

ZONDERVAN

A Skeptic's Guide to Faith

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Formerly titled *Rumors of Another World*

Requests for information should be addressed to:

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Yancey, Philip.

[Rumors of another world]

A skeptic's guide to faith / Philip Yancey.

p. cm.

Previously published as: *Rumors of another world*. c2003.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-310-32502-4 (softcover)

1. Christian life. 2. Apologetics. I. Title.

BV4501.3.Y363 2009

248.4—dc22

2009020800

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Cover photography: Shutterstock®

Interior design: Beth Shagene

Printed in the United States of America

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I wrote this book for people who live in the borderlands of belief, a phrase first suggested to me by the writer Mark Buchanan. In regions of conflict, such as the Korean peninsula, armies on both sides patrol their respective borders, leaving a disputed territory in between as a buffer zone. Wander into that middle area and you'll find yourself in a "no-man's-land" belonging to neither side.

In matters of faith, many people occupy the borderlands. Some give church and Christians a wide berth yet still linger in the borderlands because they cannot set aside the feeling that there must be a spiritual reality out there. Maybe an epiphany of beauty or a sense of longing gives a nudge toward something that must exist beyond the everyday routine of life—but what? Big issues—career change, the birth of a child, the death of a loved one—raise questions with no easy answers. Is there a God? A life after death? Is religious faith only a crutch, or a path to something authentic?

I also meet Christians who would find it difficult to articulate why they believe as they do. Perhaps they absorbed faith as part of their upbringing, or perhaps they simply find church an uplifting place to visit on weekends. But if asked to explain their faith to a Muslim or an atheist, they would not know what to say.

What would I say? That question prompted this book. I wrote it not so much to convince anyone else as to think out loud in hopes of coming to terms with my own faith. Does religious faith make sense in a world

of the Hubble telescope and the Internet? Have we figured out the basics of life, or is some important ingredient missing?

To me, the great divide separating belief and unbelief reduces down to one simple question: Is the visible world around us all there is? Those unsure of the answer to that question—whether they approach it from the regions of belief or unbelief—live in the borderlands. They wonder whether faith in an unseen world is wishful thinking. Does faith delude us into seeing a world that doesn't exist, or does it reveal the existence of a world we cannot see without it?

I “think out loud” by putting words on paper, and out of that process this book emerged. I begin with the visible world around us, the world all of us inhabit. What rumors of another world might it convey? From there, I look at the apparent contradictions. If this is God's world, why doesn't it look more like it? Why is this planet so messed up? Finally, I consider how two worlds—visible and invisible, natural and supernatural—might interact and affect our daily lives. Does the Christian way represent the best life on this earth or a kind of holding pattern for eternity?

I am at times a reluctant Christian, buffeted by doubts and “in recovery” from bad church encounters. I have explored these experiences in other books, and so I determined not to mine my past yet again in this one. I am fully aware of all the reasons not to believe. So then, why do I believe? Read on.

PART 1

WHAT ARE WE MISSING?

*Every ant knows the formula of its ant-hill,
every bee knows the formula of its beehive.
They know it in their own way, not in our way.
Only humankind does not know its formula.*

FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY

CHAPTER 1
LIFE IN PART



The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.

ALBERT EINSTEIN

More than ten million people in Europe and Asia have viewed a remarkable exhibition known as Body Worlds. A German professor invented a vacuum process called *plastination*, which replaces individual cells of the human body with brightly colored resins and epoxies, much as minerals replace the cells of trees in a petrified forest. As a result, he can preserve a human body, whole or stripped away to reveal its inner parts, and display the cadaver in an eerily lifelike pose.

I visited Body Worlds in a warehouse art gallery in London after an overnight flight from my home in Colorado. I was feeling the effects of jet lag until, on entering the gallery, I encountered the exhibition's signature piece: a man all muscles, tendons, and ligaments, his face peeled like a grape, with the entire rubbery organ of skin, flayed and intact, draped over his arm like a raincoat. Sleepiness immediately gave way to a morbid fascination.

For the next two hours I shuffled past the sixty preserved bodies artfully arranged among palm trees and educational displays. I saw a woman eight months pregnant, reclining as if on a couch, her insides opened to reveal the fetus resting head-down inside. Skinned athletes – a runner, swordsman, swimmer, and basketball player – assumed their normal poses to demonstrate the wonders of the skeletal and muscular systems. A chess player sat intently at a chessboard, his back stripped to the nerves of his spinal cord and his skull removed to reveal the brain.

One display hung the pink organs of the digestive system on a wire frame, descending from the tongue down to the stomach, liver, pancreas, intestines, and colon. A placard mentioned five million glands employed for digestion, and I could not help thinking of the combination of cured salmon, cinnamon rolls, yogurt, and fish and chips – sloshed together with at least a quart of airline coffee – challenging those glands inside me at that moment. Moving on, I learned that babies have no kneecaps at birth, that the body's total volume of blood filters through the kidneys every four minutes, that brain cells die if deprived of oxygen for even ten seconds. I viewed a liver shrunken from alcohol abuse, a tiny spot of cancer in a breast, globs of plaque clinging to the walls of arteries, lungs black from cigarette smoke, a urethra squeezed by an enlarged prostate gland.

When not observing the plastinated bodies, I observed the people observing the plastinated bodies. A young girl wearing all black, her midriff bare, with orange hair and a lip ring, roses tattooed on her arm, alert to all live bodies but barely noticing the preserved ones. A Japanese woman in a flowered silk dress and straw hat with matching straw platform shoes, very proper, staring impassively at each exhibit. A doctor ostentatiously showing off his knowledge to a beautiful young companion twenty years his junior. A know-it-all college student in a jogging suit explaining wrongly to his girlfriend that “of course, the right brain controls speech.” Silent people pressing plastic audio wands to their ears, marching on cue like zombies from one display to the next.

The sharp scent of curry drifted in from outdoors, along with the throb of hip-hop music. Local merchants, sponsoring a curry festival, had blocked off several streets for bands and dancing. I moved to a window

and watched the impromptu block party. Outside the gallery, life; inside, the plastinated residue of life.

Wherever Body Worlds had opened, in places like Switzerland and Korea, organized protests had followed, and the exhibition had papered one wall with news accounts of the demonstrations. Protesters believed that it affronted human dignity to take someone like a grandmother, with a family and home and name and maybe even an eternal destiny, and dissect and plastinate her, then put her on display for gawking tourists.

