMANISM OR THE GOSPEL: WHICH PROVIDES US WITH INTRINSIC VALUE AND OBJECTIVE PURPOSE?

Chapter 2: Secular Humanism—The Secular Search

1. Think of the atheists you know. If you've had conversations with them about spirituality or religious matters, what were those conversations like?
2. Do you believe that God's existence is *necessary* to *objectively* affirm that humans have inherent dignity, purpose and moral value? Why or why not?
3. How would you explain the distinction between the concepts of "secularism" and "secularizationism" (see **pages 47-48**)?
4. What are some of the benefits of empiricism (**pages 53-56**) for discovering truth and what are some of its drawbacks and limitations?
5. What are some of the challenges and obstacles that arise when people use empiricism to analyze questions involving morality, ethics and meaning?
6. Do you agree with scientism, which is the view that science is the only way in which humans can know truth? Why or why not?
7. The *Humanist Manifesto II* claims that humanity has *objective* meaning *in and of itself*. It also asserts that ethics is autonomous and situational and that human life "has meaning because we create and develop our futures." What contradiction, if any, do you see in these two statements—that humanity has inherent meaning and that humanity gives itself meaning?
8. By affirming human value without invoking God, in what way is secular humanism forced, as Tom Flynn explains, to elevate humankind to being the object of its own salvation?

Chapter 3: Saying Nothing as Loud as We Can

1. Why is it morally wrong to discriminate on the basis of any of race, gender or ethnicity?

2. How do theists and secular humanists differ in their answer regarding the *source* of the sacredness and value of race, gender and ethnicity?
3. What is the difference between *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* value (see **pages 65-66**)?
4. Do you agree with Richard Dawkins that your sole reason for living is to reproduce (**page 71**)? Why or why not?
5. Is Dawkins's claim consistent with the view that humanity has intrinsic value and purpose?
6. Atheist philosopher Julian Baggini has said that atheism is about facing up to the fact that life without God can be bleak, nihilistic and miserable (**page 74**) Do you agree with Baggini's claim that without God there is no reason to believe that life *should* be meaningful and moral?
7. Is *accepted* morality always the same as *objective* morality? Given an example such as human slavery, which was prominent even in Enlightenment-era Europe, what are some of the problems with grounding the existence of objective moral values in "shared values"?
8. Is atheist philosopher Joel Marks correct in concluding (**page 76**) that as an atheist he must embrace amorality?
9. If there is no morality in a universe without God, can categories of right and wrong ever amount to anything more than mere personal preference?
10. Why is reason only a tool by which we *discover* truth and not a foundation or source for *establishing* truth?
11. If we measure the value of something by what we are willing to pay for it, how might the gospel of Jesus Christ speak to the intrinsic value of humanity?

Chapter 4: Will the Real Humanism Please Stand Up?

1. Consider my friend's statement that his mother's death was a "life-shaping moment." What are some life-shaping moments from your own life, and did they draw you closer to God or push you further away?
2. In what way is the so-called problem of evil really a restatement of the question *Do we have intrinsic value and objective purpose* (**page 91**)?
3. Stephen Hawking, Paul Davies and Roger Penrose have all recognized how finely tuned the universe is to allow for life (**pages 92-95**) What conclusions and inferences do you personally draw from the fine-tuning of the universe?
4. Carl Sagan believed that it would be a "waste of space" if humans were the only life forms in the universe. Why can't it be the case that God made the universe, with all its celestial bodies and amazing properties, specifically so that humanity could exist on a rare and amazing planet?
5. If God did create the universe, with its marvelous physical complexity and fine-tuning,

and created our specifically complex DNA, what would that tell us about our purpose and dignity?

