



*For community screenings, panels, and workshops,
and college courses and seminars*



THE STORY OF
God
WITH
MORGAN FREEMAN



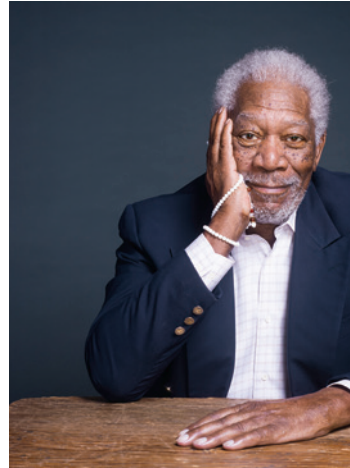
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JOURNEYS IN FILM: THE STORY OF GOD

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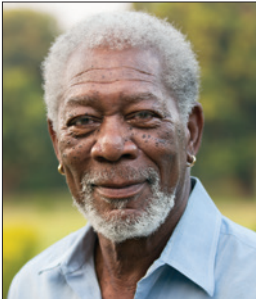
Introduction to *The Story of God, With Morgan Freeman*

Morgan Freeman, the actor who played God in the 2003 film *Bruce Almighty*, has undertaken a six-part series on world religions called *The Story of God*. The 78-year-old actor traveled almost 100,000 miles to trace the origins of the great world religions. He visited sacred sites—a Maya temple in Guatemala, the ghats of Varanasi in India, Vatican City in Rome, the pyramids of Egypt, and more. He interviewed monks and Monsignors, imams and rabbis, scientists and scholars. The result is a survey of themes that these religions share. They all ask the same great questions, but may answer those great questions in a variety of ways.

Humans have speculated about these questions for eons. Now Morgan Freeman takes the viewer with him as he attempts to learn more about how humans have tried to answer these questions across continents and millennia. This discussion guide has been prepared to help you understand more about what you see on the screen and to follow up with additional reading on the topics that stir your interest.

- How did we get here? Who or what created the universe? What do the creation stories of different religions have in common? What does the scientific theory of the Big Bang tell us?
- Is there a God? How has the idea of one or more supreme beings evolved over time? Is there any evidence in our brains that we are predisposed to believe in God?
- What is evil? Where does it come from? How is the need to control evil related to the rise of civilizations?
- Can miracles be real? How can we understand the existence of “impossible” happenings?
- How will the world end? Will there be a fiery apocalypse? What will bring about the end of the world as we know it?
- What happens after we die? How has belief in the afterlife evolved?

A Letter From Morgan Freeman and Lori McCreary



Dear All,

Who is God? Where did we come from? Why does evil happen? Are miracles real? What happens when we die? These questions can be puzzling, terrifying, even inspirational. We've asked ourselves these questions many times, and most likely, you have, too. The answers are often as different as you and I, and vary depending on where you live, how you were raised, and what you believe.



That's why we set out on this global journey—to explore different cultures and religions, on the ultimate quest to uncover the meaning of life, the question

of God, and everything in between. We are proud to bring you this story and share our findings on how faith has shaped our lives and influenced the evolution of our society.

Religion has changed throughout the course of civilization, dividing as much as inspiring. But even in our current geopolitical landscape, our experiences in nearly 20 cities—in seven different countries—shed a brilliant light on the remarkable and unmistakable similarities among different faiths, even those that historically have been at odds or seem to stand in stark contrast to one another.

Throughout this personal journey, we found many answers. In some places, we found only more questions. But through it all, the one constant we discovered—the one irrefutable fact—is that we're all looking to be part of something bigger than ourselves.

We went to some of mankind's greatest religious sites. We traveled with archaeologists, immersed ourselves in religious experiences and rituals all around the world, and even became test subjects in scientific labs, where the frontiers of neuroscience are intersecting with the traditional domain of religion. We've sung the call to prayer at a mosque in Cairo, taken meditation lessons from the Buddhist leader of the oldest line of reincarnating lamas, discussed Galileo with the head of the Papal Academy of Sciences, and explored the first instructions for the afterlife rendered in hieroglyphs inside the pyramids of Egypt.

In the end, what surprised us most was finding how personal those answers were for each and every one of us. There is no wrong answer when it comes to understanding God or what you believe. We hope *The Story of God* and this discussion guide will spark new interfaith conversations and begin a wider dialogue about the ideas and values that we all share—rather than focusing on those we do not.

It is our pleasure and great joy to bring you this special series, and our hope that you'll find our journey as enlightening and inspirational as we did.

