

# A Way with Doubt!

Handbook for Doubters

**by W.G. Rietkerk**

First Published 2025



# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	5
Chapter 1 Is it sin to doubt?.....	7
Chapter 2 Can you prove to me that God exists? <i>About intellectual doubt</i> .....	17
Chapter 3 Don't say 'doubter', say 'stubborn'. <i>About doubt of the will</i> .....	37
Chapter 4 'But I just feel very differently' <i>About doubt of feeling</i> .....	47
Chapter 5 Doubts about God's guidance.....	57
Chapter 6 Is God a projection? .....	71
Chapter 7 Are all religions fundamentally equal?.....	95
Chapter 8 Is my unbelieving sister going to hell? <i>Doubt about hell</i> .....	115
Chapter 9 Unanswered prayers <i>Doubt in the effect of prayer in time of need</i> .....	125
Chapter 10 Doubt and the problem of suffering .....	133



# Introduction

I worked for fifty years in the organisation of L'Abri Fellowship. This is a name for a group of communities of hospitality where people can come and stay and reflect on their life. 'A time out' in the language of sport. Everyone is welcome. Trying to find honest answers on honest questions was one of the introductory statements of the work as it began in the Swiss Alps by Francis and Edith Schaeffer.

Looking back I thought: maybe it is interesting to summarize what kind of 'honest questions' I encountered during those years. So I made a list of the "Top Ten Doubting questions" I faced during my years in L'Abri. I gave it the name : A way with doubt, which discloses that it is offered in the first place as a way to handle doubt. At the same time I hope that in some cases it will be a help to get rid of doubt.

May it bless you as you start reading it in finding your way. Be welcome in one of our homes (see: [labri.org](http://labri.org) for locations) because talking about doubt in a place of welcome and (intentionally) openness always offers more than a book can do.



# Chapter 1

## Is it sin to doubt?

*"No one needs to doubt that we all doubt from time to time!"*

*(Karl Barth, Introduction to Theology (Einführung in der Theologie))*

Doubt is a subject that everyone can relate to.. Almost everyone experiences doubt at some point in their lives and knows what it means to be uncertain about something. There are different forms of doubt: It doesn't always delve deep, for example, when one wonders whether to wear the blue or red sweater today or the innocent doubt: where to go for vacation ? Or what to study after high school? Or what is the best use of my money? I do not talk about these innocent doubts.

Another form of doubt is doubt born out of pure curiosity or fascination. For example, one might consider a scientific question like this: Is light a wave, or does it exist as particles? This is creative doubt—a tool for reaching deeper knowledge. It is certainly no sin; quite the opposite!

But there are also forms of doubt that can deeply touch a person's heart.. Let's assume you're totally in love with someone. The question of whether this affection is mutual is a doubt that can haunt you day and night. one could call it existential doubt.

The deepest form of this kind of doubt is doubt in the realm of faith. Doubt in matters of faith is more burdensome than all the other doubts.. Whether it's doubt about the reality of God or doubt about the meaning of life – it often touches people much more

deeply. This existential doubt is not a prerogative of Christian believers. Non christians wrestle with it too. The former French president Francois Mitterand (1981-1996) went through deep doubt when he faced the end of his life. Although he was an atheist in his lifetime, he questioned his own non-believe and it led him to give up his hard core atheism. Recently in Holland a book became a bestseller written by Lieke Marsman . She is very open about her doubt in the atheism in which she was raised. Now that she went through an amputation of her arm at the age of 31 years she went through a deep doubt in the atheist worldview.

Many Christians believe that when it comes to faith, it is fundamentally wrong to have doubts? Is doubt in faith, not by definition a sin? The answer is: no, not by definition .It can be when we handle it in the wrong way. Many times it is a blessing in disguise. Doubt is a complex phenomenon. Also existential doubt has a dimension of the healthy creative doubt .How can we understand this well ?

### **We need to unravel the complexity**

This is what I will be doing in this book! I hope it will help in giving 'honest answers on honest questions' and in handling the feelings that accompany doubt, like fear, feeling guilty or even falling into despair. Before we do this let us first look at the biblical teaching on this main question of how to deal with doubt and whether it is sin. Because I believe that most readers of this book will be Christian believers, I begin with a summary of 'doubt in the Bible.' Non-Christians may choose to skip this section and continue with 'Doubt as an Envelope' at the end of this chapter.

## **Creative and existential doubt in the Bible**

When we look at the life of believers in the Old Testament, we must notice that they were many times overwhelmed by doubt. Consider Abraham, who was called the father of all believers. What doubts did he not go through! In Genesis 12, God promises him a great nation as offspring. But notice what happens later in the book of Genesis. In Genesis 17 it has been twenty-five years since God showed Abraham how great his offspring would be. Sarah and he still have no children, and they are now so old that Sarah cannot even conceive. When God repeats His promise of descendants, Abraham openly shows his doubt: "Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, 'Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?'" (Genesis 17:17). This is the same Abraham whom Paul would praise centuries later for his great faith! The same Abraham who, without seeing anything of God's promises, continued to believe unconditionally, regularly let his vision be clouded by doubt. Abraham, the father of all believers? You may well also call him the father of all doubters! The same can be said of the other well-known heroes of faith. Jacob doubted whether God's promise that he would inherit the Abrahamic blessing would be fulfilled, so much so that he thought he'd better help God a bit (Genesis 23). Moses doubted his mission (Exodus 3:11, 4:10-13), and Gideon doubted God's power to help him, (Judges 6:13-15), David cried "Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Psalms 13:2), Jeremiah wondered if God was still Israel's Helper, (Jeremiah 14:8-9). And there are many others. Despite this, they are praised for their faith. Their doubt did not lead them to unbelief, but rather to a stronger faith. They all, as Paul says in Romans 4:18

of Abraham, believed “against hope in hope.” Perhaps instead of the title ‘heroes of faith’ above Hebrews 11 you should really put: “And yet” – ‘And yet’ they trusted, ‘and yet’ they believed. That ‘and yet’ of faith gives us the space we so desperately need when we talk about faith doubt.

In the New Testament we read in Acts 17:11, that the Christians in Berea are praised because they “received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.” “The message” refers to the message of Jesus’ redemptive work. The Jews in Berea were eager to accept it as true, but they also examined the Scriptures to see if this good news aligned with what the Scriptures said about the coming Messiah. They learned that Jesus was indeed the Messiah spoken of in the Scriptures. As a result, many of them came to faith (verse 12). This is a creative form of doubt and led to something incredibly positive! When we apply this passage to our own faith, we can conclude that it is right to critically engage with what is said about God and the Bible in the church or in society. Not because we want to nitpick or show off our knowledge, but because we are asked to test everything against the Bible.

Paul rightly says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:15-16). Often, we will indeed find that testing will lead to more knowledge and understanding of God’s Word and its meaning for our lives. Existential doubt! Questions like: is God truly omnipotent? Does He keep His promises? Did Jesus really rise from the dead? These are questions we find among believers in both the Old and New Testaments, not just among unbelievers or

"little believers." Even among the great men and women of God, we find moments of existential doubt that are familiar to us. How difficult it can be when, even though you know that God is guiding you, you see nothing of that guidance and care when you look at your circumstances!

John the Baptist was one who struggled intensely with this. Was n't he the one who had the special calling to be the forerunner of Christ? In Luke 3:20, we read that he was imprisoned. All his life he had worked for the preparation of Jesus' coming, and now that Jesus was there and he himself was put into prison like a criminal, he was overwhelmed by deep doubt. He had his disciples ask the Lord Jesus, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Luke 7:20). He had presented Jesus as a man of judgment, but He came as a "man of sorrows." Sometimes doubt can be related to a wrong understanding of things, or to a lack of knowledge of God. In the New Testament, we see that regularly among the people around Jesus. Most Jews had a very different image of the Messiah than Jesus showed. Not only his opponents, the Pharisees and scribes, who had studied a lot, but especially the people who were closest to Him, His disciples. Perhaps the hardest thing to believe was the fact that Jesus did not choose the path of power, but the path of humility. He died on the cross, though He was the Son of God!

Thomas, one of His disciples, had, as we know, particular difficulty with that. After the death and resurrection of Jesus he is the one who simply cannot believe that Jesus has truly risen from the dead and been seen by the disciples. Call it existential doubt! But with a "yet" Because with the question that must have occupied him day and night, he was deeply aware that he had lost his whole heart to

the same Jesus. He is also a good example of the ambiguity in the mind of a deep doubter. In John 10, he says to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." He preferred to die with Jesus rather than live without Him. How torn he must have felt between, on the one hand, his desire to see Jesus, to passionately embrace Him, and to give Him his whole life, and on the other hand, his doubt about the impossibility that someone could come back from death?! How do you explain that someone whom he saw hanging on the cross with his own eyes now stands alive before him? Desiring to give everything, and yet fearing to surrender. Having a deep longing for God, and yet being overwhelmed by thoughts like, "does He really exist?" Does that exist? Yes, it does! Does it exist among weak members of the Church or among still struggling beginners? No, it occurs among people who have been following Jesus for a long time like Thomas, or who gave their lives to prepare for His coming, like John the Baptist! or today Mother Teresa.

### **An envelope with a message**

Is doubt a sin? Perhaps we should ask the question differently. How do you deal with your doubt? We have seen that doubt is a very real thing in the life of a believer, even someone who has grown far in faith. So, if we experience moments of serious doubt, we should not be surprised. The witnesses of faith in Hebrews 11 were not set as examples because they never doubted, but because they did not let their faith be overcome by doubt. Apparently, it comes down to how you deal with doubt - which is a reality in the life of every believer and non-believer. If you handle it wrongly, it can distract you from God and lead to sin.

## **Open the envelope!**

In what ways can you mishandle doubt? For example, you might suppress your doubt for yourself and others, perhaps precisely because you consider it a sin to doubt. We have seen with the biblical characters mentioned above that they openly expressed their doubt. This allowed them to be corrected by God, often leading to a deeper faith and a firmer trust. Those who suppress doubt or taboo doubt questions (even the very deep ones) should not be surprised if they do not grow further in faith. The thought that doubt in matters of faith is sin has often led people to suppress their doubts and questions or fear to address them, fear for judgment from others. Suppression does not help.

## **Flirting**

On the other hand flirting with it does not help either. Here in Holland there is a movement coming up, called the New Spirituality with a different way to handle doubt. Instead of doing the hard work to analyse the complexity they celebrate doubt and shape a structure for a worldview where nothing is absolute anymore. I prefer to stick with Helmut Thielicke, who calls doubt ( in *The waiting father: Sermons on the parable of Jesus*) an envelope that carries a message within it. But to hear that message, you have to open the envelope!

Doubt remains a difficult thing. I often think of the words of Paul in Romans 7: 'What I do not want, that I do.' We do not want to doubt, and are sometimes (rightfully) ashamed of it. We would prefer to be shining witnesses of the faith, hope, and love that God has placed in our hearts throughout our entire lives. But still, doubting is a reality; a reality that we find difficult to deal with both in

relation to ourselves and to others. It's also a reality that reminds us of the brokenness of our existence. Doubt is and remains in the Bible primarily a lack of trust, as we have seen above. The word 'doubt' contains the word 'two'; you are as if hesitating between two thoughts and are attacked by conflicting feelings.

On the other hand, you also cannot grow in faith if you flirt with your doubt, if you give it too much honor and attention. It also happens within the church that people hold themselves and others to believe that life is a search that cannot lead to certainty about God because 'we humans in our limitations can never make statements about a God who is above.' This can lead to nurturing existential questions of faith and scepticism about any certainty.

### **Like a fever**

How do you deal with doubt, firstly within yourself? I think it's very enlightening if you try to honestly consider within yourself where that doubt actually comes from. Because doubt is like a fever. You can only fight it when you know where the infection is. Doubt arises from somewhere. Someone who doesn't understand the source of their doubt is like a boxer who just punches in the air!

### **Different kinds of existential doubt**

Looking to the source I distinguish three types of doubt depending where it comes from:

1. There is doubt that stems from the **intellect** and is caused by a lack of understanding or acquiring new understanding, or a lack of facts. That is what chapter 2 deals with.

2. There is also doubt of **the will** that stems from semi-conscious bindings within ourselves. Chapter 3 deals with that.
3. A third type is doubt of **the feeling** which has everything to do with how I experience God. That is what chapter 4 deals with.

For each of the three doubts, you have to follow a very different therapy. But just like a medical doctor can make a mistake in the diagnosis of fever, making a mistake in dealing with a mental problem can be very painful. To use the medical imagery for a moment: taking stomach powders for a headache only makes matters worse. So, a rational argument that can be the solution if the problem in the head creates a problem or can even increase it in other cases. If the root is in the will or the feeling, rational arguments strengthen the doubt. But In the same way: being loving and gentle with the will-doubter is not always helpful. He needs a push. And being strict and firm or even condemning someone who doubts in their emotions: ( 'it feels like it's not true') is just as big a mistake. In all cases it's important to first taste the spirit. This difference also explains why the Bible speaks so differently about doubt, sometimes very mildly, but other times very rejectingly and sharply condemning. (cf. James 1:6 and Jude vs.22).



## Chapter 2

### Can you prove to me that God exists?

#### ***About intellectual doubt***

*“Nature offers me nothing or it raises doubt and anxiety. If I did not notice anything in it that pointed to a deity, I would decide in the negative sense; if I saw signs of a creator everywhere, I would find peace in faith. but now that I see too much to deny and too little to be certain, I am in a deplorable condition... and have wished a thousand times that God, if he exists, would show himself in an unmistakable way.*

*Blaise Pascal, Thoughts (\*Prisma 2nd edition page.72)*

For a long time in the history of the church, it was customary for the study of theology to be preceded by a period of study in philosophy with the aim of laying a kind of rational certainty underneath faith. In that preliminary phase, future theologians were given rational proofs for the existence of God. This is the first type of question I want to discuss. Can we prove that God exists?

Doubt arises when no one is giving you good reasons to believe. “Why do you believe in God?” I once asked this as a teacher to a group of teenagers in the church. The question confused them. Some of them said : “there must be a creator” (good point! ). Others said : “I just believe: I am raised in it”. (true!). One of them said: “ I feel it that way” but added that the feeling comes and goes (honest self-observation), and when the feeling is not there, doubt

arises But all of these answers are weak. We do not need conclusive proofs but faith is not a riddle, or a mood. When a girl doubts whether she should marry the friend she is in love with, she does not seek scientific evidence. ( It would be hard to provide it anyhow!..). But good arguments do help tremendously. They carry us through when changes in our feelings overwhelm us. You can question the Bible about this. Knocking on the door is one of Jesus' encouragements. See how Jesus interacted with people: He never said, 'Do not ask!' 'Believe or I'll shoot!' . Jesus always responded to questions because he knew that there are good arguments. To come to a strong faith, it is extremely important to hold on to that.

Therefore having said this. it is now time to ask ourselves: are there any genuine, authentic reasons to believe?. Countless individuals in the twentieth century (with Freud at the forefront) have said: 'It is all merely tradition,; a crutch for the weak,; a means to an end,; a neurosis from childhood.' 'No evidence,' That is what Bertrand Russell would say if he would ever see God and be asked why he did not believe. He would say : no evidence God, no evidence.. . So: what are the actual reasons to believe?

### **Start with I but go on with WE**

I have noticed that this question in our time only piques interest when it is taken personally: why do I believe? My grandchildren did not listen to most of my lectures except the one with the title: Why I believe? It is interesting to see that the apostolic creed is formulated in de I form ('credo = I believe )-The listener would prefer a personal answer to this question, demonstrating that it is subjectively genuine. Such answers are occasionally appropriate. I did tell them a highly personal experience of being overwhelmed

by the personal love of God at the age of 17. One can point to the apostle Paul, who, when asked why he believed, provided a very personal response. He recounted how once, while traveling to Damascus, something unforgettable happened to him; a light shone upon him and Jesus appeared to him (Acts 22). Nevertheless, it is notable that at another moment, he takes a very different approach. When asked to send a sort of resumé to Rome, outlining what he actually believes and why, he does not speak at all about his personal experience (see the letter to the Romans in the N.T.) He knew that his personal experience was unique. To put it blunt: that was not helpful as a model to strive after. In talking about what he believed he moved from the personal to the (now shared with all Christians) foundation of his personal belief and how it is founded in reality. He believes because it is true. But when we keep on reading in Romans he first discusses this foundation of faith in reality before coming back to the very personal dimension. In short Paul would say: I believe in the personal God of the bible in which He reveals His character and plan because it does justice to the reality outside me and the reality within me.

Alternative images of God do not give that. With an impersonal god in Eastern religions everything that is personal remains incidental. It will all finally flow back into the river of life like a drop of water that for a moment flashed out of the current but then finally melts back into it again at the end. I cannot believe that. It does not do justice to the longings that are connected with the knowledge that I am a unique person (see the second point). On the other side the God of the Philosophers in the West is merely a supreme power, a first mover (and as Aristotle added he remains himself unmoved); the great watchmaker who wound up the clockwork of creation

after its production and then set it aside. That god leaves us alone, is far away, and must make us think that evil is also built into creation by him. That is incompatible with the personal God who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ as our Father.

You see what I am doing here. I cannot help but test what I believe against reality. Francis Schaeffer said: There are criteria which we can apply on the many world views that we meet. The first one is: Is it true to reality? In sharp contrast to Bertrand Russell, Francis Schaeffer always spoke about two areas against which we may test the truth of what we believe from the Bible. These are the structure of the universe around us (nature and history) Say: reality outside us ) and the manishness of man (the world within us). He borrowed this from the well-known letter of Paul to the Romans. In the first chapter of that letter, Paul says that the majesty of God can be understood with the mind from His works (vs. 20). In chapter 2, it says that every person has a heart and a conscience, and that God has written His law in his/her heart (vs. 15).

## **I. Reality outside**

Whether you believe or not, the reality outside us points beyond itself. Think of nature, of phenomena like butterflies and planets; they evoke our wonder. We can see from the laws of nature that they are conceived reasonably . Some one with thoughts has created them and because we are made as reasonable beings we can understand them and we can work with and copy them. Time and chance alone can never explain the complexity and majesty of this incredible universe. It points beyond itself. 'Yes, there is also cruelty and horror,' someone might say, 'Just look at the behavior of the parasitic wasp or the atrocities in the Ukraine.' That is also

true. But even the most hardened evolutionist will agree that this is an evil that evidently is connected with the process of evolution . However, he has no answer to the question of why and how. But the bible explains the wonder and the evil.; it started good, but evil entered it . Creation , fall, ..and happily also redemption are the main characteristics of the reality of nature and history outside of us. There is immense beauty, but it is also a broken reality. There is also evil. It intrudes the world, but it goes against God's intention. Jesus is God's answer to evil. The history of Israel, the coming of the Messiah and the renewing work of the Spirit are realities in history and can be verified.. Every-one who wants can see the reality of God in nature and in history. Jesus is the key to understanding the outside world. Through Him, we learn to see that God is really there to work out his Plan. The reality of good and evil remains decisive for my faith. If the belief in the existence of God does not do justice to reality, then I cannot believe that faith is true. In the middle-ages this was the content of the five proofs to believe in God. God as the first cause (firsts mover), universal causality, the origin of moral order, the joy of imagination, the creator of our destiny.

The philosopher Kant in the 19th century had a point when he said that these insights did not have the structure of a scientific proof. Like two times two is four. But this is also true for other essential realities in which we all believe, like the reality of love and beauty. I can say "This is beautiful" looking at a painting of Rembrandt or a sunset on a summer evening. But it is not possible to prove this with the laws of natural science. Comparing the rational methods of finding truth in natural science with the instrument through which a fisherman is catching fish, the reality

of beauty, love and basic trust, is too big and will never fit into that net. Even the leap from a First Cause to the Father is too great to fit into the net of scientific proof. Therefore it is better to talk not about proofs, but about sensible arguments.

Today, people prefer to speak of signals. These signals do not necessarily prove the existence of a God, but they are powerful arguments. They point toward a higher reality. The Dutch philosopher Theo de Boer sees signals of a higher reality in the general accepted law of what he calls 'the secret of salvation of life through death'. On the one hand, a decline in energy is visible. In this process of decline, a movement upwards is also visible, directly counter to it'. (The God of Pascal (1990), p. 89-93). By this he meant that death always carries within it a promise of something new, something different. 'How typical,' he says, 'that the finest specialization and refinement of culture precisely occurs through the law of loss of energy which is a decline...'

### **Talking about evidence**

Prof. A. v.d. Beukel refrains from mentioning specific signs because he believes that all things bear such signals, which he calls secrets. According to him, it is not the case that only here and there a signal lights up of another reality. That depth lies in all things. He demonstrates this in his book 'The Things Have Their Secret' (1991) using a few phenomena, such as the phenomenon of light. Of course, light behaves as particles or - from another perspective - as waves, but the reality is more than can ever be explained in any quantum mechanics book. This is a scientist who in contrast to Bertrand Russell concludes that the certainty of whether God

exists does not rest on superstition, but on evidence based on observations and perceptions.

