

OpenTheo

#17 Other religions, the New Age and Islam

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

What happens to those who don't believe in Jesus? What can I say to my New Age sister? My Muslim friend gets so much comfort from her faith... do I need to evangelise her? These and more listener questions get addressed by Tom Wright in this episode.

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Transcript

[MUSIC] Premier Podcast.

[MUSIC] The Ask NTYN-thing Podcast.

[MUSIC] >> Welcome back to the show, another dose of unadulterated Tom Wright goodness coming your way on today's edition of the program.

We're going to be looking at the subject of other religions. I'm Justin Bralley, the man who gets to sit down with Tom Wright on a regular basis to pick his brains and ask your questions here on the show brought to you by Premier in partnership with SBCK and NT Wright online. And it's been great to get some of your feedback as well to the show.

I've read out in previous episodes some of the reviews that have been left for the podcast. Here's some what's come in on my own Twitter though, people getting in touch with me to tell me what they thought of the show. Tim said, I know it's rather typical these days for an American white male millennial pastor to love Professor Tom Wright, but I've truly been blessed by the podcast with Justin, Deep Wisdom and Remarkable

Humility.

Worth a listen. I assume you're talking about Tom that rather than me. Tim, good to hear from you though.

Ben got in touch to say really enjoying Tom Wright and Justin's podcast, the Ask NTYN-thing podcast, super insightful stuff, much of which I haven't heard before, even on the more commonly discussed topics. And Adam said he was shocked to learn that NT Wright loves Sibelius, which relieved her here, but it's not the third century heretic, but the Finnish composer. And finally, Dean, who's an Australian listener and who's in touch occasionally, says he really enjoys it whenever Tom Wright drops into his podcast feed, but says, could you ask Tom where he scored those croissons, look at the size of those puppies, house breaks.

And in preferring that of course, there's some other video clips that we release from the show from time to time there in which you can see some of the food and refreshments that are laid on between us as we record these podcasts. Yes, they were particularly large croissons, as you say, Dean. If you want to catch more videos, by the way, from the Ask NTYN-thing podcast, we do release them on a regular basis so you can go and check them all out at the website, askentyrite.com. You also get bonus video content and other special offers if you sign up there at askentyrite.com to the newsletter.

Well, as I said, today's episode is on other religions. Now, that's a topic we'll also be tackling at our unbelievable conference coming up very soon on Saturday, the 20th of July in London. 13 international thinkers, including people like Krishkandaya, Kristi Maer, Bruxy KV, and many more speaking, truth in a post-truth world.

Go and check it out. Get yourself booked in if you'd like to be there on the day. PremierChristianRadio.com/unbelievableconference, and I'll make sure there's a link in the info from today's podcast.

And we're currently running another book giveaway on the show. Three signed copies of Tom's best-selling book, Paul a Biography, and I'm chucking in a copy of my own book, Unbelievable, Why After 10 Years of Talking with Apies, I'm Still a Christian. As usual, you just need to be signed up to our newsletter to be automatically entered.

Do that by the end of July when we'll select the next three winners. Again, it's askentyrite.com, and that's your place for more episodes, updates, bonus video content, and entering those prize draws. Well, that's enough of me watering on.

Let's see what Tom has to say in today's edition of the show. Welcome back to the show. Today on the program, we're going to be looking at other faiths.

We've got a number of questions about interfaith issues, how we should relate, especially when it comes to evangelism and mission and that sort of thing, Tom. I'm sure

in some of the roles you've held, that's often involved meeting with religious leaders of other kinds. Yes, when I was Bishop of Durham, I was involved both with interchurch work, particularly with some of the freer churches and some of my Roman Catholic neighbors, but then also at a national and international level with some Christian Jewish work and also some Christian Muslim work.

In Durham, there wasn't a large presence of, say, Buddhists or Hindus or other people from the subcontinent of India, but we did have, interestingly, a well-known Orthodox Jewish community in Gateshead in the northern part of the Durham Dales. That was frustrating. I used to meet people from there sometimes, but they're very much enclosed, keeping themselves themselves and, indeed, apparently not having much contact with other less Orthodox Jewish groups.

