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G O O D ?
R E A L L Y ?

Good news about the God
I don't believe in

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Ærlig talt, Gud!

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A WORD OF WARNING FOR HAPPY CHRISTIANS

The church I pastor is quite adventurous. A few years ago, they took part in an ambitious project. We posed the provocative question: “Does the God of the Book of Revelation believe in Jesus?” Our intention was to examine whether God’s actions in Revelation are in harmony with the life and deeds of Jesus as we read about them in the Gospels, including His teaching that people should not repay evil with evil, not seek revenge, do good to our enemies, and so on. Does the author of, for example, these words—“Fire came down from heaven and devoured them” (Revelation 20:9)—believe in the same Jesus who only decades earlier had rebuked His disciples for merely thinking such a thought?

When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” But Jesus turned and rebuked them. And he said, “You do not know what kind of spirit you are of, for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.” And they went to another village (Luke 9:54, 55).

Our journey through Revelation demanded a lot from both the speaker and the audience. Some participants found it difficult to follow all the material; others looked forward to the seminar being over. But for some of us, our thinking was revolutionised when we discovered that Jesus’ self-sacrificing approach is the exact same method used by God when dealing with evil in Revelation. The Lamb with the fatal wound has won—the ultimate victory is His, because of the sacrifice of Himself. His sword is not the type wielded by an arm, but rather extends from His mouth. The blood on His robe is His own blood. When God’s people faithfully follow the Lamb and His method, the world will begin to believe in God.

Wherever “love your enemy” is promoted and practised as the defining trait of God’s character, there is indeed hope of redeeming His reputation. The Book of Revelation dreams of the day when the peoples and kings of this world will celebrate that the Lamb who was slain is the King of Kings. During the seminar, we even permitted ourselves to ask whether a person who never had a genuine chance in their life, would be permitted to repent after Jesus’ second coming.

Not all Christians find experimental Bible reading such as this particularly enjoyable. When a congregation in a different part of the country started listening to the recordings of these seminars, I started to receive phone calls. Was this in line with the truth? And how about if, what, and whether? And how could I continue to be employed as a pastor when I permitted myself these kinds of thought-experiments? I hardly dare to imagine what might happen if someone actually reads this book. I fear that it, too, will provoke and offend.

First, I permit myself to question teachings and formulations that Christians have taken for granted and loved dearly for centuries. But I’m not alone in doing this. It has been done throughout history. Among English-speaking Christians, there is presently a growing Neo-Anabaptist movement, investigating whether God is as nonviolent as Jesus. Where Martin Luther made justification the benchmark for faith, lifestyle and theology, the Anabaptists made Jesus’ life itself into a similar benchmark. And that implies the end of violence and revenge as a method. However, there are two diverging understandings of Christian nonviolence. The first states that we can afford not practicing violence and revenge, because some day in the future, God will execute it on our behalf. The other understanding states that violence and revenge is never a sustainable or productive solution, not even for God. The Neo-Anabaptist movement is actively investigating this second alternative, because it is this idea they find in the life and teachings of Jesus.

Second, this book permits itself to remain open-ended, both in its scope and its conclusions. It consists of a small collection of articles dealing with certain themes that pose a challenge to the faith of many believers, as an invitation to a dialogue about the future of the Christian faith. Had I waited until I had finished my ponderings and contemplations, or till I was

completely satisfied with my formulations, this book would never have been published. If I had decided to include all subtleties, it would have become impossible to read. Certain readers might be provoked by my omission of various philosophical and theological arguments that could have further illuminated the distinctions I draw. I simply have to apologise for not having been able to include everything.

Third, this book utilises provocative exaggerations to get its points across. Unfortunately, I have always had a taste for exaggerations and overstatement. I look upon them as a shortcut to the main point. Without making any further comparison, I've always experienced Luther's hard-hitting language as exhilarating, while also imagining that those who knew him probably glimpsed a twinkle in his eye and the hint of a smile playing round his mouth as he fired off the most unabashed comparisons. The danger is that if one doesn't understand this exaggeration and overstatement, it can become a source of misunderstanding and hurt feelings. However, behind the forceful and simplified language in this book, there lies much carefully considered academic literature containing perspectives that have, in most cases, been with us since the early church.