That scientists sometimes cannot ignore the existence of a higher reality is evidenced by the much-discussed book by the British religious scholar Karin Armstrong, 'A History of God' (1993). This work is the result of a study originally aimed at the history of how people believe in God. Armstrong began the study as a convinced non-believer, but gradually became more convinced that it is impossible to believe that the entire history of faith is merely based on imagination. Her conclusion is that there must be a divine reality - although she does not believe that anyone is capable of comprehending, let alone defining, that reality.

You see what I am doing here. I cannot help but test what I believe against reality. There are criteria which we can apply on the many world views that we meet Francis Schaeffer gave three touchstones:

1. Is it true to reality? This is what I just did
2. Does it contradict itself?
3. Can you live it?

### **Does it contradict itself?**

The beauty of biblical revelation lies in its cohesive unity. Jesus took the time to demonstrate from Moses and the prophets that he was the Christ. Across the Scriptures—written over a span of fifteen centuries—there is a remarkable consistency in teaching.

Together, the books of the Bible testify to the existence of an infinite, personal God who has a plan for humanity and the earth.

They reveal both humanity's failure and the depth of God's compassion and grace—His election of Israel, salvation through Christ, and ultimately, the fulfillment of His grand design: the coming kingdom of peace and justice.

This stands in stark contrast to worldviews that, while fostering hope, remain irrational by failing to address the fundamental problem of universal death.

### **Can you live it?**

Can I live it? It may happen that you find a truth that aligns with reality, that is consistent and coherent from a certain viewpoint, but with which it is impossible to live. Dr. Schaeffer found nihilism to be such a worldview. According to nihilism, reality ends in death. Meaninglessness is the endpoint of human endeavor. Based on such a worldview, no one can live and make honest choices that truly matter. The same applies to agnosticism. This proves the fallacy of this worldview. In contrast, biblical revelation provides us with rules for life. It even provides us with the only framework within which real life is possible.

### **No proof?**

Besides religious writers like Karen Armstrong there are an increasing number of scientists today who leave the position of the mainstream atheistic or agnostic scientists. Under the pressure of evolutionistic science and the reductionist vision of the philosopher Kant, even many Christians have moved so far that they took the position of believing that science and faith should always be separated! This created the atmosphere that although there is a lot to say in defense of faith as religious experience

science cannot be of any help. Surprisingly the twenty- first century came with a shift. Further scientific study today dismantled Darwinian evolutionist science and created doubt in the also by Christians mostly accepted slogan: we have arguments but no proof. The scientist and journalist Lee Strobel gave a summary of these recent developments in his book "The Case for a Creator". In chapter 2 on the theory of Darwin's evolution Strobel explores the iconic images used to support evolutionary theory, such as Darwin's finches and the Miller-Urey experiment. He interviews Jonathan Wells, a biologist and critic of evolutionary theory, who argues that these images are misleading or misinterpreted. Wells contends that the famous finches actually show variations within a species rather than evidence of one species evolving into another. Similarly, he challenges the Miller-Urey experiment's relevance, arguing that it does not accurately simulate early Earth conditions. Strobel and Wells discuss how these examples are often presented uncritically in educational materials, which they believe undermines a more thorough scientific investigation into origins.

### **Doubts about Darwinism**

In chapter 3 Strobel dives into the scientific doubts surrounding Darwinism. He speaks with Stephen C. Meyer, a philosopher of science, who questions the adequacy of natural selection and random mutation to account for the complexity of life. Meyer introduces the concept of "specified complexity" and the information-rich sequences in DNA, arguing that these cannot be sufficiently explained by Darwinian mechanisms. The chapter highlights the growing body of scientists who are skeptical of Darwinism and are seeking alternative explanations, such as

intelligent design. Strobel emphasizes the importance of questioning prevailing scientific paradigms and considering new hypotheses. In chapter 4 Strobel addresses the relationship between science and faith, exploring whether they are necessarily in conflict. Strobel interviews several scholars, including physicist and theologian John Polkinghorne, who argue that science and faith can be complementary rather than contradictory. They discuss how the fine-tuning of the universe and the apparent design in nature can be seen as evidence of a Creator. The chapter emphasizes that many respected scientists have been people of faith, and it challenges the notion that belief in God is inherently unscientific. Strobel aims to show that a rational investigation of the universe can lead to conclusions that support the existence of a Creator. These chapters collectively build a case against the adequacy of Darwinian evolution and in favor of considering intelligent design as a plausible explanation for the complexity and order observed in the universe. The conclusion is that although we do not believe in a scientific proof of God, to say that there is no scientific evidence as Bertrand Russel said is rendered out of date!

## **II. The Reality Within me**

Even within the reality within me, there are signals indicating the existence of a higher reality. American philosopher-sociologist Peter Berger, in "A Rumor of Angels" (1990), lists five such signals, which become visible in human behaviors. They are not proof, but they do demonstrate that our reality points beyond itself. A beautiful example Berger gives is that of a mother soothing and comforting her baby with the words: "There, there, everything will be alright." Her words allude to an ultimately all-encompassing Harmony. No one would say the mother is lying, yet everyone

knows that every human life on earth will end in death. This is because there is a universal awareness that there must be another, higher, and better order.

A second signal of transcendence is play. When people play, they create another world for themselves, where their own rules and a different sense of time apply. Is immersing oneself in a self-created reality just an escape? Berger believes that play momentarily offers us a glimpse of eternity. The sense of timelessness we experience aligns with our deepest being. When the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra played while the city was under siege in 1945, it had an effect on the listeners like never before. The third signal is the phenomenon of hope. People always maintain hope, even in dire circumstances. Viennese psychiatrist Frankl discovered in the concentration camp that hope was the only thing that ultimately gave people the strength to persevere. F.i. the Dutch writer and survivor of Auschwitz Floris Bakel writes in his book *Nacht und Nebel* that he survived only thanks to the fact that he knew his bride was eagerly waiting for him to come home. Is hope a cosmic illusion, or does it point to a higher order?

The fourth signal Berger mentions is the radical condemnation with which every human judges certain evils. Child murder, concentration camps, torture... upon hearing of these, every human heart spontaneously feels absolute disapproval. 'If there is no hell, then we must invent it,' said an atheist once. During the condemnation of Eichmann, everyone felt that no worldly punishment was sufficient to condemn this evil. Does this not also point to what the Bible teaches about eternal punishment and judgment? Finally, he mentions the signal of the existence of humor. Something is humorous when two realities collide in an

incident or event. Animals become comical to us when we attribute human characteristics to them. For example: a mouse and an elephant walk together on a bridge. The mouse says, 'We're stomping along nicely!' The discrepancy between the two realities, which remains evident, is not resolved in humor but rather keenly felt, which is what makes us laugh. The essence of human spirit is essentially trapped in our perishable world. But where there is humor, eternity momentarily enters liberatingly.

### **Image of God**

So there is a connection between religious answers and the inner world of all humans. The outer world can never truly meet our deepest needs and longings. Consider the awareness of uniqueness. An animal dying of old age does not fear death, but humans do. This indicates that the erasure of individual human existence is not normal. Every human being has a deep longing for meaning, a longing that no earthly possession can satisfy. The hangover of top athletes (like Boris Becker) or famous writers (like Ernest Hemingway) is well-known. When they reached the top and had everything their hearts desired, they asked, 'Is this all there is?' Even fame and money could not satisfy the deepest longing of their hearts.

Finally, I mention that no one has an answer to the question of how it is possible that there are universally held absolute feelings about what is good and evil among humans, feelings that leave no one without a guilty conscience. All of this reality within us of desires and fears becomes absurd if they are not fulfilled or anchored in some other reality in any way. The British theologian Michael Green rightly says, 'In physical life, there exists a fulfillment for

every physical need that arises. Food corresponds to hunger, and a kiss to love. Would this not apply to "higher" desires as well? Then we could truly speak of a sadistic universe.' Here too, the God whom we come to know in Christ offers fulfillment for these deep longings. Our moral feelings are based on his character, and thanks to his unique personality, we believe in our uniqueness. After all, we are made in his image. Through Christ, we are assured that despite deep failure and serious damage, everything will ultimately be alright. Thus, my faith in this God 'fits' with the reality within me. For all these reasons, the apostle answers in Romans 1 and 2 the question of why people believe in God: because his divinity shines forth from the reality outside of us (Romans 1:20) and because it is evident from the soul of humanity within us (Romans 2:15). The revelation of God does justice to reality, providing the appropriate answer to the questions it raises. The real reason why I believe in God is that it teaches me the truth about the reality in which I live.

### **III. Belief comes from the heart**

Having said all this Leslie Newbigin in his book on doubt that we would go wrong if we would suggest that belief is a conclusion derived from reasoning alone (see "Proper Confidence" (SPCK 1995) p.76). Something more must happen for an argument to touch me and bring me to belief. On the day of Pentecost, the crowds were deeply moved in their hearts and convinced of the truth of the Gospel. This was the result of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Was this conversion merely a purely emotional experience that cannot be further articulated? No, the work of the Holy Spirit has everything to do with those more objective grounds mentioned earlier. But it is also more than that; it is an event in which the

scales fall from your eyes, so that you suddenly 'see' it. So it was also with the conversion of Paul; he suddenly 'saw' as true what he had previously known but not believed. The aspect of reality that completely touches you in the encounter with the Word will vary from person to person. From this, you can see that God addresses not in a general way but personally in a very unique manner.

Belief has everything to do with the turning point, as occurs with the apostle Paul when he suddenly shifts from: 'we all have knowledge [of God]' to 'being known by Him' in 1 Corinthians 8. Paul even shows a certain disdain for that 'knowledge of God, which is still separate from being 'known by' Him. 'Yes, indeed,' he says, 'we all have knowledge. We can boast about it and argue over who possesses the truest knowledge, or who may be counted among the group of true "knowers", but then we have not yet come to know as we should.' True knowledge is "knowing in love", a knowledge you only receive when you are known by Him. This is something entirely different; from a distant knowing, I come to an encounter and a relationship. Knowing then becomes recognizing. A recognition that fits all the pieces of the puzzle together, as happened with the disciples when they suddenly recognized their master and savior in the man before them and exclaimed in surprise, 'It is the Lord' The joy that this experience brings about is immense. 'It is one thing to play with "thoughts" and "suspicions" or "conclusions"; it is quite another to come into contact with the living God himself,' as the well-known C.S. Lewis says in "Miracles". He compares this event to catching a fish for the very first time; you suddenly feel that there is something alive on the other end of the line. Or to the time when you walk alone through a dark forest at night and suddenly hear someone growling beside you. 'There

comes a moment when children playing burglars suddenly hold their breath: were those real footsteps on the stairs?' Although emotion and deep personal involvement play a role in experiencing God's presence, this experience is not disconnected from reality. If it were, it would lack the necessary foundation, and faith would slip through your fingers before you knew it. Therefore, the apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans, does not extensively report on his personal experience but rather wraps it in a brief discourse on reality and how it works. No one wants to be comforted by good news that is not based on facts. Similarly, regarding faith, if it consists only of experience, it will float aimlessly. The experience must be rooted in revelation. Revelation reveals to us reality as it is.

#### **IV. Causes of intellectual doubt**

The arguments put forward to point to the existence of God provide support when my doubt stems from a lack of understanding. That is the first cause of intellectual doubt. There is also a second, much more common cause, which can be subsumed under the first but is so widespread that it is good to give it separate attention. That is having a wrong concept of God. Finally, it is good to consider that all loving knowledge, the experience of recognition, must be continually nurtured. You must constantly recall it and allow your faith to be refreshed and deepened by it. Without remembrance, faith in God fades. It even begs the question whether one can think well without remembering.

#### **A. Lack of Understanding**

We must grow in understanding. For doubt can stem from a lack of insight. When Copernicus asserted that the earth rotated on its own axis and thus spun around the sun, it was difficult for many

people to believe. Not only because for centuries they had seen it differently, but also because at the moment that this was discovered they knew nothing about the law of gravity.. Lack of knowledge prevented them from believing in Copernicus' discovery. How could the earth spin so rapidly on its own axis without us flying off it at the same speed! A visit to the carousel at the fair is enough to shake that belief. Yet Copernicus was right. However, it required a new understanding before people could accept Copernicus' truth. That came soon when Galileo discovered the laws of gravity. Lack of understanding prevented people from believing in the truth. This happens more often than we think, especially when it comes to believing in God. A wrong doctrine about predestination (such as the idea that the Bible teaches that three-quarters of humanity has already been eternally rejected before the foundation of the world) leads to deep, unnecessary doubt. The same goes for the notion that the Bible allows no room for any interpretation other than that the earth was created six thousand years ago in six literal 24-hour days. These are ideas that arise from a misunderstanding, and upon reflection, they naturally lead to doubt.

Jesus always engages positively with this intellectual doubt. He never says, 'You shouldn't ask those kinds of questions.' He talked until the early hours with Nicodemus, a Jewish teacher who had many questions for Jesus. And think again of Thomas, who could only believe based on his observations. In the Gospel of John, he is the one who repeatedly asks the critical questions - dares to ask them, because it requires courage. And how does Jesus respond? He always meets him with an answer! Ultimately, Thomas arrives at the very personal and moving confession: 'My Lord and my God!' As

Luther said: 'faith could be defined as comfort in doubt' ("getroste Verzweiflung"). In the Bible, you read several times that God stimulates people to ask questions: 'Question me!' But there are other moments when you can clearly see that continuous intellectual doubt is related to deeper-rooted sin within us or to a woundedness or inability that we do not directly perceive in ourselves. On the one hand, the revelation of God is generously open to questioning; it is written: 'test everything and hold on to the good,' (I Thessalonians 5:21), and this means that you may ask sharp and critical questions.

But this is different from when someone makes their own autonomous reason the starting point for everything and thus, in essence, places themselves above God. If someone does this, they are saying, in a way: 'Lord God, now you must justify yourself to me!' Then we see that criticism must itself be criticized. Even Job falls into this trap, so that God, at the end of the Book of Job, reverses roles and says, 'Job, do you think you are a judge above Me?' This critical attitude is very strong in our time because how often do we not challenge God on the throne of reason? He must justify himself in everything for us, otherwise, we do not deign to believe in Him. When we notice this, in ourselves or in others, we must be very critical and ask: 'What is going on here? Here, we have elevated our own reason to such a height that it is above God instead of being subject to the Maker, to the one who gave us reason itself!' (Read C.S. Lewis: "God in the dock")

## **B. Wrong image of God**

A distorted image of God can become a source of doubt and lead to a crisis of faith. However, on the other hand, much doubt can fade away when we come to know Him better.

On a human level, this is beautifully illustrated in the relationship between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth is intrigued by Darcy but perceives him as too proud. What changes her reservations about his character into the certainty that he is truly worthy of her love? She gradually gains insight into his true nature. The misconceptions she held about him dissolve, and she discovers who he really is. As a result, her doubt melts away.

Similarly, in faith, much changes when we are freed from a false image of God. Many people struggle with doubt because they misunderstand who God is. This is evident in stories of unanswered prayers. Some pray for a perfect score on an exam, a winning lottery ticket, or the healing of a gravely ill loved one—only to find that God does not grant their request. Where is He? Why isn't He doing anything? they wonder. But they fail to see that their sense of abandonment stems from a mistaken understanding of God.

Nowhere in the Bible is God depicted as a kind of Santa Claus who grants all His children's wishes. At the same time, others see Him only as a strict Judge, always watching over their shoulder to ensure they behave. In both cases, doubt arises—often followed by disbelief. If only someone had explained to them in time that God is not as they imagine! He is neither the indulgent father who caters to every desire nor the relentless Judge scrutinizing their every move. Rather, He is the wise and loving Father—one whose

thoughts are higher than our thoughts and whose ways are far beyond our own.

### **C. Lack of remembrance**

Often, doubt with the intellect is a result of a lack of 'maintenance'. Every relationship will crack if you don't continually give it time and attention. That's why the Bible names 'remembrance' as one of the best remedies against doubt. Remembering is: consciously recalling what He has done for you, not only back on Golgotha, but also here and now in your life. Remembering is: letting God's voice speak to us. If we do that, the soul can breathe again, and doubt doesn't stand a chance. The people of Israel began to doubt God when they no longer clearly remembered how God had saved them in the past. We are just like them and quickly forget how God helped us yesterday or the day before, and therefore sink back into doubt; doubt whether He also helps today and is with us. Especially a second or third generation of Christians can very easily forget what God has done for them, and then doubt can present itself as an obstacle. You combat this doubt by remembering; by remembering how God began His work with our forefathers and how His faithfulness continues through the generations. It is no coincidence that a Jewish proverb says: 'remembering is the breathing of the soul.'

We live in a time where everything is doubted, and where doubt in some respects is esteemed higher than certainty. In society as a whole, certainty is suspect. If you talk about certainty, you'll quickly hear the word 'fundamentalism' muttered. People make it clear that certainty is dangerous: 'How much injustice has been done in the name of whatever certainty?' Certainty makes people

afraid. 'Those overly certain people always make me feel very unhappy,' someone once said to me. Certainty is also deceptive, and millions of people have been swept along in the triumph of some 'absolutely certain' ideology. Today more than ever, we are aware that this often leads to the chaos of war and anarchy. You could conclude that we should rather live in doubt. But doubt paralyzes. Doubt creates fear. Doubt creates a vacuum in which the demons of chaos and destruction, which - with the rejection of certainties - had been banished, return in much greater numbers. That's why it's important to stand up for certainty in our time - no, not the desperate, self-designed certainty of the tower builders of Babel, based on our own logic and strength (who you can also encounter in the church!) No, we must stand up for received certainty. Like the one Paul spoke of in 1 Corinthians 8:3 or Pascal in the fragment sewn into his coat, known as 'The Memorial'. (A.W.p.19): 'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of philosophers and scholars. Certainty. Certainty. Feeling. Joy. Peace. God of Jesus Christ. Your God and my God. That certainty remains vulnerable and can come under attack again - it was not for nothing that. Pascal sewed the Memorial into his coat, to always carry it with him. We opened this section with a quote from Leslie Newbigin, where he calls memory the joyful affirmation of things that can be doubted. It is important to recognize the destructive power of doubt and to arm ourselves against it through a multi-dimensional approach. This leads us now to a discussion of another kind of doubt in the next chapter: doubt of the will.

## Chapter 3

### Don't say 'doubter', say 'stubborn'.

#### *About doubt of the will.*

*"And while I was searching for what was actually injustice, wickedness, I came to the conclusion that it was not a substance but a perversity of the will, which had turned away from You, who are God. It was a turning away towards the lowest things, casting aside its inner self and swelling outward".*

*Augustine, Confessions, VII, 22*

Is it primarily our intellect that obstructs an unconditional belief in God? I don't think so. For many people, doubt is ultimately not a matter of lack of arguments, evidence, or understanding, as was the case with Thomas or the Jews of Berea. It often gets stuck on something else. A person is not only endowed with intellect; we also have feelings and we also have a will. Is my doubt now fueled by my intellect, by my will, or by my feelings? This chapter deals with the second aspect. What is doubt of the will and how should one deal with it?

#### **Double minded**

We had a boy staying with us in l'Abri for a long time, who was inexhaustible in asking questions of doubt. Wasn't God just a human invention? And why does He allow children to suffer? And hoping for guidance is just fantasy. And so on. At first, we took it seriously, but we quickly discovered that there was no getting through to him. Until we discovered how he spent his weekly day off (in our work, each guest has one day off per week). He used that

day to visit the Red Light District in Amsterdam. A habit he was by no means willing to give up! This is an example of doubt, which is prompted by fear on one side – and unwillingness on the other side – to give up my life as I want it, with myself at the center. Doubt is used here as a barrier against God who wants us to live according to His will and standards.

It is remarkable that the Bible is very critical of this kind of doubt, the doubt of the will, compared to emotional and intellectual doubt. A good example of doubt of the will in the bible is the attitude of the Pharisees in Luke 20:1-8, where we read that they once came to Jesus with the question in whose name and with what authority He acted. Jesus' answer is very revealing; He asks them a counter-question. 'First tell me: was John's baptism from God or from men?' That seems like an evasive question. But if you look closely, you'll notice that that question actually gets to the heart of the matter. As they prepare to answer that question, it becomes clear that they actually had a very deep unwillingness to risk themselves in finding the truth. 'If we say, "John's baptism was from God," then He will say, "Why didn't you believe him?" But if we say, "From men," all the people around us will stone us.' So they answered, 'We don't know.' To which Jesus said, 'Then neither I will tell you. Anyone who is not willing to do the truth with all his will and life should not think that he will receive anything from the Lord, unstable as he is in all his ways (James 1:7).' 'Even if someone were to rise from the dead,' Jesus says in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, 'they will not be persuaded!' (Luke 16:31).

The distinction between the different types of existential doubt has greatly helped me understand the well-known text from James 1: 5-8 : "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives

generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.”. I myself struggled with this word from James. It looks like offering to help someone who wants to stop drinking on the condition that they stop drinking first. But you have to look closely at this text. It says: this is about a certain type of doubt. It is the doubt of people who are 'double-minded and unstable in all they do.' James is talking here about the person who is not willing to act if it turns out that God exists. Here an appeal to the will is the only way to get rid of that doubt. This James text talks about doubt of the will, not about emotional doubt, or doubt of the intellect.