6. Jesus effectively tells the Samaritan woman and us that we are sacred because we bear the image of God (John 4:23-24) Is it more preferable to be a cosmic accident with no place but the existence that we eke out, or a beloved and designed creation of God?
7. Is the Euthyphro dilemma (**pages 105-107**) more of a problem for the atheist than the Christian? How so?
8. According to naturalism, survival of the fittest is the guiding force for life In what sense then are humans equal, given that we see vast disparities in traits, abilities and intelligence in the material world?
9. Intuitively we judge how valuable something is by how much we are willing to pay or sacrifice for it If Jesus is God and is therefore infinitely valuable, what does his death on the cross as a substitutionary atonement for our sin and rebellion tell us about (1) the severity of our sin and (2) how much God values us?
10. How does the problem of evil actually support God's existence? (See **pages 113-114.**)
11. In the end, does secular humanism or does the gospel provide the true humanism—a worldview that truly affirms human existence and dignity—that is worthy of embracing? Why?

PART II: EASTERN AND WESTERN SPIRITUALITY OR THE GOSPEL: WHICH GIVES REAL ANSWERS TO SUFFERING?

Chapter 5: Pantheism and Pain

1. Think of the Buddhists, Hindus and New Agers you know Have you had conversations with them about spirituality and religious matters? If so, what were those conversations like?
2. Pantheism teaches that the divine is all there really is We are simply mistaken to think that there is a difference between anything, because everything is part of the divine Does this seem true to you? Why or why not?
3. If pantheism is true, and everything is part of the divine, how can we rightly distinguish between good and evil if there is no difference between anything?
4. If we are one with the divine, as pantheism and the New Spirituality claim, then how did we ever come to forget this fact and succumb to the illusion that we are not divine?
5. How does Scientology, with its engrams, e-meters, audits and other techno-speak, provide a good example of the Western adoption of pantheistic teachings? (See **pages 124, 126.**)
6. Read Matthew 5:48 in its surrounding context Swami Vivekananda used this passage to imply that Jesus taught that we will one day become God Now read John 3:16-17 in its

surrounding context Deepak Chopra claims that in this passage, “Jesus bolsters his divine identity in the strongest, most eloquent terms Higher consciousness saves a person from the illusion of death, and this gift comes from a loving God ” Do these textual interpretations of Jesus’ words seem plausible given the context of his words and the fact that Jesus was a fiercely monotheistic Jew? Why or why not?

7. In your own words, describe the influence that pantheism has had on films such as *Star Wars*, *The Matrix* and *Avatar* What pantheistic themes and concepts do you observe in these films?
8. Do you believe that pantheism provides a coherent answer to the problem of pain and suffering in a way that satisfies the whole person—heart and mind? Why or why not?

Chapter 6: Escaping the Escapism

1. C S Lewis warns us that our love of the exotic and our “horror of the Same Old Thing” can entice us away to explore seemingly novel ideas that end up providing nothing new compared to our everyday experiences When you compare the core of pantheism’s solution to pain and suffering—namely, our own effort—with solutions from other world-views, does anything especially unique stand out, or do they all look similar in their emphasis on saving ourselves?
2. Do the gospel’s answers appear to be the “Same Old Thing,” given that Christianity is the only worldview in which we are *not* our own saviors and need to be saved from ourselves? Why or why not?
3. Jesus offers us peace “not as the world gives,” meaning (based on the Greek *eirene*) a state of being “set at one” in relationship with God Why does this peace have nothing to do with being enlightened or embracing our own divinity or strength (see **page 141**)?
4. Why does this peace, unlike the “inner peace” offered by pantheism, *blossom* in the presence of suffering?
5. If we humans are the problem—if we are the cause of our own pain and suffering—then how is it possible that we can be trusted to be the solution?
6. For pantheists, pain and suffering arise because we have forgotten that we are God According to the gospel, pain and suffering arose because we wanted to be God (Genesis 2–3) In your view, which of these two is more likely correct?
7. Read John 11:1-43, the story of Lazarus’s death and revivification Does Jesus treat pain and suffering as illusions or as meaningful realities of the human condition?
8. The Hindu philosopher Radhakrishnan says that a suffering God does not satisfy the religious soul (**page 151**) Do you agree?
9. Is the gospel—which tells us that we give not to receive but because we are grateful—capable of satisfying the soul? (See **page 152.**)

10. After examining the evidence, which of these two alternatives—pantheism or the gospel—would you say provides a better and more coherent answer to the question of how to deal with pain and suffering?

PART III: ISLAM OR THE GOSPEL: WHICH TELLS US ABOUT GOD'S GREATNESS?

