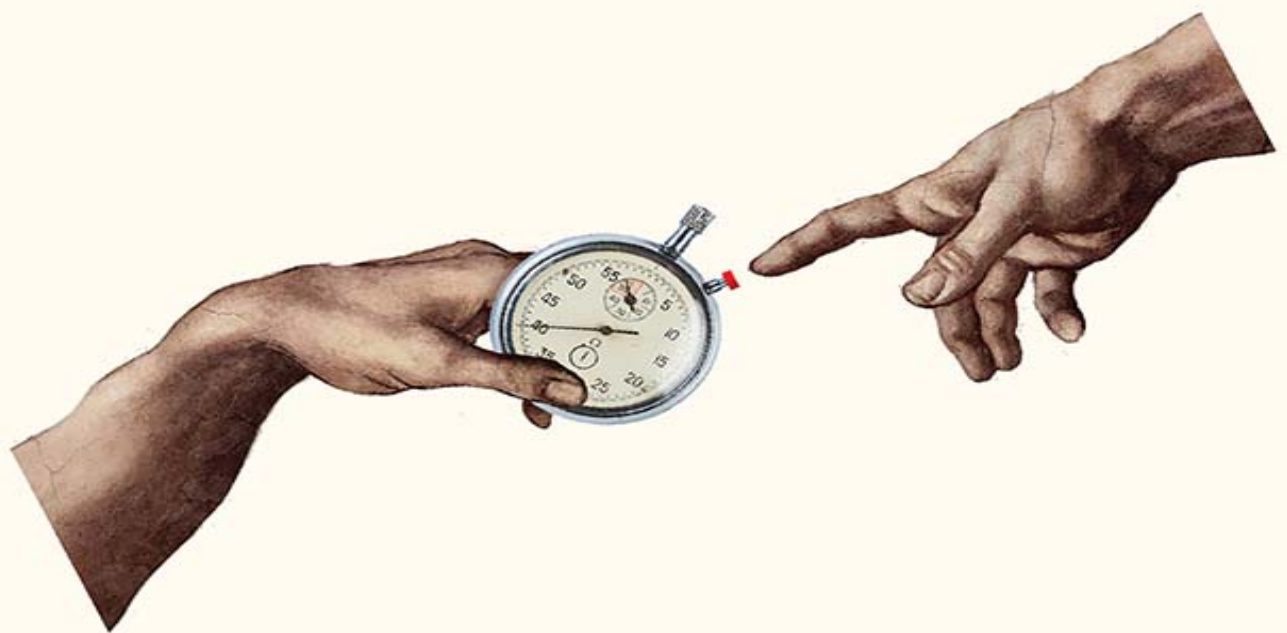


Svend
Brinkmann



My Year
with God

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My Year with God

Faith for Doubters

Svend Brinkmann

Translated by Tam McTurk

polity

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Preface

I have been interested in religion and faith ever since I was a small child. 'Does God exist? If there's a god, it would change everything!' was the way my mind worked back then. 'So why are we not all thrashing it out passionately until we settle the matter once and for all?', I mused. It was baffling. Surely this was one of life's biggest questions?

Despite harbouring thoughts like these for so long, I have never reached a definitive conclusion. At times, I have really wanted to believe, but not found it in me. At others, I have looked askance at the faithful: what is it that makes them capable of believing such incredible things? Is it faith or delusion? Or perhaps there is something wrong with me? I do not believe in spirits, gods, miracles, resurrection or eternal life. I am deeply sceptical about all things spiritual, alternative or with the merest hint of the New Age. And yet, I am deeply fascinated by religion. There is just no getting away from it.

With all these questions ringing in my ears, I chose to spend a year of my life looking at what faith and religion are - and can be - in the modern world. The idea was to find out whether the religious dimension to life might have relevance to someone like me, a scientist from a secular background. What can religion be for those of us who do not believe that there is more between heaven and earth than we might imagine?

Each month, I looked at a different question to do with faith and religion. I addressed each one with every ounce of curiosity and openness I could muster, seeking to cast off personal prejudices and give God a chance - at least for a year. I hoped that my diary would forge a path somewhere

between fundamentalism and outright rejection of religion, that I would be open-minded and not become bogged down in either of the two all-too-familiar trenches from which people often fight it out over these questions.

No matter which way you look at it, the fact remains that the vast majority of people have always professed some kind of religious faith or another. Indeed, studies suggest that is still the case for more than 80 per cent of humanity,¹ so it is highly probable that you, the reader, are either religious or at least open to the concept. Contrary to a great deal of twentieth-century thinking, the world does not seem to be evolving away from religion and towards atheism. Not believing in a god of some kind remains a minority position. For better or worse, faith seems to be here to stay, and although the questions raised in this book are ones that aroused my personal curiosity, I hope they will help believers and non-believers alike to come to a better understanding of each other. Perhaps they are not as far apart as they often think.

