

## APPENDIX A

### AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A “DIED-AGAIN” CHRISTIAN

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*“Jesus said, ‘The kingdom of the Father is like a certain woman who was carrying a jar full of meal. While she was walking on a road, still some distance from home, the handle of the jar broke and the meal emptied out behind her on the road. She did not realise it; she noticed no accident. When she reached her house, she set the jar down and found it empty.’”*

The Gospel of Thomas

Logia 97

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Are you a Christian? Do you consider yourself to be a *true* Christian who sincerely believes in God in such a way that He is what matters most to you in this life? Do you truly believe that the Bible is the infallible and inerrant Word of God? Are you completely convinced that the credibility of Christian faith depends on its veracity in all matters?

If so, what would you consider as the pinnacle of disillusionment? Something that could not possibly happen but, if it did, it would shatter your reality completely. How would you feel if everything that ever mattered to you; everything that gave happiness, meaning and purpose to your existence should somehow prove to be an illusion? How would you feel if you discovered that you were nowhere closer to understanding and relating to ultimate reality than some savage who lived and died with a mind saturated by myth and superstition? How would you feel if you were a happy born-again Christian who, by some sick twist of fate, happen to discover that the God you believed in does not really exist? Do you have any idea what it feels like to be a "died-again" Christian?

Once, I did not. I was born into a Christian family. From the beginning, I participated in organised Church religion. Like many others, I went to Sunday school and, at home, I listened to stories from the Bible. For the first twelve years of my life, I practised my faith without any real problems. Yet there was not anything magical about it; it was cultural baggage and simply one more compartment of my life. Like most children, I was often more interested in playing and talking with my friends than listening to the minister or to the Sunday school teacher. To be honest, some sermons and prayers seemed real boring and many of the hymns too sentimental and dreary.

However, all this changed when I was about twelve-and-a-half years old. One day I was reading my Bible when I came across the Book of Revelation. For some hitherto inexplicable reason, I was totally gripped and enthralled with the vivid imagery and story line of the book. I did not understand much of the alien symbolism but somehow reading that book triggered something deep inside of me. I was so moved by the text that I experienced something I can only describe as a spiritual rebirth.

For the first time in my life, I felt an utter willingness and obsession to believe in God

and to love Him with every fibre of my being. He became an undeniable and totally overwhelming presence in my life and I was flooded with a perpetual euphoria and a deep sense of inner peace and purpose. I had an unquenchable desire to devote my entire existence to the service of Christ.

Everything was different. The Bible became something that I could not get enough of and nothing about it seemed boring anymore. The highlight of my weeks was no longer playing with friends but going to Church, listening to long sermons, singing sentimental old fashioned hymns, going to Sunday school and cultivating my spirituality.

Everybody who knew me could testify that I literally had a personality transformation. Almost everything about me changed. I no longer delighted in my old ways of living. All I wanted to do was to live my life to the glory of God and commit myself to following Christ wherever he might lead me. I could literally feel the Holy Spirit working in me, making me sensitive to sin and giving me a holy aversion to all things that were not honouring to God. I could see the fruit of the Spirit in my daily life and each day I seemed like today might be the day that Christ would return on the clouds and we would live happily ever after. I longed for that return and had no fear of judgement or death as I felt completely at ease in my relationship with God. Never before was my life so meaningful and so filled with joy and purpose.

I soon decided that I would like everyone to experience what God has graciously given me. I wanted to become a missionary.

As the years went on and I passed through high school I was spared things like peer pressure and the typical teenage identity crisis. I knew exactly who I was and where I was going and what I wanted to do with my life. I had no desire whatsoever to indulge in anything that might damage my relation with God. I loved Him so much that the lack of friends and unpopularity resulting from a godly lifestyle was hardly even noticed by me. I was completely enraptured by God's guiding and loving presence and I wanted to share it with everyone.

One day, when I was seventeen, a missionary came to visit our school during a prayer

meeting. After the meeting I talked with him and asked him regarding the options open to someone like myself who was about to finish school and wanted to become a fulltime missionary. He listened to everything I said and told me that the best thing for me might be to study theology. I could specialise in missiology and become a minister sent to the mission field by a local Church or an international missionary agency.

After that encounter, I decided that following matric I *would* like to study theology. After all, what could be more pleasant than having to study the Bible and learning more about the things of God and his Church? I really looked forward to my studies as even back then I had an insatiable and unquenchable desire to spend ever more time with the Word of God and share my experiences and thoughts with fellow believers. Everything was going to be perfect and my whole meaningful life ahead of me flashed constantly before my eyes. What a way to go!

