

***WAKING TO REALITY: A FORMER
ATHEIST'S DISCOVERY OF GOD AND SELF***

**A THREE PART SERIES, PREPARED FOR
"THE IMPERFECT PASTOR"**

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Part 1

A Hellish Starting Place

“Believe in Jesus and you will be saved.”

These words were emblazoned into my mind from the time I was a youngster. At first glance, one can find hope here. Salvation, whatever that is supposed to mean, seems assured. However, here in the West, this statement often bears with it a specific, and might I say, terrifying context. For if you were to ask most Christians, “What are we saved from and should we have cause for concern if we fail to heed this call to believe in Jesus?” Without a mincing of words, the answers you will receive will probably end up looking like the following: *You are saved from God’s wrath, and yes, you will burn in hell if you do not believe.* And this is exactly the theology that was forced upon me very early on.

With this permanently fixed in the back of my mind, I of course chose to believe in Jesus. What child would not, given those gloomy prognostications? And while I cannot recall the exact age when I “gave my heart to the Lord,” I do know that it was fairly early on. Indeed, I cannot remember a time when I did not have this dualistic (heaven and hell) worldview. It was always a given.

End. Of. Story.

This was a terribly difficult reality to live with, as I never actually felt secure in my “belief” in Jesus. And what did that even mean anyway? Was I supposed to simply believe that Jesus was who he said he was and then go about being a kid? Or did I have to believe and then also follow his teachings, which seemed downright impossible? I mean, even his disciples could not follow him when it counted most. Prior to Jesus’ public execution, Peter denied him three times, the other disciples did not even have the chance to as they failed to show up to the event, and do I need to even mention everyone’s favorite scapegoat, Judas? All these guys bailed when Jesus needed them the most, and if I did the same thing, it was off to the big eternal underground cookout?

My mind would often wander in this way, constantly asking all the “what if” questions I could: *What if I blasphemed the Holy Spirit, would nothing else matter in my life after that point because my sin was “unpardonable?”*¹ *What if I failed to repent of some sin I may have committed prior to death, would I not get a second chance?* And on and on my troubled young mind would go.

As time went on, things only got worse. Sure, on the outside, I was just fine. I excelled at school, always had the highest or nearly highest batting average in little league, and was perfectly comfortable in most social settings. But internally, I was so fixated on death and the afterlife that it drove me mad. Perhaps that is why I had so many nightmares growing up. Some of the most memorable were the most recurrent: run-ins with the very creatures of Dante’s hell, and being

¹ See Matt 12:32 and Mark 3:29.

forced to charge through the killing fields of Armageddon. The sleep paralysis and night terrors that accompanied the nightmares did not help my situation.

Needless to say, by the time my teenage years hit, I was pretty much a wreck. Not many people know this about me. And really, they should not be expected to. I hid things fairly well. I never made it known just how terrified I was about going to hell. And if not me, then I was convinced the “non-believers” that I loved certainly were.

My grandfather.

Various girlfriends I had throughout my youth.

My friend Ryan who died in a car accident.

Two of my classmates who committed suicide.

All of them, I believed, were hellbound. And why? Because they did not say the magical salvific phrase Christians say to get themselves into heaven. This was horrifying and there was not a damn thing I could do about it. After all, the Bible was clear on this.

But how was this fair?

How was this just?

Prominent atheist neuroscientist Sam Harris, in a debate against Christian apologist William Lane Craig, makes this keen observation:

What if Muslims are right? What if Islam is true? How should we view God in moral terms? How would we view God in moral terms, or should I say, Allah? Okay, we have been born in the wrong place, to the wrong parents, to the wrong culture, given the wrong theology. Okay, needless to say, Dr. Craig is doomed. He’s been thoroughly confused by Christianity. I mean, just appreciate what a bad position he’s now in to appreciate the true word of God. I have been thoroughly misled by science. Okay, where is Allah’s compassion? And yet, he’s omnipotent; he could change this in an instant. He could give us a sign that would convince everyone in this room. And yet he’s not gonna do it. And hell awaits. And hell awaits our children, because we can’t help but mislead our children. Now, just hold this vision in mind, and first appreciate how little sleep you have lost over this possibility. Okay. Just feel in yourself in this moment how carefree you are, and will continue to be, in the fact of this possibility. What are the chances that we’re all going to go to hell, for, for eternity, because we haven’t recognized the Qu’ran to be the perfect word of the creator of the universe? Please know that this is exactly how Christianity appears to someone who has not been indoctrinated by it.²

With these types of things running through my head as well, I thought of my grandfather, who had always been rather agnostic when it came to Jesus, yet was one of the best men I knew.