Blessings to you,

Morgan Freeman and Lori McCreary
Executive Producers

Episode 1

Beyond Death

*We have the power to live life in a way that others remember us.
And become eternal, like the stars.*

— Morgan Freeman

1. The episode opens as Morgan Freeman is walking over a wooden bridge in Greenwood, Mississippi. He reflects on the fact that he first faced someone's death as a boy there. As an infant, he had been left in the care of his grandmother, who died when he was six years old. His older brother also died when Freeman was young. *What was your own first experience with death? How did it affect you? Did you have family or caretakers to help you deal with it or did you handle it on your own?*
2. David Bennett believes that he drowned when he was a young man, but his body was recovered and he was resuscitated. *How does he describe the experience of death? How is his experience similar to that of others who have had near-death experiences? How could such an occurrence be explained? How do you think such an experience might change a person? Has your personal understanding of near death experience changed after seeing this episode?*

3. Egyptologist Salima Ikram leads Morgan Freeman into a pyramid in the funerary complex of Djoser in Egypt, which serves as the tomb of a pharaoh who lived almost 4,400 years ago. After walking a remarkably well-preserved pathway and bending almost double to come through another passage, he finds himself in a room covered with inscriptions for another pharaoh, Unas. *What do the inscriptions say? What did they indicate about how the Egyptians viewed the afterlife? Why was the king's afterlife important to the Egyptian people?*



4. Although the pyramid at Saqqara is an ancient and detailed testimonial of belief in the afterlife, there is evidence that humans may have believed in some sort of life after death even before the Egyptians developed their elaborate theory of the afterlife. *What does this evidence consist of?*
5. The Mexican Day of the Dead (*Día de los Muertos*), celebrated primarily in southern Mexico, had its roots in indigenous celebrations held in early summer. Since the Spanish conquest, the festival takes place on November 1 and 2, coinciding with the Catholic Church holy days of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day. *How do Mexican families celebrate the Day of the Dead? Why is it considered a happy rather than sad time? What does it say about practitioners' belief in the afterlife?*



6. The Aztec Empire shocked the Spanish conquistadors with its use of ritual human sacrifice. The Maya also had human sacrifice, although not to the extent that the Aztecs practiced it. *Why did these societies sacrifice humans? What did they hope to accomplish by this practice?*
7. In the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, on the site where Christians believe that Jesus died, was buried, and rose again, Morgan Freeman learns about ancient Jewish burial customs. *Describe the nature of the Jewish cemetery shown in the film. Does it in your opinion lend support to the story of Jesus in the Gospels, as archaeologist Jodi Magness says? How was Christian belief in the afterlife*



different from the Jewish vision of what happens after death? Do you think this is the reason that Christianity spread so rapidly?

8. Morgan Freeman states, "Christians believe you only have one chance to live a good life and make it to heaven. But Hindus believe you have more than one chance. With reincarnation, death is just a step on the way to the next life." Both Hindus and Buddhists believe that life is cyclical (*samsara*). The way you live in this life will determine how you will be reborn in the next life (*karma*). *What is reincarnation? What is the goal of reincarnation? What is meant by the term "moksha" (similar to the idea of "nirvana" in Buddhism)? Why is cremation at the Marnikanika ghat (cremation place) in Varanasi considered so important?*
9. Dr. Sam Parnia has been studying the near-death experiences of almost 2,000 people. *What has he learned about what happens when we die? Does this support or refute David Bennett's story of drowning from the beginning of this episode?*



- 10.** Martine Rothblatt says that his robot Bina 48 is an experiment “to encourage technology to allow people who love life, including loving other people in life, to continue that love indefinitely into the future.” *What is your reaction to this segment? Do you think that robotics can eventually “cheat death” as Rothblatt suggests?*
- 11.** The Temple of Millions of Years was built by Rameses III to give him eternal life. According to Egyptologist Salima Ikram, when Rameses’ name is pronounced, his *ka* receives a burst of energy and his life is extended. *How important is the immortality he achieved because later generations know his name? How does Morgan Freeman interpret this concept in his own life?*
- 12.** At the end of the series *The Story of God*, Morgan Freeman makes a personal statement:

It is my fervent hope that people will open their hearts and minds and see that our beliefs don’t have to divide us: They have the power to unite us. They allow us, together, to achieve remarkable things.

Do you think that he is right, that knowing more about the belief of others can make our world more peaceful?

Beyond Death: For further reading and study

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/04/the-science-of-near-death-experiences/386231/>

A reporter’s analysis of scientific research on near-death experiences

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwWuF6KL4d8>

National Geographic video exploring Egyptian beliefs about the afterlife: “Egypt Underworld — Pathways to Eternity”

<http://www.britannica.com/topic/prehistoric-religion>

A quick survey of prehistoric religious belief based on archaeological evidence

<http://latino.si.edu/dayofthedead/>

The Smithsonian page on the Day of the Dead, complete with fact sheet and teacher lesson plans

<http://www.archaeology.org/issues/138-1407/features/2173-mexico-city-aztec-buried-world>

An article about recent archaeological discoveries about the Aztec reasons for human sacrifice

<http://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=1667>

A detailed discussion of Hinduism’s beliefs about dying, reincarnation, karma, and the proper rites for the dead

<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/life-after-life-transgender-ceo-martine-rothblatt-builds-robot-bina48-mind-clone/>

A news report about the creator of the Bina 48 mind-clone

<http://www.ancient-egypt-online.com/medinet-habu.html>

Background information about Rameses III and his Mansion of a Million Years

Episode 2

Apocalypse

As I've traveled the world, my understanding of the apocalypse has evolved. I had always thought of it as an all-destroying doomsday. But I've discovered that some people yearn for the apocalypse: They want to be free of injustice. They want to escape suffering. They want to see the ultimate truth.