That was always something I would pray about and wish we could do more to involve them. There were little bits of involvement, but yes, in my own work as a biblical scholar, I've often had to work alongside and with Jewish colleagues coming at similar questions from very different angles. Then when Ron Williams' Archbishop, he got me involved with some of the Christian Muslim dialogues that he was doing.

I've done a bit of that. Never as much, I have to say, as I might have liked, but I've always learned an enormous amount and it's been exciting. Well, as I say, a number of people wanting to ask questions about this.

Eric Inouye, who we'll begin with, who says, "There seems to be very little, apart from the specific doctrines that we hold and our specific ritual practices, that separate us from other belief systems, faith-healing prophecies, speaking in tongues, mystical experiences of something great, a loving one's neighbour, forgiveness in a peaceful formation of character, prayer and a relationship to a God." All of these can be found to some degree or other in other philosophies or religions. Which features of our faith, as lived out in the present, are truly unique and special for Christians? If there are none, then are we condemned to a purely intellectual, i.e. the historical basis is stronger basis for our faith? Eric apparently seems to think that there's a great deal of commonality and we just really differ in some of the specific ways. Yes, Eric has a point.

If you go back to the first century and read one of my favourite non-Christian authors from the first century, Epictetus, there are places where Epictetus, who is a kind of a cheerful street level stoic. There are places where you almost want to put your arm around him and embrace him when he talks about God, even though he's a stoic, who believes that God is everywhere and everything is God. Nevertheless, there is a personalness to his God and he has a wonderful prayer invoking this God and thanking him for his goodness, etc.

And you have a sense, are you a cryptocristian or what? Because this is not like the atheism that we know in the modern secular world. And I think if you've been soaked in

the secular world, as so many of us have been, where just the assumptions of secularity are all around us, then when you meet people who seem to have a prayer life, a sense of the love of God, etc. etc.

etc. You think, "Oh, well, that's what I got from my Christian faith." Of course, the difference, and Eric kind of swats it away at the end of his question, the difference is Jesus, that for the Christian, everything that is true about the God who made the world and the idea of a God who made the world is not common to all the faiths, of course. Everything about that God comes into focus, personal human focus, in Jesus and Azeroth, and more specifically, for the Christian, Jesus' death has accomplished the defeat of the powers of evil so that Jesus' resurrection has launched new creation.

And that all that we know arising out of that comes from that. And it isn't just, "Oh, well, we've got some historical background." No. Christianity is about something that has happened in history as a result of which everything is different.

People say, "Oh, it doesn't look that different to me." But actually, and again, I say as an ancient historian primarily, I know what the Roman world in the first two or three centuries looked like reasonably well. And I know the impact that is made when you get people living radically differently. And of course, Christianity was born into a world of many faiths.

It's not just chapped like Epictetus, but there were all sorts of different religions, some of them very intense, some of them yes involving speaking in tongues or prophesying, which is why Paul in 1 Corinthians has to say, "Here's the litmus test." If somebody thinks that this is the spirit, then if they end up saying, "Jesus be cursed," then that wasn't the Holy Spirit, which shows that there's all kinds of stuff going on. And so we have lived in this world which says, "Here is the secular world, and there are these religious people, mostly Christians, we think." And then we discover there's all these other people and that it's secularism that's actually out of step with the rest of the world. So we live in a complicated and confusing world, but Jesus is at the center of what Christians believe.

I suppose the question that strikes me as Eric is then asking is in a sense well okay, granted Jesus is unique in terms of the way we believe God has been revealed to us and through him that we approach God and so on. But if it looks like these other faiths are having broadly similar experiences, aren't they just sort of simply doing God their way and we're doing God our way? Again there's a glass half full glass half empty thing, and there are passages in Scripture which help us with that, like the story of Naom and the Syrian, who suddenly meets the prophet Elijah and gets cured of his leprosy and then has to go back home where he's required to bow down in the Temple of Rimmon. And Elijah says actually I understand your situation that's fine.

Or like Cornelius in the Book of Acts who doesn't know about Jesus but has been praying

to God as best he can and when Peter comes to him he says I see that God says no partiality because in every race anyone who tries to love him and follow him is acceptable. At the same time you're then on that knife edge where Jesus says on the one hand those who are not against us are for us and then on the other hand there are other occasions where those who are not with us are against us. And discerning that difference has always been a tricky part of Christian discipleship and the danger is that people will use the fact of other faiths and they seem to have this good experience whatever as a way of downplaying the distinctiveness of Jesus and saying well Jesus was one great teacher but then there's Buddha and there was Moses and Muhammad and so on.