### **Two forms of doubt of the will**

There are different forms of doubt ultimately rooted in the will and not in feeling or intellect. These are the skepticism of the agnostic (1) and what I call 'the doubt of the unsigned contract' (2).

The characteristic of these forms of doubt is their ability to disguise themselves. In contrast with feeling and thinking, unwillingness disguises itself and often dresses itself up with the garment of intellectual or emotional doubt. Even at the highest level of scientific pretense. Doubt of the will usually needs to be unmasked first. We are stuck to idols and prejudices. 'Don't say "doubter," say "stubborn"; that's one of Pascal's famous 'pensées'! Doubters of the will say: any and every statement that comes with certainty should be rejected. But the irony is that even this very claim is marked by a kind of certainty. Such people are often

unconsciously cherishing convictions and lifestyles with absolute certainty. Let's be honest and say that this stubborn person is in each of us - as long as the Spirit of God has not touched us.

### **Waiting for absolute certainty**

Many people adopt the attitude of an agnostic when asked whether God exists or not. They refuse to choose one or the other because they wait for scientific proof. The question is what you mean by absolute proof? ? Thanks to the work of scholars like Polanyi and Kuhn, it has now been shown that even the most hard scientific truths presuppose an element of trust in unproven assumptions and interpretative framework.. Lesslie Newbigin described this long road in a chapter of his last book 'Proper Confidence' under the surprising and meaningful title: Certainty as the way to nihilism (chapter 3). He himself opposes 'doubt as the way to certainty.' If someone accepts no other certainty than the scientific one, they will ultimately end up in nihilism, but whoever begins with honest questions without such prejudices (you might almost say without such a secret idol) stands under the promise of (what I like to call): faith certainty, which is a fruit of trust.. The question to the agnostic is: "what if there is a reason beyond your search for certainty"?

### **Pascal and the agnostic**

In the third chapter of Pascal's *Pensées* (p.64-78), we read fragments of a famous conversation between Pascal and an agnostic. Pascal agrees with him that purely intellectual arguments do not lead to certainty about God: Pascal, however, does not want to leave it at that, 'Let us then examine this point, and say: "God is, or God is not." We have to make up our mind and choose!!But to

which side shall we incline? This leads the discussion to an investigation. Could it be that there is a deeper reason why the friend is unable to choose?

Pascal even tries an in my eyes tricky argument: 'Let us play a game. Heads or tails. Choose: for or against. What will you bet? It's definitely wisest to choose God: 'If you win, you win everything; if you lose, you lose nothing.' His friend seems momentarily taken aback by this argument and counters with remarkable openness. 'Yes, but my hands are tied and my mouth is gagged. I am forced to bet, I am not free. They won't let me go. Being in that state: what do you want me to do?' Having reached this point, Pascal goes to the deepest background of his agnostic friend's struggle and says: 'But then at least acknowledge that your inability to believe is due to your passions... Strive then, not to convince yourself by the increase of proofs of God, but by the decrease of your passions'. I have reproduced this conversation of Pascal at length because it is an example of how the doubt of the will usually lurks at the bottom of the heart. Pascal penetrates in this conversation to that deep layer in the heart of his friend, where he must face his own unwillingness. In modern language we may think of 'passions' as more related to emotional desire, but for Pascal it is much deeper. According to Pascal, passion is the natural attachment of a person to perishable things that hinder his view of God. The Bible calls this the sinful self-centeredness of humans; the unwillingness to be open to the seeking love of God.

### **If you can't choose**

What should you do if you would like to be open to God, but can't? Pascal responds: then just pretend. Just do it, kneel down, bow

down, pray the seeker's prayer: 'God, if you exist, break open my soul, if I have one.' You will see that it works. And it is a fact: what is madness to the intellect, and for intellectual doubt not a good remedy, is for the doubt of the will a remarkable miraculous medicine. 'You want to come to faith and you don't know the way, you want to be healed of your unbelief and you ask for the remedy: then learn from those who were bound like you and who have now wagered all their goods. They are people who know the way you would like to follow and are healed of an ailment from which you want to be healed. Follow the way they began: they pretended to believe...' (p.76,77). How can that help? We don't always understand the workings of a medicine, but if it works, we use it. And with doubt of the will, it works, because as Pascal himself says: 'it diminishes your passions, which are your great obstacle.' It affects you to bend your knees, even if your heart is filled with doubt. 'It makes you foolish,' says the friend. No, says Pascal, '[when you become] humble, your pride is broken, gratitude fills your heart, you become generous, faithful, and honest. A sincere friend, truthful.

Certainly, you will not live in corrupt pleasures, in fame and in pleasure, but will you not taste other pleasures...? You will understand that you have wagered on something certain and infinite, for which you have given nothing.' Only now does the friend come to acknowledge and he says: 'Oh, this argument transports and delights me.' And Pascal concludes by saying: 'If you like this argument, know that it comes from a man who before and after fell on his knees to pray to that infinite Being, that He may also subject you to Himself in the same way, for your own well-being and for His glory...' (p.77) Pascal thus relativizes his earlier

argument by saying that no human argument can do what only God can do through the Holy Spirit in the case of the doubt of the will. 'He opens the closed heart, He softens what is hard and circumcises what is uncircumcised. He pours new qualities into the will and makes the will that was dead, alive, that was evil, good, that did not want, now want, that was rebellious, obedient. He moves and strengthens the will, so that it can bear fruits of good works like a good tree' (Dordrecht Confession III/IV, 11).

### **An unsigned contract**

Os Guinness gives the following example in his book 'God in the Dark (Hodder and Stoughton '1996 p.84 ff.) to illustrate how indecision results in uncertainty. It happens regularly: two people fall in love, move towards marriage, but start to doubt intensely when everything seems to be becoming definitive. You then repeatedly see that once the signature is set, the doubt disappears. Personally, I doubted enormously before I got engaged, but never again after I got engaged. When the will had clearly decided, I was rewarded with certainty. Not before that time. Why is that? That's because you've made the actual commitment! There are countless Christians who carry their Christianity with them like an unsigned contract. They are somewhat involved, but have never made the act of total dedication, have never committed themselves to it, never sealed it with the promise of total dedication. The promise of certainty is given after the choice is made. 'Whoever does my will shall know whether he is from God,' says Jesus. Doubt of the will can be fought with dedication. It is very important here to mark that moment of surrender: the wedding ring, the ritual, the song, an act which emphatically underlines the choice. Much of the doubt among Christians who have been raised in a reformed family

is the doubt of an unsigned contract. Everything is clear - but the signature has never been put under it. Therefore, it is very important to, just as the Lord Jesus himself did, call indecisive people to make the choice. The doubt, which originates in the will, will not disappear before then. You must make a confession or be baptized. Make a choice. If you want to be sure of God then you must seek Him, says Jeremiah, with all your heart. If you don't do it with all your heart, you won't find Him. You must be willing to say 'God if You really exist, then I'm all in, regardless of what it will cost me.' If you don't dare and want to say that, then don't think that God will ever lead you to certainty.

### **First obedience, then certainty**

Certainty only comes after the step is taken. In the Gospel of John, we are told that once people went to Jesus himself with the question of doubt: how can we be sure that you speak the truth, while you haven't even studied theology? To which Jesus pointed to His Sender: 'I did not come on my own!' What He added to that is very significant: 'If anyone wants to do the will of my Father, he will know whether this teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own' (John 7:17). If you really want to know if it's true then you must first be willing to do His will. Certainty is promised here as a result of obedience. That is already inherent in the self-revelation of the Name: YHWH in Exodus 3:14. When Moses asked: if I come to Egypt and say I've been sent by You, and the Israelites will ask me: 'what is his name?', what should I say. Then the Lord said: tell them: 'I will be there with you. That is my name and that's how I want to be invoked from now on.' That name is a promise. God does not give a definition of Himself to the core question, He does not declare Himself here for the questioning intellect, but appeals to

the will: do you doubt if I will really be there for you and if I am able to save you: here is my name: trust Me and you will see that I am there and what I can do. Later in history, it was the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard who said: to trust people you first need to know them but with God it is the opposite with God you have to trust Him first, then you get to know Him. Basic trust is the first need of every human being (Eric Ericson)

### **"On est embarqué"**

I end this chapter with one of Pascal's shortest aphorisms: Der mensch sitzt im Schiff ("Thoughts " Prisma p.75). He wanted to say: we have set sail, we are sitting in the ship already. In other words, there is no possibility to avoid the adventure of sailing. When you are born, you are placed on the waters of life. No one can avoid choosing!



## Chapter 4

### 'But I just feel very differently'

#### *About doubt of feeling*

*"The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of."*

*(Blaise Pascal in 'Pensées')*

*"Looking to doubt psychologically gives a signal that one cannot stay at the same spot, but has to grow. Man is in a process of growth. Sometimes it means taking a step back."*

*(H.C.Rumke in 'Character and Disposition in Relation to unbelief', 1985,147)*

The third form of existential doubt, the doubt of feeling, is a form of doubt that many Christians are confronted with at some point. As the famous French philosopher Pascal already expressed: they are beyond the reach of rational analysis and follow their own not always easily understandable logic. Many Christians continue to struggle with moments of deep doubt although they may have sincerely and with their whole life chosen for God, It is not a matter of understanding, it is not intellectual doubt. They don't lack the will either. They want to go all the way and would do anything to achieve certainty. Someone once said to me after a long conversation: "thank you for your explanation, I do think I understand, but I wish I could believe it". There were obviously other reasons that made it hard to believe. "Everything makes sense, but I just cannot feel it." No matter what one intellectually affirms or does in dedication to God and people, it still feels as if God is not there. It is more on the level of experience and feeling,

call it alienation in which one experiences nothing of what the Bible promises - the certainty of God's presence, communion with God, His guidance and work, His kingdom in our lives. Many people go through this in times of suffering. 'Whatever I do,' says C.S. Lewis (in the movie *Shadowlands*, after the death of his wife), 'it's as if I'm getting a door slammed in my face.' This doubt of feeling is a form of doubt that goes beyond will or understanding. It plays a very important role in our time. How does the Bible view doubt of feeling? Where does this form of doubt come from and how should we deal with it?

### **Doubt of feeling in the bible**

As mentioned earlier, the Bible approaches people with doubt of feeling with compassion. At the end of the book of Jude in the New Testament, the apostle Jude writes : 'And have mercy on some who doubt, and save them by snatching them out of the fire.' Jude here points to the mercy of God who is merciful to such doubters. We encounter this compassion f.i. when Jesus appears to the disciples after the resurrection. It is said of them: 'they still could not believe it' (Luke 24:41). Jesus reacts to this encouragingly and attentively and says: 'Give me bread and fish, and I will eat it in front of you!' We find this tone in God's attitude towards Elijah when he sinks into a deep emotional depression and doubt after an enormous feat on Mount Carmel, as described in 1 Kings 18. These few passages from the Bible already show that the background behind doubt of feeling can be very different each time. The disciples cannot emotionally grasp the truth because it is 'too good to be true'; with Elijah the spiritual pressure had become too great and oversaturation and depression played a role. With Lewis, who was mentioned earlier, there was unprocessed grief. It is worthwhile

not to resign too quickly and give up hope but to push through to deeper backgrounds. Sometimes this can mean a struggle. We find this struggle with people of great significance in the Bible, such as Jeremiah, the prophet who with his prophecies of doom repeatedly incurred the hatred and anger of the entire land. This made him desperate, oversensitive, and sometimes strongly doubtful. Yet he says in Jeremiah 20:7: 'You have persuaded me and I have let myself be persuaded'. He came to a deeper faith, not as a logical deduction or a conclusion drawn from a number of previously formulated propositions. It is much more vivid. It is a struggle against deep resistances that lived within himself, it is a struggle to understand things that seem inexplicable at first sight. It is also a victory over his fear and ultimately a surrender to the truth. Believing is trusting. As Jeremia continues in the text in Jeremia 20:7 : 'Thou art stronger than I, and have prevailed. If we struggle with this kind of doubt, it is often because something is preventing us from 'jumping into the deep end'. Those who struggle with this may ask to be healed of unnecessary distrust in that particular area. Much doubt only disappears when we understand that it is stuck on the inability to trust. This can have many causes. For one, there may be certain disappointments. For another, it may be fear ('if I entrust myself, I will be taken advantage of'). For a third, it may be shame ('would I be so important to God that He wants a relationship with me?'). For yet another, it may be stress. All those deep feelings can lead to me being unable to surrender and trust God (and others).

### **Doubts due to your upbringing**

Many people grew up in a situation that undermined their ability to trust. I once talked with a woman who after a long conversation said: I understand now much better what you explained about the

truth and especially the love of God. I wish I could believe it! At first I could not say anything to her. I felt an inability. Faith is a work of the Spirit and as I am not the Holy Spirit what could I do? But later on I remembered how she told me about her upbringing and how she suffered under a very emotionally manipulating mother. Whenever she entrusted herself to her mother as a child, her mother would use her for her own purposes in such a way that she did not leave her daughter of her own worth. In her later life, this created a resistance to trusting any-one. If you are manipulated by an appeal to your emotion ('if you don't do this, I will be very sad') it creates a problem later on in the ability to trust any one else, especially if that person wants your trust. This works itself also out in belief. Trusting God is harder for these people than for others. This is caused by manipulation and betrayal. Thankfully it is possible to do something about this and not just 'leave it to the Holy Spirit'. It is possible to help people to wind back and by understanding the background in the past to overcome this problem. We are in a process of growth, as Rumke said.

### **Doubt due to grief**

A special form of this inability is powerlessness as an element of grief processing. This form of powerlessness is not so much caused by upbringing but by a severe blow or great loss, such as the loss of a loved one. In the processing of grief from a tragic event, there can be a phase where one feels, "God is not here, He wasn't there, and He will never be here! I do not experience or recognize Him!" Everything becomes cold, and it seems like nothing opens up new perspectives. The Bible also provides examples of this, such as with Jacob in the Old Testament. His heart remained cold when he heard the good news that Joseph was still alive. He was still

mourning about the loss of his son Joseph and could not accept the truth of this good news for himself. What an inability to trust! One desperately wonders if it is possible to come out of such a state. The writer of the letter of Jude in the New Testament opens the way in verse 23: by pointing to the mercy of God. God meets us in our emotional doubts with infinitely great compassion! Sometimes He shows this in very practical ways; He sent an angel to Elijah to treat him to a good meal (1 Kings 19:4-8). Job's friends initially sat with him for seven days and seven nights, "and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great" (Job 2:13). Healing through loving presence. In the book Brothers Karamazov by Dostoevsky Ivan's brother Alyosha does not give counter arguments against Ivan's angry accusations to an in his eyes cruel God, but he comes to him without words and embraces his brother.

### **Doubts due to overwork and exhaustion**

Emotional doubts can also be caused by overwork. In 1 Kings 19, Elijah's depression and doubts were a result of great stress. He had performed a tremendous act on Mount Carmel by challenging the people to decide between God and Baal: "How long will you waver between two opinions?" Elijah stepped out in faith, asking fire from heaven, and Israel chose the Lord in large numbers and one could say that Elijah with God's help achieved a great victory. In chapter 19 we read a remarkable after-effect of that day: a completely different Elijah: Jezebel began to pursue Elijah and threatened him with death. Just one day after the climax, Elijah was overwhelmed by feelings of doubt and depression. We see how the same Elijah suddenly gives up. He sinks into a deep depression and stretches out in the desert under a bush and says, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take my life."

And then God sends an angel to give him a good meal To take rest and then follow the way to Horeb, the place where God began his love relationship with Israel! And where He now reaffirms his profound grace by appearing to Elijah "in the whisper of a gentle breeze." This was God's special therapy for Elijah's doubts. Sometimes no calls to faith are needed, but simply a: "Go to sleep!" "Get some good rest!" and then go back to the source! Back to Horeb, the mountain where God made His covenant with Israel. The Lord leads him through the desert, 40 days and 40 nights, on the way to Horeb. He gave him a time of reflection and processing of things. Much emotional doubt is due to unprocessed disappointments and fears that have severely affected our ability to trust. Things have happened in our lives that have damaged our mechanism for trusting others and God.

### **Doubts due to fear**

There is yet another equally important barrier to belief: fear. In the gospel of Mark we read about the storm on the sea of Galilee and how even with Jesus on board, the disciples were overwhelmed by fear. 'Master do not you care that we perish?' Fear paralyzes. Fear freezes our natural ability to trust, especially if we inherit it from our parents in our upbringing. Basic distrust because we were left to ourselves when we were still young. instead of basic trust there grew distrust, crippling us in the process of growth. Growth never comes without stepping out and taking risks. This debilitating power of fear can best be illustrated with the example of the psychiatric patient who thought he was dead. He ran around all day shouting, "I am dead, I am dead!" In this way, he withdrew from all responsibility and ended up in a psychiatric facility. However, the doctor understood that this man was perfectly sane intellectually.

Being mentally ill does not mean that one has lost one's mind. As G.K. Chesterton once said: "A madman is not someone who has lost his reason, but someone who has lost everything except his reason". The psychiatrist went to work and tried to convince the man with logical arguments that he was not dead but alive. Ultimately, he found a compelling argument. He said to his patient: "Living people bleed. If you prick their skin, blood comes out; only water comes from a dead person. Do you agree with this statement?" Yes, the patient agreed with him. Then the specialist suddenly pricked the "dead" man with a needle, and blood immediately flowed out. The patient's eyes opened wide, and he exclaimed, "Oh, I always thought dead people couldn't bleed, but now it turns out I was wrong." Here we see how persistent deviations rooted in fear can be. The psychiatrist did not bring him to reason but led him to a better understanding that fear was his problem, namely his fear of taking responsibility. (I took this example from the book of Os Guinness on Doubt).

So we touch here on another root for inability to trust. It will not help to convince by reason but only by helping people to trust the one Person who will never disappoint us. Only when we understand this will the art of persuasion become apparent. We can only move forward with such a person if we can convincingly and comprehensively show that the intimate relationship with this Lord works in exactly the opposite way of what one fears with anxiety. From the Scriptures, I can demonstrate this in the story of Mark 4 of the storm at sea; Jesus did not argue with the disciples, He just woke up at their cry and was there with them . He stood at their side. Jesus is with us in the boat. Healing presence helps. And read about the lives of Jacob who at a lonely journey , lost in the

desert, experienced a holy presence (Genesis 28:16), read of the apostle Paul, who told about a guiding presence in the night of storm and threatening disaster (Acts 27:23) and especially David who in Psalm 139 confesses that this awareness as a promise and reality for all believers.

### **Doubts due to disappointment**

When people react with skepticism to the good news of the gospel it sometimes reminds me of what is written in the Bible about the patriarch, Jacob. When he heard the good news that his son, Joseph, was still alive, “Jacob was stunned; he did not believe them” (Gen. 45:25-28). Today, and maybe especially today, when people hear the good news of the gospel, sadly, they often doubt Jacob's way. It is because of disappointments in the past. To believe is to trust. The Hebrew verb for believing, “aman” comes from the same root as our English word “amen.” To “say amen” to something means to consider it trustworthy. Jacob could not do that, at first, because his trust had been damaged. Perhaps more than once in the past, he had heard rumors that Joseph was still alive, but on closer investigation he was disappointed, every time. Now, however much he wanted to, he dared not trust another rumor! More than that, he could not. There is a close link between disappointment, in the past, and doubt in the present.

Disappointment in life because of sad experiences in the past has a power to damage trust. But this is not something that cannot be healed. Healing begins when we stop suppressing the disappointment. It is easy to say this but takes courage and sometimes a good friend or therapist who is honest and may confront you with experiences that at first were too hard to digest.

Nothing is so rewarding than bringing it out in the air, and facing the confusion. Work through the pain, and change the first chosen wrong strategy! It leads to healing of the almost naturally taken attitude of skepticism and doubt concerning the good news of the bible.

### **In conclusion**

Many people are trapped in their disappointment, discouragement, fears and call it basic moods. These act like sunglasses that color their perception of reality. There is also no room for God, as He truly is, due to a certain emotional state. In such a case, God does not force his way in; instead, He first wants to address these "basic moods." He wants to way in. Instead He first wants to address these basic moods. He wants to help us in very practical ways; by putting people in our path who help us for a while, by giving us the opportunity to process things, or by giving us time and space to come to rest. He is not only "the God who lives," as someone once told me, referring to the title of F.A. Schaeffer's most important book, but also "the God who heals!" This is often a long process. But we can trust it because behind it is the same one who led Jeremiah to exclaim: "You have persuaded me, Lord, and I let myself be persuaded!"

Note: for further reading see my book "If only I could believe" Destinee Media 2001.



