

LOSING MY RELIGION

HOW I LOST MY FAITH REPORTING
ON RELIGION IN AMERICA—AND
FOUND UNEXPECTED PEACE

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C O N T E N T S

Epigraph	iv
one	“You Need God” 1
two	Born Again 5
three	A God Thing 25
four	Answered Prayers 39
five	Shot Out of a Cannon 61
six	My Ten Commandments 79
seven	Father Hollywood 91
eight	A Spiritual Body Blow 107
nine	The Golden Rule 121
ten	Millstones Around Their Necks 135
eleven	A Gentle Whisper Silenced 151
twelve	“Rebuild My Church” 163
thirteen	Heal Thyself 173
fourteen	The Dark Night of the Soul 197
fifteen	At the Edge of the Earth 215
sixteen	Letting Go of God 235
seventeen	One Story Too Many 253
eighteen	“Welcome to the Edge” 259
Epilogue	275
Index	285

The Dark Night of the Soul

As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?
My tears have been my food
day and night,
while men say to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”

— PSALM 42:1–3

IN CHRISTIAN CIRCLES, the book *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* became an instant classic when it was published in 1998. Written by Lee Strobel, a respected legal reporter with the *Chicago Tribune*, the book chronicles the author's spiritual journey from skeptic to devout evangelical as he investigates the scientific and historical evidence of Christianity.

Inspired by Strobel's work, I thought I, too, could use my inves-

tigative skills to bolster my waning faith. I wanted to find evidence that what the Apostle Paul told the Corinthians was true: that a person would be transformed by his belief in Christ.

“And [Jesus] died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again,” Paul wrote (1 Corinthians 5:15–20). “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! . . . We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.”

If the Gospels were true, then shouldn’t I be able to find plenty of data that showed Christians acted differently—superior in their morals and ethics—from the rest of society? I wanted to see that people were changed in fundamental ways by their belief in Christ. This was a new tack for me. For years, my assumption was that Christianity was true, and my studies and readings focused on shoring up that belief. I used the historical record, the Bible, anecdotal evidence and arguments by theologians and apologists to back up my position. Now, I wanted to take a step back and test my assumption about the truth of Christianity itself by examining how Christians behaved, looking at their actions, not their words.

I wasn’t worried about what I would find. I viewed my own doubts as a symptom of my failings as a Christian, and not that something was fundamentally wrong with Christianity. I did feel a growing distance between God and me, but I knew this wasn’t an unusual condition for people of faith. I took solace in reading about St. John of the Cross, the 16th-century Spanish mystic who felt abandoned by God and experienced a crisis of faith, a period of time he referred to as the “dark night of the soul.”

“The soul perceives itself to be so unclean and miserable that it seems as if God had set Himself against it,” he wrote. The separa-

tion from God nearly drove St. John mad—that’s how badly the Spaniard wanted a relationship with the Lord.

I also identified with another beloved saint, St. Therese of Lisieux. Born in the 18th century, the sickly Carmelite nun known as the “Little Flower of Jesus” successfully petitioned the pope to allow her to enter a convent early, at age 15. She died after nine years of cloistered life, virtually unknown outside the gates of the small, anonymous convent of Lisieux in northern France. She wrote a spiritual memoir there called *Story of a Soul*, in which she described the “Little Way” by which she strived for holiness—through small acts of kindness, patience and understanding that she believed pleased the Lord.

“Love proves itself by deeds, so how am I to show my love?” she wrote. “Great deeds are forbidden me. The only way I can prove my love is by scattering flowers and these flowers are every little sacrifice, every glance and word, and the doing of the least actions for love.”

The memoir, not written with the public in mind and published posthumously, became one of the best-selling religious books of the 20th century. St. Therese’s writings revealed in honest detail the spiritual crises she had gone through despite her great faith. “Jesus isn’t doing much to keep the conversation going,” she once said of her prayers. She also wrote about her uncertainty about the afterlife: “If you only knew what darkness I am plunged into.”