In response, Professor Gunther von Hagens had posted a vigorous statement defending his exhibition. He explained that the cadavers/persons had before death voluntarily signed over their bodies for precisely this purpose. Indeed, he had a waiting list of thousands of prospective donors. He credited Christianity as being the religion most tolerant of this line of scientific research and included a brief history of the church and medicine. Bizarrely, the exhibition ended with two splayed corpses, all muscles and bones and bulging eyes, kneeling before a cross.

That groggy afternoon at Body Worlds highlighted for me two distinct ways of looking at the world. One takes apart while the other seeks to connect and put together. We live in an age that excels at the first and falters at the second.

The cadavers, dissected to expose bones, nerves, muscles, tendons, ligaments, blood vessels, and internal organs, demonstrate our ability to break something down – in this case, the human being – into its constituent parts. We are *reductionistic*, say the scientists, and therein lies the secret to advances in learning. We can reduce complex systems like the solar system, global weather patterns, and the human body into simpler parts in order to understand how things work.*

*René Descartes stated the motto for reductionism: “If anyone could know perfectly what are the small parts composing all bodies, he would know perfectly the whole of nature.” Francis Crick, codiscoverer of the structure of DNA, applies the formula to human beings: “You are nothing but a pack of neurones... You are ... no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.”

WHAT ARE WE MISSING?

The recent digital revolution is a triumph of the reducers, for computers work by reducing information all the way down to a 1 or a 0. Nearly every day a friend sends me jokes by email. Today, I got a list of questions to ponder, including these: Why is “abbreviated” such a long word? Why is the time of day with the slowest traffic called rush hour? Why isn’t there mouse-flavored cat food? People with too much time on their hands come up with these jokes, type them into a computer, and post them electronically for the amusement of the rest of the world.

I think of all the steps involved. The jokester’s computer registers a series of keystrokes, translates them into binary bits of data, and records them magnetically as a file on a hard disk. Later, communications software retrieves that file and translates it into a sequential code, which it sends over a modem or broadband line to a computer server sitting in an isolated room. Some user plucks the joke for the day from the server, imports it to a home computer, and forwards it to a list of email contacts. The cycle goes on and on, with bits of joke data streaming over phone lines and wireless signals, even bouncing off satellites, until at last I log onto the Internet and download my friend’s attempt to bring a smile to my face.

Masters of the art, we can reduce not just jokes but literature and music and photographs and movies into digital bits and broadcast them around the world in seconds. On the ski slopes of Colorado I meet Australians who email snapshots of their ski vacation back to friends and family every night. A few minutes on an Internet site will let me search and locate any word in Shakespeare or view the artwork hanging in the Louvre museum.

Have we, though, progressed in creating content that others will someday want to store and retrieve? Does our art match that of the Impressionists, our literature compare with the Elizabethans’, our music improve on Bach or Beethoven? In most cases, taking apart what exists proves easier than creating what does not yet exist. Think of the best artificial hands, built with state-of-the-art technology, yet clumsy and mechanical in their motion compared to the human body’s.

School textbooks used to report that the chemicals constituting the human body could be bought by catalog for eighty-nine cents, which of course does nothing to explain the magnificence of an athlete like Michael Jordan or Serena Williams. A junior high sex-education study of fallopian tubes and the vas deferens hardly captures the wonder, mystery, and anxiety of marital sex. And the impressive displays at Body Worlds in London pale in comparison to the ordinary people chewing gum, sipping Starbucks coffee, and chatting on cell phones as they file past.

We reduce into parts, but can we fit together the whole? We can replace the cells of a human body with colored plastic or slice it into a thousand parts. We have a much harder time agreeing on what a human person is. Where did we come from? Why are we here? Will any part of us survive death? The people on display at Body Worlds – do they endure as immortal souls somewhere in another dimension, perhaps peering whimsically at the line of tourists filing past their plastinated bodies? And what of an invisible world reported by the mystics, a world that cannot be dissected and put on display in a gallery? Knowing the parts doesn't necessarily help us understand the whole.

I once heard the missionary author Elisabeth Elliot tell of accompanying the Auca woman Dayuma from her jungle home in Ecuador to New York City. As they walked the streets, Elliot explained cars, fire hydrants, sidewalks, and red lights. Dayuma's eyes took in the scene, but she said nothing. Elliot next led her to the observation platform atop the Empire State Building, where she pointed out the tiny taxi cabs and people on the streets below. Again, Dayuma said nothing. Elliot could not help wondering what kind of impression modern civilization was making. Finally, Dayuma pointed to a large white spot on the concrete wall and asked, "What bird did that?" At last she had found something she could relate to.

I have visited the tip of Argentina, the region named Tierra del Fuego ("land of fire") by Magellan's explorers, who noticed fires burning on shore. The natives tending the fires, however, paid no attention to the great ships as they sailed through the straits. Later, they explained that they had considered the ships an apparition, so different were they from

anything seen before. They lacked the experience, even the imagination, to decode evidence passing right before their eyes.

And we who built the skyscrapers in New York, who build today not just galleons but space stations and Hubble telescopes that peer to the very edge of the universe, what about us? What are we missing? What do we not see, for lack of imagination or faith?

Søren Kierkegaard told a parable about a rich man riding in a lighted carriage driven by a peasant who sat behind the horse in the cold and dark outside. Precisely because he sat near the artificial light inside, the rich man missed the panorama of stars outside, a view gloriously manifest to the peasant. In modern times, it seems, as science casts more light on the created world, its shadows further obscure the invisible world beyond.

I am no Luddite who opposes technological change. My laptop computer allows me to access the text of every book I have written in the past twenty years, as well as thousands of notes I have made during that time. Though I am holed up in a mountain retreat, using this same computer I have sent messages to friends in Europe and Asia. I pay my monthly bills electronically. In these and other ways I gratefully enjoy the benefits of the reducers' approach to technology and science.

Yet I also see dangers in our modern point of view. For one thing, reductionism, the spirit of our age, has the unfortunate effect of, well, reducing things. Science offers a map of the world, something like a topographical map, with colors marking the vegetation zones and squiggly lines tracing the contours of cliffs and hills. When I hike the mountains of Colorado, I rely on such topographical maps. Yet no map of two dimensions, or even three dimensions, can give the full picture. And none can possibly capture the experience of the hike: thin mountain air, a carpet of wildflowers, a ptarmigan's nest, rivulets of frothy water, a triumphant lunch at the summit. Encounter trumps reduction.