And, finally, this book focuses on genuinely difficult questions—questions not everybody necessarily wishes to engage with. If you are a confident and happy Christian today, content with your faith and the answers you've found, maybe you should lay this book aside. It wasn't written for you. It was written for people who are searching, people who would like to believe in Jesus, but who more than once have shaken their fist at heaven and shouted, "God? Really?"—or something along those lines. The title of the book has changed several times during the writing process: Does God Believe in Jesus? Is God a Christian? God as the Accused Party or A Slandered God. The literal translation of this book's original title in Norwegian was *Honestly, God?*

This book takes the neoatheist—that offered by Dawkins, Hitchens and others—critique of "God" seriously. Part of the book also deals with how well-intentioned Christians have attributed certain characteristics to God, characteristics the New Testament attributes to the devil. The book also investigates atrocities so horrific that "God? Really?" doesn't cut it.

There is a time and place for everything, and maybe you don't need this

book right now. I was so fearful of what such questions might do to my faith that I left them alone for many years. So don't allow any well intentioned person or book club to decide that the time is right for you. Decide for yourself. But if you do decide to read it, it is my hope that my own journey through the most difficult questions to ever challenge my faith might be of some help to you too.

CHAPTER 1

“GOD” MUST DIE!

I felt utterly out of place and like a bit of a failure. I had been flown in from Norway to conduct a series of so-called public meetings in a Finnish university city. The campaign had been given the edgy title “A sceptical faith”—or, in Finnish, “Skeptinen usko”. The idea was to spark curiosity around questions of faith, and to gain new friends and contacts for the church that had invited me there. I had finally worked up the courage to read Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* and realised that the book was nothing to fear. I was almost disappointed to find that a man who could write such clever and entertaining material on theories of natural science could produce such useless arguments against faith in God. And I hadn’t found the books by other renowned atheists to be any more challenging. So here I stood, before a hopeful little group, to eradicate all logical and conceivable obstacles to faith, and demonstrate that the road to a joyous belief in God was wide open, despite Dawkins & Co’s claims to the contrary. I had no intention of proving the existence of God. I wished only to remove some of the obstacles for those who wished to believe.

On the front row sat a young man who had been brought up in the church, but who evidently had become a fervent Dawkins supporter. I don’t know if he was present because his father, seated next to him, was hoping the meetings might save his faith or if he had other motives. At any rate, it soon became evident that my philosophical and scientific refutations and arguments against Dawkins were not having the desired effect on the young man. It was hard for me to understand why. My arguments were succinct, simple and logical. My illustrations were forceful and entertaining. My critique of Dawkins felt irrefutable.

In retrospect, I realise that I might have misrepresented Dawkins somewhat or not properly understood what the young man was asking. But would it have made a difference if I did? Maybe in this case it would, but more often than not, we make the massive mistake of assuming that people actually want to believe in God when often they do not. Which is why Dawkins doesn't need logically convincing arguments. If you want him to be right, being an entertaining, rhetorically hard-hitting wizard with words is more than enough.

If you read the books and listen to the lectures given by the greatest stars of New Atheism—Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Stephen Hawking, Victor Stenger, Lawrence Krauss and many more—you will soon start to realise that this is not about whether it is possible, logically or scientifically, to believe in a Creator of the universe. The question is much more whether it is desirable to be a believer. And the answer from the entire pack is a resounding no! If an omnipotent God still has some kind of relationship with His creation, He has evidently done such a lousy job that every rational human being must surely hope that He does not exist. Add the words and actions of those who have claimed to speak on His behalf and these authors see absolutely no reason to choose faith over no faith. A famous quote from Richard Dawkins illustrates this point:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.¹

And it doesn't improve the situation when believers point to "the Gospel". Where Christians hear a beautiful story about lost sinners being offered salvation, the journalist and author Christopher Hitchens hears only a story of manipulative abuse of power:

God invents—makes—a human species, takes a brief look at it and decides: "It's in rebellion against me!" It doesn't know how it's done this, but that's his verdict: "You're in rebellion against me. For one thing, you've broken the rule I gave you, 'Don't think for

yourselves.’ You deliberately went and looked for knowledge. Now you’re in rebellion. Now you’re going to suffer. Now there’s nothing that won’t happen to you. I made you and I can break you. And I will. I’ll flood you, I’ll plague you.” Now—what is this? This is like a terrible insect or rodent in the laboratory of a cruel and stupid person. And what is more nihilistic and alienating than that? It’s all summarised in one line, if you wish: To believe [this], you have to consider yourself created incurably sick, and then ordered, on pain of death and eternal torture, to be well. This is not morality.²

In another lecture, he describes Christianity as a dictatorship:

It even manages to pollute . . . the most important word of all, the word “love”, by making love compulsory, by saying, “You MUST love, you must love your neighbour as yourself,” something you can’t actually do . . . [and] by saying you must love someone who you also must fear. That’s to say, a supreme being, an eternal father, someone of whom you must be afraid, but you must love him too. If you fail in this duty, you are, again, a wretched sinner. This is not mentally or morally or intellectually healthy.