The doubts of St. John of the Cross and St. Therese were something that even Jesus experienced. While on the cross, he stunned witnesses and Christians through the centuries by shouting, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The doubts of holy men and women continue today. Mother Teresa was one of the most revered religious persons of our time, symbolizing for millions the beauty of Christian devotion, sac-

rifice, holiness and works. Yet she suffered excruciating doubt. Recently published letters in *Come By My Light* reveal that she felt absent from God for the last 50 years of her life. Not five days or five months or five years, but *five decades*. Frustrated, ashamed and sometimes in doubt about God's existence, Mother Teresa kept her spiritual crisis a secret from everyone but a few spiritual mentors.

"Please pray specially for me that I may not spoil His work and that Our Lord may show Himself—for there is such terrible darkness within me, as if everything was dead," she wrote in 1953.

In another letter, she wrote: "I spoke as if my very heart was in love with God—tender, personal love. If you were [there], you would have said, 'What hypocrisy.' "

"Jesus has a very special love for you," she assured one mentor in 1979. "[But] as for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see,—Listen and do not hear—the tongue moves [in prayer] but does not speak . . . I want you to pray for me—that I let Him have [a] free hand."

These saints had struggled with faith just as I was now wrestling with it. I found comfort in reading about them, because honest discussions of doubt were rare commodities in the modern church. Today, many Christians—especially evangelicals—express doubt in catch phrases: "I'm in the desert right now," "I'm going through a dry patch," "I'm not walking with God these days." Their doubts are treated with pat prescriptions: more prayer, more church, more Bible study and more bromides: "If you're at the end of your rope, tie a knot of faith and hang on," "Stop running away from God so He can catch up," "You just need to turn toward God and He'll be there."

I often heard a story called "Footsteps in the Sand," in which Jesus shows someone who recently died how He had walked with him throughout his life, symbolized by two sets of footsteps side by

side in the sand. But the follower of Christ points to a particularly rough time in his life when there was only one set of footprints.

“Jesus, why did you abandon me when I really needed you most?”

“I didn’t abandon you, my son. I was carrying you.”

Most Christians keep any deep spiritual crisis under wraps. I felt I was failing as a Christian because I was experiencing such feelings. Somehow I had let Satan disrupt my spiritual life. Maybe it was because I had stopped attending church. Or quit going to Bible study. Perhaps I wasn’t praying enough. It could be that the pat prescriptions were correct. Whatever the reason, I was sure it was my fault. God hadn’t moved away from me; I had moved away from Him. I refused to consider that my faith was evaporating.

Few people were comfortable talking about the subject, and many just didn’t understand what was happening to someone whose faith was slipping away. I wouldn’t have understood it myself a few years earlier. Like addiction or mental illness, it’s something that is difficult to have empathy for until you’ve gone through it yourself.

I wondered whether I was being tested like Job in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Book of Job is the only biblical story in which the curtain is pulled back to reveal the machinations of God’s world. The Lord tells Satan that Job will always stay faithful to Him. The devil responds that if enough were taken away from the prosperous Job, the once-faithful servant would turn on God. The Lord accepts Satan’s challenge and the game is on, with poor Job the unwitting pawn. In rapid succession, he suffers the deaths of his sons, daughters and servants, the loss of his fortune and the infliction of boils all over his body. But not once does Job forsake God. I identified more with Job’s wife, who witnesses all this and says to her husband (as he stoically scrapes off his boils with a shard of

pottery): “Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!” Her position seems more reasonable than Job’s.

During one of our Monday-morning runs along Newport’s Back Bay, I confided to my best friend, Hugh, that I had entered a spiritual wasteland. I expected a heavy conversation, perhaps some disappointment and a mild rebuke for allowing myself to fall away from God. But Hugh, the eternal optimist, didn’t think much of it.

“It happens all the time, Billy,” he said. “It will come back, don’t worry. You can’t lose God. He’ll always be there for you.”

He advised me to get my butt back to church and to attend an upcoming men’s retreat run by his church. He reminded me that it had been more than a decade since my born-again mountaintop experience, and I hadn’t gone on a retreat with him for the past couple of years. He said it would be the perfect chance to recharge my spiritual batteries. I wanted to say no; a retreat with a bunch of gung-ho Christians wasn’t very appealing at the moment. But I knew Hugh wouldn’t let it rest until I agreed to go. He can be very annoying that way. I said yes.