More importantly, the reducers' approach allows no place for an invisible world. It takes for granted that the world of matter is the sum

total of existence. We can measure and photograph and catalog it; we can use nuclear accelerators to break it down into its smallest particles. Looking at the parts, we judge them the whole of reality.

Of course, an invisible God cannot be examined or tested. Most definitely, God cannot be quantified or reduced. As a result, many people in societies advanced in technology go about their daily lives assuming God does not exist. They stop short at the world that can be reduced and analyzed, their ears sealed against unconfirmed reports of another world. As Tolstoy said, materialists mistake what limits life for life itself.

I have a neighbor who is obsessively neat. He lives on ten forested acres, and every time he drove up his long, winding driveway, the disorderly dead branches on the Ponderosa pine trees bothered him. One day he called a tree-trimming service and learned it would cost him five thousand dollars to trim all those trees. Appalled at the price, he rented a chain saw and spent several weekends perched precariously on a ladder cutting back all the branches he could reach. He called the service for a new estimate and got an unwelcome surprise. "Mr. Rodrigues, it will probably cost you twice as much. You see, we were planning to use those lower branches to reach the higher ones. Now we have to bring in an expensive truck and work from a bucket."

In some ways, modern society reminds me of that story. We have sawed off the lower branches on which Western civilization was built, and the higher branches now seem dangerously out of reach. "We have drained the light from the boughs in the sacred grove and snuffed it in the high places and along the banks of sacred streams," writes Annie Dillard.

No society in history has attempted to live without a belief in the sacred, not until the modern West. Such a leap has consequences that we are only beginning to recognize. We now live in a state of confusion about the big questions that have always engaged the human race, questions of meaning, purpose, and morality. A skeptical friend of mine used to ask himself the question, "What would an atheist do?" in deliberate mockery of the What Would Jesus Do (WWJD) slogan. He finally stopped asking because he found no reliable answers.

Eliminating the sacred changes the story of our lives. In times of greater faith, people saw themselves as individual creations of a loving God who, regardless of how it may look at any given moment, has final control over a world destined for restoration. Now, people with no faith find themselves lost and alone, with no overarching story, or meta-narrative, to give promise to the future and meaning to the present. To regard nature as beautiful, humans as uniquely valuable, morality as necessary – these are mere “constructs,” we are told, invented to soften the harsh reality that humans play an infinitesimal role in a universe governed by chance.

Most people in history have experienced this world with its pleasures and pains, its births and deaths and loves and passages, as linked to the sacred, invisible world. No longer, or not for many, at least. Now we are born, play, work, accumulate possessions, relate to one another, and die with no consolation that what we do matters ultimately or has any meaning beyond what we assign it.

Jacques Monod bluntly states the modern plight: “Man must learn to live in an alien world that is deaf to his music and is as indifferent to his hopes as it is to his sufferings or his crimes... Man at last knows that he is alone in the unfeeling immensity of the universe, out of which he emerged only by chance.”

Einstein remarked that the modern age has perfect means but confused ends. Physicists have reduced matter to subatomic particles and software engineers have reduced most of what we know about the world to bits of information. We know how things work, but not why. We seem bewildered, actually, about why anyone makes any given choice – whether to love their kids or beat them, whether to study for a test or binge-drink. Why do we act the way we do and make the choices we do?



The new science of evolutionary psychology has arisen to assert that we simply act out the script of our DNA. Advocates propose a single principle, the “selfish gene,” to explain behavior, and evolutionary theorists

herald this insight as the most important advance since Darwin. I do what I do, always, to perpetuate my genetic material. Even individual acts that do not benefit me personally will benefit my gene pool.

In a sour twist, these thinkers view all goodness as a form of selfishness. Altruism, proclaims Edward O. Wilson, is purely selfish: a person acts in an apparently noble way toward the goal of getting some reward. Goodness depends, he says, on “lying, pretense, and deceit, including self-deceit, because the actor is most convincing who believes that his performance is real.” Challenged to explain Mother Teresa’s behavior, Wilson pointed out that, believing she would get her reward from Christ, she acted on that selfish basis.

Although specialists may believe this selfish-motive theory, for most people it does not ring true. Therapists who spend all day listening to people’s stories know that the choices we make do not easily reduce to a single explanation. Parents learn by hard experience that no reward-and-punishment scheme can guarantee the results they want.

What drives us, any of us, to become the persons we are? What makes some students responsible and conscientious while others drop out of school? What drives some people to become millionaires, others to become missionary nurses, and others to watch television all day, leeching off their parents? No single explanation of purpose or motive tells the full story.

The reducers face their greatest challenge in trying to find a stable ground for morality. Not long ago, two evolutionary psychologists roused the ire of feminists by presenting rape as a normal part of natural selection, a technique males use to spread their seed as widely as possible. Given their selfish-gene assumptions, this distasteful theory made good sense.

Another leading evolutionary theorist, Frans de Waal, says, “We seem to be reaching a point at which science can wrest morality from the hands of the philosophers.” He looks to nature for examples of “ethical” behavior, and they abound: whales and dolphins risking their lives to save injured companions, chimpanzees coming to the aid of the wounded, elephants refusing to abandon slain comrades.

Well, yes, but it all depends on where you aim your field binoculars. Where do you learn about proper behavior between the sexes, for example? Each fall outside my Rocky Mountain home, a bull elk bugles together sixty to a hundred cows, bullies them into a herd, and uses his magnificent rack of antlers to gore all male pretenders. Nature offers relatively few examples of monogamy and fewer still of egalitarianism. Should our females, like the praying mantises, devour the males who are mating with them? Should our neighborhoods resolve their disputes as do the bonobo chimpanzees, by engaging in a quick orgy in which all the neighbors mate with one another? Why not, if we learn our morality from other species?

Or consider violence. Zoologists once thought murder a peculiarly human practice, but no longer. Ground squirrels routinely eat their babies; mallards gang-rape and drown other ducks; a species of African fish, the cichlid, feeds on the eyes of other cichlids. Hyenas get the prize for ruthless cannibalism: within an hour, the stronger of newborn twins will fight its baby sibling to the death. Some evolutionary psychologists concede that humans are genetically scripted to further this cycle of violence.