## Chapter 5

### Doubts about God's guidance.

*"I was the lion who forced you to go to Aravis. I was the cat who warmed you by the grave. I was the lion who gave the horses the strength for the last few miles so that you could warn King Lune in time. And I was the lion, but you can't remember that, who pushed the boat from the land where you lay, almost dead, so that it landed where the man who had been woken in the middle of the night was ready to receive you."*

*(Aslan in C.S. Lewis, "The Horse and His Boy")*

#### **God's guidance has no subtitles**

There is much confusion and uncertainty about God's guidance in the life of humans. In the Netherlands, foreign films on Dutch TV are usually not dubbed but provided with subtitles in the Dutch language. It would be nice if we would have such subtitles under the daily life that we live. Especially in times when we have to make important decisions, the question of God's guidance can occupy us greatly. We would like to know if God is involved in our choices and, if so, what God wants from us and what the best decision is. Especially in matters of doubt regarding God's involvement in our lives, many search for information that could give them a boost.

Reading in the bible one might think of the many stories about the extraordinary ways in which God has led people. Did they receive subtitles? Stories like those told in the Bible, such as the remarkable history of Jozeph or the story of Ruth, the Moabitess who was incorporated into the people of God. We read of Gideon

laying a fleece and how the apostle Paul was guided on his missionary journey. But also in stories from outside the Bible, stories from church history, or extraordinary incidents in our surroundings, there can be remarkable manifestations of God's guidance in the people's life.

Edith Schaefer wrote a book called "The L'Abri story" about the history of the L'Abri work. In the early sixties, when Francis and Edith Schaeffer felt called to create a place in Switzerland where people could turn with their faith and life questions, they initially encountered quite a bit of opposition. Their permit to stay in the catholic canton where they first settled was withdrawn, so they prayed for a chalet in the protestant canton nearby and found one suitable for their work in the mountain village of Huémoz. The problem was that they did not possess one cent to finance it. They prayed about it to the Lord, and in the morning they had to pay the first down payment of a thousand dollars, exactly that amount came in the mail in the form of a check. There are more stories like this to tell, and they are an encouragement for anyone who wants to become aware of God's guidance in his or her life. But at the same time, these stories can cause a lot of difficulty; they can lead to uncertainty and disappointment. There are people who have tried to find the same kind of clarity in these stories about a particular choice they faced, and who have been ashamed and disappointed in the process. For example, I know there was a man in Groningen who initially thought that God was leading him in a certain decision, but then had to conclude that he was completely wrong. He was looking for a house at a certain moment, and exactly on the evening when he prayed for guidance, the doorbell rang. A man stood at the door and offered him a house for a very

reasonable price. He, naturally very happy, saw it as the miraculous guidance of God and gratefully accepted the offer. What he didn't know then was that he had been 'swindled'. It turned out later that the beams under the floor were completely rotten. What went wrong here? How is it possible that one person receives a miraculous answer to prayer, while another completely misjudges what he thinks is God's guidance? While one person experiences God's guidance in a very special way, the other doesn't know what to do with it at all and is full of questions like: is there a blueprint of God's guidance? Can we ask God for signs? Does God also guide the lives of non-Christians? Someone once said to me: 'I think God only leads us in big decisions, but in small things we have to do it ourselves.' What are the conditions for experiencing God's guidance in our lives? Isn't it true that one only sees God's guidance in life later looking back? One thing seems to be certain: God's guidance does not provide us with subtitles for the story of our daily life. Under the flow of the living images of our lives, there stands no text written from above. Before explaining the biblical view on guidance it helps to first see misunderstandings and shortcomings that have arisen in understanding God's guidance in our lives

### **God's guidance does not exclude your own responsibility**

It is important to consider the background of asking for a sign and why we would like to have it in a blueprint. Simply put, it is often a way of shifting personal responsibility. If I face an important decision, such as whether I should choose this man/woman as my partner for life, and can't oversee the situation, perhaps because I'm not ready for it (as happened to me), I pray for a sign. What I don't realize is that I'm actually shifting the responsibility for a

decision I should make myself onto the Lord. I myself got hopelessly stuck in this dilemma. A healthy and thoughtful consideration should have led to a decision that I had to make myself. Given my age, I was simply not yet ready for such a significant decision and I needed to wait till I was mature enough to take that decision myself. Sure, with the help of God... Yes, the Bible clearly teaches that there is divine guidance, but it never excludes personal responsibility. Yes, God guides us and rules the world, but in the biblical view it is at the same time true that we are 100 % responsible. There is an unfathomable intertwining of what God does and what I do. To see that, one should balance the use of Gideon's fleece with a word from the apostle in his letter to the Philippians in the New Testament, where he urges the church to work out their own responsibility, "for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12-13). This is mysterious; I am supposed to make decisions in my responsibility, for 100%, but at the same time God is working in it and moving forward in this with His work. We ourselves are 100% involved (and responsible) and God is simultaneously involved for 100 % . Apply this to the question of God's guidance in your life: start with the fact that He is the one who leads your life. "Lord, you have searched me and you know me" (Psalm 139:1), and then : Lord help me to find my way, See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting" (vs. 24). The well-known pastor Tim Keller once put it challengingly: "God does not give guidance, but He is guidance." With this, he wanted to reject a wrong approach and point to the right one. It is the wrong path to ask for a sign in a situation of uncertainty if you haven't first put yourself on the rock that He is there, the One who knows us and upholds us no matter what we do. This insight comes close to rediscovering the gospel,

as was done during the Reformation. First the indicative, then the imperative. Believe that God has saved you in Christ, and let it be true for you (Romans 6:10-15). Believe that the Lord knows and leads you, and it will happen to you!

### **Gideon's fleece (Judges 6:36-40)**

From this perspective, if we look back at the example of Gideon, Gideon received the hint through the sign of the fleece that he should go into battle against the Midianite army, but that didn't stop him from taking responsibility, devising a clever military strategy: torches in jars, breaking them in the middle of the night, and causing panic. Success guaranteed! We read the same of all the other biblical examples. Take the story of Eliezer and his search for a wife for Isaac. Notice with Eliezer how he does not for a moment shirk his own responsibility when seeking and receiving guidance (Genesis 24:21). He wonders whether it is the Lord who has made his journey successful. When his inquiry yields a positive result, he declares, "This is from the Lord." With Paul, it goes even further—he actually ignores a clear sign! The prophet Agabus says that the Spirit has told him that Paul will be taken to Rome as a prisoner if he continues his journey to Jerusalem, which will lead to a death sentence in Rome! Agabus has drawn his conclusion: don't go, that is God's guidance. Paul sees it differently and says: I must go. He weighed the sign and read it in his responsibility differently, realizing that this would give him the opportunity to bring the gospel to the heart of the Roman Empire .(Acts 21).

In short, be cautious when referring to Gideon, when asking for guidance: first place your life in the hands of the Lord who, no matter what you do, leads and upholds your life. Then choose your

way in your own responsibility, (for which I give some hints at the end of the chapter) and you will find the path He shows.

### **God is personal means personally involved**

The heresy of deism has often affected the Christian tradition. God created the world and gave the instruction manual with it, but beyond that, we are left alone. In contrast to the evangelicals, reformed people are often very activist in this regard, they carry out the will of God on earth and emphasize their role as culture-bearers. But the Lord himself hardly influences this at all. That He is eager to guide us amidst all these Christian activities is lost. Or, as someone confessed when he discovered this in a down moment: I did a lot for Him, but little with Him. Within that type of Christian life, there is no place for inner communion with God, for a daily walk with Him. Unfortunately, that leads to spiritual impoverishment. It could be the explanation why the Free University in Holland in the century after the courageous beginning of Abraham Kuyper became completely secularized. For evangelicals God may be sometimes too close but with the reformed He is too far away. The Bible emphatically states that God is a personal God and that His greatness consists precisely in His desire to be involved in the small things of our lives.

He is 'acquainted with all my ways' (Psalm 139:3). Sometimes, His greatness is revealed precisely in the fact that He is involved in even the smallest details of our lives. *Know Him in all your ways.* God is not merely the God of the masses—He is the God of each one of us personally.

In Psalm 32, God declares: *'I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you'* (verse 8). What a remarkable promise! We can bring all our doubts and uncertainties before Him, trusting that He is present, guiding and helping us. Even if we traveled to the farthest limits of the sea or made Sheol our resting place, His hand would still lead us, and His right hand would hold us fast (Psalm 139:7-10).

David, the poet of these psalms, experiences God as deeply and personally involved in his life—even in the smallest details: *'For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O Lord, You know it altogether'* (Psalm 139:4). And David was not alone in this awareness of God's intimate presence. All the prophets of the Old Testament spoke of the wonder of God's nearness. In tender words, Isaiah describes God's care for His children: *'He will tend His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms; He will carry them in His bosom and gently lead those that are with young'* (Isaiah 40:11).

The New Testament also speaks extensively about this. Romans 8 emphasizes living by the Spirit and repeatedly mentions God's *guidance*. We are led by the Spirit of God—the Holy Spirit, the very presence of Jesus, who reveals the way we should go and remains our Guide along the journey. Every Christian receives this guidance. Luke testifies to this in Acts 16, describing how the Spirit of God directed Paul and Silas, guiding them in various ways—sometimes through a vision, sometimes through unexpected events, and often through intuition or an inner peace. It was the Lord who personally led them. In a vision, God reassured Paul: *'Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you'* (Acts 18:9).

God's guidance should not be a source of anxiety but of trust. And it is up to us to seek it. Take time for it. Wait before you act. Be still and pray in every situation—not as a mere habit before meals or a ritual in Sunday worship, but right in the moment, on the spot.”\*\*

### **Seekers for certainty**

Many people would like to believe in guidance, but cannot. They want to have answers and instructions as certain as two times two equals four. It's part of our human nature to look for certainty, but this tendency is especially strong in our western rational 'enlightened' culture, where certainty is connected with scientific proof. And it is true: the rise of science has delivered us from many forms of sometimes even cruel superstition. Think only of witchcraft. We have learned only to believe something as true, when it can stand the test of scientific verification. The path to certainty is through experimentation. If you want to know something, you investigate it; you test, you form a hypothesis, you test it again, and you establish laws. Then you take those laws as the basis for your actions.

This mindset is ingrained in us from an early age, starting in elementary school. When people say they know something for sure, they often refer to a certainty obtained in this way. Naturally, this also has implications for faith. Perhaps you, as a reader, are one of those seekers who long for more certainty about God's guidance. You picked up this book because the title appealed to you, hoping to find ideas that would help you find it. You approach it exactly as we've been taught to deal with problems: be as objective as possible, gather as much information as you can, test them out and then draw your conclusions. But listen: this is a very rational way of

looking at reality, and we might wonder if we are fooling ourselves by thinking that only things which can be proven by reason are true. You may not realize that there are many very important realities in your life that you do not treat like you treat these matters of faith. Think of beauty, or taste, or justice, or love... none of these great human realities are proven through reason alone. Reason can even make me blind to them.

The Hebrew (and biblical) way to achieve certainty is different from the Greek way. In biblical thinking, it's denied that such a neutral, objective point exists. It is not possible for us to withdraw from reality and create truth in relationships, built on reason alone and detached from what comes to us through openness, intuition and emotion. This means that there are insights that only lighten up in a relationship. Only after opening ourselves in trust do we attain certainty; Greek thinking dictates that we must first obtain certainty through taking distance and intellectual knowledge, only then do we trust. The Bible presents it differently by reversing that with : Open up—with both intellect and emotion—and then certainty can grow. This is an insight not just for religion, but also for all personal wisdom: The truth that I am a person that is loved by people around me (a certainty that no human being can miss) will never be received through reason alone, but only by opening up to those people in trust. There is truth that can only be discovered by taking a step in its direction. That step is: opening up. This includes our intellect entirely. The Bible never tells us to shut down our intellect. Jesus always answered every question people asked Him, except when He realized it was a trick question. This trust is ultimately an act of faith.

## **The skill of sailing**

Overcoming doubt and growing in faith is not a capacity that we naturally possess, like reason. It is more a skill that we have to learn. Skills aren't innate; they must be practiced. They need to grow, they can grow strong, they can come in crisis in unexpected moments. Someone compared it once with the skill of sailing: How can we ever learn to sail if we've never set foot into a boat? Think of the first time that we stepped into a rowing boat... how it felt as the boat almost took in water... Just like faith, a boat is sometimes 'challenged,' such as in a heavy storm when it rocks unpredictably. But through practice, the sailor's certainty that it will turn out well grows, and the same applies to faith. It's precisely that certainty that we will come through that brings us a lot of joy.

So, I would say: take the leap! Open yourself to God, trust in Him with all your mind and all your heart. Trust that if you open yourself to a relationship with Him, He will reveal the truth to you. Believe that God guides your life, that He has already given you the truth, and you will discover more of it. If you want to be sure of God's guidance in your life, you should actually start by thanking God for His guidance. Instead of praying for God's guidance when you are burdened by inner conflict or uncertainty about which path to take, you can say to Him, 'God, I thank you for leading my life.' In ups and downs it will help you grow in certainty.

## **Some hints in the practice of guidance**

Is guidance not just a matter of chance? Consider the well-known story of Ruth the Moabitess, who lost her husband and went with her mother-in-law to an unfamiliar land. Something seemingly insignificant happened to her there, but it had far-reaching

consequences: she went to glean in the fields, and 'as it happened' (we read) she found herself working in a field that belonged to Boaz' (Ruth 2:3). The translation 'as it happened' means : by chance. Without her being aware, God led her to a field belonging to a landowner who was favorable to her. Here we see how indeed belief in guidance is interwoven with 'chance'. That small incident, seemingly insignificant, led to Boaz becoming her husband, and she was incorporated into the lineage from which Jesus would later be born. That's the greatness of God. Working sometimes through moments that seem like pure chance.

### **Can we only see God's guidance in hindsight?**

Do we see guidance perhaps only at the end of the journey? Ruth only realized afterwards that God had led her when she heard about Boaz. That is often how it is. But there are moments that we see it right away when it happens. Think of Gideon or Edith Schaeffer when she received the thousand dollar gift in the postbox. It is true that most of the time we can only see it looking back. And sometimes we do not see it at all, and we have to wait for the moment that the veil that hangs over all of history will be taken away (Isaiah 25:7). But mostly we see it in looking back . What matters in all these things is that we trust who God leads us in all things whether we see it clearly or not. Ruth in the bible is a model for us: she said being asked by her mother-in-law to stay in Moab: 'Where you go, I will go [...] your people shall be my people, and your God my God' She burned her bridges, but she trusted in the Lord, and we, who read the story many centuries later, can see that God did indeed lead her. Although God's guidance may be more visible at some times than others through the realities of everyday life, though sometimes we only see it at the end, we can trust that

He never leaves us for a moment. But as we said before, subtitles every day? No, our lives don't have that!

### **Does God also guide the lives of non-Christians?**

A beautiful and well-known example of God's guidance in the lives of non-Christians is King Cyrus, the king of Persia who allowed the people of Israel to return from exile. God 'stirred up his spirit' to build a house for Him in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 36:22-23, Ezra 1). God's guidance is sometimes also visible in the lives of non-Christians. This is the point James Redfield makes in the bestseller "The Celestine Prophecy". God is present in various ways in the lives of people, as they are all created by Him (Acts 14:16-17). "He does not leave himself without witness," as Paul tells the non-Christian inhabitants of Lystra. He has a purpose for this, which he explains in the gospel. It is a pity that James Redfield keeps revolving around the supernatural but fails to see that everything supernatural does not by definition come from God. There are also evil powers at work. Supernatural guidance can come from God as well as from the devil. Secondly: I would call God's hand in the lives of believers : guidance and in the life of non-believers: providence.

### **Can I say that God guides me at every moment of my life?**

The answer is: No. God never guides us on ungodly paths. I once heard the story of an elder who, after a forty-year marriage, divorced his wife and married his secretary. He said about this: 'We did that in trust and also prayed together for it, and we are confident that the Lord is leading us.' Well, that's impossible; God does not lead us into evil, and His will with my life always runs parallel to His will with all of us. His will with a capital 'W' is what He asks of us, our will with a small w must be embedded in that

Will as revealed in the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. God never leads us against His commandments, it's as simple as that. So, as soon as someone says they are being led by God to do something against His commandments, we must resolutely oppose that and say, 'Well, that simply can't be. You're imagining it!' If we deal casually with God's law, we lose God's guidance in our lives and stray away from God. We may trust His guidance in His revealed will.

What conditions must I meet to see God's guidance, the will with a small 'w', in my life? First of all, it's important to note: we only discover the will of God with a small 'w' when we do the Will of God with a capital 'W'! You could also say that there is no guidance if we don't also commit ourselves to Him. I think, for example, of Abraham's servant, Eliezer. He experiences God's guidance in a special way because it was a self-sacrificial journey: as the eldest servant of Abraham he himself would be the first in line for Abraham's heritage. In this journey he paves the road for his successor. And received supernatural guidance (see Genesis 24). The more committed we are in our service of God the more we see! Therefore, develop good guidelines and present your thoughts and desires to God in prayer so that the Lord can clarify to you what your deepest motives are and correct you.

Finally, it is very important that when we are in a period of decision-making we also seek advice from others. God often wants to make things clear through others. 'A wise man will listen to good counsel and increase learning,' it says in Proverbs 1, but 'fools despise wisdom and instruction' (verses 5-7).

## **Final word**

I would like to conclude this chapter with Psalm 37, which says: 'Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act' In the presence of God we discover the deepest desires of our heart as we focus on Him (Psalm 37:3 and 4). Sometimes you will see it, at other times not. We do not get subtitles under our stories each day, but in the end something will happen to us in line with the quote of C.S. Lewis with which we started this chapter.

## Chapter 6

### Is God a projection?

Once upon a time, two explorers unexpectedly stumbled upon an open clearing in the middle of the jungle. They had hacked their way through the forests, and suddenly they found themselves on a grassy field, right in the middle of the woods. Many flowers were growing in that clearing! One of the explorers said, "Some gardener must have been working here, it can't be otherwise!" But the other explorer denies it and says, "Nonsense, it's just pure coincidence; there's no sign of a gardener." To determine who is right, they set up a tent and kept watching. But no gardener ever shows up. Then the explorer (who said it was the work of a gardener) says, "Yes, but that man comes unnoticed, at night, while we sleep." "Fine," says the other, "okay, then we'll fence off that area." They fenced off that beautiful part there in the jungle, they let bloodhounds patrol. But what happened? No movement, no barking betrays the arrival of an intruder! Nevertheless the 'believing' explorer, as I'll call him, is still not convinced. He says, "Yet there is a gardener, but he is invisible and he is impervious to bloodhounds, he makes no sound and he sneaks into our garden, where he loves and cares for." Then the skeptical explorer becomes desperate, and he says, "But what remains of your original claim? In what way is what you call an invisible gardener different from an imaginary gardener?"

This story was conceived by the English theologian John Wisdom and vividly summarizes what this chapter is about: projection. One explorer is convinced that there is a gardener, even though he is invisible. He is convinced because he clearly sees the work of a

gardener. The other explorer implies with his question that the fact that there is no gardener to be seen means that there is no gardener at all. Isn't something invisible inherently fruit of the imagination? Is there a difference between an invisible gardener and an invented gardener, as the story above wants to address? Or translated to our subject: isn't God a product of the human mind, set up because of suppressed fear or unconscious desires?

### **Images are hidden in the slide**

Projection is a technical term for the work of a slide projector. For example, imagine I show you a slide of Lake Geneva. Then I could point with my finger at the screen: 'Look, those are the Dents du Midi and that's the Chateau Chillon, and there's Lake Geneva.' One could say: there's nothing there! It's just an image of something that's actually inside that machine. Now, that is exactly as the proponents of the 'projection theory' say: 'What we believe doesn't exist outside of us, it's in our heads, and we project it onto the screen of eternity'.

Now you might think, such a doubt can only come up in the mind of 'enlightened thinkers', you don't find that thought among solid Christians .. but I think that that is not true, there are many believers who have been bothered sometimes by this thought. Even Don Camillo, the sympathetic priest in the well-known novel of Giovanni Guareschi cannot escape that feeling of unrest, as at one point, praying on his knees before the image of the crucified Christ, he seems to hear a voice whispering to him: 'It's all self-delusion, you're praying to nothing but yourself, did you really think your voice resounded outside this room?' Thoughts like this expose one of the deepest doubts of modern man: if our concept of

God is created by ourselves, there is no God out there, despite the beliefs of thousands of years.

### **Be honest!**

If it's true that all people of all times have projected gods, why have they done so? Bertolt Brecht, a famous writer of the last century wrote "Kalendergeschichten" with short provoking stories about Mr. K. (Herr Keuner): "Someone asked Mr. K. if God exists. Then Mr. K. replied: "I advise you to consider whether your behavior will change after answering this question. If not, then we better not ask this question. Don't bother. But if your behavior does change, then I can at least assist you by saying that you have already made a choice! You need a God!"