On the second half of the run, we prayed, as usual. Hugh asked for the usual things: world peace, protection for his family, comfort and healing for those who are sick or in need. He always thanked God for my friendship, which made me feel good. Hugh also asked the Lord to strengthen my faith and reveal His perfect love for me. When it came my turn, what had felt as natural as breathing in years’ past now seemed awkward and tense. As the words came of my mouth, it no longer felt as if I was talking to my heavenly father who loved me unconditionally. Instead, I was talking to myself, and felt stupid doing it. It occurred to me that maybe this was again Satan’s work—or even a Job-like test from God—so I continued in prayer, but kept it short. My dialogue

with God had changed. What had seemed like a two-way conversation had turned into a monologue. Now when I prayed, I started to feel a bit like a mental patient, babbling to myself.

The men's retreat in the San Bernardino Mountains didn't bring me closer to God. The difference between my first retreat and this one was striking. I wasn't swept away by the music, the testimonies, the sermons and the small-group sharing. I felt like an outsider, watching the rituals of a foreign tribe whose language I didn't understand. Anger unexpectedly welled up inside me at my brothers in Christ. Was it that easy for them? Were they just sheep? Didn't anyone else feel the way I did? Why in the world would God make it so hard to follow Him? What was with all the mystery? It was depressing. When it came time to meet in small groups or participate in other retreat events, I snuck back to my cabin and read a book or slept. I wanted it all to go away. I couldn't wait to get off that mountain.

On the drive home, Hugh and I talked about ways to rekindle my faith. I thought about using some accrued vacation time to head to Europe and walk the 1,000-mile "Way of St. James"—*El Camino de Santiago*. Millions of pilgrims had been making the journey to the cathedral in Santiago, Spain, for more than 1,000 years to visit what was said to be the tomb of St. James. I had read many stories of pilgrims who talked about the transformative experiences they had on the trail, particularly when they met other Christians along the way. It seemed like a wonderful way to unplug from the world, spend time with God and other Christians and pump up my faith.

My other idea was to go on a month-long retreat to a monastery that taught the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. The founder of the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits, developed rigorous spiritual exercises that involve deep meditation on specific verses of Scripture,

visualizing oneself with Jesus during his three-year ministry. Ignatius used his imagination to place himself in the biblical scenes of Jesus, either as an unseen witness or as one of the characters. I talked with people who participated in the exercises. They said they felt as though they had experienced life with Jesus. They reported smelling the fish being caught on the Sea of Galilee, hearing Jesus' words during the Sermon on the Mount and tasting the bread and wine at the Last Supper.

Ignatius was a late convert to Catholicism, so I always had been attracted to him. Born in 1491, he grew up in a wealthy family in Spain. He was ambitious, romantic, conceited and free-spirited—anything but religious. But at age 30 he suffered a leg wound in a battle against the French at Pamplona. While convalescing in the castle of Loyola, Ignatius had only two texts to read: a four-volume life of Christ and a book on the saints. The books left him with a sense of peace and tranquility, a marked contrast to the depression and emptiness he felt after reading his favorite books of romance and chivalry. The reflections helped ignite a conversion that led Ignatius to develop a systematic method of prayer, and to eventually found the Society of Jesus, in 1539. I thought Ignatius's 500-year-old program could help me.

Hugh said both ideas, if I could afford the time and money, had promise. I thought so, too. But before I made the investment, I decided it wise to collect some evidence that showed me Christians were measurably different from others. Otherwise, a pilgrimage or retreat was just an extension of a fantasy.

It was discouragingly easy—though incredibly surprising—to find out that Christians, as a group, acted no differently than anyone else, including atheists. Sometimes they performed a little better; other times a little worse. But the Body of Christ didn't stand out as mor-

ally superior. Some of my data came from secular institutions such as the Pew Research Center and the Gallup Poll, but the most devastating information was collected by the Barna Group, a respected research company run by an evangelical Christian worried about the health of Christianity in America. For years, George Barna has studied more than 70 moral behaviors of believers and nonbelievers. His conclusion: the faith of Christians has grown fat and flabby. He contends that statistically, the difference between behaviors of Christians and others has been erased. According to his data and other studies, Christians divorce at about the same rate as or even at a slightly higher rate than atheists. White evangelical Christians are more racist than others. Evangelicals take antidepressants at about the same rate (7 percent) as others. Non-Christians are more likely to give money to a homeless or poor person in any given year (34 percent) than are born-again Christians (24 percent). Born-again Christians are taught to give 10 percent of their money to the church or charity, but 95 percent of them decline to do so. The percentage of Christian youth infected with sexually transmitted diseases is virtually the same as the rate among their non-Christian counterparts. Ronald J. Sider, a professor at Palmer Theological Seminary and an evangelical, covers a lot of these statistics and more in his 2007 book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*.