We feel outrage when we hear of a middle-class couple “dumping” an Alzheimer’s-afflicted parent, or when kids push a five-year-old out the window of a high-rise building, or a sniper opens fire on strangers, or a ten-year-old is raped in a hallway, or a mother drowns her two children because they interfere with her lifestyle. Why? On what grounds do we feel outrage if we truly believe that morality is self-determined or scripted in our genes? And if morality is not self-determined, then who determines it? How do we decide?

In a widely publicized case a year before the famous “Scopes Monkey Trial,” attorney Clarence Darrow successfully defended two university students against the capital offense of murdering a boy for the intellectual experience of it. Argued Darrow, “Is there any blame attached because somebody took Nietzsche’s philosophy seriously and fashioned his life on it? . . . Your Honor, it is hardly fair to hang a nineteen-year-old boy for the philosophy that was taught him at the university.”

In short, the reducers offer little compelling reason why we humans should rise above the behavior of beasts rather than mimic it. Adolf Hitler said it well: "Nature is cruel, therefore we too can be cruel."

Not always, but often, the act of reducing the world around us also dilutes pleasure. I would guess that an uneducated Masai warrior, standing on one leg, leaning on a staff, gazes at a lunar eclipse with a greater sense of wonder than I do after studying the scientific explanation in the day's newspaper.

Some famous reductionists readily admit the atrophy of a pleasure sense.* Charles Darwin poignantly describes the process:

Up to the age of thirty or beyond it, poetry of many kinds ... gave me great pleasure, and even as a schoolboy I took intense delight in Shakespeare... Formerly pictures gave me considerable, and music very great, delight. But now for many years I cannot endure to read a line of poetry: I have tried to read Shakespeare, and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me. I have also almost lost any taste for pictures or music... I retain some taste for fine scenery, but it does not cause me the exquisite delight which it formerly did... My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts... The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature.

Uneducated, "primitive" people intuit something mysterious and sacred behind the world of buffaloes, scarlet macaws, orangutans, and giraffes. Often they even make nature an object of worship. In contrast, those who reduce the world to matter risk withering the sense of wonder.

*A reducer of an altogether different sort, Vladimir Lenin, could not tolerate a flower in his room. "I cannot listen to music too often," he confessed after attending a performance of Beethoven's "Apassionata" sonata. "It makes me want to say kind, stupid things, and pat the heads of people. But now you have to beat them on the head, beat them without mercy."

WHAT ARE WE MISSING?

I stood once in a field in Finland, shivering in the cold, and watched a brilliant display of aurora borealis, the northern lights. Waves of luminous green arced across the heavens, covering perhaps one-seventh of the dark dome above. Tendrils of green light assumed the shapes of puffy clouds, then split into segments, then pulsed and slid together like the interlocking teeth of a giant comb. They floated in the heavens, defying gravity, blocking stars. It amazed me that a marvel so magnificent and vast proceeded in utter silence; no roar of volcano or growl of thunder accompanied this celestial fireworks show. I found myself wondering how such a spectacle would have struck the ancient Norsemen, who knew nothing of sunspots, solar wind, and electromagnetic disturbances.

The biblical psalms celebrate the created world as the expression of a Person, a masterpiece of artistic creation worthy of praise. But how can we ascribe beauty to a world assumed to be an accidental byproduct of collisions of matter—especially when our sense organs also result from random collisions?

For years I have been receiving the magazines that come with membership in the Sierra Club, Wilderness Society, and National Audubon Society. Reading them usually leaves me depressed because most issues devote many pages to accounts of how we are fouling our water and air, bulldozing wilderness, and consigning animal species to extinction. I find it surprising, though, how often the authors of these articles use words like “sacred,” “hallowed,” and “immortal” in their impassioned pleas for corrective action. As one environmentalist said about saving a stretch of river in Montana: “It’s ours to preserve for progeny. It would be sacrilegious not to.”

The Sierra Club was founded by John Muir, an eccentric naturalist who had a well-developed theology of nature. To him, it showed God’s handiwork. Hiking through the Cumberland forests of the southeastern U.S., he wrote,

Oh, these forest gardens of our Father! What perfection, what divinity in their architecture! What simplicity and mysterious complexity of

detail! Who shall read the teaching of these sylvan pages, the glad brotherhood of rills that sing in the valleys, and all the happy creatures that dwell in them under the tender keeping of a Father's care?

Most of Muir's heirs as leaders of the Sierra Club have abandoned his theology. Yet just as the founders of the United States appealed to "unalienable rights ... endowed by their Creator," environmentalists still grope for some transcendent authority, a Higher Power, to sanction our reverence for creation. Hence they borrow the musty metaphor of "sacred," even after rejecting the reality, and continue to draw on the biblical concept of stewardship. Otherwise, what inherent value can we assign to a snail darter or a redwood forest?

Vaclav Havel, former president of the Czech Republic, a survivor of a communist culture that earnestly tried to live without God, stated the problem:

I believe that with the loss of God, man has lost a kind of absolute and universal system of coordinates, to which he could always relate everything, chiefly himself. His world and his personality gradually began to break up into separate, incoherent fragments corresponding to different, relative, coordinates.

Havel saw the Marxist rape of his land as a direct outgrowth of atheism. "I come from a country where forests are dying, where rivers look like sewers, and where in some places the citizens are sometimes recommended not to open their windows," he said, tracing the cause to the "arrogance of new age human beings who enthroned themselves as lords of all nature and of all the world." Such people lack a metaphysical anchor: "I mean, a humble respect for the whole of creation and awareness of our obligations to it... If the parents believe in God, their children will not have to wear gas masks on their way to school and their eyes will not be blinded with pus."

We live in dangerous times and face urgent questions not only about the environment but also about terrorism, war, sexuality, world poverty,

WHAT ARE WE MISSING?

and definitions of life and death. Society badly needs a moral tether, or “system of coordinates,” in Havel’s phrase. We need to know our place in the universe and our obligations to each other and to the earth. Can we answer those questions without God?