The book can be read from start to finish. It was written chronologically, in diary form, and, to some extent, the chapters build on each other. Having said that, it should also be possible to jump around and read about questions and themes of particular interest. Where appropriate, I have drawn on previous works that sprang to mind when contemplating the issue at hand.

I would like to thank the patient readers who provided helpful feedback as I was writing the book: Kåre Egholm Pedersen, Christian Hjortkjær, Lene Tanggaard and Thomas Aastrup Rømer – two theologians, a psychologist and an associate professor of pedagogical philosophy. You made important and challenging points and I have tried my best to follow up on them. Thanks are also due to my ever-helpful editor, Anne Weinkouff, for being open to my ideas

and providing invaluable support all the way from the idea stage to publication. It is great to have an editor who is on the same wavelength as the author's thinking and language. For the English edition of the book, I would like to thank everyone at Polity, especially Inès Boxman and Louise Knight, and Tam McTurk who provided a wonderful translation. Thanks also to my family - Ellen, Karl, Jens and Signe - for listening and discussing each of the monthly questions with me. Conversation is perhaps the best medium for debates about faith and philosophy, so I am grateful to all of those with whom I have discussed existential matters over the years. Finally, I would like to dedicate the book to my mother, who always listened to all my questions - including the ones to which there are no answers.

Notes

1. According to the Pew Research Center, the figure for those who profess no faith at all may be as low as 16 per cent of the global population:
www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec.

January

Why a book about God?

2 January

My childhood musings about whether there is a god weren't just for fun. After all, the existence of a deity would imply some kind of order in the universe that we - humankind - didn't create. It would mean a supreme being who might have a plan for our lives, whether we like it or not. It would provide some kind of meaning and purpose to life. It might even mean there's an afterlife - at least if God is indeed omnipotent, omnibenevolent and wants the best for us. But, purely logically, the existence of a god also throws up the less appealing possibility that we risk eternal damnation for the sins we commit in this life - an idea guaranteed to give any child sleepless nights.

Maybe it's all the other way around if there's no God? Maybe we have to define the meaning of life ourselves and endow it with a significance that stretches beyond mere physical existence. But what might that be in a universe in which physics, chemistry and biology explain everything, and nothing lasts forever? Ultimately, is meaning even possible without a God?

According to the statistics, I have now lived over half of my life without answering the question I first asked myself as a child. And I'm pretty sure I'm not alone. Many people are religious, of course - even in a relatively secular country such as Denmark, where I was born and still live. Many also call themselves atheists and absolutely reject any belief in a supreme power. But then many of us find

ourselves somewhere in between these two poles. Do we have to choose a side? And if so, how?

Like the vast majority of Danes, I was baptised and confirmed in the established Lutheran Church and would probably be described by some as 'culturally Christian' - but I can't purport to believe in God. He didn't really play a role in my childhood home. We didn't say grace before meals or pray before bed, and only went to church for baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals. If we did talk about religion, it was implicit that faith was irrational and that, ultimately, the world could be explained scientifically.

The funny thing is that I can't say with certainty that I *don't* believe in God either. Atheism has always seemed to me to be a bit too definitive a position in a world so mysterious that some astronomers are religious, and famous physicists like Stephen Hawking and Holger Bech Nielsen discuss the possibility of a God without scoffing at the concept - even though the former did dismiss God as an unnecessary hypothesis, and the latter operates with a concept of 'God' in quotation marks. Years ago, when I signed up for Facebook and was asked my religious views, I wrote 'agnostic' - the slightly dull, fence-sitting position of not really having faith but leaving the door slightly ajar just in case. Agnosticism implies that mere mortals are not in a position to judge whether there is a higher being. Much like the ant has no way of knowing that humans exist due to the limited intellectual capacity of the species, according to agnosticism, human ants are in much the same position when it comes to positing the existence or non-existence of a deity.

I have a deep-rooted fear of religious fundamentalism, in the sense of justifying attitudes to politics, ethics or life by calling it God's will. But dogmatic atheism seems almost as

bad to me - not because atheism is a religion, as some of its opponents like to claim (no, lack of religion really *is* the opposite of having religion), but because I find it fairly unimaginative. It suggests that the materialistic interpretation of the world of the last few centuries, which leaves no room for the divine, is the ultimate truth. How do we know for sure? 'We' don't. At least not if 'we' means humanity as a whole, because the vast majority of us have always professed some form of faith - and still do.