Chapter 7: From Whence Comes God's Greatness?

1. Think of the Muslims you know. Have you discussed religious matters, including the differences and similarities between Islam and Christianity, with them? If so, what were those conversations like?
2. Do you think Takbir—the absolute superiority of God as the greatest possible being—is among the most foundational beliefs of every Muslim? (See **page 158**.)
3. In Islam, is it possible to know God personally to some meaningful degree and to have a relationship with him, or can we only know *about* God through the imperfect glimpses of his character that we see through his commands?
4. How does this contrast with what the Bible says regarding the ability of humans to know God personally?
5. Are the similarities between Islam and Christianity deep, or are they superficial in nature?
6. While Christians and Muslims share the conviction that God is the greatest possible being, how is this important point of agreement—God's greatness—also a big point of departure between the two faiths (see **pages 166-172**)?
7. A Muslim commentator has explained that God is utterly transcendent in Islam yet near to us in personal ways. Do you see any tension between the principle of Takbir and the Muslim desire to worship a God who is near to us?
8. After reading this chapter, how would you summarize or explain the difference between Islam and Christianity with respect to their views on whether, and to what extent, we can know God relationally?
9. Which view do you think is true and why?

Chapter 8: God's Greatness and the Preservation of the Gospel

1. Can a Muslim who fully believes that God is great also believe that the Bible has been so badly corrupted that it contains damnable blasphemies about God? Why or why not?
2. Do you think that believing in something just because it is your tradition is a sufficient reason for such belief?
3. What does John the Baptist imply about such an approach in Luke 3:7-8?
4. Look at **pages 178-180**. Muslims believe that every word in the Qur'an, and even the tense of every verb, was precisely dictated by God and is therefore true. Based on this,

can Muslims believe that the Bible was corrupted—given the Qur’an’s imperative in Sura 5:47 that Christians judge by what God had revealed, and the admonition in Sura 5:68 that Christians and Jews “stand fast” by the Torah and the Gospel? Why or why not?

5. Refer to **table 8.1 on page 186** Based on the content of Paul’s letters as compared with the content of the four canonical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), does it appear that Paul was a faithful messenger of Jesus, or was he a hijacker of that message?
6. Muslims believe that God revealed the Bible but it became corrupted over time Do you agree that if the Bible was corrupted, then one of two conclusions necessarily follows: either (1) God was unable to preserve the Bible or (2) God was unwilling to preserve the Bible (see **page 187**)? Why or why not?
7. Why would both Muslims and Christians—who believe that God is great—have to reject either alternative in question 6?

Chapter 9: God’s Triune Greatness

1. In the end, having examined the evidence, which do you believe describes the Greatest Possible Being—the Bible’s description of God as triune, or the Qur’an’s declaration that God is an absolute singularity of nature and person? Why?
2. The Qur’an seems to address the Trinity in order to debunk it (Sura 4:171; 5:73) Does the Bible teach anything even remotely like the ideas that God is “a third of three” separate beings, that the Trinity is God plus two other beings or, as Sura 5:116 suggests, that the Trinity consists of God, Mary and Jesus? (See **pages 190-193**.)
3. I gave three reasons for Muslims to believe in the Trinity: (1) the Bible (which a Muslim must believe is uncorrupted) teaches it, (2) the Trinity does not defy logic and (3) the Trinity proves God to be the Greatest Possible Being over and above a Unitarian conception of God What do you personally think of these reasons?
4. Refer to **table 9.1 on page 195** How do these Bible verses support the claim that God is a triune being, with one nature or essence and three distinct personalities or centers of consciousness?
5. How might the Trinity also be suggested by the meaning of *ehad* as used in the Shema?
6. Do you agree that a concept like the Trinity can be transcendent in the sense that it is not illogical—it is not contradictory—but still be beyond our ability to fully understand? Why or why not?
7. If the Trinity is logically possible, why might it also be theologically necessary? (See the discussion at **pages 202-209**.)
8. Why is the love of the Trinity qualitatively perfect? What is it about God’s “abundant love” (as Robert Wagenet described it on **pages 203-204**) that caused him to create us?
9. In what way does the Trinity explain how God can love and not lack, how he can relate and not depend on others to relate?