Modern literature exalts as a hero the rebel who defiantly stands his ground in a meaningless universe. Evolutionary philosophy holds up *homo sapiens*, a species much like any other, destined to live out the script of selfish genes. What if both views of the world are missing something large, important, and portentous for our future—like the natives of Tierra del Fuego who simply ignored Magellan’s ships sailing past?

*Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness . . .
Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?*

T. S. ELIOT

CHAPTER 2

A TUG BETWEEN TWO WORLDS



*Behind the corpse in the reservoir, behind the ghost on the links,
Behind the lady who dances and the man who madly drinks,
Under the look of fatigue, the attack of migraine and the sigh
There is always another story, there is more than meets the eye.*

W. H. AUDEN

My wife and I stayed once in a bed-and-breakfast in rural Tasmania, the rugged island off the southern coast of Australia. A sheep rancher had built a guest cottage in the middle of his fields, and for an extra fee lodgers could take a meal in the ranch house. Aware that we would probably never eat fresher lamb, we signed on.

Over dinner I innocently asked about the odd coloring—orange, red, blue, and green blotches—we had seen on the rumps of his sheep. “Ah, that’s how we tell when the ewes mated,” he explained with a chuckle. “I hang a container of colored chalk in a rather strategic place on my ram. He leaves his mark when he does his duty, and that way I know that all the ewes with orange rumps, say, were serviced on the twenty-first. When the due date rolls around—sheep are almost always fertile, you see, and they deliver right on schedule—I can herd the orange ewes into the barn and give them special care.”

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In the next few minutes I learned much more about the reproductive habits of sheep. Each ewe has only a six-hour window of receptivity to mating. This poses no problem to the ram, who can infallibly sense which ewe might welcome him at any given moment. The rancher relied on ten rams to “service” four thousand female sheep, which meant that the rams worked themselves to exhaustion over several weeks, losing much of their body weight in the process. All work, no romance. When I saw a scrawny, bedraggled ram, his chores done, his strength dissipated, good for nothing but the slaughterhouse and even then unfit for human consumption, I breathed a prayer of thanks for human sexual arrangements. (Zoologists note that very few species—humans, dolphins, some primates, and the large cats—engage in sex as a form of pleasure.)

The next morning as I went jogging through the fields, taking care where I stepped, I tried to imagine life from the sheep’s point of view. Ninety percent of waking hours they spend wandering around, heads down, looking for lush green grass. Every so often a pesky dog barks and nips at their heels, and to humor him and shut him up they move in the direction he wants. Lo, better grass often awaits them there. As weather changes, they learn to huddle together against the rain and wind.

Once a year a rambunctious cousin appears among them and dashes from sheep to sheep, leaving the ewes marked with strange colors on their rumps. Bellies swell, lambs emerge, and attention turns to weaning these small, frisky creatures and watching them gambol through the grass. Brothers and sisters may disappear, sometimes attacked by a Tasmanian devil—these carnivorous marsupials, nastier than any cartoon stereotype, really do exist!—and sometimes ushered away by the two-legged one. The same upright creature periodically drives them into a barn where he shaves off their coats, leaving them cold and embarrassed (sheepish) for a time.

As I jogged, it occurred to me that sheep, to the degree they think at all, may well presume they order their own destiny. They chew cud, roam the fields, make choices, and live out their lot with only a few rude interruptions from dogs, devils, rams, and humans. Little do they know that

the entire scenario, from birth to death and every stage in between, is being orchestrated according to a rational plan by the humans who live in the ranch house.

C. S. Lewis conjectured, “There may be Natures piled upon Natures, each supernatural to the one beneath it.” Do we stand in relation to God as sheep stand in relation to us? The Bible suggests that in some ways we do. “It is [God] who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture,” wrote a psalmist. Note the possessives: *his* people, *his* pasture. According to this point of view, we live out our days in a world owned by another. We may insist on autonomy – “We all, like sheep, have gone astray” – but in the end that autonomy is no more impressive, or effective, than the autonomy of a Tasmanian ewe.

If God exists, and if our planet represents God’s work of art, we will never grasp why we are here without taking that reality into account.



Intimations sneak in even among those who restrict their view to the world of matter. Scientists who dare not mention God or a Designer speak instead of an “anthropic principle” evident in creation. Nature is exquisitely tuned for the possibility of life on planet Earth: adjust the laws of gravity up or down by one percent, and the universe would not form; a tiny change in electromagnetic force, and organic molecules will not adhere. It appears that, in physicist Freeman Dyson’s words, “The universe knew we were coming.” To those who know it best, the universe does not seem like a random crapshoot. It seems downright purposeful – but what purpose, and whose?

I find more of a spirit of reverence among secular science writers than in some theologians. The wisest among them admit that all our widening knowledge merely exposes our more-widening pool of ignorance. Things that used to seem clear and rational, such as Newtonian physics, have given way to gigantic puzzles. In my lifetime, astronomers have “discovered” seventy billion more galaxies, admitted they may have overlooked 96 percent of the makeup of the universe (“dark energy” and

“dark matter”), and adjusted the time of the Big Bang by four to five billion years. Biologists who gaze through microscopes rather than telescopes have discovered unfathomable complexity in the simplest cells.

The process of reducing has, ironically, made the world more complex, not less. The DNA molecule inside each cell contains a three-billion-letter software code capable of overseeing and regulating all the anatomy on display in Body Worlds. Increasingly, we are learning to read the code. But who wrote it? And why? Can anyone guide us in reading not only the microcode inside each cell but the macrocode governing the entire planet, the universe?

Whispers of another world seep into art as well. Poets, painters, novelists, and playwrights—those who know a little about creating a universe—feel stirrings even when they cannot detect their source. Virginia Woolf described “moments of being” that hit her with the force of an electric shock:

Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what: making a scene come right, making a character come together... At any rate, it is a constant idea of mine that behind the cotton wall is hidden a pattern, that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this, that the whole world is a work of art, that we are parts of the work of art. Hamlet, or a Beethoven quartet, is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven. Certainly and emphatically, there is no God. We are the words. We are the music. We are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock.

To an artist, the world presents itself as a creation, akin to Beethoven’s quartets and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. What if Woolf is wrong and there is a personal/creator? If we are in fact God’s music and God’s words, what tune should we be playing, what words reciting? Milton’s question echoes across time: “What if earth be but the shadow of heaven?”