² The debate, in its entirety, can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yqaHXKLRKzg>.

When he had the full capacity of his mind, he was giving and kind. He lovingly took care of my grandmother, was a great dad to my mom and uncle, and influenced me as much as anyone during my youth. And what, he was going to burn in hell for all eternity because he could not come to a “correct” conclusion about the exact nature of Jesus Christ? Then on the flipside—and I do not mean to judge, but hear me out—folks like the *Westboro Baptist Church*, who, like the zealots they are, picket other people’s funerals whilst holding obscene and hateful homemade signs, are well on their way to life’s after-party in the sky because they have the secret password: J-E-S-U-S?

Really?

Moreover, what about my friends who struggled so strongly with depression that they felt they had to take their own life? Why, instead of healing these sick people, instead of delivering them from the bondage they were so held in, would God torment them forever? Any human being who did this would be considered fit for an insane asylum and pumped full of psychotropic medications, and yet that is exactly what God was going to do to people I cared about? *Why?* Well, I was given all sorts of reasons, the most common being that his justice demanded such. That is to say, sin deserves punishment, and all are guilty of sin (see Rom 3:23). And if anyone did not accept the whoopin’ Jesus took, then they would receive their just desserts.

“Some great ‘father,’” I would mockingly think.

Yet, in spite of this cynicism and sarcasm, I clung to these “traditional” views for many years. Allow me to correct myself, for in all reality, they clung to me. And I did not know what to do. This was just the reality of the universe, derived from the “difficult truths of the Bible,” as I was often told. Sadly, the one difficult truth of the Bible that stuck out to me was that God was an asshole.

The Bible was clear about this.

First, turn your attention to Num 25, where is a plague on Israel because God is mad that some of the people have started making sacrifices to other gods. So what he does is instructs Moses to “impale them in the sun” so that he does not have to be angry anymore. After a Midianite woman is “brought in” by an Israelite man (code for “gettin’ it on”), Aaron’s grandson Phinehas does just as God instructed—he rams his spear through their bellies. Hurray! This pleases God, so the plague of vengeance, which killed twenty-four thousand Israelites, is lifted. Because of Phinehas’ great zeal for the Lord, he is given a “covenant of peace” and a “covenant of perpetual priesthood.” Now, let me reiterate that in case it did not sink in: Phinehas is given a *covenant of peace*, by God, for *murdering an interracial couple* who were said to be partially, if not fully, responsible for a *divinely-mandated plague* that ended up killing *twenty-four thousand people*. The Bible makes this clear, and it is a “difficult truth” to accept indeed.

But wait, there’s more.

Head over to Deut 20. Here we have some rules for how Israel was to properly conduct warfare while taking back the “promised land.” What God makes clear is that he does not like the

Canaanites nor a few of the other “-ites”—not even the cute, chubby-cheeked little children. In fact, he wants them all dead—every man, woman, and yes, *child*. We have a word for this: genocide. And this is not the only place where we find evidence that God is a bloodthirsty, genocidal maniac. In fact, that depiction is littered all throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, primarily in books like Joshua, Judges, and the aforementioned Deuteronomy.

Yet, in spite of this brutality and bloodlust, the story that really got to me—and in fact is the one that broke the camel’s back for my faith—is the little tale about Onan, and it comes from Gen 38. Here is the brief synopsis: God murders a wicked man named Er (we’re off to a smashing start, are we not?). This makes Er’s wife a childless widow. As was the custom, Onan, the brother of the slain Er, was to bear a child with Er’s wife. However, Onan was not having any of it so “pulls out” early, ejaculating on the ground. God then gets pissed and kills Onan too, leaving Judah with two dead sons (as well as a bunch of semen and blood to mop up).

The end.