— Morgan Freeman

1. Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in August 2005. The Category 3 storm with 100–140 mph winds did severe damage, but the destruction was vastly increased when levees failed and much of the city was flooded. Over a thousand people died, many more lost their homes, and property damage was estimated to be over \$100 billion. *Why does Morgan Freeman begin his story of the apocalypse in New Orleans? Is this an effective opening? Have you ever found yourself in a dangerous situation caused by natural forces? If so, how did you feel? How did you react?*

2. The archetype of a catastrophic flood destroying humankind appears in many forms in history and mythology: Noah's flood and the flood in the story of Gilgamesh from the Near East; the Greek story of Deucalion's flood; the Indian story of the first man, Manu; and the Aztec couple Tata and Nena, who survive a great flood with the help of the god of rains.



There are numerous other examples. *What might explain why so many cultures have apocalyptic stories of great floods? Is the archetype of the flood merely a metaphor? If so, what does it represent?*

3. When Morgan Freeman goes to Jerusalem, he visits the Wailing Wall and the parts of the Temple of Jerusalem that remain underground; he learns about the desire of many Jews to rebuild the Temple. *What is the Jewish understanding of a Messiah? How is this vision of a Messiah different from that held by the other two Abrahamic religions, Christianity and Islam?*





4. When Morgan Freeman goes to Qumran, outside of the city of Jerusalem, he learns about a religious sect, the Essenes, who lived in the desert there until they were destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. *Who were the Essenes? Why did they withdraw from the main body of Judaism? What do their apocalyptic writings suggest about the end of the world? Why are the Dead Sea Scrolls so important?*
5. At the Biblioteca Casanatense, Morgan Freeman views some papyrus fragments of the Book of Revelations, which was written in Greek. Kimberly Haines, the scholar he speaks with there, thinks that Revelations is political. She bases her opinion on the Greek tradition of *isopsephy*, the tradition of applying numbers to the letters of a name. In modern times, some people have been superstitious about this number and refuse to use it; the superstition actually has a name, *hexakosioihexekontahexaphobia*. *What does the number 666 stand for in the Book of Revelations? Why does Haines think that the number 666, popularly attributed to the Anti-Christ, is actually a coded word for the Emperor Nero?*
6. When Morgan Freeman interviews a former jihadist in England, he learns of a connection between belief in an apocalypse and the terrorist movements of Al-Qaeda and ISIS in the Middle East. *What is the explanation that Maajid Nawaz gives for his eventual rejection of jihadist thinking? What does he suggest about the connection between an apocalypse and the current world terrorist crisis?*

7. In Tikal, the ancient Maya capital in Guatemala, Morgan Freeman finds out more about the reputed Maya prophecy of the end of the world, which had many people nervous about December 21, 2012. *What were the baktun? How did they fit into the Maya understanding of time? How did this misunderstanding of the “prophecy” occur?*
8. The Gwalyang Karmapa is the 17th Karmapa, a term that means “the embodiment of Buddhist activity.” Born in Tibet, he was recognized by monks as a reincarnation of the 16th Karmapa and was given his title at age seven; at age 14, he left Tibet secretly and went to India to continue his studies. In the video, he talks with Morgan Freeman about the concept of enlightenment. *What advice does he give on how to meditate? What is the Karmapa’s understanding of the concept of apocalypse?*
9. *How has Morgan Freeman’s idea of the apocalypse changed over the course of his journey? Why does he say some people yearn for the apocalypse?*
10. When the video returns to New Orleans, Morgan Freeman is again speaking with Charles and Angela Marsalis. *How did the “apocalypse” of Hurricane Katrina change their lives? What did it teach? Freeman says that the attitude of the couple is very “Buddhist.” What does he mean by that? Do you agree?*
11. At the conclusion of the video, Morgan Freeman sums up: “Apocalypse is a Greek word meaning ‘lifting the veil.’ It’s not about war, it’s about enlightenment. It’s not about death; it’s a state of mind and heart that helps us see the truth. Not some far off day of judgment, it’s here, it’s now.” *Explain in your own words what you think he means by this. Do you agree? Has your personal interpretation of the idea of apocalypse changed after seeing this episode?*

Apocalypse: For further reading and study

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/09/world/middleeast/historical-certainty-proves-elusive-at-jerusalems-holiest-place.html>
An article concerning the debates about the location of the Temple in Jerusalem

<http://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/>
An introduction to the Dead Sea Scrolls from the Israel Antiquities Authority

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/07/muslim-views-of-the-apocalypse_n_2635839.html
A brief article on the Muslim concept of the apocalypse. The scholar mentioned in the article, Dr. Abdulaziz Sachedina, is the author of *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of the Mahdi in Twelver Shi’ism*.