Sometimes the shock hits not one person but a community, a whole nation even, a shock so great that, unlike Virginia Woolf’s, it does turn

thoughts to God. That happened to the United States on September 11, 2001. As a side effect, an act of monstrous evil exposed the shallowness of an entire society. Professional sports ground to a halt, television comedians went off the air, as did all commercials. In a flash we saw the comparative meaninglessness of much of our lives. That three thousand people could go to work as part of their daily routine and never come home made us all aware of our fragile mortality. Married couples canceled divorce plans; mothers and fathers trimmed work hours to spend more time with their children. We found a new kind of hero: firefighters and police officers who, contra the principles of sociobiology, gave their lives for people they never knew.

Over the next months, the *New York Times* ran a separate article commemorating every single person who died, not just the famous or the newsworthy, as if each person killed on that day had a life of value and meaning, a life that mattered. And for a time attendance at churches swelled. The shock conveyed good and evil, death and life, meaning and absurdity in such stark terms that we turned for answers to the people—pastors, priests, rabbis—who have always warned us not to build our houses, let alone our skyscrapers, on shifting sand.

What Americans learned on that day, and are learning still, is that sophisticated moderns have not renounced transcendence but rather replaced it with weak substitutes. Unlike past generations, many are unsure about God and an invisible world. Even so, we feel the longings for something more.



A society that denies the supernatural usually ends up elevating the natural to supernatural status. Annie Dillard tells of experiments in which entomologists entice male butterflies with a painted cardboard replica larger and more enticing than the females of their species. Excited, the male butterfly mounts the piece of cardboard; again and again he mounts it. “Nearby, the real, living female butterfly opens and closes her wings in vain.”

C. S. Lewis uses the phrase “sweet poison of the false infinite” to describe this same tendency in the human species. We allow substitute sacreds, or false infinities, to fill the vacuum of our disenchanted world. Politics offers one dangerous example.

“I am warning you in all seriousness. I tell you that communism is sacred,” said Nikita Krushchev in 1961, hailing a massive political experiment. Ten years later his successor Leonid Brezhnev reiterated, “Everything which bears on the life, activities, and name of Lenin is sacred”; the idolatry found its expression in thousands of statues and in Lenin’s corpse macabrely displayed in Red Square. For all but a few diehards, however, the promise of communism vaporized as it joined the fate of other substitute sacreds. In the words of A. N. Wilson, “Dethroning God, that generation found it impossible to leave the sanctuary empty. They put man in His place, which had the paradoxical effect, not of elevating human nature but of demeaning it to depths of cruelty, depravity and stupidity unparalleled in human history.”

Sex seems the most blatant of the false infinities today. I remember with a start the first glimpse I got of a *Playboy* centerfold, just a few years into its publication. The sight pulled back a veil of mystery and beckoned me, an adolescent, to a new, unexplored world charged with seduction and promise. Now *Playboy* is something of a relic, long since overtaken (outstripped?) in its audacity. This morning when I checked my email, I had an invitation to watch an eighteen-year-old named Brandi, naked, on her webcam. Kathleen promised to do *anything* for me while her husband was away. No matter how many filters I sign up for, such invitations still leak through.

I do not mean to pick on sex nor flinch like a middle-aged moralist. I am merely suggesting that the modern West has raised it almost to divine status. Tellingly, *Sports Illustrated* refers to its bathing beauties as “goddesses” and Victoria’s Secret dresses its supermodels in angel outfits. Previous generations honored virginity and celibacy. Now we present sex as the highest good, the magical lure that advertisers use to sell us convertibles, Coke, and toothpaste. In the documentary film on AIDS,

Longtime Companion, one man is nursing his lover on his deathbed. “What do you think happens when we die?” the narrator asks. “We get to have sex again,” they reply. Compare that eternal ideal to what most medievals would have said: We get to enjoy the presence of God.

A priest I know mentioned that he has come to suspect the transcendent power of sex as portrayed in ads and rock music videos. According to the surveys, one out of three or four of the people he sees on the commuter train each day has had sex the previous night. But he can’t see any difference as he studies their faces. They look no happier, no more fulfilled, no more transformed. “Shouldn’t something as powerful as sex is promised to be – I speak as a celibate priest – have a more lasting effect?” he asks.

In the Old Testament, God complained that “my people . . . have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.” An idolater chooses things that may be good in themselves and grants to them a power they were never meant to have. What once was called “idolatry,” enlightened Westerners call “addictions.”

Eventually an idol, or addiction, begins to control the devotee, rather than vice versa. Woody Allen, a cultured and brilliant filmmaker, explained his affair with his twenty-one-year-old adopted daughter this way: “The heart wants what it wants. There’s no logic to those things. You meet someone and you fall in love and that’s that.” The poet Michael Ryan, in his memoir *Secret Life: An Autobiography*, openly admitted that his own sex addiction became a form of idolatry: “It determined what I thought and what I felt. My personality was formed around it. All of my talents, all my good qualities as a human being, were devoted to serving it, and I was willing to sacrifice anything to it. Although I could perform practical tasks perfectly well, it was running my life.”

Virtually anything can become an idol. Ancient Egyptians worshiped dung beetles, and some Hindus in India still worship cobras and the small-pox virus. In Melanesia, followers of the cargo cult pray for airplanes and ships to descend on them with containers of Spam and crackers, as they

did during World War II. Each false infinite indicates a disorder of values and reveals much about the society that honors such idols.

Sportswriters calculate that the year after Michael Jordan retired (the second time), he earned from his endorsements more than twice as much as all U.S. presidents earned for all of their terms combined. He earned more endorsing Nike shoes than all the workers in Malaysia who made the shoes. He may pay \$200 for a round of golf, but earns \$33,390 while playing that round. I like Michael Jordan and wish him all the best, but a society that pays him more in one year – for *not* playing basketball – than it pays all their presidents combined seems to me a society out of balance.

Alone of all the beasts, the human animal has the power and freedom to center life in one impulse. We have not, it seems, the power to abstain from worship.* Instead, we swallow the sweet poison, substituting lesser gods for God. “Nearby, the real, living female butterfly opens and closes her wings in vain.”

Robert Barron writes:

[God] delights, it seems, in using trees, flowers, rivers, automobiles, friends, enemies, church buildings, paintings in order to announce his presence or to work out his purposes... There is something crude in the depiction of God intervening directly in the play, the clumsy *deus ex machina* interrupting the speeches of the other actors and upsetting the stage. How much more tantalizing the God who hints and lurks and cajoles hiddenly *through and around* the actors, even unbeknownst to them. It is the humble God who chooses so to act.

