

# Introduction

## Getting Rid of God

### What Is a Christian, and Why Should I Care?

“So you’re a *Christian*?” She said it like I had just told her I was radioactive or invisible or from the galaxy Andromeda. She explained: “I went to Mass a few times as a kid. But now I’m a Buddhist. It’s just so less judgmental. It’s a better fit for me.”

“I can definitely understand the appeal,” I confessed, “what with the crazy, violent, and competitive world we live in. What a gift it is to be able to detach and let go of this false self that craves attention and these empty possessions at which we clutch and grab.”

She smiled and nodded, relieved that I wasn’t a fundamentalist kook who was going to pester her about Jesus. And then she turned the conversation back toward me: “What does it mean to be a Christian?”

We were in row 20, seats D and E of a Boeing 737 on a non-stop flight to San Francisco, just settling in and buckling up. She had noticed the book I was reading, *God for Us*, spelled out in

giant silver letters on the spine.<sup>1</sup> I wondered whether this would be a three-hour conversation or just a polite, passing exchange.

*Am I a Christian?*, I asked myself. To be honest, a lot of the time I don't feel like it. And when I read the actual stories of Jesus, I seriously wonder if I am worthy of the name. But I didn't know what else to say. So I simply said, "Yes, I'm an agnostic about a lot of things, but I do believe that God is sheer unconditional grace, and I believe that God has been revealed to the world in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, who we humbly call 'the Christ.'"

She stared at me with a blank expression. I could tell that even those words were far too churchy, too in-house Christian-speak. That's a problem for those of us on the inside. We lose touch with how culturally meaningless these words have become.

## God Is Dead, Long Live Relationship

Take the word *God*, for instance. This word is dead. Through sheer overuse, it has been emptied of meaning. Look at what we've got, OK?

- God of the politicians, invoked to win the hearts and minds of voters
- God "the man in the sky" to whom athletes point when they make a play
- God who shames us into better behavior
- God who condemns most of the world's population to hell
- God the answerer of desperate prayers
- God as an idea that we think our way to
- God the first cause, who wound it all up and let it go
- God the exclamation (OMG!)

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1. A breathtakingly gorgeous book by the late great Catherine LaCugna, a feminist theologian who taught at Notre Dame and died of cancer in 1997. *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992).

None of these vague and general notions of God come anywhere near to capturing God incarnate, God *for us*, God made flesh in the suffering servant of Jesus of Nazareth, who died a horrifying and gruesome death at the hands of the extremely violent and barbaric Roman Empire.

What we need is to completely reboot, recover, reconstruct our notion of God. I propose that we substitute the word *God* with *relationship*. Thus, if I could return to that conversation with that passing stranger on the plane, I would say something like this: “I don’t believe in God so much as I believe in relationship. Rather I trust that the experience of relationship itself—the intense, uncanny, risky, but loving bond that can exist between creatures—is the highest high, the truest truth we can know—relationship like that deep, primal connection that exists between a mother and a child. The question is, where does relationship come from? My answer is that it emanates from a God of pure, self-giving love, revealed to us in Jesus the Christ and made real to us by the Holy Spirit of God’s suffering love.”

## Relationship as a Lens

Being done with God and venturing into this new terrain of relationship, what would it look like to examine Christian faith through this new lens? That’s the purpose of this book. (Spoiler alert.) I take the classic topics of the faith and view them through the lens of the loving relationship of grace. Revelation, the Trinity, God, Jesus, the atonement, the Holy Spirit, the created world, sin, heaven, hell, the church—what do these subjects look like when viewed through the lens of the self-sacrificial, relational lens of the Trinitarian love of Father, Son, and Spirit?

As such, this is a book about theology, an arena that can be boring, academic, dry, dangerous, but at best wonderfully blissful. At its worst, theology has been in service to all manner of barbarism and torture, invoking the divine to justify the most

heinous forms of violence. But theology is also capable of breathtaking beauty. What if you could hear words that made you feel profoundly hopeful, words that made you feel deeply and unconditionally loved, words that assured you that grace, forgiveness, and hope for all of creation are not just the sentimental whims of a few deluded dreamers but concrete historical realities? That is what theology is capable of. Or to be more precise, it's the subject matter that theology is called to reflect upon.<sup>2</sup>

*What is theology?*, you might be asking. There are a zillion ways to define it. I take it to mean something like this: theology is a second-order critique of the first-order event of the Word of God. The first order stuff is primary, central, the core, the raw, in-your-face encounter with the divine. Though they differ on the details, Christians believe that God shows up, that revelation happens, through scripture, preached word, sacrament, prayer, imagination, silent meditation, the created world, and other means. Christians display a wide variety of understandings as to *how* God is revealed, but they do believe in some sort of self-revelation of God as the source of their faith. Think of this first order experience as the primary stuff of the divine encounter.<sup>3</sup>

The practice of theological reflection, or “theology” for short—which is what I am attempting in the bulk of this book—is the gift of stepping back from that first order encounter and asking questions. If God speaks, how do we best understand? If there is a Word from God, what does it mean for humanity and for all of creation? How are we to behave? How do we be open to

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2. Not that there's no bad news. We'll learn all about the bad news in chapter 10. But for now, just know this: the bad news is properly understood only in the light of the good news, the knowledge that it will be overcome.