After school I enrolled at the local university to study theology. During the first few years I came to discover that the Bible was a much more complex book than I could ever imagine despite all the times I had previously spent reading through it. Of course, I was not a little upset when some of the professors seemed to say things that were at odds with what I had learned at Sunday school and from all the devotional books I had collected over the years.

All the talk about historical critical issues, hermeneutical problems and the beliefs of other ancient Near Eastern religions were somewhat offensive to my naïve conservative evangelical sensibilities. Maybe that is why, in those days, my favourite subject was dogmatic theology. This subject, taught as it was by conservative yet respectable and intellectually gifted scholars, provided me with the kind of interesting and relevant knowledge that I liked and which confirmed and supplemented what I had learned in Sunday school.

During the first three years at varsity, my studies in dogmatics and philosophy led me to decide that, if I could not get a job as a missionary, I would certainly not mind becoming a professional systematic theologian. As I strove to discern my exact theological identity I became certain that, whatever the stigmas pertaining to the label, I want to be known as a conservative evangelical theologian. Being a fundamentalist

was what I wanted to be and I clung to that identity with pride as it seemed to be the option most loyal to God and the one that seemed to enrich my spirituality the most.

I started to read and internalise many books written by conservative evangelical scholars. Back then I became very distraught and saddened by liberal theology which I believed to be a satanic delusion. I decided to do something about the matter as I had also developed an interest in apologetics.

I was always the first one to enter into heated debate with any professor or student whose views of God or the Bible did not live up to what I considered to be orthodox. Especially Old Testament studies were somewhat offensive to me since so much of the prescribed material was of the historical-critical variety and that was utterly incompatible with my belief in the verbal inerrancy of scripture. It irritated me no end that so much of critical scholarship talked about Yahweh and Yahwism as if God and the Bible were merely part of just another outdated mythology.

At that point in time, I used to think that anyone who did not believe that the Bible is the complete and inerrant work of God could not possibly be a *true* Christian. I became depressed by the liberal tendencies of people at the university and in the Church. I often considered the prospect of quitting my studies and going overseas to study at a conservative evangelical seminary. I've had it with inquiries that seemed to be detrimental to my fundamentalist faith.

For many years my favourite theologian was a fundamentalist New Testament scholar from the United States called John MacArthur. I read all his works and identified myself completely with his theology and spirituality. Moreover, I was happy with such a theology and the related evangelical spirituality. It seemed to me the only authentic kind of Christianity there could be.

Meanwhile my interest in apologetics led me to read further in philosophy and theology and, unlike many of my fellow students, my reading was not limited to what was prescribed by the course. Even during holidays, I spent my time in the library reading everything that seemed interesting. I read all the popular conservative apologists who defended the belief that the Bible was inerrant in matters of theology,

history and science.

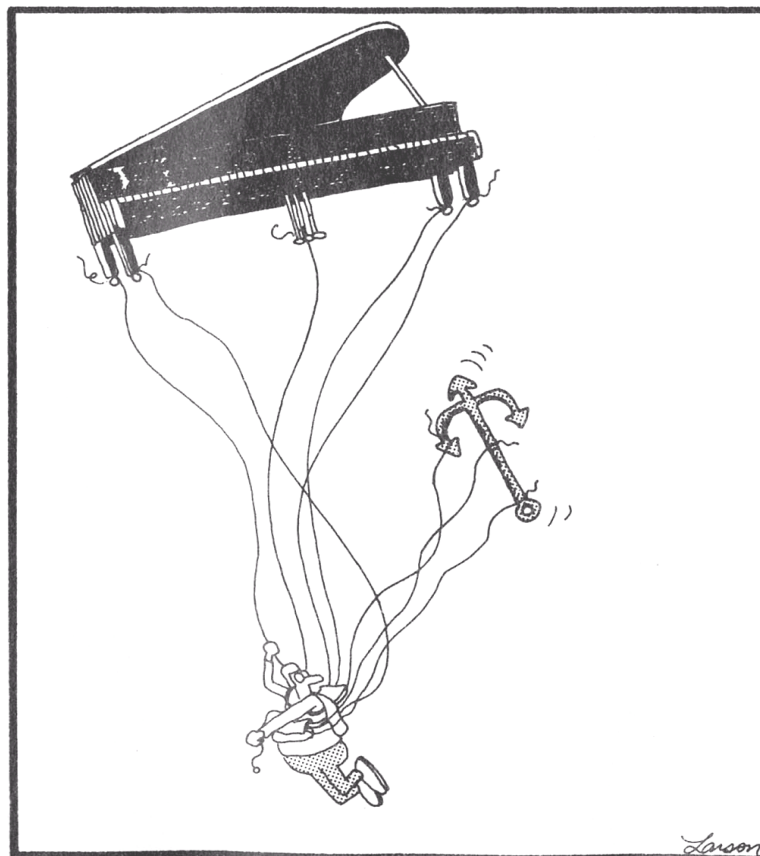
At the time, I was also pursuing post-graduate studies in Semitic languages and developed an absolute passion for biblical studies – albeit only via conservative evangelical hermeneutical approaches to the text. It would become my mission in life to expose critical scholarship for being the fraudulent instrument of Satan that I truly believed it to be. I soon thought that I had explanations for all the pseudo-problems generated by critical theology about God and the Bible. There was only one truth and I had it.