I can recall asking my pastors about the meaning of this passage, only to receive the stock “difficult biblical truth” answer. And because they could offer no better explanation, that was it for me. I was done. I simply could not comprehend how God could do this to poor Onan, or to poor Judah, or to poor Er, or poor Er’s wife. Why them and not me? Certainly, my shower can testify to how much “seed hath been spilled” during my teenage years and I never once had a lightning bolt crash through the skylight. Nor did I have any mysterious heart attacks after my many porn sessions. Nor was I smitten any of the other countless times I disobeyed and spat in God’s face. But Onan was. Just like that. Murdered. For pulling out early.

Sick.

This was the God I was told was true, yet this was the God I could no longer worship. I tried, and I failed. While most of my family, friends, and pastors seemed content to sing praises to this murderous deity, I was not. I could not. It was physically impossible and no matter how many of the motions I went through, no matter how many Sunday nights I spent leading others in worship, no matter how much I read my Bible, it was literally impossible to sincerely worship God.

So I walked away from the faith. But where I was walking to I had no clue. Agnosticism? Atheism? Who knew? In front of me was only a barren desert, with just a few cacti scattered throughout the landscape and one or two tumbleweed gently rolling by—daunting to say the least. I knew I could not go back though. There was nothing to go back to—nothing of value anyway. Only an angry god pointing his angry finger at me, his other hand ready to toss a thunderbolt my way. The choice was simple then, into the desert I went.

Part 2

The Fallout of Deconstruction

*“Before the truth sets you free, it tends to make you miserable.”*³ ~ Richard Rohr

The desert can be a scary place if you are not accustomed to it. Water is scarce. Food sources are sparse. Human population is non-existent. Incidentally, it is a perfect analogy for when thinking about our spiritual journeys. My guess is that anyone who has even begun the journey understands just how fitting the analogy is. In the spiritual desert, you have little to sustain you. And you are essentially alone, with no direction and no particular place to go. So all you can do is wander, and wander, and wander.

That is exactly what I did.

When I first stepped into the desert, I carried with me the rawest of emotions—anger, bitterness, and depression. I felt betrayed, lied to, deceived six ways from Sunday. I would become especially irate any time I reminisced about the nightmares from my youth. Countless horrifying dreams, all over something I could no longer bring myself to believe in. I thought: *I could have avoided all the terror and pain, and could have gotten some better sleep too, had I simply never become a “believer.” I could have lived without the fear that my deceased friends and family were burning in God’s eternal torture chamber had I never been told these “harsh biblical truths.” I could have lived as a child should, without all the terrifying dispensationalist eschatological hocus-pocus.*

On and on thoughts like these went. Yet dwelling on them was not at all helpful. They just made me angrier. Moreover, the past was just that, the past. And there was nothing I could do about the past. The only thing I could do, then, was move on and attempt to figure out what this universe was all about. So to start, I looked to those who had the strongest critique of religion, especially Christianity, to see what their solutions to life’s biggest questions were. What I discovered frankly scared the shit out of me, as it was the atheistic philosophers who seemed to have the most rational arguments for what the nature of reality was. And if they were correct in their assessments, then that meant little case could be made for a God at all. In one way, this was a relief, for, at minimum, the angry monster God in the sky seemed preposterous. Yet, in another way, no matter how much I despised Christianity—and religion altogether—I was not quite emotionally ready to face a universe without a God. But, intellectually, that is what seemed true the more I read and listened to folks like Christopher Hitchens, Friedrich Nietzsche, Richard Dawkins, Stefan Molyneux, Neil deGrasse Tyson, et al. Considering I was so torn, what was I to do?

For a time, I simply wavered. I straddled what was for me the uncomfortable fence between agnosticism and atheism, where my more atheistic days were my more cynical. These were the days I would figuratively shake my fist toward the sky—to a God I did not even really believe in—and mockingly ask: *How can you sit up there and allow children to get cancer and AIDS?*

³ Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 74.

Or allow 9/11? Or all the other evil that exists in this messed up world? The only answer I received was silence. Yet, there were also those days where something would hum inside me (to use Rob Bell's language). Some still small voice would "speak." I knew not what it was, but it was, for lack of a better word, *something*. This something is what kept me straddling that torturous fence, gathering splinters in places nobody wants them.