This year, I am going to give God a chance. My uneasy relationship with religion has gone on for long enough. What does it mean to believe? How do you start? What is the relationship between personal faith and organized religion? Does finding religion change your life? Does a secular outlook on life leave any room for religion? What use is faith? Does it make you more moral? These are some of the questions I want to explore. I have no way of knowing what the outcome will be. I can't promise to come out as a believer and change my Facebook profile. Right now, in fact, I'd say that's pretty unlikely, but I do promise to commit myself wholeheartedly and openly to the religious dimension. I will look at faith in a sincere and inquisitive manner without jumping to conclusions, and readers will be able to follow the process as I, hopefully, become wiser.

While it was my choice to explore religion and write a book about it, I don't think people choose to be religious any more than we choose to fall in love. But perhaps an open and enquiring mind makes us more receptive to the impulse - just like falling in love. This is one of the things I hope to find out this year. I readily concede that the whole venture has a somewhat artificial air. I expect most people become religious when they find themselves in an existentially borderline situation or face a major crisis, such as losing a loved one or being diagnosed with a

terminal illness. ‘There are no atheists in foxholes’, as the saying goes. Take, for example, the Danish author Puk Qvortrup’s moving book *Into a Star*, about how, as the pregnant mother of a young toddler, she suddenly lost her husband and the father of her children. She had never believed in God, but when her husband was on life support in hospital, Puk found herself praying:

I was surprised to see my hands clutched to my chest and hear myself whisper: Dear God, please, please listen to me. We haven’t spoken before because I don’t believe in you. But this isn’t about me; it’s about Lasse. Now’s the time to show me you exist. Lasse is about to be a father again; he has so much to live for. We need him. Show mercy.¹

But no mercy was shown. Lasse didn’t come back round. And therein lies one of the classic religious conundrums: why would God allow innocent people to die far too young and cause grief to so many others?

I have never suffered a devastating loss like Puk Qvortrup. I’m also well aware that I live a privileged and secure life with a loving family in a reasonably well-run country. I have no obvious reason for giving God a chance. Maybe I should wait until a crisis hits – because sooner or later, they always do. I could also approach the question from the opposite perspective: I may not currently be facing any of life’s great dramas, but they come to all mere mortals at some point, so perhaps it would be good to think about faith before they strike.

That is one reason to make a start – so that I’m not totally lacking in religious resources when the day comes that I need to deploy them. (I am already having doubts about my approach: *deploy* sounds too instrumental, although it is one of my considerations.) The second reason is so that nobody can say I have turned to the religious dimension out

of sheer desperation. Quite the contrary, in fact. I do so out of sincere interest. One oft-cited objection to faith is that it acts as some kind of comfort blanket for people who need solace and hope – one implication of which is that religion is, in fact, just an illusion, something for the weak. Given how many people are believers – and the historical influence of religion on virtually every aspect of all human cultures – I find the comfort-blanket critique lacking in credibility. Maybe faith fulfils that function for some, but it has many other functions as well. Besides, what’s wrong with comfort blankets? Surely no one would dismiss somebody like Puk Qvortrup, who turns to God – in whom she doesn’t even really believe – out of pure despair? Not me, at any rate.

I’m writing this on an intercity train speeding from one end of the country to the other. It’s a brand new year, and no one yet knows what it will bring. My journey with God begins now, on the second day of the year, and will continue until the end of December. Family, friends and colleagues may rest assured that I’m unlikely to cast off my worldview based on physics, cosmology, evolutionary theory, psychology and whatever else we think we know about the universe, the planet, life and humankind. It would take something completely unexpected for that to happen. It would be a bit like being a different person – so closely are my views on life linked to a scientific understanding of the world.

Nor do I have the remotest intention of turning into a hermit in a forest or desert, or retreating to an ashram in India in search of mysticism. I can also guarantee readers that I won’t become a creationist and believe that God, as an intelligent designer, created the world once and for all, mere millennia ago. I have always thought such a literal interpretation of the Bible, which fabricates some kind of competition between religion and science, is totally wrong.

Partly because, if that were the case, science would always prevail over religion due to its empirical methodology and ability to predict outcomes, but also because it turns religion into something that it is not. Religion and science are not parallel paths to enlightenment, competing to see which has the deepest understanding of the same issues. They deal with different kinds of issues. They are about different things. And that is the basis for my approach to this book and the year ahead.