<http://www.archaeology.org/issues/44-121/features/386-maya-long-count-calendar>
Discussion of the Maya calendar and its meaning

www.kagyuoffice.org
The website of the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa, with information about his biography, his activities, and Buddhism in general

<http://time.com/3991634/hurricane-katrina-anniversary-new-orleans/>
A 10-year retrospective on Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, with links to stories in the *Time* magazine “vault.”

Episode 3

Who Is God?

The answer to who God is lies in our imaginations and our ideals. Whether we pursue these divine ideals alone or in a community of thousands does not matter. Only that we strive for the spiritual connections that make our lives richer.

— Morgan Freeman

1. This episode begins at a blues club in the Mississippi Delta, where Morgan Freeman recalls great blues players such as Muddy Waters and B.B. King. He mentions that they have passed on but their spirit is still living. *Why do you think Morgan Freeman begins an episode on the concept of God with this scene?*
2. Lakewood Church, a megachurch in Houston that is housed in a former basketball arena, was founded in 1959 by Pastor Joel Osteen's father, John. When the father died 40 years later, his son Joel took over as pastor. As many

as 30,000 people now attend weekly, and the church's television broadcast in a hundred countries reaches an estimated 7 million. *What vision of God does Pastor Osteen seem to have? What words does he use to describe the relationship between God and humans? Why do you think this church appeals to so many people in an age when church attendance nationally is declining? Some critics have called this an example of the "prosperity gospel," the belief that God blesses favored people with material wealth. Do you see any evidence of that in this scene?*

3. Traveling to India, Morgan Freeman learns that Hindus believe in a multiplicity of gods—millions, in fact; there is a shrine at every corner. Hindu gods may take the form

of natural forces, animals, and supernatural beings. *How do Hindus decide which gods to honor? How do they honor them? What is the purpose of the puja ceremony that Freeman witnesses? What does Freeman mean when he says Hindu belief is like a "spiritual fingerprint," unique to each person?*





4. At the bowl-shaped basin called Tnorala in Australia, Morgan Freeman talks with a descendant of the Aboriginal people who were caretakers of the sacred place. He hears the sacred story of parents whose baby fell to earth from the heaven, forming the crater of Tnorala. *How does science provide insight into the origin of this story? What is the understanding of God as envisioned by the Arrernte people of Australia?*
5. In trying to understand if God is a product of our imagination or if God hardwired us to feel a connection with the divine, Morgan Freeman visits a neuroscientist who has done extensive work on changes in the brain during meditation; the scientist calls his search for answers “neurotheology.” The effect is measured by injecting radioactive dye into the subject’s bloodstream. He then uses a SPECT (single-photon emission computerized tomography) scanner to measure changes in the subject’s brain activity. *What are the physical effects of meditation on the brain? Is the effect on an atheist’s brain similar to that on the brain of a believer?*
6. A C-shaped ring of large stones buried in a field called Durrington Walls near Stonehenge, in Great Britain, is built over a deeper ring of stones that faced a line of hills to the east. Those deeper stones were toppled and buried,



and the new ring built over them was aligned with the shadows of the winter solstice. Paul Garwood and Vince Gaffney, professors of prehistory and archaeology at the University of Birmingham, theorize that the new monument shows an emerging belief in one god, the sun. *Why would worship of the sun have helped early humans survive? What were these monuments used for?* It has been estimated that building the newer henge took a million man-hours to move 100,000 tons of chalk. *Why would people go to such extraordinary lengths to build such a structure?*

7. Sun worship also ruled at the time of the Pharaoh Akhenaten in Egypt (approximately 1353–1336 BCE). He began his reign as Amenhotep IV, but changed his name to



reflect his dedication to the sun god, Aten. *How did Akhenaten attempt to change religious belief in Egypt? What were his motives? How effective was his attempt to impose monotheism on the people of his country? Did he have any long-lasting effect?*

8. The Old City section of Jerusalem contains sacred sites for three major religions: The Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque; the Mount of Olives and the valley of Gethsemane; and the Western Wall of the Temple. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are called Abrahamic religions because they began with Abraham, whom



the Jewish philosopher Yoram Hazony calls “the first monotheist.” *Why do you think the monotheism of the early Jews, Christians, and Muslims was successful when Akhenaten’s monotheism died out with his reign? What kinds of controversy now surround the Temple Mount?*