*Dostoyevsky had predicted this in his novel *The Possessed*: “The one essential condition of human existence is that man should always be able to bow down before something infinitely great. If men are deprived of the infinitely great they will not go on living and die of despair. The Infinite and the Eternal are as essential for man as the little planet on which he dwells.” Simone Weil adds, “One has only the choice between God and idolatry. There is no other possibility. For the faculty of worship is in us, and it is either directed somewhere into this world, or into another.”

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The ordinary, natural world contains the supernatural, a necessary step since we do not have the capacity to apprehend God directly. We see God best in the same way we see a solar eclipse: not by staring at the sun, which would cause blindness, but through something on which the sun is projected.

Nevertheless, all too often the church has given the impression of opposing natural desires, judging them, in a word, “unspiritual.” Mystics have fled into deserts and caves in a self-denying quest for the supernatural. Whole denominations have taken refuge in legalism, labeling as sinful any expression of natural desire.

I have certainly gone through odd phases of desire-quenching, even after moving away from Southern fundamentalism and its long list of forbidden activities. After reading stories of believers in concentration camps – Alexander Solzhenitsyn in the Soviet Gulag, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Corrie ten Boom in Nazi prisons, Ernest Gordon in a Japanese work camp – I tried to adjust my lifestyle accordingly (whether in solidarity with the prisoners or in paranoid expectation, I cannot recall). Every alternate day I drank no coffee, for whoever heard of a prison serving good coffee? I stopped using Visine drops for dry eyes and hand lotion for dry skin. I gave away two-thirds of my income, wore the same dull clothes day after day, and tried to dispose of all unneeded possessions.

Simple lifestyle became, for me, boring lifestyle. I resigned myself to an attitude of enduring life on earth – better yet, suffering here – in anticipation of a better life to come. One day a question occurred to me, or perhaps to my friends: Why should anyone look forward to a better life without experiencing at least clues of it here? I realized that natural desire was not an enemy of the supernatural and repressing desire not the solution. Rather, to find the path of joy I needed to connect desire to its otherworldly source.

I learned a healthier approach from C. S. Lewis, who had awakened to the reality of another world through such pleasures as Nordic myths, nature, and Wagnerian music. He sensed in our longings not just rumors but “advance echoes” of that world. Flashes of beauty and pangs of

aching sweetness, he said, “are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard.”

I realized I needed to smell some flowers and listen to some melodies in order to recognize what clues I might be missing on earth. My attention turned from dividing life into natural and supernatural, or spiritual and unspiritual, and instead I sought a way to combine the two, to bring about the unity that, as I increasingly believed, God intended.

What pleasures do I enjoy? I asked myself. I find a strange thrill in wildness. Dashing down to the safety of timberline over slippery mountain rock as the thunder clouds roll in and lightning bolts strike closer. Coming face to face with a grizzly bear on a trail and realizing that not a single decision I make matters; the bear controls the options. Visiting exotic cultures where I can identify nothing that I eat, smell, or hear. Oh, I enjoy domesticated pleasures also: gourmet coffee, high-fat ice cream, peaches and blueberries picked at the orchards. And now that I live in the country, I miss the cultural fare of the city: foreign movies, fine music, theater productions that stay with me for days.

I began to listen to my own longings as the rumbling of another world, a bright clue to the nature of the Creator. Somehow I had fallen for the deception of judging the natural world as unspiritual and God as antipleasure. But God invented matter, after all, including all the sensors in the body through which I feel pleasure. Nature and supernature are not two separate worlds, but different expressions of the same reality.

I discovered in St. Augustine, a connoisseur of women, art, food, and philosophy, a guide to the goodness of created things. “The whole life of the good Christian is holy desire,” he wrote. The Latin phrase *dona bona*, or “good gifts,” appears throughout his writings. “The world is a smiling place,” he insisted, and God its *largitor*, or lavisher of gifts. He likened these gifts to a wedding ring fashioned by a fiancé for his betrothed. What bride would decide, “The ring is enough. I need not see his face again”? No, the ring, a token from the groom, underscores the real message, his pledge of love.

Augustine knew well the seductions of desire that might tempt him away from the giver of good gifts. For this reason he prayed for God to gather together his “scattered longings” and keep them in their proper place. “I had my back to the light and my face turned towards the things upon which the light fell,” he said of the desires he felt during his days as a pagan. Only as he turned to face the light could he see the generous source of all good things.

Others, too, followed a similar path of tracing rays of light to their source. Thomas Merton credits the religious art of Rome as instrumental in his conversion. “After all the vapid, boring, semi-pornographic statuary of the Empire, what a thing it was to come upon the genius of an art full of spiritual vitality and earnestness and power – an art that was tremendously serious and alive and eloquent and urgent in all that it had to say.” Gradually, almost by accident, he became a pilgrim – appropriately, he notes, for the artwork was originally intended for the instruction of people incapable of understanding anything higher.

The Jewish scholar and revolutionary Simone Weil memorized George Herbert’s poetry, especially the poem “Love,” to repeat to herself as a way of fighting off migraine headaches. She recited it both for aesthetic and anaesthetic value, and to her own surprise the poem became a prayer: “Christ himself came down and took possession of me.” She felt at that moment of intense physical pain “a presence more personal, more certain, and more real than that of any human being.”

The poet Herbert himself foresaw a day when God “shalt recover all thy goods in kinde / Who wert disseized by usurping lust,” when redeemed creation will reclaim beauty, art, nature, and culture for its original intent. Until then, we must content ourselves with a process of decoding. Like rescuers who sift through pieces of stained glass shattered by a bomb, we trace dispersed clues to their original source and significance.

My natural desires, I now see, are pointers to the supernatural, not obstacles. In a world fallen far from its original design, God wants us to receive them as gifts and not possessions, tokens of love and not loves in themselves. I have learned to pray, following Augustine, not that my

desires be quenched or taken away, rather that my scattered longings be gathered together in their Source, who alone can order them.

When the email invitation came, uninvited, to tune in to a webcam pointed toward a naked eighteen-year-old named Brandi, I recognized it immediately as a symptom of this disordered, reductionistic world. My computer offered pixels of nude flesh from a digital camera, not a living person. God has more, far more, in mind for my scattered longings than disembodied deception.