But why a book? Why reach out to other people? Why not just search my soul for traces of faith and not bother other people? The answer is that I think many others feel the same. A lot of us are secularized, culturally Christian agnostics, and it would be good for us to have a collective discussion about the nature of faith and religion and the impact they can and should have on modern human life in a secular society. Judging by the sheer number of interviews, radio broadcasts and TV documentaries on these topics at the moment, there really does seem to be a widespread and genuine interest in such a discussion, and I want to play my part in it.

I have done a lot of work on the legacy from antiquity and the enduring significance to this day of Greek thinking. I have drawn on what might be called the legacy of Athens – the thread in the history of ideas that began with the ancient Greek philosophers and continued up to the Renaissance and into the Enlightenment, which we might also call humanism. In this tradition, humans are rational, ethical and possess an innate dignity that makes us deserving of respect. However, there is also what might be called the legacy of Jerusalem. The Christian heritage has been equally essential to human self-understanding and to society in our part of the world. As the historian Tom Holland recently concluded, Christianity even ‘created the Western consciousness’.²

With these thoughts in mind, one of my goals with this book will be to supplement 'Athens' with 'Jerusalem' - the intensely rational Greek with the humbler, more devout Christian. Religion has been a bit of a blind spot in my work - not because I didn't want to accord it significance, but because my focus was elsewhere. Although my books have not directly addressed God, they have nevertheless addressed many of the same ethical and existential questions around which Christianity and other world religions revolve, and to which they offer answers. So, the time has come to look God in the eye. For a year anyway.

5 January

Home again after a few days in Copenhagen. Unfortunately, work won out on the long train ride and marking exam papers took precedence over reflections on faith and religion. It wasn't exactly a religious experience. But I have managed to spend some time on the question of why I think it's important that I write this book. Am I actually religious without knowing it? Finding the answer to that is one of my first priorities. After all, if I'm already a believer, what's the point in making a fuss about becoming one?

When discussing religion with colleagues, I have occasionally cited a remark by Ludwig Wittgenstein, perhaps the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century. It was he who laid the foundations for the discussion about the philosophy of language that took centre stage in the latter half of the century and showed that language isn't a single thing but consists of myriad language games used for different purposes. One consequence of this line of thought is that religious language is not the same as scientific language. Wittgenstein once said that he was not a religious man but couldn't help looking at every problem from a religious point of view. This is largely how I think of

myself. As mentioned previously, when asked whether I believe in God, I don't really know how to respond – what does it even mean to 'believe in God'? Nevertheless, I think there are many insights about life to be gained from theology and religious philosophy. I also really like visiting churches and graveyards – partly for aesthetic reasons, but also because they strike a chord somewhere on my emotional scale that few other places reach. I know many other non-believers feel the same way. Does this indicate that I have some kind of impulse to believe?

An example of my ambivalent attitude to religion: in 2018, the Danish Humanist Society named me its 'Humanist of the Year'. The organization is founded on atheist principles and promotes a society in which all views on life are equal, which would, in effect, water down the role Christianity plays in society. They gave me a nice prize – a beautiful paper collage – and I was grateful for the recognition. Nevertheless, I have to admit to a nagging feeling that the accolade went to the wrong person. I've nothing against being known as a self-avowed humanist in the tradition of Greek philosophy, Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment ('Athens', as it were), but these days the concept of humanism is often seen as synonymous with atheism, as is the case with the Danish Humanist Society. In his great work on secularization, the philosopher Charles Taylor uses the term 'exclusive humanism', by which he means a humanism that deliberately distances itself from all aims and values beyond human happiness and wellbeing.³ This atheist form of humanism *excludes* all non-human values, because it doesn't think there is anything else of value other than that which emanates from human happiness. I have my doubts about this philosophy. I sense that there are legitimate discussions to be had about our relationship to life, nature and each other that cannot be accommodated purely within a human horizon. Does this

mean that we need faith or religion – perhaps a concept of God? I’m not sure, but it is one of the questions I want to pursue.

8 January

As a research psychologist interested in philosophy, I am used to thinking about a range of different intellectual propositions. What is the relationship between the brain and the psyche? The individual and society? Actions and behaviour? I use scientific tools to tackle these issues. The question is whether the same approach can be used for faith. Is faith something intellectual, something cognitive? Apart from monks, nuns and others who dedicate their lives to their faith, is it possible to become religious just by thinking about it? By entering into more or less constant meditation on religion? I don’t know, but it’s something else I hope to find out.

I must admit that one of the consequences of a busy, modern life like mine – one that doesn’t revolve around church on Sunday, regular prayer (before meals, at bedtime, etc.) and rules based on religious commandments – is that carving out time and space for religious contemplation requires a conscious decision. As that’s the whole point of this project, it’s quite ironic that I’ve not had time to do so yet. Perhaps religion has been marginalized from modern life precisely because so many of us are too busy. No matter your attitude to religion, I think it would be a shame if the reason that people don’t believe or don’t have the opportunity to engage with these existential questions is simply that they don’t have the time.