9. While visiting the Al-Hussein Mosque in Cairo, Morgan Freeman learns about the Islamic tradition of the call to prayer, issued by a muezzin, a man chosen for his exceptional voice. The imam says that the beauty of the voice would be the manifestation of God. *What other manifestations of beauty help Muslims encounter the divine? Why are the walls of the mosque covered with calligraphy? Why are there no statues such as you might find in a Christian or Hindu shrine?*
10. *What is your reaction to the following statement by Morgan Freeman? “...[T]here is a bit of the divine in all of us. There’s God in you, and God in me. The God in me is who I really am at my core. The God in me is the best version of me. The God in me is who I strive to be, who I was meant to be.” Do you agree or disagree? Why?*

Who Is God? For further reading and study

<https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/Pages/Home.aspx>
Home page of Lakewood Church in Houston

https://www.asia.si.edu/pujaonline/puja/lesson_contents.html
The Asia Society’s introduction to Hindu belief for teachers

http://aboriginalastronomy.blogspot.com/2011/03/impact-craters-in-aboriginal-dreamings_28.html
A blog post about the Aboriginal story of Tnorala and the Arrernte oral tradition

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2015/05/26/harvard-neuroscientist-meditation-not-only-reduces-stress-it-literally-changes-your-brain/>
Additional information about the impact of meditation on brain activity

<http://www.stone-circles.org.uk/stone/index.htm>
A list of stone circles in Great Britain, including Stonehenge and Durrington Walls, with additional information about each

<http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/132ohist&civ/chapters/10AKHEN.htm>
A Web page by Prof. Mark Damen of Utah State University about Akhenaten’s attempt to impose monotheism

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/what-is-beneath-the-temple-mount-920764/?no-ist>
An archaeological dig illuminates the ancient causes of some of the controversy surrounding the Temple Mount.

<http://www.metmuseum.org/learn/for-educators/publications-for-educators/art-of-the-islamic-world/unit-two>
The Metropolitan Museum’s unit on Arabic calligraphy

Episode 4

Creation

So I'm setting off on a journey to discover why we believe what we believe and what our faiths have in common.

— Morgan Freeman



1. In the opening of this episode, Morgan Freeman recites three brief passages about the creation of the world:

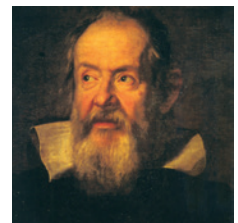
“There was neither nonexistence nor existence ... no realm of air, no sky beyond it.”

“And God said, ‘Let there be light.’ And there was light.”

“In order to create the Earth, they said, ‘Earth,’ and immediately it was created.”

Were you surprised to find that these accounts were from three different ancient texts—the Rig Veda, Genesis, and the Popul Vuh, respectively? What do these passages have in common? How do they differ?

2. In comparison with the preacher in the Greenwood church, Morgan Freeman does not find the story of Creation to be easy; to him, Genesis is quite a puzzle. He goes to the Vatican, where he sees the traditional Christian six days of Creation illustrated on Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling and then interviews Monsignor (now Archbishop) Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. In discussing Galileo, the monsignor tells Freeman that the story about Galileo being at odds with the Church may be apocryphal. In fact, Galileo was forced to recant his proofs of the Copernican heliocentric system in 1633 and his “Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems” was placed on the Church’s Index of Forbidden Books. In 1992, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences announced to the world that Galileo had been right after all.



Why do you think Monsignor Sorondo wanted to minimize the controversy about Galileo? What do you think the monsignor meant when he distinguished between the

literal Biblical account of creation (theological) and the Big Bang theory (scientific)? Can a person of faith believe both accounts simultaneously? How can they be reconciled?

3. In considering the relationship between Islam and science, Morgan Freeman says, “Scholars in Cairo kept science alive while Europe lumbered through the Dark Ages.” Many



advances in astronomy, mathematics, chemistry, navigation, and medicine were in fact made during the Golden Age of science in the Islamic world, which stretched from Spain to China. Modern students are familiar with algebra, the name of which comes from Arabic. “Arabic” numerals, brought back from North

Africa by Fibonacci, make math much simpler than it was in Roman times. *What was the Muslim understanding of the beginnings of the universe? How close is it to the tenets of modern science?*

4. Morgan Freeman continues on his journey to the Indian city of Varanasi on the Ganges River. *What does he learn about the Hindu story of the role of the Ganges in creating the world? Why is the river so important to Hindu culture? Why is water pollution in the Ganges such a threat?*
5. Morgan Freeman is interested in the earliest manifestations of religion and visits several archaeological sites in a quest for an answer to this question: Did living together trigger the birth of religion or did religion already exist? *What does he learn about early human religious beliefs at the excavation site of Çatalhöyük (chat-uhl-HER-yuk) and Gobekli Tepe? What evidence have archaeologists and anthropologists uncovered to suggest belief systems of the people who lived there?*