And actually when you look at it that's not how it works it really isn't. And so I think particularly the invention of the idea of faiths which is a modern thing that's itself part of the secular agenda and the way that the questions come at us is the reflex of that secularity which says secularism is the real thing and there are these funny people who do these funny things. And I want to say Christian experience it comes in all shapes and sorts and sizes because we're all so different and trying to judge the truth or validity of Christianity by the sort of experience that it gives me or you or some people is like going for a walk in the hills and taking a compass bearing on a sheep.

That sheep is going to be moving around you better watch out. Similar sorts of questions here and we'll see what your response is. Maryman York says my sister is a new age adherent and I find that whenever we talk about spirituality we use much of the same language the universe loves her God loves me etc.

And we even seem to be in agreement about a lot mercy and self giving love of principles she also follows for example. I can't really see much of a difference in how we implement those in our lives either. Both of us seem to have arrived at the same way of living life through different means.

What I wonder is how does the work of the Holy Spirit fit into this? I wonder at least not be somehow better at this way of life than her given that we're roughly equal otherwise but that I have the Holy Spirit guiding me. Not that being better matters I just want to understand the Holy Spirit's part in all of this. Also made me wonder if our way of life can be copied without having our faith then why is membership in God's family a necessary prerequisite for becoming part of his new creation project so to speak.

Yeah good question and again using a railway illustration having just spent a certain amount of time on trains recently. If I get a train from Aberdeen to Bristol quite a bit of the track will be the same track as you'd be using if you went from Inverness to London. It's coming down the middle of the country a certain way but your origin is different and your destination is different.

The fact that that middle bit you're on the same track doesn't actually tell you about where this kind of came from or where it's going to. That's partly helpful. It doesn't get

you all the way but I think I would say yes there are many people out there who will say like the Jewish teacher who muses about what Jesus says in Mark 12 and Jesus says you're not far from the Kingdom of God and he's sort of thinking it through.

It looks as though and there are many many people in the New Testament times who would see what these early Christians were doing and perhaps like Gamaluil in the book of Acts saying this is the kind of movement that might just be from God so watch out don't start opposing it. Now again navigating these things as a matter of discernment but again and again historically where Christians have as it were said oh well all people of good will act this way so we'll just go with the flow. That may work for a year or for even a generation but then as we've seen in our country and our culture an assumed Christian Britain which I grew up with the assumption just gradually turns away and then people assume well aren't you coming with us because we're still doing what we think we should and the Christians have to say well sorry no we don't cross that bridge but if you've got out of the habit of discerning things Christianly which means on the basis of Jesus the gospels etc and prayer for the spirit then the facility to say no when it's required may have atrophied and that's a real problem but as I say in the early church the reason people became Christians was because these Christian communities were actually living radically differently that's not to say there weren't other communities that were trying to live differently and that there were some parallels between them but my goodness the Christians had the inner motivation because they believed that Jesus had defeated evil on the cross so that if people said well you can't really sit down need with slaves oh yes we can they're humans too and they are part of the family or you can't really treat women as equal oh yes we can this is a sister she's part of the team and so there's all sorts of things where again and again Christianity does make a difference when you really follow it through.

What you were saying earlier and just then made me think as well that sometimes we don't give credit to the fact that the reason someone who says they're a new age adherent living in 21st century Britain does probably have rather similar values and goals to you is probably because we're soaked in still a Judeo-Christian heritage which has yes has informed so many of the values that people now think well of course we all think that don't we quite quite and the answer is we do and we don't and Christians differ among themselves obviously as well but part of my trouble in answering that question is that the phrase new age can mean all sorts of things and this was big in the 80s and it seems still to linger on and re-emerge in new ways some new age stuff is basically pantheistic that that God is as this person says God is the cosmos or the cosmos is God well go back to ancient stoicism it's all there and as I say you'll find Epictetus is a good friend but at a certain point what the new age can't really have is a serious critique of evil because pantheism and the idea that God is the cosmos and the cosmos is God then everything that happens just just everything that happens and if there is radical evil and you'd have to be very naive not think that there is then what's