“Whether the issue is divorce, materialism, sexual promiscuity, racism, physical abuse in marriage, or neglect of a biblical worldview, the polling data point to widespread, blatant disobedience of clear biblical moral demands on the part of the people who allegedly are evangelical, born-again Christians,” Sider writes. “The statistics are devastating.”

George Barna doesn't see the data as casting doubt upon faith. “The issue isn't whether Jesus or Christianity is real,” Barna says. “The issue is, are Americans willing to put Christ first in their lives?”

But okay, I thought, let's assume for a moment that the Body of Christ has fallen off the straight and narrow path because of man's insatiable need for sin. After all, the Bible is filled with characters who receive clear directions from God and proceed to transgress them, starting with Adam and Eve. Every apostle, except perhaps Judas, expressed doubt at one time that Jesus was the Messiah. The most remarkable for me is Peter, who Jesus proclaims as the "rock" upon which His church will be built. Peter spent several years by the side of Jesus, witnessing His miracles and absorbing His teachings. No one could have been better prepared to defend Jesus against his enemies, proclaiming Him the Messiah. But on the night before His death, Jesus tells Peter that the disciple will deny that he knew Him three times before "the rooster crows" at sunrise. Peter looks at Jesus and says, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." (Mark 14:31)

After Jesus is arrested, the Roman authorities set out to find His accomplices. Three times Peter is asked if he knew Jesus, and three times he says no. As the rooster crows, Peter remembers his Lord's prediction and weeps "bitterly." If Peter—an eyewitness—couldn't get it straight, how are we supposed to 2,000 years later?

And I already knew that the majority of Catholics ignored some of the church's basic teachings. A recent poll co-sponsored by the *National Catholic Reporter* found that the majority American Catholics believed they did not have to obey church doctrine on abortion, birth control, divorce, remarriage or weekly attendance at Mass to be "good Catholics." Catholic women have about the same rate of abortion as the rest of society, according to a 2002 study by Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health. And 98 percent of sexually active Catholic women have used a modern method of contraception, according to a 2002 national survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

I just couldn't find any evidence within Protestantism or Catholicism that the actions of Christians, in general, showed that they took their faith seriously or that their religion made them morally or ethically better than even atheists.

But what about prayer, I thought? We Christians believe in the power of prayer. We pray in church, in the morning and at night, before our meals. We hold prayer meetings and prayer vigils. We pray 24 hours straight on the official Day of Prayer. Those of us who have a special knack for it are called "prayer warriors," and given lists of people who need something from the Lord—a biopsy to come back negative, a teenager to get off drugs, a laid-off worker to find a job, a pregnant woman to have a healthy baby, a cancer patient to be cured. Every day, millions upon millions of believers utter prayers to the Lord. Surely I could find some scientific evidence that prayer works.

I couldn't.

There aren't many quality scientific studies on the efficacy of intercessory prayer. The best are double-blind studies where patients with medical conditions are unknowingly prayed for by others. A 2001 study by Columbia University did show that women undergoing in-vitro fertilization treatments benefited from the prayers of others, getting pregnant at twice the rate of those who weren't prayed for. In the following months, however, skeptics found fatal flaws in the research methods and discovered that one of the researchers had been accused (and later convicted) of fraud. After an internal investigation, Columbia officials admitted to problems with the study and pulled it off their website. Of course, even today, Christians cite this study as proof that prayer works. As Mark Twain said, "A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting its shoes on." Other double-blind studies failed to show any benefit to intercessory prayer.