3. In classic reformation based Protestantism (my tradition) this first order event is called “proclamation,” the preached word of the love of God revealed in the life, teachings, and works of the risen and crucified Christ interpreted and acted out in the sacrament of holy communion.

hearing that word again? How do we think critically about the ways in which this divine revelation has been distorted? Understood this way, the woman's question to me on the plane was theology, my response to her was theology, and the ways I've continued to wrestle with her question and wish I'd answered it differently are theology.

All stripped down, theology is the *gift* of stepping back from worship and proclamation of the church and asking the big questions: Where is the good news? How do we best proclaim it? And how in the devil has the church managed to turn the good news into bad news? Sometimes that happens in seminary classrooms, sometimes in row 20 of a flight from MSP to SFO.

## 51 Percent Christian?

Oh, and a word about the title of this book. How can you be 51 percent Christian? That's ridiculous! Of course it is. It's supposed to be. Can you measure your faith in percentage points? No, but I'm trying to get at something more serious. We've somehow come to believe that faith is all or nothing, that you're either a 100 percent Christian or not a Christian at all. That puts way too much pressure on us. Faith becomes a series of mental exercises in which your little brain attempts to triumph over whatever source of doubt might arise. Not only does that run counter to what the Bible says, it is also hopelessly self-centered, not to mention exhausting.

In confessing that I am a 51 percent Christian, I'm trying to tell you that you have permission to doubt, to question, to stand on a barren heath on the coast of Denmark and shake your tiny fist in anger at God. But in the end, it's not about you. Faith is about relationship, and that is the only way it makes even a lick of sense. What if this God we profess faith in is, essentially, *relationship*? Then faith in God becomes something that you choose every day. Or better yet, it chooses you.

## After Certainty

In two thousand years of Christian history, we've witnessed countless episodes in which the certainty of the faithful has legitimized discrimination, persecution, violence, and war. During such dark times, certainty has become an idol, with truly tragic results. Humans created God in the image of their culture, their clan, or their tribe, and then they extracted from their idol-god some indisputable "will of God" that somehow perfectly corresponded with their arrogance, exclusion, and condemnation.

In my tongue-in-cheek embrace of this "51 percent Christian" moniker, I'm actually getting at something very serious. *Certainty just might be the enemy of faith.* Though I'd be glad to take credit for that intuition, it's really nothing new. In trying to knock down the idol of certainty, I'm following in the tradition of two of Christendom's more imaginative thinkers: Blaise Pascal, a Frenchman who lived in the mid-1600s, and nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. They are the two great critics of dogmatic certainty. Instead of appealing to foundational, rigid, preestablished truths, Pascal and Kierkegaard reveled in irony, inversion, satire, surprise, story, and tension. They trusted in a living word that is always new and can never be captured in the certainty of a system.

We are, after all, living in a postcertain world. As we continue to wrestle with and criticize the modern era, the quest for grand foundational truths is crumbling. Academic disciplines are becoming more limited and humble about the scope of their respective knowledge. Even in the sciences, researchers and scholars are recognizing limits and paradigm shifts. Isn't it time that Christians embrace this postcertain climate we now inhabit and open ourselves to more honest and fruitful dialogue with all sorts of academic practices and disciplines?

Finally, what about that movement that, at present, is growing much faster than Christianity: namely, atheism? Must Christians be always at war with the atheists? No, there is another way.

Instead of fear and exclusion and argument, what if we were more open to engaging our atheist sisters and brothers in meaningful action and reflection about the state of our world? Bertrand Russell, forefather to the likes of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennet, has an oft-quoted quip that gets to the heart of the danger of certainty: “The fundamental cause of the trouble is that in the modern world the stupid are cocksure while the intelligent are full of doubt.”<sup>4</sup> Brother Bertrand hints at the possibility of a climate in which *both* Christians and atheists are a bit less certain of their claims and much more open to common action and reflection on matters of peace, justice, ethics, and environmental action.<sup>5</sup>

## Operating Instructions

According to some recent surveys, more than half of current readers fail to read books to their completion. But here’s good news about this book. *You do not have to read the whole thing!* And you do not have to read it in order. This book will be a topical journey through the teachings of the faith. The chapters surely are related to each other, but you are welcome to pick and choose as you go.