This indeed is thought provoking! If you believe in God but it has no impact at all on your behavior, forget it. It has no significance to talk about, but if He is so important to you that you would not be able to live without him the matter is already settled: be honest: you need him. In answering this witty story I would say: is it true that this answers the question? It is true that Brecht formulated the most common explanation of belief in God. It fulfills a basic need. We humans projected a God on the screen of heaven because of our suffering, our vulnerability, our helplessness. This explains for Brecht sufficiently why people believe in the existence of a heavenly Father. But the question : 'is that God really there' is not answered by this observation. Sometimes things we deeply wish are really there

## How to avoid despair?

Many thinkers, artists, doctors, films and media follow this way of thinking. It left me with the same kind of emotion that is expressed in the painting of man in despair by Francis Bacon on the cover of the well known book of Dr. Hans Rookmaaker *Modern man and the death of a culture*. Indeed this is where the projection thought leads you. Suppose everything is made up by men: God, a Creator, heaven, life after this life. Where do we end up? Millions of people are daily winding themselves up into a belief in God that can be explained psychologically. How short humanity has been enlightened! All former generations of people have been buoyed up by an illusion. And watch out: this is not just a crisis in belief and religion. What about all the realities that are intrinsically connected with it, From Flores Nightingale to Mother Teresa, Bach's cantatas, - without God, all this is inconceivable, isn't it? If everything that flows from belief in God is based on error and falsehood, then I am just a small cog in a large, randomly created machine and merely the product of evolution. Then I wander around in a world governed by the fixed laws of cause and effect, where everything has a horizontal explanation. Rookmaaker showed how the disillusionment of a world without God has become painfully visible in modern art. On the title page of his book with the same title he did put the painting: "Head VI" (Hayward Gallery, London) by Francis Bacon. Depicted on it is a man who, bewildered, can only scream, trapped in a glass cage. If this is all there is, a world consisting of neutrons and protons circling around each other, then you start to scream! Can this really be everything?

C.S. Lewis expresses the same bewilderment in one of his children's books: "The Silver Chair." A boy and a girl end up in an underworld

without sun, without color and beauty after all kinds of twists and turns. There they suddenly encounter a witch. She enchants and intoxicates them a bit and then asks all kinds of sneaky questions.

“Tell me, what kind of land is the one you come from?” “Well,” says the boy, “that’s a land where it’s always light” – that was the first thing that came to mind – “and there’s a sun.” “What,” she says, “a sun? Then tell me what a sun is.” “Yes,” says the boy, (thinking “how should I explain that to someone who has never seen the sun before), well, you know, it’s like a lamp hanging from the ceiling.” Then she says: “What? A lamp hanging from the ceiling? But that’s impossible! What does it hang on?” “Think clearly now.” “Yes,” says the boy, “indeed, I’m probably a bit confused; perhaps the sun doesn’t exist after all.” “Of course not,” says the witch, “it doesn’t exist at all!” and so step by step all great realities of Narnia are dismantled.

A great depression falls over them : Narnia, the beautiful, good world, where the sun is and where flowers grow and where it is nice, does not exist.?! But then Puddlegum accidentally steps into the fire and that awakens him out of the enchantment... He says: "Just a word, ma'am, you may well be right about everything but I'm someone who always wants to know the worst in order to make the best of it. So I won't deny anything you've said, but a word still needs to be said. Suppose we were only dreaming, suppose we had invented all those things, trees, grass, sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself [in Lewis the image of Jesus Christ] - suppose we had only dreamed up all that, then I can only say that in that case the invented things are much more important than the real ones" [...] "I stand on Aslan's side, even if there is no Aslan to lead. I live like a Narnian, even if there is no Narnia! Thank you kindly for the meal,

as soon as these people and the young lady are done, we will leave your court and step into the darkness to seek in our further life the land on the Other Side' that is always better than to live here in this black pit of yours”.

I like this tricky answer of Puddlegum, it looks similar to the way the apostle Thomas decided to keep following Jesus. Let us go that we may die with Him.(John 11:16) But a better answer is needed. I will try to do that by looking at the idea of projection from three perspectives. First, it helped me to discover where this idea of projection comes from, when did it start to jump into the mind of believers? That is very recent! and can be localised as fruit of the western mind around 1800.Secondly I want to weigh the arguments and analyse the emotion. This comes with a fundamental rejection of this modern enlightened erroneous idea. Finally I believe we can only find certainty in the biblical revelation! So : review, rejection and revelation in answer to the idea of God being a projection of the human mind.

### **1. Review: where did the idea of projection come from?**

To investigate how this projection thinking originated, we must go back to the philosophy of the nineteenth century, and we must start with one of the most influential thinkers of the nineteenth century, G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831). He said in short about faith: in the self-consciousness of man, God comes to self-consciousness. The novelty of this thought is that God is intrinsically connected with the human mind. Hegel did not deny God, but he emphasized that God's mind grows in us, He comes to Himself in us. A disciple of Hegel was the German philosopher Feuerbach (1804-1872). He built on Hegel's view, but went a step further: if Hegel was right in

saying that God reveals Himself in the consciousness of man and not outside of it, so he argued, should we not go much further and say that God only exists in the minds of men, in short: that God is imagined by people. His denial of God was so shocking to many people of his time that he never received an appointment as a professor for that reason. According to him, God is nothing but the ideal image that man has of himself. The absolute Being, the God of men, is his own being. Theology, according to him, is not the doctrine about God, but the doctrine about man; it says nothing about God, who does not exist, but much more about man and about the wondrous processes that work in his mind: Read: "Man strives for happiness, for fullness, and for harmony; he only finds impotence in himself, so he fantasizes an omnipotent God for himself. He finds mortality in himself, which forces him to believe in heaven. He feels himself alone and insignificant; that evokes a divine father image in him. Only the poor man has a rich God! (Ludwig Feuerbach *Das Wesen des Christentums*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1971 p.71).

With this, the entire Christian religion comes into an unfavorable light; in fact, all believers of all times have clung to an illusion. The trend that Hegel initiated with his 'humanization' of God is thus taken much further by Feuerbach: there is no such thing as an almighty and perfect God opposed to a small and imperfect human, because God is in the human himself. God is thus humanized and man is deified. It is therefore very telling that Feuerbach had put on his gravestone: *homo homini deus*, which in Latin means: 'man is his own god.' After Feuerbach, a school of philosophers and scholars emerged who adopted this thought and developed it in their own fields of expertise. A disciple of Feuerbach whom we all

know was Karl Marx (1818-1883), one of the founders of communism. He supported Feuerbach's idea with his analysis of society. From him comes the statement that no one will enter the twentieth century without having to go through the 'fire-brook' of 'Feuer-bach'. Marx applied Feuerbach's views on society. He argued that property is unfairly distributed in society. The workers who produce goods do so on behalf of others and cannot dispose of the work of their own hands; it became the property of the upper class, which in turn was hardly involved in the production. That is unnatural and causes man to estrange himself from himself. For this reason, man seeks his salvation in a heavenly reality that soothes the absence of the earthly; nothing but a projection of himself into a God, which according to Marx does not exist at all. That is what happens in the church when priests and ministers promise the people a golden future in heaven. Such a religion works like opium of the people - it makes the people resign to their fate, while it would be better to remove the cause of the alienation.

As Marx translated Feuerbach's projection theory into society, Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung translated it into psychology. Freud provided an important stimulus to Feuerbach's thought through his analysis of the emotional life of man, which, in his opinion, can fully explain the belief in God. In 1927, his book appeared: *The Future of an Illusion*. With the word illusion, Freud refers to religion. He starts from the helplessness of man, who is confronted with nature and culture who are overwhelming to him and lead to frustration and conflict. By clinging to a divine father he finds comfort and courage and can feel at home in an inhospitable world. By doing so, man continues the situation of his childhood, when he feared his father and also expected all help from him. In

Freud, religion is thus something neurotic, a neurotic relic of childhood. If you want to become mature and healthy, then you must shed off this continued childishness, which you inherit from humanity from its earliest stage. Already here I want to mention that Freud as a person had a lifelong conflict with his own father. His disciple Carl Gustav Jung followed Freud in the idea of projection but he did not see faith as a sign of immaturity, as infantile remnants of antiquity. Naturally, like Freud, Jung is convinced that religion, in whatever form, is projection. But in contrast with Freud Jung doesn't see this religious projection as negative, as a pathological condition, but rather as positive, as indispensable for human health and balance. He says: "In my practice, it has been shown that man becomes unhealthy without religion, falls into extreme confusion, just think of today's nihilistic man. Therefore, man needs religion precisely!" Of course, it's best if this no longer happens in the form of traditional religions but rather through the introspective and self-worshipping psychology of Jung. Jung's psychology argues that man must search within himself. The depth of the human soul is divine in nature and forms images that were the gods of traditional religions.

In the Netherlands, public discussion about the idea of projection arose following Simon Vestdijk's "The Future of Religion." In that book, he gives a definition of religion that is strikingly similar to that of Feuerbach. Vestdijk's definition is: "Religion is the striving for union with (or the realization of the ideal of) a naturally perfect human, the eternal Human." The publication of this book was followed by a storm of protests. One theologian who defended Vestdijk was F. Sierksma. In 1957, he published the book "The Religious Projection." In this book, Sierksma approaches the

phenomenon of religious projection as an anthropologist. He places the phenomenon of religious projection in the broader context of projection in general. He says: even animals project. When a robin observes a twig with a robin's feather attached to it, it fills the "objective" external world with "subjective" content. And shows friendship. So does man, as a disoriented mammal. People project when a certain phenomenon in their environment seems incomprehensible to them. When they cannot grasp it through their consciousness, they project and thus "fill" that frightening reality outside them with religious representations, unconsciously, so that that unknown reality becomes familiar to them! An example of this is the Eskimos who, in a harsh winter, have not caught seals for a while and then project their belief onto a goddess who holds all seals at the bottom of the sea. Reality doesn't become less severe - there are still no seals to catch - but the phenomenon has become understandable; they have gained acceptance and creativity through projection. But this is a good example of how what is called projection in fact is not just seeing something where there is nothing, but wrong and distorted observation. of a reality beyond man's capacity to understand. Surrounded by what is overwhelmingly greater than man, humans have given it all kind of names. This is a better analysis than the simplistic view of psychologists.

How current this thinking still is was demonstrated a few years ago when Professor H.S. Versnel defended the proposition in the newspaper Trouw: "who believes in God, believes in a self-made construction, for which nevertheless universal validity is postulated." And why do people do that? His answer is (you guessed it): because people simply cannot cope with a reality without God.

They lack the courage to give up their self-made God. Is it any wonder that many people today, when they hear such an impressive list of philosophers, psychologists, and theologians talking, also start to doubt the existence of God or the value of their faith? However, we would not do justice to our faith and to the people of all times who believe in a God if we did not let the consequences of this thinking sink in and take a critical look at it.

## **2. Rejection: internal assessment: critique from 'within'**

Now leaving beside the untenable consequences of a world without God, what can be said about the doctrine of projection itself? Truth is truth even when it leads to misery. The real answer on this whole idea of projection should be investigated. Projection is a universal human phenomenon. We all know the old saying that goes: as the innkeeper is, so he trusts his guests. If someone enters the inn of that innkeeper, he projects in the guest that characteristic that is repressed within himself. This image is recognizable to every human being, and we must admit that there is also certainly an element of truth in it when we say that every human being sometimes projects. And it doesn't even have to be about interpersonal relationships only; projections can also play a role in faith. We can think of nuns in a convent who worship Jesus as the Bridegroom. (with excuses for the example) : Are there sometimes not psychological motives to be found there, repressed feelings, deep personal longings, distorted images of God? But we should stay closer to home. In a Reformed church newspaper, a minister wrote, addressing another minister who had hurt him: "Here the wrath of God flares up." The question is: did the wrath of God really flare up here, or only the wrath of Minister X? It often

happens that repressed feelings, which one is not supposed to have in Christian circles, are conveniently projected onto God.

So, we must admit that believers are indeed not always free from projection. Does this mean that we should then adopt the projection theory? No, this type of projecting is different from Feuerbach's view of projecting as spiritual hallucination. To refute that we must go to critical notes from psychology, philosophy, and anthropology.

### **Psychological criticism**

Within psychology, a counter-movement has emerged today alongside this thinking about religion as projection. And by this, I don't mean Christian psychology, but psychology as it was taught, for example, in the 1950s at the University of Utrecht, especially by the renowned psychiatrist H.C. Rumke (1893-1967). He wrote the book "Character and disposition in relation to unbelief" and comes to the astonishing conclusion that where people did not believe, did not want to believe, or even could not believe, this was often caused by some neurotic or psychological illness. As soon as a person became psychologically healthy again after therapeutic treatment, it often happened, according to Rumke, that the person 'naturally' rediscovered faith. That person returned to a attitude of faith rooted in deep trust. He writes that he often experienced in his practice that when someone was under treatment with him, as soon as his psychological difficulty disappeared, his faith also reappeared.

"I think that by pure empathy, I can phenomenologically distinguish a belief based on projection from a genuine belief... the content is

different, it has a different weight, it lies at a different spiritual level; the inner attitude reflected in it is different. And I can point to the productive power of genuine faith.

These are also words of a psychiatrist! The main argument of Freud and Versnel works like a boomerang. Those who say, "People believe out of fear or need," should not complain when their unbelief is subjected to the same investigation. For a twentieth-century, informed person, it is extremely threatening to be confronted with a God who demands an account, isn't it?

C.S. Lewis expresses the same in his book "God in the Dock": "Today I see my religion abandoned on the grounds that "the well-to-do minister had every reason to assure the nineteenth-century laborer that poverty would be rewarded in another world". Now, he undoubtedly did. Assuming that the Christian faith is a mistake, I can easily see that some people can still have a motive to instill it. I can see that so easily that I can, of course, play back the ball by saying that "the modern man has every reason to try to convince himself that there are no eternal sanctions behind the morality he rejects".

Besides Rümke, I mention the name of Dr. H.M.M. Fortmann, a Roman Catholic religious psychologist. Fortmann further delved into the psychological arguments brought forward by Rümke. In his book "Als ziende de Onzienlijke" (see note 10), he presents all the views of psychologists and sociologists on religion and arrives at a remarkable conclusion. He refuses to believe that projection exists at all. According to him, what is called projection is simply a matter of incorrect or flawed perception:

The saying: As a host is so he uses his guests, even that it is not projection. Because you can say: does that host not have a reason? If he himself is unreliable, and guests come to him, and he thinks they are all unreliable - is there anyone who is one hundred percent reliable? There is always reason for suspicion, because a hint of unreliability lurks in every person! But then projection is not the placing of a feeling content existing in me outside of me, but then it is the incorrect perception, enlargement, or caricaturing of something existing outside of me.

On psychological grounds, he argues that in all cases where projection is mentioned, one should speak of incorrect, caricatural perception. This also applies to the nun who clings to the image of Jesus as the bridegroom. You could say that the Bible itself provides a basis for this in the Bible, Jesus is indeed called the bridegroom of the church. Only can be looked at one-sidedly and inadequately. Another example is that of the hunter in the forest; he has been hunting all day and has caught nothing until he suddenly thinks he sees a hare, and he shoots. But ... it is the branch of a bush... You might think it's a typical case of projection, the man has been hoping to shoot a hare all day and yes, he sees something and shoots. But Fortman sees it differently; according to him, it's a matter of incorrect perception. Because he didn't shoot at a stone or a rock - he wasn't that foolish - but he saw something there that looked like a hare and made a mistake by thinking it was a hare. It wasn't that he imagined something that didn't exist; there was something outside of him, even if it wasn't a hare. And so Fortman denies the existence of projection in the sense of positioning something non-existent as existing outside of oneself.

Also P.J. Roscam Abbing (in *Psychology of the religion*, p.77) believes that we should react much less rigidly to accusations of projection. Isn't it fully human to project? If we sharply delineate projection from hallucination, why should we always negatively judge projection? Can a person live without projecting? Is this not just the good gift of imagination? Applied to God: if God calls Himself Father, are we not projecting our own overt or silent thoughts and feelings about what a father should be into that father image? Of course, in doing so we can project both wrong and justified feelings onto God. It should be corrected by (divine) revelation; the things God wants to make clear to us. But, yes, call projection imagination and we could live with it. And C. van Rijnsdorp (in *Laatste gedachten* p.93) pleads for not juxtaposing revelation and projection as irreconcilable. 'Revelation aligns with the projecting ability of humans. Like physically the food we eat and that comes from outside corresponds with the capacity of the stomach inside of us because they are made for each other. The projection theory only sees half the truth. The creature never creates its own food but is built to take it in and consume it. So too : man is created for revelation.'

### **Philosophical criticism**

Today, no one supports the idea that the projection theory provides a total explanation of religion anymore, and this is partly due to the philosophical criticism that the projection theory has elicited. The philosopher Eduard von Hartmann (himself not a Christian) has formulated this sharply. He argued that the only original thought of Feuerbach was the thought that the gods are the projected desires of man. 'Now it is entirely true that something does not exist because one wishes it. But it is of course

also not true that something cannot exist (solely) because one wishes it.' Upon reflection, this is very logical. If a psychologist were to analyze and describe my deepest dream images about the ideal woman and then, based on my own words, compare the characteristics of my wife with them, to then conclude that those two descriptions are suspiciously similar, does that similarity compel us to conclude that my wife does not exist? Reality will teach him otherwise. Fortunately, there are many things that we deeply wish for and that also exist. A second philosophical argument is articulated by F.A. Schaeffer (1902-1974), who argued that there is a certain attitude behind the preference of contemporary people to speak about projection. This attitude presents reality as consisting of a mechanical external world, which is objective and meaningless, contrasted with my inner world, my consciousness, which is subjective and meaningful. According to Schaeffer, reality cannot be divided into thinking subjects and neutral objects in this way. The 'relational', the fact that there is not only an 'I' but also a 'thou', another who gives meaning and color to my being, does not play any role in this philosophy. Also, the meaning or significance of created things themselves is neglected in this view because, in this vision, all meaning and value flourishes from within the human psyche. This places an inhuman burden on humanity. Who can fulfill that?

### **Anthropological criticism**

This leads to the criticism from anthropology. Philosophical anthropologists have asked the projection thinkers: What are you actually doing? Do you really think that all the beautiful things that delight a human have their origin in the consciousness of humans? Do you really think that there is an objective, cold mechanical

external world, opposed to a subjective, meaning-giving human internal world? That the smell of tasty food is just only a product of your nose? Are we as human beings lost in a cold universe, which we must now color meaningfully with our own spirit out of sheer necessity? Roscam Abbing points out that there are relationships between humans and non-humans that are more colorful than merely explanatory, and that a (wo)man can only become truly human when she fulfills his potential in relationships. Regarding projection, Roscam Abbing says the following: 'I can think that everything is illusory, but I can also believe that this projection is adequate. I can live from the conscious, deep faith that to my projecting, call it imagination... there corresponds to a reality existing outside of me. I do not live as if it were an illusion, but in the deep conviction that I am in relation to a reality strange to me. Then I am in dialogue with a Thou who addresses me.' And: 'Finally, it is not only a conviction that my projecting corresponds to an adequate reality, but it is a revelation of another to me, which convinces me that my absolutist self-awareness is a lie.' It is in this field of anthropology that decisions are made. We human beings are dialogical beings.

### **3. Revelation: external criticism based on revelation**

Christian faith is not based on feeling, nor on unconscious desires, but on historical facts. Feeling, experience, perception, and realization are consequences and not the cause of faith. They do not prove its truth, but they do serve to strengthen faith. They are the echo of the revelation in my world of feeling and experience. And so f.i. the reality of the cross (at the center of God's revelation) is by its nature proclamation, gospel, good news about something that happened outside of me, 'then and there.' According to the

testimony of the Bible, this fills my emotion and corresponds with my longings, but it even goes against my emotional life and contradicts my religious needs. The Bible does see experience as important, but what stands out is that the salvation and truth of God are never based on our experience. One of the most striking things is that the Bible does not anchor faith in needs or their satisfaction, but in historical events. Christian faith stands or falls even with historical events. The second thing that stands out is that the Bible condemns nothing as much as projection! The second commandment is devoted to this. It says: 'You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.' Three thousand years before Feuerbach, Moses said to the people of Israel: 'You saw no form' (Deut.4:15), and therefore it was forbidden for a man to make an image of God for himself. This prohibition applies not only literally but is also psychologically elaborated in Psalm 50. Here, Israel is summoned by God to His judgment seat. God says: 'Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?' (vs.13) 'If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine' (vs.12). God here puts heavy criticism on the idea that sacrificing - the pillar of Israel's cult - served to appease God. The Israelites apparently thought: 'if we sacrifice a lot, then God will bless us and we will have a good harvest.' Well, God detests this thought! God points out the origin of this: 'you imagine that I am like you' (vs.21). The Israelites thought they could do business with God, but their conception of God was entirely based on self-imagination. The thought that God is like us often occurs to us - we don't have to deny that - but it is abhorred by God. In the New Testament, we find remarkably similar traits. Around the main theme of the New Testament, the

death and resurrection of Christ, we also encounter the idea of projection among Jesus' contemporaries. When the women return from the tomb on Easter morning and tell the disciples that Jesus has risen, they think it's 'nonsense' (Luke 24:11). Quite logically, they must have thought: you go to the grave with the deeply repressed desire to see Jesus again, it is early in the morning and dimly lit, you know how that goes. But when that same day Jesus himself appears among them, that is what breaks their thought of projection and throughout history his word is the basis of our certainty and powerful to break through the grin of the cat.