In 2006, a few years after my investigation, Harvard researchers published a comprehensive study on 1) whether intercessory prayer works and 2) whether the knowledge of receiving it influences a patient's recovery after heart bypass surgery. The study found that prayer didn't have an effect on patients who were unaware of it. Patients who knew they were being prayed for actually had *more* complications than another group who received prayer unknowingly. Atheists trumpeted the news that not only didn't prayer work, but in some cases it actually worsened the condition of patients. Those who believed in the power of prayer criticized various aspects of the study. The more sophisticated argument, I thought, was that it was nearly impossible, at least today, to conduct a valid study on the efficacy of prayer. For example, should the prayers be the same? Should the people saying the prayers and the people prayed for be of the same faith? The same denomination? And as Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion* and Christian theologians argue, would God even consent to be a participant in a study about prayer?

"The Oxford theologian Richard Swinburne . . . objected to [a study on the effects of prayer] on the grounds that God answers prayers only if they are offered up for good reasons," Dawkins writes. "Praying for somebody rather than somebody else, simply because of the fall of the dice in the design of a double-blind experiment, does not constitute a good reason. God would see through it."

I did find one study that, because of its simplicity, seemed to answer the question. In the first scientific study of its kind, Sir Francis Galton in 1872 tested a very simple premise: Since every churchgoer in England prayed for good health for the royal family, shouldn't British royalty live longer than other affluent classes in England?

It turned out that monarchs had the shortest life span of his

sample, finishing just ahead of the clergy (who also had many people praying for them). Kings and queens and pastors, on average, died sooner than lawyers, doctors, aristocrats, officers in the Royal navy and artists.

“I show that the divines are not specially favoured in those worldly matters for which they naturally pray, but rather the contrary, a fact which I ascribe in part to their having, as a class, indifferent constitutional vigour,” wrote Galton, a half-cousin to Charles Darwin.

As for the clerics’ shorter life spans, Galton wrote, “Prayers of the clergy for protection against the perils and dangers of the night, for protection during the day, and for recovery from sickness, appear to be futile in result.”

I found one other simple argument that trumped the double-blind studies. I discovered it on a website called “Why Does God Hate Amputees?” In a straightforward manner, the website’s authors pose some uncomfortable questions for those who believe in the healing power of prayer. They set up their argument by showing that those who believe in the Bible should expect their prayers to be answered. They click off many passages where Jesus promises this.

“If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.” (Matthew 21:21)

“If you ask anything in my name, I will do it.” (John 14:14)

“Ask, and it will be given you.” (Matthew 7:7)

“Nothing will be impossible to you.” (Matthew 17:20)

*“Believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”
(Mark 11:24)*

The website shows how “miracle” cures for cancer and other terrible diseases are often used by Christians as proof of God’s all-powerful and all-loving nature. But, it then asks, what about amputees? Why doesn’t God regenerate the limbs of amputees—including the heroic young men and women in the armed forces who sacrificed a body part for their country?

“No matter how many people pray, no matter how often they pray, no matter how sincere they are, no matter how much they believe, no matter how deserving the amputee, what we know is that prayers do not inspire God to regenerate amputated legs,” the website states. “It would appear, to an unbiased observer, that God is singling out amputees and purposefully ignoring them.”

Of course, there is a simpler explanation, more elegant, though it’s deeply dispiriting. The most logical answer to why God won’t heal amputees is that either God doesn’t care or doesn’t exist. This would also explain the lack of miraculous healings for people with Lou Gehrig’s disease, long-term quadriplegics, untreated AIDS patients and those with Parkinson’s disease, mental retardation, Down syndrome and a host of other maladies. Christian apologists offer different explanations to try to make sense of why bad things happen to good people. Among their explanations for why people who have lost limbs are never made whole by God (also detailed on the “Why Does God Hate Amputees?” website): healings for amputees aren’t part of God’s plan; the Lord sometimes answers prayers by saying “No”; God needs to remain hidden, and regenerating a limb would display the Lord’s miraculous powers too openly; God has a special purpose for amputees—just the way they are; and God answers the prayers of amputees by having scientists develop artificial limbs.