No doubt we will always feel a tug between two worlds, for human beings comprise an odd combination of the two. We find ourselves stuck in the middle: angels wallowing in mud, mammals attempting to fly. Plato pictured two horses pulling in opposite directions, with our immortal parts pursuing the divine Good while beastliness strains against it. We have “eternity in our hearts,” said the Teacher of Ecclesiastes, and yet bend under the “burden of the gods.” We stumble from cradle to grave, tipping sometimes toward eternity and sometimes toward base earth, the humus from which we came.

C. S. Lewis once made the observation that the tug of two worlds in humans could be inferred from two phenomena: coarse jokes and our attitudes toward death. Comedians tell us something about reality, for many of their jokes revolve around excretion and reproduction, two of the most natural processes on earth. (Not once did the sheep in Tasmania look for shelter before using the bathroom, and the rams certainly didn’t blush at sex.) Yet we humans, in our smirks and double entendres, treat these biological functions as unnatural, even comical.

As for death, man responds to it even less like an animal. Nature treats death as a normal occurrence, the foundation of the all-important food chain. Only we humans react with shock and elaboration, as though we can’t get used to the fact. We dress up our corpses in new clothes, embalm them, and bury them in airtight caskets and concrete vaults to slow natural decay. We act out a stubborn reluctance to yield to this most powerful of life experiences.

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These two “unnatural” reactions hint at another world. In a way unique to our species, we are not fully at home here. As a symptom of that fact, we feel stirrings toward something higher and more lasting. Although our cells may carry traces of stardust, we also bear the image of the God who made those stars.

I sense the tug in two different directions. On the one hand, for reasons I have been explaining, I have come to doubt the reducers’ explanation of the world. Rumors of transcendence awaken my spiritual intuition, and as I follow them I find a way of solving at least part of the mystery of existence. Why are we here? We are God’s creation, an unfinished work in which we play a decisive role.

On the other hand, I stumble over the absurdity of flawed human beings expressing anything of supernatural reality. After all, we who are made in God’s image are also subject to baldness, hemorrhoids, presbyopia, osteoporosis, and every other ailment in the medical encyclopedia, not to mention our moral defects. And the human body, a dollar’s worth of chemicals, becomes, according to the apostle Paul, the temple of God’s own Spirit. Can the supernatural world really find a home in such earthy containers?

Because we are material beings, God must deal with us on that level. Every spiritual experience depends on the cooperation of our very mundane bodies. A stroke can put an end to a saint’s prayer life. Stop all intake of food and water, and a mystical state will soon come to an end. Nearly everything we know about the supernatural world comes filtered through the ordinary, natural world – which makes it easy for skeptics to dismiss or disbelieve.

That very fact frustrated my belief for several years. I kept running into frauds, people who practiced the “natural” behavior of faith with no real connection to any reality beyond.

As a journalist, I encountered a woman who by using forty different aliases had conned scores of churches in a dozen states out of thousands of dollars. Having studied the behavior and language of evangelical churches, she then learned to mimic it convincingly. She would appear

at a Calvary Chapel, Baptist, or Assemblies of God church and testify that she was ready to renounce her Mormon beliefs. In every case the churches welcomed her, “protected” her from Mormon officials supposedly on her trail, and showered her with cash, food, housing, and medical care. By every measure, her behavior convinced them she was a soul mate. In the next city, this amateur actress would reverse the con, appearing at a Mormon church to renounce her evangelical convictions. More than fifty Mormon churches baptized her, as did scores of evangelical churches. She was last spotted in Birmingham, Alabama, claiming to be a former Jehovah’s Witness.

Years earlier, I had followed the exploits of Marjoe Gortner, a child evangelist who began his career at the age of four. I watched films of him as a child, standing on a chair to preach, screaming at the devil, gesturing with his hands like a preschool Billy Sunday. When he reached adolescence, Marjoe began making his living as a tent evangelist, converting thousands and raking in millions of dollars. Finally, at the age of twenty-eight he admitted to himself he didn’t believe a word of it and decided to quit—but not before inviting a documentary film crew to record his last evangelistic crusade. The film footage shows him speaking in tongues, shedding crocodile tears, pleading for funds, preaching fire and brimstone, giving invitations, and leading new converts in “the sinner’s prayer”; then it shows him backstage laughing, counting the offering, and explaining to the camera each of the “tricks” he had used in the service.

I suppose these frauds disturbed me so much because they hit close to home. As a teenager, I began attending prayer meetings and imitating whatever respected Christians did. I learned the key to acceptance was a ritual called “giving your testimony” in which your voice took on a soft, sincere tone and you told of some way the Lord had blessed you or “spoken to you.” After a few weeks I had become one of the best testimony-givers of the bunch. I could incite prayers of thanksgiving or beckon tears from those around me.

In my mind, I had exposed others’ faith as unfounded. If I could pass for a veritable saint just by following the prescribed formula, how could

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Christian experience possibly be genuine? I look back on those days with shame and regret because I have since experienced God's grace and mercy, even to one who sought to discredit faith. That agnostic phase did, however, give me sympathy for those who want to believe yet find no unshakable proof of the supernatural. Today, I get letters from doubters, skeptical of the church, asking for such ironclad proof. I have to tell them there is none.

You need eyes to see and ears to hear, Jesus said to those who doubted him. It takes the mystery of faith, always, to believe, for God has no apparent interest in compelling belief. (If he had, the resurrected Jesus would have appeared to Herod and Pilate, not to his disciples.)

Because the skeptics see rumors of another world as just that, rumors and not proofs, a thin membrane of belief separates the natural from the supernatural. Prayers may sometimes seem like hollow, sleepy words that bounce off walls and rise no higher than the ceiling. Kneeling may on occasion give a sharper sense of sore knees than of God's presence. We experience the highest realities through the lowest, and we must learn to pay attention to notice the difference.

I thought of a rather cruel trick I once played on a wasp. He was sucking jam on my plate, and I cut him in half. He paid no attention, merely went on with his meal, while a tiny stream of jam trickled out of his severed esophagus. Only when he tried to fly away did he grasp the dreadful thing that had happened to him. It is the same with modern man. The thing that has been cut away is his soul.

GEORGE ORWELL