During my fifth year, while I was looking for more conservative apologetic literature in the university library, I came upon two books with the word “fundamentalism” in the title. However, little did I know when I checked out these books that their contents were anything but fundamentalist. Both books were actually written by a well-known Old Testament theologian who actually intended to criticise the fundamentalist ideology. However, since I felt so sure about the veracity of my own convictions on the matter, I decided to read the books anyway to see what someone could possibly argue against my own unshakeable viewpoint.

Looking back today, I can point to many shortcomings in those books. Yet at that time, though they did not provide me with satisfactory answers to my subsequent theological questions, these writings of James Barr initiated within me a process that eventually led me to recognise what was wrong with conservative theology. Completely against my own desire I had to admit that, on some points, the anti-fundamentalist critiques were valid. What shook me up the most was the dreadful realisation that the Bible that I thought I new may not be the perfect Word of God that my fundamentalist ideology made it out to be. Moreover, as every fundamentalist knows, if the Bible becomes suspect, *everything* becomes in doubt...

Frantically I became obsessed with reading all I could about critical books on the Bible. I also started reading critical philosophy of religion as well as critical works on the history of religion and comparative religion. Even psychology of religion eventually also became a subject of interest.

This spree with critical theology and philosophy was not because I could yet identify myself with anything other than the conservative evangelical theology I was accustomed to. Rather, I was searching to see for myself from first hand accounts whether the conservative criticisms of critical theology were correct or not and vice-versa. I desperately wanted to remain conservative but was willing to reluctantly follow the truth wherever it might lead me. Surely, since God is truth, the quest for it could never lead me away from God, could it? I dared not think about the prospect; *nothing* would make me lose faith completely.



**Murray didn't feel the first pangs of real panic until he pulled the emergency cord.**

I read everything that dealt with the problems of theology and philosophy. Whether it pertained to the synoptic problem, the historical Jesus, the nature, origins and diversity of earliest Christianity, the history of Israelite religion, pentateuchal criticism, contradictions in the Bible concerning history / theology / eschatology / thanatology / ethics, unfulfilled prophecies of the Old Testament, the use of the Old

testament in the New, the history and development of biblical interpretation and Christian dogma, myth in the Bible, biblical archaeology, parallels with other religions, the relation between religion and science, arguments for and against the existence of God, stories of people having lost their faith and people who claimed that scholarship does not destroy faith, theories about the origin of religion, the history of philosophy (especially modern European philosophy and post-modernism), psychology of religion, sociology of religion, Old Testament theology, New Testament theology, etc. etc. – been there, read that.

Of course, as Robert Carroll (1991:124) noted:

Reading is a dangerous thing. It can harm your psychic life. It can certainly change your life. Of course, whether it does or not depends on your situation and how you read...A chance remark, a glimpsed graffito on a wall, a sentence on a page or in a book, a half-remembered line from an old song, or something much more substantial such as an argument in a book understood for the first time, a story, a novel, a biography, even a critical study of something (dare I say, a commentary on a classic text?) – any such encounter could be the means of changing one's life in ways impossible to predict before the experience.

No kidding!

I really tried to get to the truth of the matter and kept on reading everything from the most fideistic and conservative apologetics to the most critical and heretical radical theology, including the liberal and moderate varieties in between these extremes. Deep down I kept hoping to find solutions to my problems and a way back to where and what I used to be – the more conservative the better.