6. Moving to the Americas, Morgan Freeman visits El Mirador in the Guatemalan jungles, the center of the Maya kingdom, perhaps the biggest metropolis in the world 2000 years ago. There he sees stone carvings that tell the story of Creation, the oldest version of the Popul Vuh in the world. *Who were the hero twins and what was their role in the Maya creation story? What is the connection between corn and the Maya people? How do the modern-day descendants of the Maya continue to honor this tradition?*
7. The last stop on Morgan Freeman’s journey in this episode is a Navajo home, called a hogan, where a Kinaaldá is taking place. He spends time interviewing Mason, the young woman undergoing the Kinaaldá, her sister, and her other female relatives. *What must a Navajo girl do to take her place as a woman? How are these rituals associated with creation? With the story of Changing Woman, who created the first human beings from her own skin?*
8. Morgan Freeman says that these oldest stories connect us all, that they are the glue of civilization. *Do you agree or disagree with him? Why?*



Creation: For further reading and study

<http://www.casinapioiv.va/content/accademia/en.html>
 The home page of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences

<http://www.nytimes.com/1992/10/31/world/after-350-years-vatican-says-galileo-was-right-it-moves.html>
 An account of the Vatican rehabilitation of Galileo

<http://www.1001inventions.com/media/video/library>
 A quirky, Harry-Potter-esque film about Islamic science

<http://www.muslimheritage.com/science>
 A website on the Golden Age of Muslim Science from the Foundation for Science, Technology and Civilisation

<http://proof.nationalgeographic.com/2014/08/04/chasing-the-sacred-down-the-ganges-from-snow-to-sea/>
 A photo story of the journey of National Geographic photographer Pete McBride as he followed the Ganges River from the Himalaya to the sea

<http://www.catalhoyuk.com/>
 The official site of the Çatalhöyük excavation project

www.mythweb.com/teachers/why/other/hero_twins.html
 An entertaining version of the story of the Maya hero twins

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma97/dinetah/change2.html>
 A detailed explanation of Changing Woman and her connection to creation and the Kinaaldá

Episode 5

Why Does Evil Exist?

*For all of our capacity to do good,
the instinct for evil has plagued human history....
If you believe we live in a world under divine control,
why should evil exist at all?*

— Morgan Freeman

1. The problem of evil is one that the great world religions have attempted to solve since their beginning. *Before watching this episode, how did you define evil? What did you see as the worst evils affecting our world today? What did you believe was the cause of these evils?*
2. The blatant legal segregation and overt racism that existed when Morgan Freeman was growing up in Greenwood, Mississippi, have been outlawed by court cases and civil rights legislation, beginning with the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Hotels, restaurants, and water fountains no longer carry “Whites Only” signs; minorities now legally have the right to vote. However, many would argue that racism still permeates our society. *What evidence do you see in our society to point to the continued existence of racism, if any? Compare racism today with that of the 1950s. What is its cause? How can it be eradicated? If you believe that racism truly has ended, why do you think that?*
3. On a visit to a maximum-security prison, Morgan Freeman meets a man who has confessed to multiple rapes and murders. *How does the inmate explain his past behavior? What reason(s) does Dr. Kiehl give for the inmate’s actions? What are some of the traits that lead to a diagnosis of psychopathy? After learning later in the program about*
- underdeveloped portions of the brain, do you believe that someone like this could be “cured” so that he could safely be set free?
4. When he enters the tomb of Menna in Egypt, Morgan Freeman sees walls of hieroglyphs that chart the soul’s progress in the afterlife. *Who was the Egyptian god Osiris? What test of virtue occurs after death, according to the Egyptians? What is the significance of this test for the Egyptians? What does it say about the nature of evil in general?*
5. Dr. Jesse Bering investigates the behavior of young children. *What is his dartboard game designed to test? How well do the children behave when they think they are unmonitored? How well do they behave when they think there is a monitor? What conclusions does Dr. Bering draw from their behavior? Do you agree with Morgan Freeman that this test suggests that “we*



have evil in us from a very young age”? Do you think belief in a Supreme Being is necessary to keep society from breaking down? Why, or why not?

6. Zoroastrianism is an ancient religion that developed about 3,500 years ago in Persia; its founder was Zarathustra, or Zoroaster as the Greeks called him. Zoroastrianism was the official religion of the Persian Empire. Largely replaced by Islam, it is still practiced by Parsis. Ahura



Mazda is the “One Wise Lord” and from him came two spirits, one good and one evil. *Why is a fire kept burning in the Zoroastrian Center? What does it symbolize? What does the rope tied around the worshiper’s waist symbolize? What is the significance of this for day-to-day behavior?*

7. In Varanasi, Morgan Freeman observes a ceremony in which a Hindu couple is trying to remove an evil spirit that is causing them trouble. *How is water used in this ceremony? What is the Hindu attitude toward the spirit that is causing trouble? How is this different from the dualism of Western religions?*
8. Water is a key element of many religions. Muslims use water for ablutions before prayer. Christians baptize infants or the newly converted. In Judaism, a *mikveh* is a ritual bath, used to signal conversion and on numerous other occasions. Offering water at a Buddhist shrine is a symbol of calmness, clarity, and purity. And water plays a role in almost all Hindu rituals; belief in the sacredness of rivers, particularly the Ganges, is strong. *Can you think of other instances when the symbol of water is particularly important? What other key practical functions does water play in our lives besides purification? Can you think of any other symbolic functions it has?*
9. Morgan Freeman meets Bryon Widner as Bryon is having another in a series of painful tattoo removals. *Why is*



Bryon having this series of removals done? What prompted him to do so? What does this act of removal symbolize for him? What deeper meaning does Freeman draw from it?