I write because I have this desire to point, and I can’t make it go away.

There is a set of paintings on display at the Unterlinden Museum in France. They are huge and haunting, and the colors are spectacular: oil paints so thick and textured you can almost smell them. Matthias Grünewald’s Isenheim Altarpiece was first

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4. Bertrand Russell, *Mortals and Others*, vol. 2, *Bertrand Russell’s American Essays, 1931–1935* (London: Routledge, 1998), 28.

5. I must give credit to my brilliant friend Christopher Zumski-Finke for helping me come up with this title. We hope to collaborate on a jointly authored follow-up to this book: *The New Pragmatism: A 51% Christian and an Uncertain Atheist Discuss God, Ethics, Parenting, and the Environment*.

installed on the altar at the Monastery of Saint Anthony in Isenheim. At the time, the monastery served as a hospital, a place of care for victims of the black plague and other skin diseases, where the noble monks of Antonine risked their lives to care for the dying and the dead. The central panel of the altarpiece features a dying Christ on the cross. His remarkably muscular body is covered in pockmarks and sores. To the right of the cross is an anachronism. John the Baptist is standing there. Anyone with even a remedial knowledge of the four Gospels in the Bible knows that John the Baptist was long gone by the time of Jesus' crucifixion. And yet, here is John.

Although the figure of Jesus is front and center, many observers are struck by a second image. John is pointing. His elongated, bony, fleshy finger is straining to point at the corpse on the cross. John's finger is speaking the message "Look, here is God. God is present in our affliction. In fact, God is for us in such a deep, intimate, painfully passionate way that God became this. This is the picture of love."

All I want out of life is to be the fleshy, bony, elongated index finger in that Grünewald altarpiece. John the Baptist, pointing, pointing to the crucified Christ, the one who calls us to die, that we might be born again. As I seek to point to this love that comes from beyond, from outside, from the heart of God, my hope is that, as you learn what it is to which I point, you will be inspired to do your own pointing. You, in your own peculiar way.



# How the Cheatin' Heart of Modernity Double-Crossed the Doctrine of Revelation

THE THING ABOUT US is that we like information. We like it a lot—more so than probably any other culture that has ever existed on the face of the earth. This is both a blessing and a curse. Information can be a good thing. I am grateful for the right information whenever my cell phone works, or I take off on an airplane, or I listen to the song I just downloaded on my iPod, Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World." In other words, information is good and useful as an *instrument*. But is information enough?

As people who are bounded by modernity, we've grown up with this optimism. We can trust our brains, right? If only we have the right information, the right inputs, we can fix things, like MacGyver. The knowability and fixability of all things has become our religion.

## Instrumental Reason, an American Idol

But can information *save* us? With our information in hand, we can attempt to set a proper course, to fix our bearings, to head in the right direction. But you know what? The human heart is prone to outsmarting our information in some pretty damn devious ways. We can take good information and manipulate it.<sup>1</sup> We can ignore some of the information, bend other parts of it, and completely overemphasize those bits that set us in the best possible light. We do all that in ways that mask our self-deception, our violence, our greed, and our apathy about each other and about the world. In other words, information is good and useful as an *instrument*. But can mere information kick our butt and confront us and expose to us the myriad delusions and self-deceptions we are all capable of?<sup>2</sup>

Regarding the task of theology, our overconfidence in information has some downright radioactive fallout. First of all, we are prone to the overbelief that *all* knowledge is propositional: that

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1. Yes, as a matter of fact, this is a thinly veiled reference to President George W. Bush and his cronies (Cheney, Wolfowitz, Rove, and Rumsfeld) and their “we know better than you” manipulation of the data that sucked us into the quagmire that is Iraq. But this issue is way bigger than our politics. We all do this, you know. When I point a finger at you, there are four fingers pointing back at me. Well, not really, because my thumb is pointing up in the air. But you know what I mean, right?

2. Any philosopher worth her or his salt will at one time or another wrestle with the question of self-critique. From whence comes self-critique? In other words, can anyone, anywhere, anyhow ever simply stand up and tell us to our face that we are full of crap? Especially when the weight of traditions and institutions blur and squash and crazify voices that claim that something is wrong? The best of the Christian tradition trusts that there is such a thing as the event of the Word of God, a Word that judges us and forgives us at the same time, a Word that completely levels us and helps us hear the ugly truth about ourselves only because we are first told that we are unconditionally loved and completely forgiven. It’s a truth that allows vision and insight and death-and-rebirth, and it sets us free to actually do what is right, for the right reasons. But more on that in our chapter on ethics.