The emphasis on this is very great in the Bible. See, for example, 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul says that the whole gospel stands or falls with the resurrection of Jesus Christ as a historical fact. It is even such a reality that he adds: 'He [appeared] to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive' (vs.6). So his claims could be verified. We also find this tone with other apostles. In his first letter, John writes: 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life' (1:1). That is the word we preach. Certainly no repressed feelings or secret ideal images, dark desires and hidden agendas - John proclaims what he has seen and touched. As far as that is concerned, the gospel of the crucified Christ is not according to man. Everything is based on the cross and the resurrection of Christ. Peter also makes the same statement in 2 Peter 1:16: 'For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.' And of course, it is true that what is based on salvation facts and

proclaimed in the gospel corresponds with deep desires in the human heart or arouses those desires. The longing in itself says nothing about the existence or non-existence of God; faith is based on salvation facts! When it comes to the question of certainty about God, we must first think about the reliability of the Bible, because it still applies: if you want to get to know God, you must read the Bible (Rom. 10:8). Now many want to see the reliability of it proven before they read the Bible. This is impossible because the proof of the truth of the Bible can only be found in the Bible itself. Only by reading the word of God can one hear His voice. As we read the Scripture, we are addressed by it. While we read, God speaks to us, and therefore the proof of the truth of the Bible lies in the Bible itself. So is it only about a feeling? No, reason is also involved. This is clearly seen in Acts 17:10-12: 'The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.' Paul's words were not accepted blindly but were indeed examined!

The first step to getting to know God is to become familiar with the content of Scripture. For a book compiled over a period of 1400 years, the Bible exhibits astonishing unity. When we read this book honestly and without prejudice, God will speak to us. We will get to know Him. That is a statement of faith, but one that invites and challenges non-believers to discover it for themselves. We will then discover that the biblical message corresponds with how the world works, with human existence, and history. It is of the utmost importance to assert that we see the truths of Scripture, those

statements of God, confirmed in the world around us. After all, God also reveals Himself in nature, His creation (Rom. 1:19). God's laws also resonate in our conscience (Rom. 2:15).

This leads me to the final question. How do I know for sure that it is God speaking to me? I came and come to that certainty again and again when I read the Bible or listen to the Word in whatever form, I notice that Someone is speaking to me, Someone who knows me, who knows who I am. Like Paul says that the fact that God knows him gives him the certainty that He speaks to him. In 1 Corinthians 8 we read: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.' He criticizes the pride and arrogance of the many that build on their own reason or feeling. He who claims to deny or know God in this way does not truly know Him, because he who has true knowledge of God knows that it is not about us knowing God but that it is in Him knowing me (Gal. 4:9). This all is given to us in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. He who accepts the crucified Christ as his personal Savior from guilt and death truly knows God because he feels fully understood, but also exposed, condemned and forgiven. Only here is the search for true knowledge completely satisfied: in my being accepted by the work of Jesus Christ for me personally. Trusting Him delivers us from the 'grin 'of the cat!

### **The grin of the cat**

The idea of projection has an incredible power of undermining our faith. That is the reason why I make this doubt in the reality of God the content of a special chapter because this doubt is not merely a

matter of the intellect (1) but also intrinsically connected with our feelings, emotion (2) and will (3). That explains the power. It fell on me in my puberty without reason as a hunch, in a flash of the mind, I still knew at what place and in what situation: a rainy day, on the bike, in that street. That morning I had read an article in the paper of a theologian who said that the Gospel of John did not tell the truth about what really happened but it was invented by the apostle of John himself. Then it fell over me as a dark cloud: there is no One there.. An empty sky. all an invention of man. It fell over me as I later understood, as the grin of the cat. The story comes from the book Alice in Wonderland. It is the story of a girl who sits at a riverbank and being bored sinks back in a day dream in which a white rabbit leads her as a tiny girl into a rabbit hole where she falls in a magical world in which she faces strange and challenging situations symbolic of the world she escaped. Suddenly she is shocked by the encounter of a Cheshire cat. The grin of that cat scares her to death, but after some time she discovers that behind the scary grin there is no body.. it is just a grin. To quote Alice speaking to the cat:

I wish you wouldn't keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly: you make one quite giddy.'

'All right,' said the Cat; and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained sometime after the rest of it had gone.

'Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin,' thought Alice; 'but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!'"

Alice's fright comes from the strangeness of the Cheshire Cat's ability to vanish and reappear suddenly, combined with his unsettling grin. ..the grin of the cat assures her that she lives in a mad world empty world but happily this is followed by the discovery that behind this scary grim there was no body. In this chapter I want to tell you what helped me to discover the same. Once we discover that there is no 'body' of solid truth in that whole idea of projection the frightening character of the grin disappears.

### **Final position**

We started with a jungle with two explorers, the believer and the unbeliever. Let us imagine for a moment that we stand there together with the believing and unbelieving explorers. Then I would point both of them to one overlooked reality. Yes, if the world around us consisted only of flowers, grass, and the sun, then it would be hard to find final certainty. But there is one amazing fact: among all plants, trees, and birds; between the trees, I see the dark shadow of a tomb, the stone has been rolled away from the entrance. We stand with Mary of Magdala in the garden, the garden of Joseph of Arimathea. It is not the grass and flowers that lead us to wonder who the gardener of this garden is, but the open tomb and all that implies. There is an open tomb in our history that cannot be ignored and cannot be explained away, and that makes us search for the gardener... who has in the meantime come to stand right behind us, and makes us exclaim with Mary: 'Rabbi!'



## Chapter 7

### Are all religions fundamentally equal?

*"If I were born in Turkey, I would be a Muslim now."*

The statement above this chapter expresses one of the most frequently asked questions of doubt. I've heard such statements often, "It all depends on where you were born." It is often said that your faith depends on your background; the place where you were born and the family in which you were raised. "Coincidentally, I was born into a Christian family, so I am a Christian. But if I were born in India, it would have been much more likely that I would now be Hindu." With this in mind the question of whether something is true or not becomes very relative. In this view, everyone has his own truth, and every culture has its own religion. And one is not better than the other. At the same time, there is an underlying thought. If you believe that everyone is inclined to blindly adopt the faith of their ancestors, then you place little value on the autonomy and responsibility of each individual. If someone were to say to you, "I was a Nazi because my parents were too," you wouldn't consider this an excuse for a wrong choice and a mistaken belief. You would say, "While your parents were, that may be considered in this case a mitigating circumstance, but as a human being, you are personally responsible for your conviction. You are not a puppet or an extension of your parents."

There is a powerful chapter in the book of Ezekiel that speaks to this very topic—Ezekiel 18. In it, we read that every person is personally responsible for their own actions. Each individual must

weigh, search, think, and decide for themselves. The prophet removes the excuse, '*My parents did it, so I am justified in doing the same.*' Instead, he emphasizes that no one is bound by the sins of their ancestors—each person stands accountable before God for their own choices.

You might wonder whether this is also true in the case of world orientation and religion. And I agree that it is not a matter of just reason alone. Nevertheless there are means by which I can weigh whether something is true, even when it comes to religious questions. That is exactly what is denied in the flow of our own European Christian culture. Ok, my friend may be Hindu, or Muslim, but cannot we all maintain our inherited belief system? The answer is: Yes, it would be ok if all religions are basically the same! Then there is no friction: everyone could just - perhaps slightly adapted on a small scale - follow the path of their upbringing. After all, there is no difference! Could this be a good answer to the doubt of this chapter?

### **The Three Rings**

At the beginning of the Enlightenment in western Europe this was felt to be the right way to go and the philosopher Lessing (1729-1781) expressed this in the following parable "In ancient times in the East, there lived a man who possessed an extraordinarily precious ring with an opal. This ring made the wearer pleasing to God and to people. Therefore, his descendants were never to part with it. At his death, he bequeathed the ring to his most beloved son. Now, the ring came into the possession of a father who loved his three sons equally. When he felt his end approaching and had to pass the heirloom on to one of his sons, he did not know whom to

leave it to. To resolve the difficulties, the father had a goldsmith craft two other rings. These were so similar to the original that no one, neither the smith nor the father, could determine which of the three was the genuine one. In secret, the father gave one ring to each of his sons. After his death, each son claimed to have received the true ring, but no one could prove he was right. The three sons went to the judge to pass judgment. Each was convinced that he possessed the true ring and that the other two were liars. But the judge said: 'Only your father could say who among you three is right. Or the ring itself must testify. You say the true ring makes someone pleasing and loving to God and people. Let that be decisive; false is the ring that cannot do that.' The judgment of the judge therefore was: 'Consider your ring genuine. Each of you must strive to prove the authenticity of the ring through love and tolerance, through inner surrender to God. If the power of the ring is also evident in your descendants, then I challenge you to return to this judgment seat in a thousand years. Then a judge, wiser than I am, will give a verdict.'

With this parable, the Jew Nathan the Wise wants to make it clear to Sultan Saladin, a Muslim, that the three major religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) are indistinguishable from each other. No one can prove which is the true religion; each is based on history and tradition. Why should one believer consider his ancestors' faith more credible than others'? Therefore, the truth of each religion must be proven in practice. Whoever is most loving and tolerant has the truth! And whoever sincerely strives for that has as much right as another who also does so. What the enlightened philosopher Lessing intended to convey with this story of Nathan the Wise in the eighteenth century finds resonance everywhere

today. In our more global knowledge of religions and cultures it led to the widespread belief that all religions have their own truth, but in this life no one can find out what it is. Religion is primarily a matter of one's own experience and feeling. In a pluralistic society, we must give everyone the freedom to shape their own life and live by their own religion. No one may claim that his or her belief system is superior to another's. This is said to be the path to peace and reconciliation in the world. The question remains and comes up in new force today:

### **Are all religions fundamentally the same?**

Religions are in the eyes of many people today like various mountain paths all coming from different sides to the mountaintop but ultimately they all lead to the same summit! Everyone is sincerely convinced of the truth of their own path. We consider it arrogant when someone says, "I believe that Christ is the way and not Krishna! The prevailing sentiment today is largely: why shouldn't I have my God and you yours? We are happy that democratic government stands for freedom of religion. But this does not mean that the sometimes deep differences should be ignored. I believe it will improve the relationship between us, when we succeed to paint the differences clearly without forgetting to say at the end: but I love you anyhow.

### **Reasons to doubt**

There are several reasons why many people in Europe have followed the path of Lessing. First, the rise of mass media has enabled global communication; the world has become a global village. The Buddhist, the Muslim, and the Hindu have entered our living rooms via satellite, and we got to know them as sincerely

convinced people. The Beatle George Harrison sings in his song 'My Sweet Lord' during the refrain the first few times 'Hallelujah', but halfway through it changes in content and he sings 'Hare Krishna'. With this, he expresses the for many attractive idea that, when it comes down to it, all religions are equal. Secondly there is still the pain that stems from the religious wars and church schisms in the past where so-called 'truth' and the application of it was used as a weapon in killing each other. This has led many today to think in a pluralistic way; everyone actually has his own truth. Who am I to address another on their faith, let alone challenge the truth of their faith? Then there is the influence of the Enlightenment and Lessing with his parable of the rings

### **Why does it bother Christians?**

The problem for all people who take their Christian belief serious is the underlying tune in all the preaching of the gospel that Jesus called himself "The way, the truth and the life"(John 14:6) and (as Peter expressed in Acts 4:12)" there is no other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved". That is the root of the doubt . Is it true or not ? Lessing would answer: no one knows Wait until the end of the world when the Lord will appear. The conclusion of the parable is that who is right or wrong is a matter of the future Truth is eschatological. No one can know for sure right now. This position is exactly the point I would like to talk about. Having placed the doubt in its historic setting I believe it to be worthwhile that we dive into the basic question about truth in religion. Thinking to the bottom. Like Paul who became a Greek to the Greeks and a Jew to the Jews So we should follow the style of Paul much more, as he shows us in 1 Corinthians 9:19-27. Let us

then, for a moment, try to be a George Harrison with the George Harrisons and the new-agers a new-ager.

### **Equality?**

If all religions are the same, what then is that equality? What do they have in common? What is their core? The remarkable discovery we then make is that all the people who say 'all religions are equal' are coming up with different descriptions of what they have in common... One says this, another says that. But there are no two who say the same thing.

The philosopher Lessing who preached that all religions are basically the same appears to have his own definition of what he thinks to be the final truth. It becomes apparent at the end of his parable of the rings. There he puts the words in the mouth of the judge: "That religion is true which proves its authenticity in doing good to one's neighbor and in surrendering to God. Whoever acts like this receives immortality as a reward." However relativistic Lessing may appear, he holds very pronounced views. According to him, the core of all religions is: God, virtue, and immortality. Be a virtuous person, and God will reward you with eternal life. This view of religion is shared by many thinkers from the time of the Enlightenment. But Christians would say: This is not the core of my religion. Think of the strong message of the apostle Paul that no man will be saved by his own good works, It misses salvation.

### **The Numinous**

In later times, many other thinkers have turned away from Lessing's enlightenment-description. Schleiermacher in the nineteenth century saw the core in a deep sense of dependence,

and Rudolf Otto in man's awe of the Numinous, that is, the terrifying and yet attractive mystery of God. A mystical experience that was at the root of Eastern religions but nowadays is experienced in the West through the path of introspection and meditation. being touched by transcendence. But Professor Kuitert said twenty years ago in his radio lectures 'Without faith nobody sails well' (\*Ten Have p.24) It is the core of all religions that they function as a kind of orientation scheme to help us change this world. He sharply contrasts this with a writer like Herman Hesse.

### **The Absolute**

Finally scholars who say: 'religion is seeking a relationship with the Absolute' probably come the most far in defining what is the core of all religions, but in fact this says nothing. It is like the answer to the question of what all people have in common: they walk on two legs... With such ingenuity, we don't get much further.

C.S.Lewis said: 'Sometimes I thought reading the people who believe that all religions are basically the same, it is like a bachelor in his club talking about women saying: 'When it comes down to it, all women are the same!' The married man knows better because he knows his wife. Only someone who is unable to form a real relationship with a woman can camouflage their disappointment or unwillingness with the cry: 'They are all the same!'

One thing is clear: everyone gives a different answer to the question 'what is the common core of all religions?'

## **Conclusion**

Lessing's description of the core of all religions - God, virtue, and immortality - is not the core of the Christian faith. It is the core of the religion of the Pharisees, against which Jesus took a stand. And concerning the 'Numinous' and the all embracing Mysterious, Yes, there is a deep awareness of transcendence all over the world , but to say that that is the key of the Christian religion is false ; Kuitert's view of religion as a scheme developed by man to orientate our actions seems to define a result or effect of (the true) religion but misses the heart of Christianity).

At this point, we must conclude that there are quite a few reservations to be made about the statement "all religions the same"

Nevertheless we do not stop here with denying they are the same but we move on from here to see where they are different and how we can choose the right one

## **Illness and Diagnosis**

Here I think is the right moment to come with my answer on the question how to find the true religion To come there I start with my own reflection after having done the inquiry on equality: suddenly I thought: nevertheless : all these religion teachers do have a point : there is not equality but there is similarity Look to all religions as far as I know they all have one thing in common and that is that they start from a deep awareness that this visible world is not ok. In this sense I am deeply religious.in strong contrast to the enlightened humanistic optimism. It helps to compare religions with the way illness and therapy are given in the physical world.

Let us see the different "founders" of the major religions: Buddha, Moses, Mohammed, Christ as doctors. When a sick patient calls the doctor, it's possible that different doctors might prescribe very different therapies.

In the first place : nobody blindly obeys any random doctor who comes to your bedside. Nor does everyone think, "If it doesn't help, it won't hurt to try them all." No, there are remedies that can kill you, dehumanize you, and disable you. So, what do I do as a critically ill patient? I listen to the diagnosis and check its accuracy.. What diagnosis does the doctor make? What does he think the problem is? Only when I have confidence in the diagnosis can I also have confidence in the offered remedy.

### **1. Is the diagnosis correct?**

Here we have the first healthy rule. It's also a clear illustration of the fact that not every diagnosis is correct, and therefore not every remedy helps. Take Buddha's diagnosis, for example: life is suffering, being born is suffering, growing up is suffering, dying is suffering. The diagnosis is that the root of all diseases and suffering is desire, clinging to this earthly existence with its pleasures. The therapy, therefore, is to let go and transcend this earthly, material life. After all, this material life is just an illusion (maya).

Most Christians and Muslims reject this diagnosis, is that unkind? Do I think a Buddhist is less of a human being, and do I elevate myself above him? If I criticize his diagnosis, am I accusing him of insincerity, dishonesty, daydreaming, or something else? None of this. On the contrary, I find Gautama

Buddha's diagnosis very profound, and I hold a Buddhist in high regard. But he cannot be my doctor because I reject his diagnosis as incorrect. Because I don't believe that the root of all evil lies in the material or in getting entangled in the material.

"All that God has created is good, and none of it is reprehensible," says the Bible. And I see that reflected in the reality we live in. Music or a wedding, a sunset and the cells of my skin; all signs of the (original) purity of earthly existence. Their purity may be tainted or can be tainted, but that's not because of the things themselves. It's often due to the way people handle them. The same criterion I use in weighing the Muslim solution: God is the absolute Sovereign, salvation only comes through obedience to the five basic Muslim duties and you will be welcomed in Paradise. A medicine that will not really pave the path to healing.

## **2. True to reality?**

So, we stumble upon another important criterion: does the diagnosis (and therefore the therapy) do justice to the reality that we all know, where evil, sickness, and suffering occur, but where there is also much good? Earthly life is not inherently bad!

Christ's diagnosis penetrates much deeper into the diagnosis of the sick human. Evil lies in the corrupt will of man. Man has separated himself from God, and therefore, he mishandles what God has bestowed upon him in creation. Creation groans and moans for what fallen man unnecessarily does to her. At

the same time, creation also looks forward to the 'revealing of the children of God', the moment when man and his evil will be healed. So, the therapy of the gospel is: you need healing of your sick corruptness. And the medicine for that healing is: Christ as the victor. Letting Him in. Only He can remove all the germs that have infected your soul.

### **3. Does it have problem solving power?**

What we see all over the world is that the good news of Christ has changed the nations. There is a reason why the Christian faith is the greatest 'religion' in the world. It changes nations from the grip of 'nature-religions' or pantheism or ideologies into communities where people flourish because it has a healing problem solving power. Yes, I know that so-called Christian nations have failed, horribly failed to show this, but that was not due to their 'religion' And it was and is their core religion in Christ that will have healing power also for that problem.

So these world religions differ very fundamentally from each other, both in diagnoses and in therapies. We don't come to an understanding if we withdraw with an attitude of: 'ultimately it all comes down to the same thing, it's about what's true for you.' Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Jew form together one front against the postmodern man who does not believe that (s)he needs healing and can save himself. But they differ in the presented medicine.

## Differences

There are several important differences to mention between religions. These differences are immediately visible when we compare in a much too short survey how each of them define God, man, and world. This naturally has major consequences for the diagnosis and the prescribed therapy. I will now briefly outline some differences between three of the major world religions: Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity.

	<b>Buddhism</b>	<b>Islam</b>	<b>Christianity</b>
Man World	Divine spark Maya (illusion)	Cog Determined	God's image Creation/history
God	The All, Absolute	Allah, Judge	Yahweh, Father,
Diagnosis	Imprisoned	Lack of surrender	Sin
Therapy	Eightfold Path	Five Duties	Receive Christ in faith

Reflecting on the last point, the path to salvation is touched by what I believe is the main difference between Christianity and all other religions. In all non-Christian religions, the path to salvation is dominated by the question: what must man do to ascend to God and salvation? The Jews try to do this through the law, the Muslims through the five religious duties, and Buddhists through the eightfold path. The gospel, however, shows us a reverse path: not down-up, but up-down. It teaches how God came to us and not what we should or could do to find Him, what He did to reach us and to liberate us from the evil powers He has sent His Son into the

world (John 3:16). He has reached out to us, and we don't have to do anything for our victory. It has been fought for us, outside of us; we just have to accept it. That's all. That's faith. It is taught in contrast to good works

### **'Christianity is not good views, but good news'**

This English quote comes from a missionary, Leslie Newbigin, who thereby refers to the core of the Christian faith. The Christian faith is (in its essence) not a good view, but good news. Now, from the question 'are all religions the same?', we want to reflect back on ourselves. What is the core of our faith? The above quote offers a good direction for that. Indeed, the most characteristic feature of the Christian faith is that it went into the world as 'gospel'. This word 'gospel' is the most suitable as description of the core of Christianity. It means 'good news'. The apostles went out into the world as heralds. The word 'gospel' or the words 'tidings' and 'message' were used in New Testament times and were borrowed from the common usage of that time. At that time without a radio news service or TV news, people depended on heralds who traveled around the empire on horseback and proclaimed their message there. In times of tension, people looked forward to the arrival of these heralds. It went something like this. Suppose people knew that the barbarians had invaded the empire. The burning question then was: would the imperial legions be able to repel the barbarian invasion? If not, the citizens knew that sooner or later their own city would fall prey to the barbarian armies. We can imagine how the citizens of that city eagerly awaited the latest news from the herald. When he rode onto the market square and raised his hands in triumph with the cry: 'We have won!', the people burst into cheers, for they had hope again. But if the herald

lowered his head and said, 'The battle is lost,' the people knew that death was near and went home in despair. The words of Jesus and the apostles about the essence of faith must be understood in those terms. Their teaching was not a deeply thought-out philosophy of life like that of the Greeks (although one can think deeply about it!) their teaching was not fundamentally an ethical revival (although it did result in a way of life). At its core, their teaching was 'gospel', good news - a herald message about something that happened outside of us. At a special moment and in a special place something happened that is of decisive significance for my life. Life or death depend on it! So, here lies the core of the Christian faith: it is gospel. There in Jerusalem, at that time and on that day, victory was won over those powers that hold me and every human being in their grip (Rom. 8:2). How do I partake in that victory, how do I let it work so that I too are involved? Those are the central questions for every Christian.