10. Does the Trinity—God in community—solve the mystery of how to understand God’s greatness?

Chapter 10: Greatness Incarnate

1. Having examined the evidence, which version of the crucifixion story do you think better demonstrates God’s greatness: (1) one of Jesus’ followers being made to look like Jesus and dying in his place, or (2) God dying for humanity in an act of utterly selfless love, which had the effect of defeating sin and death to redeem mankind? Why?
2. Muslims reject Jesus’ claim to be God in John 8:58 as a fabricated corruption. They argue that the earlier Gospels record little to nothing about Jesus claiming to be divine, but as more Gospels were written, the writers put greater and greater claims on Jesus’ lips until he claims to be God in John’s Gospel. How do passages from Mark, the first Gospel written, demonstrate this argument to be false? (Hint: see Mark 2:1-12; 13:26; 14:62.)
3. In claiming that God *cannot* incarnate himself, aren’t Muslims putting an unwarranted limit on God’s abilities?
4. What is the classical understanding of God’s incarnation in Jesus?
5. Read **pages 215-216**. What is the difference between being “fully” human and “merely” human?
6. How is Jesus fully human and not merely human, and how does this fact ensure that the concept of the incarnation is not inherently contradictory?
7. Think about how Islam claims God reveals himself and how Christianity claims God reveals himself. Which seems to satisfy God’s greatness better?
8. Some Muslims would protest that regardless of the possibility of the incarnation, Jesus’ death by humiliating crucifixion is unthinkable because it is not befitting God’s majesty. How does the Christian answer this objection to the incarnation?
9. According to the Qur’an, humanity’s sin is so pervasive that it pollutes the whole earth (Sura 35:45). Because God is immutable, there can be no compromise in either his maximal justice or his maximal mercy. God is Al-Adl, “The Just,” and therefore he necessarily punishes sin. God is also Ar-Raheem, “The Merciful,” and therefore he always wants to forgive sin. But how can God do both without compromising either?
10. From the discussion starting at **page 226**, *compossibility* is the harmonious and uncompromising existence of seemingly inharmonious things. Through Jesus’ death on the cross, how were God’s maximal mercy and maximal justice expressed without compromise?
11. On **pages 226-228**, I provide the analogy of the legal guarantor to help us understand how Jesus’ payment of our penalty on the cross can be just. How does the legal concept of a guarantor help us to see that it is not unjust to punish a guarantor who willingly guarantees a debt that a debtor cannot pay?

12. The Qur'an agrees with the Bible in recognizing the fundamental importance of love when the Qur'an proclaims that God is Al-Wadud, full of loving kindness. If God is the Greatest Possible Being and love is the greatest ethic, where do we find love expressed in the greatest possible way—in Islam where God doesn't self-sacrifice, or in Christianity where he does?

Epilogue: A Worldview that Views the Whole World

1. What is your reaction to the information and the arguments presented in *Grand Central Question*?
2. Based on the reasons you have encountered in this book, is the gospel the true destination for humanists who are searching for an understanding of the intrinsic value of each human being?
3. Does the gospel—with its stark realism about the world's brutality, our role in it and the divine solution to our very real problem—offer pantheists the real path to meaningfully deal with suffering and pain?
4. Do the Trinity and the incarnation demonstrate God's greatness in such a way as to satisfy Muslims' passion to worship God as the Greatest Possible Being?
5. Does the gospel both affirm and answer, in intellectual as well as emotional terms, life's major questions? Why or why not?
6. Is the gospel sufficiently comprehensive that it can answer multiple Grand Central Questions at once?
7. Why is the cross so integral to the gospel's answer to each worldview's Grand Central Question?
8. Does the gospel provide the answers to the fundamental questions and to the Grand Central Question that you have asked in your own life? Why or why not?
9. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, are you willing to engage with others in their struggle to find answers to their Grand Central Questions?
10. If you are considering the credibility of the gospel, are you willing to change everything if the gospel's answers to the Grand Central Questions speak to your heart and your mind?