Now, while this theological grudge match was taking place in my mind, I began to take a strong interest in political philosophy. I gravitated toward libertarianism and folks like Ron Paul, studying what is known as the non-aggression principle as much as I could. It is more complicated than this, but what this principle essentially states is that one cannot initiate force or coercion against another (including their property), and contrary to what the church taught about how humans should behave, this teaching actually made sense to me. Almost ironically, it even sounded similar to Jesus' command to "do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31). So I began preaching it, thinking it would make sense to others in the same way it made sense to me. *Boy was I wrong*. In fact, most people did not take too kindly to it at all. And because I was still pissed off about all-things-church, I made sure to let those folks really have it—in the form of debate and argumentation. I did it with a chip on my shoulder too, allowing the hurt to dictate how I would approach situations. This caused my split with the church to grow even larger, from a crack to a chasm.

The chasm that was only exacerbated by my politics seemed to grow exponentially any time I questioned Western theological doctrines. And while I may not have had any theological *answers*, I certainly had *questions*—and lots of them. To my Calvinist friends, I asked how a Father could choose which of his children to save. I asked how they justified the New Testament claim "God is love" in light of their soteriological and eschatological beliefs. I asked why their God's justice had to be juxtaposed against his love and defined as even harsher than pure retribution. I asked why their God failed to look like Jesus. I asked how they could claim God had Jesus killed in order to forgive our sins, while Jesus preached forgiveness while he was yet alive. I asked and I asked and I asked.

And I failed to receive any satisfactory answers.

My questions for the Arminians were just as abundant. If Jesus came to save everyone, did he fail in his mission? Are we certain that human beings possess the sort of libertarian free will that this argument hinges on? From the looks of things, can we really say that people are, on the whole, behaving as if they are free, or rather, freed from sin? So for instance, does an insane person have free will? Does a severely handicapped person? Does a person who has suffered so much abuse in life that they fail to understand why they habitually cut themselves have it? Does a child born addicted to methamphetamine? Does a soldier who comes back from war with PTSD have it? Does a woman who has been serially raped since her toddler years? And all of these people and *many* more have to "freely" choose Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and savior or they will suffer eternal punishment in a burning lake of fire?

Frankly, for all intents and purposes this God seemed no better than the monster God of neo-Calvinism.

Again, so many questions and not many satisfactory answers . . .

Even worse yet, my questioning pushed friends away. It was not my intention though. My intention was to get answers to life's toughest questions. My intention was to figure out what the hell this experience was all about. *Why are we here? If there is a God, what is he, or she, like?* Etc. Nonetheless, people scattered. And frankly, I do not really blame them. I was coming from such a different place in life that it would have been impossible for people to understand me unless they themselves were on a similar journey. That is just the way the desert works. (I just wish I would have realized that then.)

Now, I cannot recall exactly when—perhaps it was around 2011/12—but everything theologically begun to change for me when I stumbled upon this little known philosopher from Oregon named Thomas Talbott. The first piece of his I read, entitled “Universalism, Calvinism, and Arminianism: Some Preliminary Reflections,” smacked me in the face so damn hard that I can remember grinning from ear to ear for days. I will quote the portion that floored me the most:

- (1) It is God's redemptive purpose for the world (and therefore his will) to reconcile all sinners to himself;
- (2) It is within God's power to achieve his redemptive purpose for the world;
- (3) Some sinners will never be reconciled to God, and God will therefore either consign them to a place of eternal punishment, from which there will be no hope of escape, or put them out of existence altogether.

If this is indeed an inconsistent set of propositions, as I believe it is, then at least one of the propositions is false. Calvinists reject proposition (1); Arminians reject proposition (2); and Universalists reject proposition (3). But in fact we can also find *prima facie* support in the Bible for each of the three propositions.⁴

I had never heard of anything like this. Apparently neither had Sam Harris! Not from a Christian at least. God? Saving all? *No, it couldn't be!* Yet, that is exactly what this very logical, philosophical, and rational Christian theologian and philosopher was saying. So I had to know more. I had to give this guy, as well as others like him, the same type of attention I gave the atheistic philosophers whom appealed to me because of *their* strong sense of reason and logic. Perhaps this newly discovered thinker could be a beacon of light to this lost ship at sea. Perhaps he and others could help my logical mind attempt to understand the hum that still buzzed inside of me. Perhaps this grin that his work gave me meant something more than even I currently knew.