### **Is it really a religion?**

All this means that Christianity, in a certain respect, can hardly be called a religion. It is so bound to the earth and its history that it rather belongs to historical movements. It can start with talking about God like Paul did in Acts 17, it can connect even with other worldviews in the experience of the reality of God, but it moves from there to the good news: what Jesus Christ has done to deliver us from sin and death. That victory is historically datable and geographically locatable. That good news from Jerusalem is the core of our faith. That immediately poses great problems for us when we want to compare the Christian faith with other religions. Because the first thing we ask is: why do they believe in something else? Haven't they heard this good news of redemption and

salvation? If not, do they perhaps not also look forward to this news? Or have they perhaps found other ways to overcome the powers that hold man in their grip (sin and death)? What then is their diagnosis of man and the world and what therapy do they have?

**Equal no. Unique yes.**

Approaching Christian faith from the word 'gospel' also shows us how unique the biblical view of God is. The God revealed in the Bible is not the 'unmoved mover' of Aristotle, who sets everything in motion but remains unmoved himself. On the contrary, He is on fire for His world (cf. Ps.18). Nor is He the stern Judge who waits until we have met His conditions before coming to our aid. He is not even the Great Watchmaker, as the thinkers of the Enlightenment (including Lessing) saw Him: the one who made the world like a giant clock and wound it up, only to let it run down according to its own laws...

The God of the Bible is also not an impersonal, all-encompassing power, as believed in the Far East. On the contrary, He is highly personally involved in His world, exerting Himself for His people out of a holy love. He stepped in human history, even though it was a history of rebellion. And He has dethroned the enemy, the great adversary, in an astonishing way, by surrendering Himself to him in our place. Thus, He has overcome evil from within our history, from within our earthly reality. We meet in Jesus a King who became a Servant to be able to embrace us all very personally. That is the essence of the biblical message.

## **One unique path to salvation?**

These fundamental differences lead us to a clear answer to the question: are all religions the same? Christian faith is characterized by a unique proclamation, a unique path to salvation, and a unique self-revelation of God. Because we do not encounter this gospel, this path to salvation, and this God in other religions, the answer to the question of the equality of all religions remains negative. no, they are not the same. But yes , there is a similarity.

I read in a German magazine about a debate in India between a Christian, Dr. Friso Melzer, and a Brahmin (Hindu priest). He came up with argument after argument to prove the uniqueness of the Christian faith. But each time, the Brahmin responded, 'We believe that too, we also have such concepts in our beliefs.' Finally, Dr. Melzer was at a loss and asked, 'What do you think of Jesus Christ?' To which the Hindu replied, 'Yes, that's true, we don't have that...!' This succinctly illustrates the difference between the Christian faith and other religions. It's precisely the knowledge of Jesus Christ that leads us to a completely different understanding of the world as history, a reverse path to salvation, and a personal God. Everything converges in Him, who said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life.'

## **No common ground?**

So, how should we position ourselves? We've made progress in answering whether all religions are equal. Yet, I don't want to stop here. Because if we claim that the Christian faith is unique, how do we relate to the religions around us? Is the relationship between them and the Christian faith one of day and night? Are they just subject to the power of evil? There have been times when

Christians let themselves be guided solely by this black-and-white thinking in their attitude towards people of other faiths.

Christians from the Reformation tradition have generally felt comfortable with this black-and-white thinking. However, early in church history, answers were given to these questions that emphasized similarities rather than differences. Early Christian apologists saw the logos (the divine reason) at work in all other religions. It is often Catholic Christians who feel more at home in this way of thinking. For them, other religions show that there is already a kind of hunger for the true thing like the religious practices of the Old Testament foreshadow the coming reality, a sort of preparatory phase for receiving the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel directs and fulfills what they have already begun to believe. This is one way to see common ground. This raises the question: what is the biblical approach? The conflictual or the more harmonious view of other religions?

The Scripture clearly teaches us that the God we uniquely encounter in Christ is the Creator of the whole world and the Lord of all peoples. In Genesis 1-11, we learn how all peoples come from His creative hand and how, after the flood, He even establishes a covenant with all living creatures on earth (Gen. 9). A covenant that preserves them from total destruction. Thus, God is not exclusively concerned with Israel and the community of Christ. His action extends over all creatures on earth. Finally, He is the Creator of the ends of the earth, whose creative power is visible in all His works (Ps. 19; Rom. 1:19 ff.).

In various ways, no matter how fragmentary, incidental, and broken, reality continues to testify to the intention of its Creator.

And mankind itself remains also after the fall created after God's image. This fact leaves mankind also after the fall behind with a thirst for the lost ideal. The person who wanders with this thirst receives continually glimpses, signals, revelations of God's nature and intentions therein. Precisely because we believe that Jesus Christ is the central revelation of the Creator of this world, we cannot believe that there would be no inkling of this central creative will outside of Him and outside of the history in which He is central.'

### **Contact points**

It is remarkable that Paul explicitly begins with this idea when addressing the Gentiles in Lystra (**Acts 14:16 and onward**). Referring to God as the Creator in verse 15, he tells them:

*'[God] has not left Himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; He provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.'*

We should not assume that by saying this, Paul diminishes his mission to proclaim the gospel—even at the risk of his own life. On the contrary, he declares: *'Because God has cared for you for so long, that is precisely why I come to proclaim to you that God, as revealed in Christ, is here for all of you—even though you have suppressed the truth about Him in unrighteousness'* (**Romans 1:18**). And again, in **Acts 17:27**, Paul affirms: *'The God you seek, we proclaim to you.'*

The Bible itself acknowledges a certain tension when it speaks about the religious world. On the one hand, God has not left Himself without a witness. On the other hand, people often distort, misinterpret, or mix this knowledge with their own inventions.

They mishandle the traces of divine revelation in the world, twisting or reshaping them according to their own desires. This paradox runs throughout Scripture: God has made Himself known, yet humanity frequently fails to see Him as He truly is.

The cultures and religions of the nations in the world are human responses to God's general revelation in the creation and the loss of Him. They can be very impressive in expressing the need and in honoring all that is left. Think of moral character in the line of Confucius, the compassion of Buddha, the impressive architecture of the Maya's and generally the - what Evert Jan Ouweneel calls the "spiritedness" of noble people all over the world.. The proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ helps the nations to understand the light of truth that they previously saw, now understood through the window of Christ, in its true nature and purpose. One could say: 'God's revelation in Christ is not exclusive (traces are found everywhere) but normative (it has insight that is universally valid).'

Much evangelism and missionary work has overlooked the truth of the first part of the phrase: God's revelation in Christ is not exclusive. Missionaries and evangelists should have an eye for the whole person, and the worthwhile culture they encounter. They should not only be proclaimers but also listeners. If they do not respect and learn from sometimes great wisdom, and cultural achievements they are, in fact, thinking too little of God, who has also left his mark among these people and in all cultures. The East offers Christianity forms of thought and expression, structures, and models which Christianity could enrich, and the South has music that is better than Calvin's melodies of the psalms, the spirit of enterprise in the Far East inspires the West and so on! All nations carry their treasures in the New Jerusalem (Revelations 21:26).. In

any case the Christian religion is not a western subculture. It will only have a future in the global world of tomorrow, when it holds on to the uniqueness of its message and when it will be inclusive in its effect.

## Chapter 8

### Is my unbelieving sister going to hell?

#### *Doubt about hell*

*"In the end, there are only two types of people: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God will say at the end, 'Thy will be done.' All those who are in hell have chosen it for themselves. Without this personal choice, there would be no hell. No soul that sincerely and steadfastly desires joy will be deprived of it. Those who seek will find. Those who knock, it will be opened to them."*

*C.S. Lewis, The Great Divorce, p. 79*

A question that occupies many people and drives some into deep doubt is the question: Will those who do not believe in Jesus be lost forever? We have a kind and friendly neighbor, who is a Muslim. Or; I study together with a humanist at the university.. Together we see daily other cultures on television, where people live with other religions. And then : think of your brother or sister who no longer believes in Jesus or the Bible. Will they then end up in hell after they die? This thought drives many people to doubt, especially when hell is depicted to them as a place of eternal torment, a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, where the worm does not die and the fire does not go out. And then there is the fate of millions of people who never heard the Gospel will they all end up in hell?

In the many conversations I have had about this, I have noticed that the core of the doubt created by this issue is linked to caricatures (1) often deeply ingrained in our genes. Did medieval ideas, and

painters like those of Lucas van Leyden, contribute to this? Have we projected our own unconscious cruel nature onto these ideas? Whatever the case, I first want to address these false notions. Secondly I want to think about the hardest point in the doubt on hell, which is: what is meant with eternal when Jesus f.i.in the parable of the sheep and the goat in Matthew 25 spoke about the goats that they will be sent away into everlasting punishment ? What is eternal? (2) Then, at the end of this chapter, I will draw a conclusion based on the answers that Jesus gave. Just like with many other questions of doubt, it is important here to realize that we cannot answer all questions, that our knowledge is fragmentary and a curtain (3) hangs over the final outcome.

### **1. Caricature representations**

In countless vestibules of medieval cathedrals, we can see pictures of the last judgement above the main entrance, images of hell at the left and heaven on the right panel. It left many behind with great fear. But it was meant to be a warning and an invitation to quickly move on to the sanctuary where the bread of comfort and joy is offered to all. Like when I told my young children: Do not come too close to the ditch! If so you will drown, watch out. A father does not say that to his children as a forecast, a prediction of something that will take place. He knows that it will most probably never happen. The purpose of the picture is a warning and an admonition.. A bit cruel if a father would add to the warning a description of what it means to drown in cold water, ( may be needed for a son who would like to try out all things) but in all cases the father has nothing else in mind than the well being of his children. The pictures of medieval painters are meant to increase the admonition : choose the safe way: come into the sanctuary!

Biblical messages especially in Revelation (ch.20) and the end of some of the parables of Jesus (f.i .in Matthew 25:31-46.) give reasons to this way of warning all people.

Sometimes pictures like this have led to a misunderstanding of Gods personality, when we think of Him to be like the sculpture of Lady justice before the building of the judicial court in Utrecht with a scale in one hand, a sword in the other and blindfolded...This is a caricature of the true God. The God revealed in Jesus is the God who is deeply moved by the whole world and loved it so much that He gave His Son for it. Jesus came to bear away our judgment. (John 1:29). Whoever takes refuge under the cross has nothing to fear. God wants all people to eventually come there (1 Timothy 2:3-6). Whoever is not there or not there yet is still not set free, but is in the same state in which we all are born in this fallen and broken world. Occupied territory. The biblical worldview knows no neutral ground. There is an enormous struggle going on between two realms, that of the devil and of God. The main point of biblical teaching is that ultimately the devil loses completely and God triumphs in Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:23-28). Man is not a domino piece in this struggle. The latter is extremely important to realize. Even though God loves us to the end, He did not make us like a wind-up toy or a robot. That means that He wants us to be involved ourselves in this salvation. If someone continues to say no to this urge of God's love, the teaching on hell is given to us as a warning: watch out: there may come a moment that God who cannot treat us a piece of stone will say: I did what I could, but if you really do not want: Your will be done! As C.S.Lewis said: heaven is the place where people say to God Your will be done. Hell is the place where God says to people your will be done. Here now comes the first

correction of a caricatured image of hell. Hell is not a punishment imposed on man from the outside, he cannot help it. It strikes him involuntarily and unexpectedly or even worse : from the beginning. No, as we read in the parables of Jesus, it is the confirmation of the path I have chosen myself (cf. Romans 1:18 and 24,26,28). It is real, but as I will discuss later: will it be eternal ? in the sense of endless time?

### **"Hell is not a physical place"**

This quote I copied from the Dutch newspaper "Nederlands Dagblad" of August 3, 1999 as a statement of Pope John Paul II. "According to the head of the Roman Catholic Church, hell is not a specific super-geographic place, just as heaven is not somewhere above the clouds. The pope called hell: "the suffering, frustration, and emptiness of a life without God." Eternal damnation is therefore not God's work but man's own responsibility. The reality of hell does not need to be a reason to doubt or despair. It reminds man that human freedom must be lived according to the example of Jesus, who said 'yes' to God, who overcame Satan, and who gave us his spirit so that we can call God our Father." So far the Pope. I agree with him and also understand his encouragement to all doubting believers.

### **Figurative language**

The biblical description of hell is figurative language. According to my concordance, the word "hell" appears twelve times, exclusively in the New Testament, eleven of those from the mouth of Jesus. He, who went through hell for us, is the only one who has the right to warn us about it. He always does this in images and parables. The literal term he uses for hell is already an image: it says Gehenna.

This was a valley located southeast of Jerusalem, which in Jesus' time was used as a rubbish dump. But the point of the comparison is not that man is treated like garbage, no, the reason this valley is used as a word for hell is because children were once sacrificed to Moloch here. This is why we read that God hates this place (Jeremiah 7:32). A word used by Jesus to express in an image that the state in which we will end separate from God is far from pleasant! Jesus says in other places that this place is like an eternal fire, and another time, he calls it outer darkness. Therefore, belief in the existence of hell does not require, as was done in the Middle Ages, that we define it as a place somewhere in the universe (under the ground? ) where horned devils are stoking the fire. The Bible itself is saying without figurative language that hell is the place "far from the face of the Lord" (2 Thess. 1:9). That is, "He is not there, and that is the worst" Everything that is said about it (fire and worms that gnaw etc.) are not literal concepts but descriptive images of this state. A gnawing worm describes the state outside of God as one of "internal self-dissolution, a constant gnawing, lamenting, and affliction of the voice of conscience." And the fire now becomes a prophecy of powers of narrowness, which destructively influence all existence." (K.Schilder)

Where is this hell? Anyone who reads the Bible in this regard will notice that Jesus speaks of something future. A state we must fear. "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." It is striking that this "terrifying passage" is precisely within a context of comfort. God preserves you from this. He knows us. Even all of our hairs are counted (Matt. 10:18-30). He will not let you fall. He does not even let a sparrow fall! How much less will He let you fall! This

is the context in which Jesus speaks about it. God does never close the door to Himself. It is man himself who, with the talent and freedom given to him, can place the door in the lock. God is able to persuade. But He never forces. In the end however the bible does speak of an eternal destiny.

## **2. How eternal is eternity?**

Whether the state of lostness in hell lasts forever is interpreted differently among Bible-believing Christians today. C.S. Lewis wrote at the beginning of his book *The great divorce* a quote from George McDonald: "A heaven with a little bit of hell in it does not exist. It is impossible to keep even the smallest thing that belongs to the devil in our heart or inner pocket. Satan must be cast out, body and soul." Lewis does not make hell disappear, but he allows it to sink away at the end of his book, under the smallest tuft of grass in heaven (p. 139). He says about this: The good is growing in its extent. In this process, evil shrinks to something smaller than an atom of this heavenly reality.

There are many who see hell dissolve into smoke. Following the interpretation of George McDonald's quote, they believe in "annihilation," based on passages like Psalm 37:20 and Revelation 18:21—without God, a person becomes nothing.

Others say that in the Bible, "eternal" often means a comprehensive "age" (aeon), call it a dispensation. And this is true. The eternal gates of the temple (see Psalm 24) existed during the entire period of the Old Covenant. In that text "aeon" means during that whole period. But after that 'compensation' they no longer existed. Certain is that the Hebrew word 'eternal' describes more a quality than a quantity. It is good Hebrew to say in the case of great music'

it was eternally beautiful. In any case, "eternal" meant not always "everlasting," but encompassing an "age," i.e., a period of time.

I sympathize with this view, but I also believe that we cannot be certain on the basis of language alone that eternal in the sense of everlasting is excluded. But it gave me enough uncertainty to change my despair and doubt into hope. But we should certainly free ourselves thoroughly from caricatures of hell. This removes false fears and makes us open and sensitive to what truly matters. Healthy fear drives us toward the good. And hope takes its place as it is placed in what Jesus Christ has done for us, in revealing the never-ending and all-encompassing love of God.

### **Is there a purgatory?**

In the just mentioned book by C.S. Lewis, (*The great divorce*) he describes in a fantasy story how people, when they die, travel through a twilight zone between death and eternal life. It is similar to what an old catholic doctrine called purgatory. All people where they are there are faced with the choice once again whether they will choose the path of the Creator. The path of self-surrender in love... or the path of self-preservation. To give one example: There is an artist there who has been admired all his life. When he realizes that in heaven he is no more important than the others, (because every person is special!) then he does not want to go there at all and goes into the dark regions. Just like the rich man from the parable of Jesus. The rich man also wants to remain 'a star' in the hereafter and not be subject to Jesus

I believe that this teaching of a purgatory. Purgatory is an extension of the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16. But

parables are stories, with a point and not descriptions given to inform us about the structure and form of an invisible world. Therefore I limit this teaching to the point it makes which is : in the afterlife there is only remorse. No way back. I believe that finally we should not go further than the answer that Jesus himself gave when asked about this.

### **3. A curtain**

So now we come to the question of what happens to the millions of people who have never heard the gospel. There was an occasion when someone came to Jesus with precisely the same kind of question we posed earlier in the introduction: "Lord, are there few that will be saved? "What about all the others?(Luke 14:33) I sense in that question the same doubt we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. What about my neighbor, my daughter Petra, and the countless other non-believers? Jesus' answer is striking. He only says: "Strive ye to enter in at the straight gate." In that answer lies a piece of reservation. And an appeal. Don't look at others, think of yourself! Make sure you make the right choice and are ready for the coming of the Kingdom! As for those others: leave that to me. Their future is my concern. 'Mind your own business'.

There is a second incident where a similar question is asked from within the circle of the disciples themselves: 'Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?' (John 14:22). Again, Jesus answers the question in the same manner: with a direct appeal to the questioner: 'If a man loves me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him!' He does not give a direct answer but shifts the focus to our own responsibility.

This reservation is generally part of God's wise tactic. Its aim is to push back curious questions and appeal to our responsibility. It's as if the Lord says: 'Leave the great matters to Me and focus on the little that has been entrusted to you.' God will not tell us more than what is necessary for our salvation and will never disclose more than we can handle.

It's also a promising reservation. Something is brewing in God that will be the solution for this immensely large question of the eternal salvation of those millions of people 'outside'. A solution that on one hand acknowledges their lostness and guilt before God, and on the other hand, showcases God's mercy and justice in Christ. What does this mean? For curious questions, God draws a curtain. You all just strive to enter the kingdom! Proclaim the gospel, insistently and persistently. What happens outside of that rests in the hands of the merciful God, who will judge fairly. Is Jesus afraid that a relativizing answer would weaken the motivation to go out and bring the saving message as the only way to be saved? That could be.

### **A third position**

Anyone who answers the question, '*Do all people outside of Christianity perish?*' with '*No, none of them*' says too much. But anyone who answers '*Yes, all of them*' also claims more than we can truly know. I choose a third position: there is a curtain drawn over the final answer.

Those who say '*No*' should carefully study the many passages in Scripture that speak of the possibility of humans persistently rejecting God and thus facing eternal destruction (John 3:36; 2

Thessalonians 1:9; Revelation 20:10). However, those who say ‘Yes, *they will be lost forever*’ also claim more than they can be certain of (see my point on ‘eternal’).

My view is this: *Heaven is the place where humans say to God, ‘Your will be done,’ and hell is the place where God says to humans, ‘Your will be done’* (C.S. Lewis). Notably, Jesus himself often spoke of this dreadful, final possibility in his teachings. Therefore, we should not erase this part of his message in favor of a doctrine of universal reconciliation—one that relies more on wishful thinking than on Scripture.

At the same time, I challenge those who claim ‘Yes, *they will be lost forever*’ to consider the many Bible passages that speak of God’s universal dealings (Genesis 14:18; 20:7; Acts 10:15 [see chapter 7]; 1 Corinthians 15:23 and following; 1 Timothy 2:3-6). Perhaps we need to think bigger about God than we have until now.