going to happen about it how does that how do you deal with that I think the thing I've noticed really emerging you know you have obviously on one hand the the diehard sort of secularist atheists who are you know really naturalistic in their thinking but I think there's a large middle ground of people who like to call themselves spiritual but not religious and who don't want to name a particular religious tradition but but say I don't disavow the idea of a sort of transcendence and that sort of thing and and I think that's quite a difficult conversation to have with someone who's neither fully against it or on one side but he's so sort of yes some hard to pin down realist or they they actually think it's funny because yes I know plenty of people who would come into that category and when my publishers recently reissued a book that I'd written 25 years ago the title they gave to the new edition was spiritual and religious in order to say actually guess what there is a convergence here and I think the but not religious bit is picking up steam from the kind of rejection of a of an old-fashioned boring out-of-date tedious churchy annuity of a previous generation it's it's a way of saying yes I'm a deeply spiritual person of course I don't go to church or any of that's often somebody who's never darkened the doors of a church or not for a long time or maybe only for a wedding or a funeral and actually they would find if they turned up that the religion is now quite different from what they might have thought and that critique of religion as well has a great deal of the sort of 19th century liberal Protestantism about it and we don't do religion we do the the real thing and so culturally that sounds appealing but actually when you cash it out it's not going to be very satisfying let alone to do justice to what Christianity is actually all about it isn't just about spirituality it's about new creation and transformation and us stumblingly finding ourselves caught up in that. Well they ask anti-write anything podcast has brought you in partnership with SBCK and anti-write online. Now SBCK, Tom's UK publisher have created a special discount on a selection of Tom's titles when you buy one you can get a second half price and it includes a number of Tom's most popular books in the deal surprised by hope simply Jesus and simply Christian to name a few of them get the buy one get one half price offer by going to their website SBCK publishing dot co dot UK then add forward slash ask anti-write that's SBCK publishing dot co dot UK forward slash ask anti-write.

Michelle in Surrey says I have a close friend who's a Muslim she and her family take their faith very seriously and from what I can see it positively shapes their life and is an important part of the way they engage with their wider community. Now I believe that Jesus is God's son his unique revelation to us and the true path to relationship with God and I'd never hesitate in being open with my friend about my own faith but at the same time I don't find that I'm in a position to try to evangelize her in the direction of Christianity she seems to draw so much from her faith already and would potentially lose so much if she did leave Islam her community possibly even her family is it wrong for me to be unwilling to evangelize her. I would always say this there's no one size fits all here and as anyone prays for a friend and I assume that she does pray for her friend then sometimes opportunities will occur to talk about Jesus to talk about the differences

between the Bible and the Quran whatever it may be.

I have done some work on Christian Muslim relations and I have had some Muslim friends and yes I know and respect the ones that I have met at the same time I know several people who have come from countries like Iran and have to their own astonishment and alarm discovered Jesus as a living presence calling them enticing them with a love which they hadn't experienced this is their own testament in not mine and just drawing them to say no Jesus really is the way the truth and the life and they look back such people at the world of Islam that they grown up in and they they look back and shudder and say that was a dark place and I needed to get out of this and sometimes that means that they need to get out of the family they need to get out of the country I've met some when I was in Durham who asylum seekers come to this country precisely because they wanted to follow Jesus and they were prepared to give up everything and after all Jesus does say in the New Testament again and again you've got to be ready to give up everything that's easy for me to say that having grown up in a Christian home and in what used to be a Christian country I haven't had to do that sort of leaving but that has always been the norm rather than the exception but it is it's very difficult because again and again the place of Jesus is central and you know over the great Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem says in Arabic there is one God and he does not have a son because of course that was a political statement that was a way of saying we won and the Crusaders didn't right and so we have to get behind that political thing this is not a statement about you know medieval political shenanigans and crusades and so on that this that distorts the whole thing the question is is Jesus who we find him to be or was he just a miscellaneous profit pointing the way forward to Muhammad instead and there it's very hard to see that there's any any way of reconciling those two absolutely I suppose Michelle in a way wouldn't disagree that she believes yeah she says Jesus I do believe in that that is what do I do in that case with someone who is settled and happy and for whom moving out of that faith would be a very true magic yes yes well I mean of course most traditional Christians would say well but if they stay there and if they say no to Jesus then they are at risk forever and that's a that's a real problem however I would say that the normal way and this has always been so from the beginning of the church is for the Christian family to live as a Christian family and to go the second mile and to show what it means to be hospitable and open to be prayerful and loving to be neighborly on the street Paul says rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep yeah if there's a party going on go and celebrate if there's a funeral go and go and cry and just show the outgoing love which often surprises people until they say hang on what's different here and it may be as with the railway tracks but for large stretches the journey there doesn't seem to be too much difference but there are places where that divergence will come about I don't know if you have a comment on this but I'm aware of something called the insider movement in certain parts of the Arab world and this is the idea that there are parts of the Arab world where certain Muslims have come to believe in Jesus as God's son but they stay within the Muslim community and even