And that brings me to the final objection. . . . This is a totalitarian system. If there was a God who could do all these things and demand these things of us, who was eternal and unchanging, we would be living under a dictatorship from which there is no appeal, and one that could never change, and one that knows our thoughts and can convict us of thought-crime, and condemn us to eternal punishment for actions that we are condemned in advance to be taking. With all this in the round, and I could say more, it’s an excellent thing that there is absolutely no reason to believe any of it to be true.³

In summary: “God is not an easy person to like, and we sincerely hope he does not exist.” Or as the atheist campaign on the London buses a few years back proclaimed: “There probably is no God, so stop worrying and enjoy life.”

A farewell to faith

There might well be many reasons to not want to believe in God. During my three decades as a cognisant, thinking Christian, I have come across many stories of people who encountered problems with their faith:

- A father who watches his daughter scream her way into death because of the agony caused by her cancer, loses his faith that God could possibly have any genuine fathering instincts for humans—and what, then, is left of faith?
- An idealistic church planter who, after several attempts, experiences that the dream of a loving, spiritual fellowship that could have brought a slice of heaven into its small corner of the world is impossible to realise, despite the world's best team of co-workers. He concludes that if this is the case, then there really is no point following Jesus or believing in God.
- Another idealistic Christian experiences that he must leave a destructive marriage, but feels he must first extinguish his faith in God, otherwise his feelings of failure and defeat will be too overpowering.
- A woman, who has grown up under a rigid faith, experiences that all the answers the church has provided do not stand up to the facts of science and the realities of life surrounding her, and the disappointment and feelings of having been deceived overshadow any possibility of better answers or alternative ways of believing.
- Years of mental suffering, loneliness, isolation and a deafening absence of both God and the church when he needed them most, completely extinguishes this person's ability and will to believe.
- The boy who grew up being told that practically everything is dangerous and potentially satanic, experiences first that the dangerous things aren't that dangerous, followed by an enormous feeling of emancipation at simply being able to enjoy being alive without any overhanging spiritual imperatives.

Some people experience that those who claim to be followers of Jesus, betray both them and their Lord: the searching girl raped by the “compassionate priest” who she hoped would lead her to Jesus; the transgender person who finds herself shut out by the congregation she

grew up in; the single mother who, rather than being embraced and helped after having given birth to an unplanned child, finds herself being punished and isolated; the family who, after 15 years of loyal and regular attendance, didn't come to church for a few weeks—and nobody missed them.

The historical account of the past 2000 years of Christianity isn't entirely honourable either. The atheist Sam Harris writes the following in his critique of standard Christian morals:

If you think that it would be impossible to improve upon the Ten Commandments as a statement of morality, you really owe it to yourself to read some other scriptures. Once again, we need look no further than the Jains: Mahavira, the Jain patriarch, surpassed the morality of the Bible with a single sentence: "Do not injure, abuse, oppress, enslave, insult, torment, torture, or kill any creature or living being." Imagine how different our world might be if the Bible contained this as its central precept. Christians have abused, oppressed, enslaved, insulted, tormented, tortured and killed people in the name of God for centuries, on the basis of a theologically defensible reading of the Bible.⁴

I don't know whether the young man on the front row in Finland wanted Dawkins to be right about God. He didn't return after the first meeting, and I never got the chance to have a proper conversation with him. But I have since wondered whether the will to believe or not to believe actually trumps most arguments. How we describe the God we claim to believe in may today hold greater currency than the classic arguments for a creator God.

This book was not written to save the faith of those who have experienced crises like those I have described above and who now experience freedom by not believing. It was written for those of us who, deep inside, have a longing for God and who want to believe, but who find that God's actions and words seem to make it difficult. Perhaps this book is written mostly to myself. That's why it contains certain shortcomings. It addresses that which challenges and threatens my own faith.

The solution for my desire to continue believing is the following simple but revolutionising suggestion: What if it is true that God is exactly like

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