I believe in a third way—one that holds both No and Yes in tension. Call it *respect for the curtain*—the divine veil that God has placed over the final outcome by not revealing a fully defined doctrine on this matter. Jesus himself maintained this approach when people tried to press him for definitive answers. A curtain is drawn over our curious eyes—the curtain of God’s incredible sovereignty in exercising justice, mercy, and grace.

Our task is clear: we are called to do what we can—to strive to enter the Kingdom and to reach out to others with the gospel. The rest, we must leave to Him.

## Chapter 9

### Unanswered prayers

#### ***Doubt in the effect of prayer in time of need***

*It was as if I got the door slammed in my face*

*(C.S. Lewis in 'A grief observed' p.31)*

Last Sunday, after the church meeting, I had a conversation with one of our guests. He came with a special question: 'My wife has symptoms of dementia, and it is hard for her to understand that this comes with depression. She prays to the Lord constantly for healing, but it seems as though no answer is coming. Now, on top of her illness, she also struggles with the added burden of feeling that God is not answering her prayer. What would you say?'

Firstly (although I did not say this at the time), this is a struggle many people face. It creates doubt. If no answer comes, they wonder: Is He really there? Lord, do You hear me? Are You there? I call this the problem of unanswered prayers. Strangely enough, the revival movement that is present today sometimes exacerbates this doubt.

The charismatic movements of our time have brought a widespread revival in our awareness of the biblical promises of healing and restoration to encourage our fight in prayer against the fallen brokenness of our existence. Indeed, the first calling of the church is to continue in prayer, full of faith—even when the patient seems to be without hope of restoration—proclaiming the resurrection power of Christ over death and decay. But what to say when

nothing happens and all our prayers seem to be a blow in the air. Doubt arises whether God really listens. Lord, are You there?

In my attempt to listen and help in this doubt I was greatly helped by the apostle Paul. In my dealing with this doubt I could point to many bible passages like in the Old Testament, the book of Job and the Psalms, but I limit myself to one for me, the most speaking passage: 2 Corinthians 12 : 7 -12. Here we read how Paul wrestled with this problem. He prayed to God to remove that “messenger of Satan”(as he called his illness) from him. Perhaps he prayed like this: “Lord God, it must be a small matter for you to break him, to defeat his destructive work and make it impossible for him to continue. You raised Christ from the dead and have already given Satan his deathblow. Therefore I know, you can also remove this evil which troubles me.” The fighting spirit of Paul’s aggressive prayer is an example of his first reaction to suffering and wickedness.

### **A wounded healer**

But though Paul faithfully followed the example of Jesus and bravely protested against his suffering, praying in the spirit of James 5, what he had asked for and hoped for with his whole heart, did not happen. He prayed three times for healing but the “messenger of Satan” did not flee. We should realize how this was especially hard for Paul because he knew from experience that God can do it. Shortly after Paul’s conversion,(Acts 15) he was miraculously healed from blindness. And on his later missionary travels he healed many blind and disabled people, raised a dead boy to life, and removed a poisonous snake from his own arm without any ill effects! Paul had closely experienced healing in answer to

prayer. But in this case no healing happened! He changed for a moment from a faithful disciple into a wounded healer (the title of a book on the well known Henry Nouwen, who experienced the same).. Paul learned a new lesson from the Lord. He prayed in protest; he prayed a second time, holding on to God's promise; he prayed a third time, trusting God completely. But his fervent requests were not granted. And then, God taught him something very special – “let my grace be enough!” It was as if God said: “At this moment, in the work I am giving you to do, you need only be a signpost to my grace. Let now my grace be sufficient for you. Because my power will be revealed most fully in your weakness.”

In coping with his suffering, Paul's uppermost commitment was to learn from it. When God's answer is not according to our expectations, we generally react quite differently—we either stubbornly persevere with our pleading prayers, or we give up all hope and give in to doubt and depression. On the one hand we are tempted by an obstinate attitude of “God must do it—he promised healing” in which we stand over God and prescribe how he should act (a demanding tone often found in members of “charismatic” and “Pentecostal” churches). On the other hand, we may be tempted to have a withdrawn, aloof attitude which excuses God's refusal by claiming that the ministry of healing is just not real!

### **God's megaphone**

Paul had neither of these two attitudes. He didn't stubbornly persevere in claiming God's promise of complete healing, there and then. Neither did he give way to doubt and claim that the promise of healing had never been intended for him. No, Paul allows himself to be taught by God. God used this undesirable and painful

thorn in his flesh to achieve what could never have come about if God had granted his request. He learned how to handle the pain! In *The Problem of Pain* (ch. 6), C.S. Lewis remarks that “God whispers to us in our joy, he speaks to us in our conscience, but he shouts to us in our suffering.” Our suffering is a way of learning more and deeper about God. God’s megaphone.

We sometimes forget that it is through suffering that God teaches us wisdom and perseverance. He may equally choose to take away our suffering—he is almighty; he can do it. But sometimes he chooses not to. Many people reject a God who does not directly remove or alleviate their suffering or that of their loved ones. But God can also use suffering to teach us—when we continue to look for him, in faith.

The same principle holds good for the nations of the world. When God’s judgments go out over the earth, the nations learn justice (Is 26:9). In response to monism, which holds to a deity who combines good and evil in himself, we can reply, “No, it is a messenger of Satan that brings my suffering.” We do not want to desecrate God’s name by saying that evil comes from him. But we also do not want to demean God’s name by pretending that suffering has nothing to do with God and takes place outside his authority. Paul teaches us to hold on to the fact of God’s power over suffering by resisting in prayer, “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Such an answer from God tests our commitment to learning from him—sometimes it will lead us to ask, “For what purpose is God allowing this to continue in my life?”

## **Transformation**

The Lord entered Paul's life in an unexpected way when he did not remove the "thorn." Instead, he explained to Paul that this would be the way to keep him from becoming conceited because of the special faithful things he had done in his past life, from becoming too self-sufficient. Satan sent the trouble intending to destroy Paul, to knock him down, but the Lord transformed the suffering and used its painful effect to make Paul even more useful to him, and more Christ-like—to preserve him and to lift him up. Paul could stand in front of people, not as a monument of strength and deliverance or one to be admired, but instead, as an ordinary, troubled and weak person—but a weak person who is being supported in an amazing way by an awesome God!

How is it possible to radiate peace when one is seriously ill? How is it possible for someone who had suffered abuse and emotional neglect to resist bravely? Such strength comes from beyond the person concerned. To see it in action, often speaks more powerfully than a hundred model sermons delivered by the most skillful preachers—it is a real-life, 3-D demonstration of God's power at work in human vulnerability and weakness.

It reminds me of a Dutch minister. A tragic bus accident in Rev. Woelderink's parish killed a number of children, including three of his own. People still remember how, on the first Sunday after their bereavement, in the midst of the heartache and pain, he said, "for one moment I was filled with such joy in the Lord, that, had he asked me to part with all my children for his sake, I would gladly have given them to him." The testimonies of Corrie ten Boom and Joni Erickson, to mention only two, are similar.

## **Always learning**

Paul saw how that wretched thorn in the flesh that at first drove him to doubt drew him closer to God. As he became more and more dependent on the power of Christ, he became more and more familiar with the safety within God's merciful goodness. Paul learnt from what he suffered that he could depend on God, and he learned humility. Like Job, he learned patience, and he learned to honor God's majesty. All God's people have to learn these things—even Jesus “learned obedience from what he suffered, and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (Heb 5:7-10).

Yes, in facing suffering, this is not our first response. And it should not be. Our first response, always, must be righteous anger, resistance, and earnest prayer for restoration and healing. The person who immediately responds, sighing “his grace is sufficient for you,” has no understanding, no mercy, and little sympathy. The transformation of our suffering happens only inside that intimate relationship with God himself. No one else can make it happen for you—no words can bring it about. It is an understanding and knowledge that grows out of the secret, personal and intimate whisperings of God's Spirit into your heart.

After Job suffered a multitude of uncanny disasters, his friends came to encourage him. They kept silent for seven days and seven nights as they sat with him. During that time they shared his struggle. If only they had continued to do that! It was after that first week that they started going wrong—they became impatient and wanted Job to get to a quick answer. But they said foolish things about God, things that were not true or right—while Job,

even in his bitter complaints, never sinned against God. God teaches us through our sufferings; he reveals his wisdom to us. But we are not to blame God as if he brought our suffering about, caused it and desired it to happen, not even in order to teach or punish us. God uses suffering—he transforms the pain to show his mercy and goodness—but he does it individually, and he does it in his own time. There are no rules, no “quick-fixes,” no time-schedules in godly grieving, sorrowing, suffering.

### **Quiet submission**

Finally, what is the final result of our experience of continual suffering? For Paul, it was quiet submission as he concluded, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:9).

Some people might dismiss this as an example of “typical Pauline spiritual masochism.” On the contrary, we know that Paul really did suffer because of the thorn in his flesh; he did not thank God for the pain itself. Instead he gave thanks for what God was achieving in him—using suffering to make him teachable and to produce a harvest in his life. It was not the pain that purified Paul but God. I sense a hint of the quiet submission in Paul’s words, “When I am weak, then I am strong.” It is this quiet submission that characterizes the third stage.

We can be, on the one hand, weak, defenseless, injured and, on the other hand, strong, powerful, and useful to God. Yes, such a wonderful transformation is possible only in the kingdom of God.

“When I am weak, then I am strong,” was not just a typical “stiff upper lip” way for a high-flyer like Paul to respond; he had been painfully honest to describe his real suffering and humiliation. Rather, his confident submission was the result of seeing a supernatural harvest in his life that far outweighed the cost of his suffering. This reminds me of Hebrews 12:11: “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace.”

The harvest is God’s will being done, powerfully, in our weakness. I have seen such a harvest and such peace in believers who have passed through a dark struggle of deep suffering—people who could only rest in the grace given them in Christ. For in the cross of Christ, God gave us everything: he went ahead and passed through death for us; he suffered all we could possibly suffer. But the cross is empty. Christ was raised and in his resurrection, revealed life. Contented submission is not passive surrender; it is active perseverance, based on the sure knowledge that our suffering is achieving a great harvest. And the strength to persevere comes from Christ’s fullness of life, freely available, now and forever—we can rely on it, in faith.

## Chapter 10

### Doubt and the problem of suffering

*Faith is comfort in despair*

*(Martin Luther in De servo arbitrio, 1525, 18-635) 'getroste verzweiflung'*

The deepest doubt I have kept to the end in this final chapter : How Can God Allow So Much Evil? Why do I have to go through all this? This is a pointed question that has been asked many times by many different people. It's a question that is filled with doubt. How can God allow so much suffering when He is almighty? Examples like the earthquake in Turkey, a plane crash in Washington, or the story of a girl who went missing and was later found dead after being assaulted and raped. Or we might think of stories closer to home, of people suddenly losing family members in accidents or to debilitating illnesses. These are examples of profound suffering that immediately come to mind. Yet suffering extends beyond these instances. Human existence is fraught with suffering in many other ways: loneliness, the challenges of upbringing, living with disabilities, difficult interpersonal relationships, or struggling with depression or anxiety. There is no aspect of life—personal, professional, social, or religious—where we don't experience suffering. This aligns with the picture the Bible paints, describing a world where brokenness after the fall of humanity has affected all aspects of life. The entire creation groans under the consequences of the fall, eagerly awaiting redemption, as stated in Romans 8. But, If God is loving, why does He allow evil to persist? If He can't prevent it, then He's not all-powerful. A loving and all-powerful God who permits evil cannot exist! Even within many Christian

circles, attempts are made to resolve the tension by weakening or denying God's love or his omnipotence. Yet, doing so often introduces a new problem.

### **Different views on evil**

Other worldviews also grapple with this problem, and it's worth examining their approaches. Without going in detail one can see that there are roughly three main approaches to the problem. We'll look at the optimistic view, the pessimistic view, and finally the realism of the biblical view.

#### **Optimistic view**

The optimistic view encompasses those views that have a hopeful outlook on eradicating evil. Evil is seen as something inherent to life with lessons to learn and painful but challenging. It is something that should be resisted but can be used to turn towards the good. Ultimately, evil isn't as evil as it seems because it can and will be turned into good.

In the Western world, we see this outlook often in the form of an evolutionist worldview, in the New Age movement and certain forms of liberal Christianity. It's closely related to a postmillennial view of history, where the world gradually gets better until the kingdom of God is realized on Earth. There's an optimism that human effort will eradicate or mitigate evil. Examples in popular culture include the Star Wars movies or many superhero movies, where evil is overcome by the hero's efforts. This view holds the greatest appeal because it maintains hope. However, it also has the most difficulties explaining the reality of evil. The eastern view on evil as an illusion could be very attractive here. This view is

common in many forms of Hinduism and Buddhism. Evil is seen as a result of ignorance or attachment to the world, and the goal is to transcend it.

### **Pessimistic view**

The pessimistic view holds that evil is more real than good and that it is not conquerable. . This view is common in certain forms of ancient religions f.i. in the ancient Persian religion of Zoroastrianism, which sees two gods—Ahura Mazda, the god of light, and Ahriman, the god of darkness—locked in eternal combat. The world is seen as the battleground for these two forces. Modern existentialism has something of this underlying pessimism. They emphasize the futility or absurdity of life. This view can be seen in all ancient religions, where evil is seen as part of an eternal battle that cannot be won.

### **Realism**

Christianity takes a different approach from these views. It acknowledges the reality and seriousness of evil but also affirms the goodness of God and the ultimate victory of good over evil. Christianity doesn't minimize evil or ignore its seriousness but instead confronts it head-on.

From a Christian perspective, evil is seen as a perversion of the good. It comes from the Devil, the enemy of God but will be defeated. It's not something created by God but rather the absence or corruption of good. Evil entered the world through human rebellion against God, seduced by the devil as described in Genesis 3. This rebellion had cosmic consequences, affecting not only humanity but also the entire created order. The Bible describes the

consequences of this rebellion in stark terms: death, suffering, and separation from God. Yet, it also holds out hope on the final victory over the evil one ending in redemption and restoration.

Jesus' death and resurrection are seen as the decisive victory over sin and Evil, inaugurating the kingdom of God on Earth. Christians believe that the ultimate defeat of evil will come when Christ returns to judge the living and the dead and to establish His kingdom in its fullness. Until then, Christians are called to resist evil, to do good, and to proclaim the good news of God's kingdom.

The Christian view doesn't offer easy answers to the problem of evil, but it does offer hope in the face of suffering. It affirms that evil is not ultimate, that it will not have the final word. It calls us to trust in God's goodness and to live in the hope of His kingdom. Having said this, the bible itself gives many examples where the pain of suffering is so heavy that it is very difficult to believe. If only I would get proof... We believe that certainty is the solution. But is it ? Is it certainty or is it trust.. In the following parable this question is tackled.

### **The parable of the partisan fighter**

"The believer is like a resistance fighter in an occupied country, who met a stranger that made a tremendous impression on him. They spent the night together, and during those nocturnal hours, the stranger told him that he was the leader of the resistance. 'Trust me, whatever happens,' he said. The resistance fighter promised that he would. Since then, he only saw the stranger occasionally and from a distance. Sometimes he saw the stranger helping members of the resistance. Then he gratefully said, 'Our

man!' But sometimes he saw him in a police uniform handing resistance fighters over to the enemy. Others would get angry and say, 'See, he collaborates.' But our resistance fighter said, 'The stranger must know what he is doing! I trust him.'

Basil Mitchell, who wrote this parable, wanted to highlight the difficult—and in our time, highly relevant—problem of verification. How do I 'prove' the truth of what I believe? For every instance where one might clearly see God at work (in the beauty of creation or the death of a dictator), there are just as many events that seem to suggest He allows us to be delivered into the hands of our enemies. Consider the murder of millions of Syrian citizens or the devastation caused by diseases like cancer.

I appreciate this parable because it emphasizes that, at its core, the Christian faith consists of trusting a Person without having immediate and visible proof. Yet, this trust is based on something—what was revealed to him in the hidden nocturnal meeting. Faith is not merely an emotion; it is a response to a promise and an encounter. But it lacks tangible, irrefutable proof. Even more strikingly, there are many times when what we witness seems to contradict the very promise we hold on to.

Therefore, today more than ever, reflection is needed on the question of what our faith is based on and how we can convey it convincingly. However, there will always remain an element of unverifiable trust, as Mitchell clearly demonstrates with this parable. The lesson is that the opposite of doubt is not certainty but trust

The apostle Paul says: 'For we walk by faith, not by sight' (2 Cor. 5:7). The mysterious leader of the resistance in the above story apparently deems it unavoidable that his men learn to trust him at all costs. Yes, to put it even more strongly (but now apart from the story): apparently, it is very important to the Lord God that we learn to trust Him before He appears to all eyes. At the same time, we must acknowledge that He provides us with every opportunity to do so. There are convincing grounds for this. We already discussed this more extensively in chapter 2.

When we look at evil in the world and wonder why we have to go through all this, the Christian answer is: we should focus on Jesus. In Him it has become clear that God has not left us alone in brokenness. But that He is present in it. And fights against it And affirms us of his love. And died for us to give us the ultimate certainty. This does not give a final answer to all our questions. Just like in the history of Job. Job asks God for an explanation, but he doesn't get it as he asks for it. He does get a reason to trust God. God appears in His majesty, as if He wants to say to Job; just trust me, I have it all under control. But God does not give him all the information about what happened in the heavenly realms in the conversation between God and the devil. In the same way we sometimes have despairing questions without answers.. Isn't it a beautiful image in the parable of Mitchell that in moments of despair eye to eye with doubting questions we are reminded of the 'personal affirmation given to us in the night' that He is on our side. in spite of all the indeed cruel events. God gives us in Christ a basis and reason to continue to trust Him. Faith is 'getroste Verzweiflung', as Luther said. Comforted despair.

## **Not certainty but trust**

The well known American psychologist Erik Erikson teaches that trust is the first and crucial foundation of human life: basic trust. In all human beings this is the first quality that is built in us as a baby and foundational for the rest of our life. The deepest doubt tries to break this basic trust. Therefore God's greatest gift is not giving proofs as if it is a problem for our brains, but restoring trust. For which He gave us all He had. The Apostle Paul says: "We walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). The mysterious leader of the resistance in the above story apparently considers it unavoidable that his men learn to trust him at all costs. Yes, to put it even more strongly (but now separate from the story): apparently, it is very important to the Lord God that we learn to trust Him before He appears to all eyes. At the same time, we must acknowledge that He gives us every opportunity to do so. There are convincing grounds for this. We already elaborated on this in chapter 2.

## **The Dwarfs**

In the last part of C.S. Lewis's Narnia tales, he describes how the animals in the forest are misled by a pseudo-messiah. While everyone knows that the appearance of the lion Aslan heralds the new era of salvation, a donkey appears dressed in a lion's skin. The plan was concocted by the ape. He saw a lion's skin floating in the river and thought: 'that will give me the power of Aslan'. The donkey was foolish enough to be misused. So he dressed himself with the clothes of a lion. Thus, the entire animal community in the forest was misled to follow the false Aslan in the form of a donkey in a lion's skin! This all ends in a terror state until the true Aslan appears and sets everything right. The well-meaning animals

immediately choose his side... except for the dwarfs. They are completely confused and, while they renounce their loyalty to the donkey and the ape, they also refuse to prove their support to the true Aslan. They remain sulking in the gray middle, unhappy to their core. When the other animals ask Aslan: 'How is this possible?' he answers: 'They have been taken in so much that they cannot be taken out any more..( in i The last battle p.140)..'. They are wounded in their ability to trust.

Healing is promised if we persuasively Open ourselves for the reality of a personal God, who did not leave us alone. He is the God who knows us, even better than we know ourselves, as we read in Psalm 139. He is perfect love, which "hoped all things, covered all things, endured all things," as Paul says perfect love does (1 Corinthians 13). This truth is deeply comforting and healing for those who feel they cannot believe because of deep fears and disappointments. It is good news from God's side, that He is a God who forgives and liberates, who enables us in love to bear our responsibility.

## **Conclusion**

Faith is comfort in despair, said Martin Luther It comes with the proclamation of the gospel. The deepest thing that happens to us when we open ourselves to this gospel is that the Lord himself comes to us, and persuades us! To trust Him, 'no matter what happens'... and He removes our ignorance. He tells us things about reality that we did not know. Many people are trapped in prejudices. They work like sunglasses that color our perception of reality. We need to be set free from certain presuppositions, in which there is no room for God. God does not force his way in, but

He speaks! False presuppositions must be addressed first. (chapter 2). He heals us from our fears and negative emotions. In addition to prejudices, there are often many more emotional hesitations.(chapter 4) And yes, He is powerful to break our sinful will (chapter 2). In the gospel lies healing from wrong ideas, unsuspected fears and a rebellious will. None of these barriers, whether we encounter them in ourselves or in others, should make us despair or resign ourselves to a feeling of powerlessness. For it is still the same God who works in us and will not rest. There will always be a reason to doubt, but read Jeremia who said looking back to times of doubt: "You persuaded me, Lord, and I was persuaded! (Jeremia 20:7.)