One thing I have managed to do is start reading Rebecca Newberger Goldstein’s *36 Arguments for the Existence of God*, a humorous novel about an atheist lecturer in the psychology of religion who writes a surprise bestseller

called *The Varieties of Religious Illusion*.⁴ The main character becomes famous as 'the atheist with a soul' because, unlike more dogmatic atheists, he takes religion seriously. I'm only halfway through the book, which I'm actually reading because I am interviewing Goldstein at a festival this summer, but I already see clear echoes of my own project. Goldstein herself is an atheist - with a soul, I think - and her novel contains a copious appendix of works of non-fiction in which she examines 36 pieces of 'proof' of the existence of God and rejects them all. In the Middle Ages, producing such proof and debating it was all the rage, and such theological pondering gave rise to a great deal of deeply fascinating philosophy. The title of the fictional bestseller in Goldstein's book is an allusion to the psychologist William James' major work on comparative religion, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James is one of my favourite psychologists and a 'founding father' of American psychology. He lived from 1842 to 1910, a period during which it was quite natural for scientists to study religious experience as a significant dimension of life. Only later, once psychology established itself as a science rooted in the same principles as the natural sciences, which left no room for faith, were such endeavours considered reprehensible.

However, if religion is something we can *think* our way to, and the modern world - from my perspective, at least - doesn't offer rituals that encourage religious openness, then where should we look for God? I've been mulling over whether I've actually ever had an experience that might be characterized as religious. And I think perhaps I have. Not at births, christenings, weddings or funerals. Nor during sex or when drunk. All of these can be intense and moving experiences, but for me they don't trigger anything I would associate with religion.

What I do recall, however, is an experience I had during a family holiday on Sardinia, the Italian island in the Mediterranean where Berlusconi has his holiday home. I went on a boat trip to some caves only accessible from the sea, along with my two sons, who were relatively young at the time. We were in a small boat with other tourists, out on the dark-blue sea, the glorious Mediterranean sun high above us. For some reason or other, I distinctly remember looking at the cliff face ahead and suddenly feeling that everything was OK. Not just with my family, work, health, etc. *Everything* was OK. With the whole world, the universe, the cosmos. The rugged, ancient cliffs, which had been there for millions of years, filled me with a feeling of profound calm and deep meaning. I have had occasional glimpses of something similar before and since, but nothing quite like this. I felt it in my body and mind at the same time – a heavy, insisting and reassuring tranquillity. Everything clicked into place: the sea, the cliffs, the sun, my kids. I don't think I've ever spoken about it before. I find it difficult to put into words what it actually meant. Was it not just a sudden surge of wellbeing that neuroscience or other modern disciplines can explain? Well, I'm pretty sure that all such feelings are based in the brain and central nervous system, but that doesn't mean they can be reduced solely to what happens in the brain (my experience of other people, for example, is similarly based in my brain, but these people also exist outside my consciousness, as separate beings). I can't even say this experience changed me. I didn't become religious or a better person (at some point, I must address whether those two things are actually linked). Nor have I sought to conjure up the sensation again. But I know this type of experience exists, and that, in itself, is gratifying, even if I can't quite explain why. Wittgenstein – who, incidentally, had a notoriously troubled mind – reported similar

episodes, which he categorized as a feeling of 'absolute safety':

I believe the best way of describing it is to say that when I have it *I wonder at the existence of the world*. And I am then inclined to use such phrases as 'how extraordinary that anything should exist' or 'how extraordinary that the world should exist'. I will mention another experience straightaway which I also know and which others of you might be acquainted with: it is, what one might call, the experience of feeling *absolutely* safe. I mean the state of mind in which one is inclined to say, 'I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens.'⁵

9 January

I gave a lecture yesterday, after which I had a quick chat with some of the audience. One friendly but insistent woman - in her thirties, I think - wanted to ask me a question. My talk was about the process of personal formation or edification (which is sometimes described with the German word *Bildung*) and stressed the importance of learning about both the natural sciences and philosophy. The woman asked whether, given all the time I spend thinking about human existence, I felt I was missing out by not believing in God. Did I not regret the absence of something on which I could lean or to which I could 'attach my thoughts'? I think those were the words she used. She explained that she was a believer and that her faith had helped her in life.

I was just about to fire off my standard response to this kind of question: that the existential and ethical questions that interest me can provide meaningful answers without the need to believe in God. For example, ethics don't