going to mosque and taking part in you know the rituals partly because of the danger of potentially disrupting and that has I think people who are very critical of that movement because they believe if you become a Christian you should if you like be distinctive and come out of that and others who say no I think there are practical reasons why it might make sense for Muslims to be as it were undercover believers in a Muslim society. I understand that and I am told that there are similar movements in the Jewish community that particularly in the Middle East itself in Israel that there are many many Orthodox Jews who are actually followers of Jesus but who have tried to find ways of expressing that and allowing that to happen without breaking with the parent Judaism of course the phrase Judaism the word Judaism is itself a modern a modern idea really in the meaning we give to it. I respect that I understand that's difficult and I want to say actually you can see the same negotiation and navigation going on in the New Testament when Paul comes back from the mission field and the Jewish believers in Jerusalem are horrified to hear what he's been up to.

It's a matter of how you figure out the way of being authentic and wise and so on and it took a long time to figure that out in the early church and we shouldn't be surprised if we run into similar things today. Travis in Montana asks in a previous episode when talking about the historical Jesus Tom mentioned that many historical figures and events are known to us through only one source therefore if we discount the validity of the New Testament as evidence for the historical Jesus we should also discount a good deal of other ancient history as well. So my question is this how then can we discount the accuracy of other religious works such as the Quran or the Book of Mormon? How is the New Testament different? So this is moving us into more of a question about the historical basis for other religious beliefs and if we're prepared to say we should take the New Testament documents seriously about Jesus why not equally apply the same rule to the Quran Muhammad and Jesus made them.

I confess I confess I've only once read the Quran through cover to cover and that was some years ago and I'm not familiar and detailed way with it and I confess I've never read the Book of Mormon but I notice that when people talk about the Bible and other sacred texts they often talk about for instance the Bhagavad Gita which again I've only skimmed through or there was recently the philosopher A.C. Grayling is leading atheist produced a secular Bible or an atheist Bible. Yes I think it was called something like the Good Book. It was essentially drawing in lots of sort of Greek and Roman sort of wisdom.

Well one wise reviewer of that said what I would want to say about the Book of Mormon and indeed the Quran on quite a different level that they aren't the same kind of thing. The Bible as Christians have it which is those two very different bits the ancient Israelite narratives etc and then the early Christian texts is telling a story and the way we have the canon at the moment it is a specific narrative about how the Creator God has worked his purposes out and then astonishingly and shockingly has brought them to their dramatic conclusion with Jesus and has launched a whole new movement and it's not a

Book of General Religious Instruction. The General Religious Instruction comes along with the fact that this is the true story of the world and it comes with an implicit invitation so now get on board with this story and make it your own become part of this story in a way which the Book of Mormon or that atheistic good book or whatever simply aren't doing theirs they're saying here's good advice for how to reorder your life.

Now as I say I don't know Mormonism hardly at all but so this is rather like just as we say other faiths in this sort of post 18th century way so the idea of other sacred books is a bit deceitful because the Bible isn't actually like those other books. The other thing I've often felt is Christianity from its inception was a public religion in the sense of it was attesting to public events. Absolutely.

Whereas I often find other books are by nature different the Quran is about private angelic sort of revelations to Muhammad same with the Book of Mormon essentially it's curious to see the discovery of these gold plates and translating them all happen in a private sort of way. And indeed you could say that other religious traditions are in a sense more mystical visionary and so on. Whereas I've always felt Christianity is rather different to that in as much as it makes a very specific claim about events that were open to the public.