We were about to find out.

⁴ Talbott, “Universalism, Calvinism, and Arminianism,” para. 2–3.

Part 3

Rebuilding the Foundation

*“To be human means to want to transcend the merely human.”*⁵ ~ Seyyed Hossein Nasr

To say that my faith changed overnight would be a lie. It would probably make for a more intriguing story—something similar to Paul’s Damascus Road event—but it would ultimately be false. I simply had too much to dig through, too much to learn. But as I went deeper down the Rabbit Hole, that hum, that *something*, kept getting louder and clearer. Sure, many of my questions only lead to more questions, and from those questions yet more questions, but oddly, I was generally okay with it. After all, glimpses of a God who is wholly good could be seen every now and then, and the more I dug, the more frequently this occurred. Eventually I was driven off and away from the atheistic/theistic fence that I spent so long on, which was a very comforting thing indeed.

Like I said earlier, my initial exposure to a theology centered, not on God’s Janus-faced nature, but on God being “love and light” (1 John 1:5, 4:8), was from Thomas Talbott. After reading his aforementioned article, I picked up a few of his books as well as a variety of others from thinkers like him—folks such as Robin Parry and Eric Reitan, for instance. From there, I focused my attention on some of the early church fathers Talbott and Parry would mention in their writings, namely, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, and Gregory of Nyssa. What I discovered, and much to my pleasant surprise, was that Christianity in the first few centuries looked nothing like it did in the twenty first. All of these doctrines that modern Western Christians clung so tightly to were open for debate back then, including (gasp!), universal reconciliation. Augustine, the father of Western theology, even admitted that “indeed very many . . . deplore the notion of the eternal punishment of the damned and their interminable and perpetual misery.”⁶ St. Basil the Great states something similar: “The mass of men (Christians) say that there is to be an end of punishment to those who are punished.”⁷

This was dumbfounding, but true nonetheless.

The proof is in the pudding: just take a look at this compilation of quotes from some of the early church fathers regarding universal salvation.⁸ These are but a few that you can find at [tentmaker.org](http://www.tentmaker.org):

“We think, indeed, that the goodness of God, through his Christ, may recall all his creatures to one end, even his enemies being conquered and subdued . . . for Christ must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet.” ~ Origen of Alexandria

⁵ Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, 27.

⁶ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, sec. 112.

⁷ Hanson, *Universalism*, Ch. 17, sec. 2.

⁸ You can find these quotes, and plenty others, at <http://www.tentmaker.org/Quotes/churchfathersquotes.htm>.

“All men are Christ’s, some by knowing him, the rest not yet. He is the Savior, not of some and the rest not. For how is he Savior and Lord, if not the Savior and Lord of all?” ~ Clement of Alexandria

“In the end and consummation of the Universe all are to be restored into their original harmonious state, and we all shall be made one body and be united once more into a perfect man and the prayer of our Savior shall be fulfilled that all may be one.” ~ St. Jerome

“While the devil thought to kill One [Christ], he is deprived of all those cast out of hades, and he [the devil] sitting by the gates, sees all fettered beings led forth by the courage of the Savior.” ~ Athanasius of Alexandria

“For it is evident that God will in truth be all in all when there shall be no evil in existence, when every created being is at harmony with itself and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord: when every creature shall have been made one body.” ~ Gregory of Nyssa

If you try saying some of these same things now, you’ll get labeled all sorts of things—false prophet, false teacher, wolf in sheep’s clothing, deceived by Satan, of a reprobate mind, and my personal favorite, member of a “circle-jerking cult.” It’s true, I, along with my best friend, actually got called this. And for the record, that accusation is false. I promise. Well, there was this one time . . . oh, never mind.

Refocus, Matthew . . .