These explanations remind me of my parents’ answers when I started to question whether Santa Claus was real. How does he get down our chimney when he’s so fat? He can squeeze himself

down to fit. How can he deliver presents to every child in the whole entire world in one night? He moves faster than we can imagine. How big does his bag need to get to carry all the presents? It's a magic, bottomless bag. How can he eat cookies and milk in so many homes? He just does. My parents' valiant but ultimately weak explanations held off the truth for a year, but eventually, like all children, I had to face the truth.

I was starting to feel the same way about Christianity and God. And now that my eyes were opening to a different reality, the evidence against the likelihood of God seemed to be found at every turn. Even suppressed doubts started to surface. I began to realize that God may not be that perfect father I longed to believe in—and be loved by. In fact, He may not even exist. Sigmund Freud put it this way, writing in 1910:

The roots of the need for religion are in the parental complex; the almighty and just God, and kindly Nature, appear to us as grand sublimations of father and mother, or rather, as revivals and restorations of the young child's idea of them . . . when at a later date he perceives how truly forlorn and weak he is when confronted with the great forces of life, he feels his condition as he did in childhood, and attempts to deny his own despondency by a regressive revival of the forces which protected his infancy.

The flaws in my belief system started to overwhelm me. I obsessed about why God received praise no matter what He did—or did not do. If a young girl is cured of cancer, "Praise God for answering our prayers!" If a young girl dies of cancer, "Praise God. Our prayers got answered, but not in the way we expected or even wanted. We don't know His plans, but we will someday and this

will all make sense. It looks like He needed her in heaven more than on Earth. She's with Him now."

This kind of reasoning was always on display during natural disasters. When a tsunami wiped out more than 225,000 people in Indonesia in 2004, the media featured several survivors who claimed God had miraculously answered their prayers and saved them. It made me want to scream. If He answered their prayers, why did He sit by and allow the killing of nearly a quarter-million people—many who were praying, too, as they were being washed away? It made no sense. Where were the people crying out, "Why would God let this happen? What kind of God would allow so many people to die, and create so much heartbreak and so much misery?" Why save a random person or two? Why not everyone? Or everyone *but* a random person or two—preferably atheists?

I had flashbacks to the Benny Hinn Miracle Crusade, and those scores of people who sat in the wheelchairs at the back of the arena floor. I knew they wouldn't be cured that night; so did Benny Hinn. Only the afflicted themselves believed that they would walk home that night healthy and whole. They didn't. But why wouldn't God heal them, if He so willingly healed others afflicted with apparently more convenient maladies?

Could it be that a God who took a personal interest in me and the rest of humanity simply didn't exist? I felt I was quickly approaching a turning point in my life. Admitting mistakes hadn't been a problem for me. I have screwed up my relationship with my wife several times over 20 years. I consider myself a good father, but I have messed up many times in raising my kids. I could list each friend I betrayed or failed to stand up for. I could probably tell you every big mistake I've made in my journalism career—if you had enough time. James Joyce believed that "mistakes are the portals of discovery." That's how I've come to see them. My mis-

takes, though plentiful and painful, have made me a better person, wiser and more mature.

But I couldn't yet admit I had made a mistake about the truth of Christianity. I was hoping for some sort of miracle that would restore my faith. Being an atheist in America—or even within my own family—was appalling to me. About 98 percent of Americans say they believe in God. I wasn't anxious to be part of a 2 percent minority, especially knowing the passions of the majority. Besides, what if I were wrong? It wasn't the most positive incentive, but the specter of hell did keep me clinging to religion; facing an eternity in Hades was a big price to pay if I were wrong. And if I admitted to my disbelief, what would I tell my kids? It was one thing to send myself to hell; it would be unthinkable to guide my children along that path.

Christians often talk about Pascal's Wager, which argues that it's a good bet to believe in Christ. If you're right, you'll spend eternity in heaven. If you're wrong, you'll just be dead like everyone else. But it seems to me that to indulge in Pascal's Wager, you actually have to believe in Christ. The Lord would know if you were faking. I could no longer fake it. It was time to be honest about where I was in my faith.

As principles go, Occam's Razor seemed like a better bet. It basically says that all things being equal, the simplest solution is most likely the correct one. It was becoming harder and harder for me to fit my idea of a loving, personal God into the reality of the world in which I lived. The simplest explanation kept boomeranging back to me: there was no God.