Absolutely the word we came flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory and yes in the Book of Acts it says you know these events were not done in a corner. This is going on everybody in Jerusalem knows exactly what was happening and the word has got out and so it's the publicness and the historicalness and the fact that the history is what it's all about. The history is not an illustration of something else.

We believe in the creator God who has rescued the world, is rescuing the world and will rescue the world rather than a God who wants to give us mystical or spiritual experiences. And again sorry to sound like a cracked record this is back to the way our culture has perceived religion and spirituality as though this is really all about me having an experience and what stories do I have to tell to facilitate or sustain this experience and it really isn't about that at all. Experience is come and go as easily as catching a cold or whatever.

What matters is here is the historical and historic event of Jesus and here is the historical me right now what am I doing today with my own self my own person and my own community that is part of this new creation project. Final question from Fred in Ontario Canada says Justin and Tom first of all I want to say thank you have greatly benefited from the material you guys put out thank you Fred. I was wondering what Tom has to say about those who have never heard of the gospel the famous John 3 16 has in a sense two paths those that believe in Christ will have eternal life and then those that reject him will perish but what about the third group those who have never heard about the gospel or Jesus.

I know Romans one comes to mind about humanity exchanging the truth of God for a lie but don't you think many humans do this unconsciously through their sinful nature. I know this isn't a simple one sentence answer but I do appreciate any feedback and anyway it's a question that's been asked in many different ways and we even tackled it I think on a previous podcast in some form or another but yeah any what about those who simply have never heard I suppose. In a way I just want to say this is above my pay grade this is God's job not mine.

Fortunately I am not the Archangel Gabriel sitting there the judgment seat and I'm actually equally worried about people who think they've heard because they went to Sunday school as a child or whatever and so oh yeah that Jesus stuff I heard all that but in fact what they heard was so unlike the reality of the actual Christian gospel that it's put them off without giving them a real taste of the real thing. They still remain in a sense unreached because they never. Exactly they never had the real thing and they ever saw the real thing and part of the Christian doctrine of creation is that God is the God of generous outgoing love and I think though it's hard to generalize from that as though we know everything about generous love and so we can say well because you know what generous love is and because God is that therefore we always have to be careful of statements which end up saying therefore God must dot dot dot and I don't think there's any moment at when we can say God must do this or that because we've generalized however what we see in Jesus again and again is Jesus used the cliches including the people who other people had excluded the tax collectors and the prostitutes going into the kingdom of heaven before you you self righteous ones so that at any point when we think okay we have this comfortable closed circle and it's us and too bad about those outside then watch out that's the point at which Jesus comes knocking on the door and says guess who I bring to this party.

At the same time Jesus himself and the rest of the New Testament as well have plenty of warnings about people either who presume to be all right or who ignore what's before them you know he says can't you read the signs of the times this is this is not rocket science if there's a wind from the south you say it's going to be hot well of course if there's a wind from the south it's going to be hot so can't you see what's going on and if people say no I just can't see I'm putting the telescope to my blind eye then watch out because God's moment is here upon you and you really might miss out so it's that's a delicate balance between the two. My response to this is often simply well like you I'm not God all I know is he'll be more just and more merciful than I could ever hope to be. Yes.

But I do know what he has asked me to do which is to invite everyone that I can answer this into this path this relationship. Absolutely yeah absolutely and and that invitation comes in as many different forms as there are people. You know I admire those who can somehow use the same evangelistic chat up line with everybody they meet but it seems to me you have to have a very particular thick skin temperament to be able to do that.

I have found over the years that because everybody I meet is interestingly different from all the other people I've met I will wait and pray and watch and see what the right way is with this person and often the right way for a day or a week or a year is simply to get to know them to love them to pray for them to be friendly and then see how the spirit takes you on from there. I'll become all things to all people that I may win some. Exactly.

First Corinthians 9. Yeah good. Thank you very much Tom to be really interesting and we'll be back with another episode of the podcast very soon. Don't forget you can get in touch with us and send your questions in by registering.

As usual the website is askntwrites.com for now Tom thanks for being with me. Thank you very much. Hope today's episode has been helpful for you and that we'll see you for the next one next time it's heaven and hell that we're asking your questions about.

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