Now, during this time of voracious reading, while much of my reconstruction was fruitful, certain questions lingered, and even bothered me a bit. Sure, I was content enough to accept that *if* God existed, *then* he was probably more like Jesus than anything else. And *if* his mission was to save people, *then* he was going to save everyone—lest I find myself either unsaved or having something to boast in (Eph 2:9). But what was I supposed to do with the God of the Bible, for instance? What was I to do with the story about Phinehas? What about Onan and his family? What about the genocidal commands? What about the command for Abraham to slaughter Isaac? What about how God’s response to humanity’s violence in the book of Genesis was to use more grandiose violence? How was I supposed to explain all of this aggression attributed to God without becoming a Marcionite, that is, without simply chucking out the Old Testament? As I understood things, even *if* God eventually saved everyone, *then* it does not follow that he is somehow justified to use violence against his creation—not if he is to be called “good” anyway.

How was I ever going to understand these things?

Well, one day, I would discover an answer—nay, a way of answering—questions like the ones above, ultimately thanks to the work of a French anthropologist named René Girard. But the very first “Girardian” material that I read was courtesy of Michael Hardin, a theologian using Girard’s anthropological insights to not only explain how and why so much violence was erroneously projected onto God, but how and why Jesus was a figure actually worth following. And while I do not want to be overly dramatic, it was as if Morpheus himself was in front of me with a red

pill in his right hand and a blue pill in his left—and like Neo, down went the red pill, allowing me to see the cultural matrix humanity has been plugged into since the foundation of the world.

Now, if I had to sum up Girard's mimetic theory in one paragraph—a difficult task indeed—it would go a little something like this . . .⁹

Human beings are mimetic, or in other words, imitative, beings. We copy each other in the most obvious of ways. This includes a copying of the desires of others. Because of this, we get into rivalries with one another, and where there is rivalry, there is violence on the horizon. When it inevitably comes, and when it escalates enough, throughout an entire society or civilization for instance, it has to be deferred onto a scapegoat. If not, the entire society could collapse from the mayhem. But when violence does get transferred onto a member or subgroup, the masses become unified and peace ensues. From all against all violence to all against one—catharsis! Our cultures and religions, then, arise because of this process.

If none of that made sense to you then that is fine. This is not really a pedagogical book anyway. If you want a primer on the mimetic theory, then pick up my book *From the Blood of Abel*. I flesh out the details there. But anyway, what this anthropological reality did for me personally was that it gave me the key to understanding why human beings—including the human beings who wrote the Scriptures—tell stories the way they do. It elucidated why, for example, the story of Phinehas reads the way it does, where peace ensues after a scapegoat—an interracial couple in this instance—gets eliminated from the community. *Those assholes were responsible for the plague, they had to go, and when they do, we will have catharsis*. Thanks to Girard, I can now call “bullshit!” and have a way of explaining why.

(But let's not take this to mean the true source of revelation came from Girard. Sure, Girard helped distill things in such a way where I could intellectually understand why myth reads the way it does, but ultimately, it is the gospel of Christ Jesus that allows us to see with new eyes why our myths are such. In short: Gospel interprets myth.)

After my “Girardian discovery,” I spent a few years reading as much as I could. I read multiple books by Girard, a bunch by James Alison, everything by Michael Hardin, as well as at least one work by folks such as Gil Bailie, James G. Williams, Jean-Michel Oughourlian, Scott Garrels, Mark Heim, and many others. It was an exciting time for me, although terribly difficult on my pocketbook. But it was so worth it. I would have never been able to learn and grow as much as I did during these years without the brilliant works of those just listed.

And during this time, I got the itch to start writing myself. I was by no means a Girardian scholar—hell, I was not a scholar of anything—but, I had been around the block and back, and had been reading pretty much the entire time. I had gone from feeling like a trapped conservative Evangelical who reluctantly believed some people would be tormented for all of eternity, to a borderline atheist who thought all things Christian were complete crap, to whatever I was at this point. I guess the best word would be “heretic,” as I now believed God was just like the non-

⁹ To paraphrase Run D.M.C.

violent Jesus of Nazareth in character and that, in the end, he was going to reconcile all of humanity—nay, the entire cosmos!—to himself. So, based on my having a history of polar opposite worldviews, needless to say, I had plenty to write about.

So begin writing I did. And, as they say, the rest is history.