10. Morgan Freeman concludes this episode by saying, “Why does evil exist? It may be that we may need evil. Without bad, there is no good. Without darkness, we can never perceive the light.” *Do you agree? Why, or why not?*



Why Does Evil Exist?: For further reading and study

<http://www.crf-usa.org/black-history-month/a-brief-history-of-jim-crow>

A history of racial segregation in the United States from the Constitutional Rights Foundation

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/1-segregated/jim-crow.html>

Another history of segregation from the Smithsonian Institution

<http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/civil-rights-movement/essays/civil-rights-movement-major-events-and-legacies>

Goals and major events of the civil rights movement

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4321752/>
An article about developmental perspectives on psychopathy and their implications for treatment by Drs. Kent Kiehl and Nathaniel Anderson

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3960665/>
More about Egyptian beliefs on the afterlife and the weighing of the heart

<http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/bering-in-mind/imaginary-presidents-and-imaginary-gods-the-real-empty-chair-effect/>
Dr. Jesse Bering’s blog about his “Princess Alice” experiment (and Clint Eastwood’s empty chair)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/zoroastrian/>
The beliefs, history, and rituals of Zoroastrianism

http://webworld.unesco.org/water/wwd2006/world_views/water_religions_beliefs.shtml
Worldwide religious beliefs about water from UNESCO

<https://www.splcenter.org/>
Website of the Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks hate groups (and helped Bryon Widner get his tattoos removed)

Episode 6

The Power of Miracles

*There's a broader way of looking at miracles, too.
What—if anything—governs the seemingly random moments that
change our lives and move us in a different direction?*

— Morgan Freeman

1. Alcides Moreno, an Ecuadorian window-washer working on a 47-story building in New York, stepped on a scaffolding one day in 2007 and felt the scaffolding break under him. His brother Edgar was killed by the fall, but Alcides survived. It may have been because he remembered to fall flat on the platform of the scaffolding, riding it down somewhat like a surfboard, perhaps encountering wind resistance. He says, “I don’t know why I’m still here, still alive, walking. Maybe it’s a gift God gave me.” *To what do you attribute Moreno’s survival? If you believe that it was a miracle, how do you reconcile that with the fact that his brother died?*

2. Morgan Freeman mentions the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico; Pope Francis paid a visit to her shrine in February 2016. According to believers, Mary appeared to a poor Aztec convert named Juan Diego. She told him to tell the bishop what he had seen, but the bishop did not believe such a lowly messenger. When Juan Diego returned to the same place, the lady gave him a cloak full of Castilian roses, blooming despite the fact that it was winter, as proof. When he opened the cloak, her image was miraculously imprinted on it.

Morgan Freeman also talks about Ganesha, the Hindu god with the head of an elephant, and Guan Yin, the East Asian goddess of mercy. Beginning in 1995, there were reports,



and even some videos, of the alleged miracle of a statue of Ganesha drinking milk. This phenomenon was widely reported in India as a miracle. Guan Yin was historically the patron of sailors and fishermen; now she is frequently invoked by those who hope for medical cures, a spouse, or good grades.

Why do these stories of miracles and miracle workers have such appeal? Are they to be taken literally or do they have some sort of allegorical meaning? What do they indicate to the people who believe in them?

3. The Catholic Church has a system for evaluating claims of miracles. The power to perform a miracle comes from God, but God shares this power with his saints. For someone to be declared a saint, two miracles must be documented and attributed to the person. *How does the Catholic Church certify its belief that a true miracle has occurred? What is the role of the “devil’s advocate”? What does that term mean in modern secular society?*
4. The ancient Romans believed that their destiny, or Fate, was predetermined, yet they still appealed for divine intervention and believed that the gods could affect human lives. *How did they determine what their fates would be? What was the role of priests and auguries? Why did men go to the ritual space of the god Mithras?*
5. Morgan Freeman attends a Seder, the ritual meal for Passover, in Jerusalem. *What is Passover? What was the origin of this special day? What specific foods and prayers are offered during the Seder, and what do the foods represent? How does the rabbi in the video interpret the meaning of miracles today?*
6. Morgan Freeman visits psychology professor Daniel Oppenheimer, a faculty member at UCLA’s Anderson School of Management. When he is first seen, he is flipping a coin repeatedly and recording the results. *What does he say about probability? How is this related to the idea of miracles?*

7. “It’s human nature to make a symphony out of the cacophony of events going on around us. It doesn’t mean that divine providence doesn’t exist; in fact, believing in miracles could alter the course of our lives, not just spiritually, but physically.” These words segue into two segments of the film that deal with physical health. The first is a visit to an 800-year-old hospital in Cairo. *Why does Morgan Freeman call medieval Muslim medicine “cutting edge”? What did medieval Muslims believe about the intersection of faith and medicine?*
8. Returning to the United States, Morgan Freeman visits Tom Renfro, who was diagnosed 18 years earlier with an incurable disease, mantle cell lymphoma, and given only months to live. Today he considers himself cured. *To what does he attribute this? Was it a miracle? What does science say today about the mind–body connection?*





- 9.** Bodh Gaya is the place in India where Siddhartha Gautama sat under the bodhi tree and experienced enlightenment, or *satori*. What do you learn from this segment about Siddhartha's life before and after this experience? What kind of miracle does the Tibetan Buddhist monk Losang Tenpa say we need today? How can it be achieved?
- 10.** In the conclusion of the episode, Morgan Freeman says, "So many souls pass through this world. As their pathways cross, miraculous things can and do happen. People get the break they always wanted. People inspire one another, people fall in love. Whether those events are orchestrated by the hand of God, or the result of a million-to-one chance, I believe we should believe in miracles. Because miracles, however we define them, well, they give us hope, and they drive us to create reality out of possibility." After viewing all these different interpretations, how do you define "miracle"?

The Power of Miracles: For further reading and study

<http://nypost.com/2014/01/05/window-washer-survived-47-story-plunge-now-walks-for-charity/>

The story of Alcides Moreno in the years since his fall

<http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/high-est-fall-survived-without-parachute/>

<http://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/blog/the-indestructible-alke-made/>

Several other "miracle" stories; note that the Guinness record has been challenged

<http://www.catholic.org/about/guadalupe.php>

Additional details about the Virgin of Guadalupe, from a believer's point of view

<http://www.imsc.res.in/~jayaram/Articles/milkb.html>

A scientific explanation of the milk-drinking Ganesha statues

http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/Chinese_Customs/Guan_Yin.htm

Stories about the Goddess of Mercy, Guan Yin

<http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/the-process-of-becoming-a-saint.html>

The Catholic process for canonization (declaring sainthood)

http://www.societasviaromana.net/Collegium_Religionis/augury.php

The ancient Roman customs of augury

<http://www.jewfaq.org/holidaya.htm>

A description of the rituals of Passover and the Seder

<http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/info/medicine/medieval-islamic-medicine.php>

The nature and role of medicine in the medieval Islamic world

<http://my.clevelandclinic.org/services/heart/prevention/emotional-health/stress-relaxation/mind-body-exercises>

An article on harnessing the power of the mind-body connection

<http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/bodgaya.htm>

A look at Bodh Gaya, the Buddha's place of enlightenment

This discussion guide was written by Eileen Mattingly of Journeys in Film.

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P. 7: PYRAMID OF SAQQARA FROM

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Djoser_Stepped_Pyramid_of_Saqqara.jpg; Day of the Dead sugar candies at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alfeniques_of_day_of_the_dead.jpg.

P. 9: NOAH'S FLOOD PICTURE FROM MEDIEVAL MANUSCRIPT AT

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:William_de_Brailes_-_The_Animals_Enter_Noah's_Ark_%28Genesis_6_-13-7_-16%29_-_Walters_W1062R_-_Full_Page.jpg; Wailing Wall from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wailing_Wall_Jerusalem.jpg.

P. 12: GANESHA, THE ELEPHANT GOD, FROM

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1_Hindu_deity_Ganesha_on_ceramic_tile_at_Munnar_Kerala_India_March_2014.jpg

P. 13: STONE FROM HENGE AT

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Southern_entrance_stones_avebury_henge.jpg; Akhenaten from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Musee_national_-_alexandrie_akhenaton.JPG.

P. 14: TEMPLE MOUNT FROM

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jerusalem_Tempelberg_3.JPG.

P. 15: COSMIC DUST FROM

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Heic1501a.png>; Galileo from <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Galileo#/media/File:Galileo-sustermans.jpg>

P. 16: ASTROLABE TEXT AT

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Abu_Rayhan_al-Biruni#/media/File:A_drawing_of_an_astrolabe_Wellcome_L0041186.jpg; El Mirador from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:El_Mirador_5.jpg.

P. 18: OSIRIS FROM

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dios_Osiris_%28M.A.N.%29.jpg.

P. 19: ZOROASTRIAN FIRE FROM

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fire_in_Yazd_Zoroastrian_temple.jpg; water collection from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Holy_Water_Collection_-_Upanayana_Ceremony_-_Simurali_2015-01-30_5350.JPG

P. 21: OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE FROM

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Christ_the_King_Church,_Tres_Valles,_Veracruz,_Mexico05.jpg.

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