I never did find the truth in any school or theory in theology or philosophy. What I did find there, however, was legitimate criticism and good reasons why my own stereotypical conservative evangelical theology was demonstrably not as perfect and biblical as it pretended to be. I also found that, while so much of critical theology is more like fashion than science and could not give me certainty regarding what was really what, at least it showed me what could not possibly be the case. It also made me aware of some problems that no one is likely to solve until the oceans froze over.



To many lay people looking in from the outside, it may look as though theologians know what they are talking about; that the subject of theology is a body of objective knowledge. To eager and naïve undergraduate students like I myself use to be, books, dictionaries, articles and encyclopaedias all appear to convey nothing but the facts. Sooner or later, however, most interested people will come to realise that, at the forefront of scholarship and in the fray of cutting edge research, there are no certain truths. Everything is a game; a running debate where ultimate truth is beyond retrieval. There is nothing else to do but to stumble forward regardless and blunder on relentlessly.

In the academic world, what is held to be true is merely the theory on top. What is thought of as being correct is merely the story on top. The truth about any issue under the sun comes and goes like shares on the stock market. Everything should be taken with a pinch of salt. Yet the uninitiated may well be deluded by the apparent objectivity and factuality of it all. Serious scholarship demands that the spelling out of personal assumptions, agendas and beliefs is a no-no for the sake of conveying the sense of an objective and scientific rhetoric of cold, hard facts. As time passes and one learns more about the nature of the enterprise, it becomes clear that at a certain level and in a certain sense, theology (like all other sciences) is indeed no more than a game. There is no perfect method or ideology in scholarship and nothing has escaped some or other legitimate criticism.

Though I have dabbled in conservative, liberal and radical theologies, none completely satisfied me and, the more I read, the more questions came home to roost. I found out that, in general, Old Testament scholars seemed to be more aware of the theological problems related to the Bible than their colleges in other theological disciplines. The systematic theologians seemed unaware of the nature and scope of the problems in biblical theology and the history of religion yet they were the ones responsible for arguing the issues in the philosophy of religion. However, the Old Testament scholars who were in the perfect position to deal with the philosophical problems generated by biblical criticism often seemed to be philosophically inept. Many appeared reluctant to address the philosophical, and particularly the ontological, implications of their research.

Having a background where my faith was linked to the Bible (or so I thought), I yearned for a domain of research *within* biblical scholarship where one could ask the questions philosophers of religion asked. These inquiries should pertain to biblical and not dogmatic theology. Only if this happened could I somehow gain perspective on my dilemma.

It was a little late in the day, however, when I realised that studying theology can be a downright dangerous business for any believer. You go into it full of romanticised and naïve ideas of what it is all about. You enter thinking you know quite a bit about the Bible, only to discover that you were grossly overestimating yourself on this matter. You expect to be spiritually fed, only to discover that all is not as it seems.

The problem with studying theology, as I suppose it is with most occupations, is the reality shock that follows as the magic of the initial encounter begins to fade. You arrive having a magical view of God, the Bible and religion but, as you begin to study the history of ideas, traditions, institutions, texts and practices, you sooner or later begin to feel like someone has robbed you. It's all a bit like finding out for the first time where food comes from; all the magic is gone. One goes on eating – one has to – yet things will probably never be the same again.

Curiosity and research pertaining to the origins and nature of the Bible, one's religion, one's tradition, one's own beliefs and one's personal view of reality can be a sobering if not devastating experience. It is a reality shock of the worst sort. There are times when I wished I had never been born. How would life have turned out had one not decided to study theology? Would I not have been happy in my ignorance? One keeps on wishing that it is all merely a bad dream and that, in no time, mom or dad will come to wake you up so that you will not be late for Sunday school. Where did it all go wrong? Why, oh why, this cruel fate? Surely, this cannot be...

Maybe I should have expected all of this. After all, the religio-cultural context certainly stacked the odds against a peaceful transition from Sunday school layperson to scientific biblical theologian to minister of a congregation.

During the eleven years of Sunday school in the Dutch Reformed Church, one is

largely exposed to the Bible in the form of paraphrased Bible stories, censored and reinterpreted to be amenable to conservative reformed sensibilities. In the sermons, the underlying message about the nature and contents of the biblical text is wholly fundamentalist. As children, no one ever taught us about the findings and contents of critical scholarship.

This negligence may, however, be understandable. Communicating the latest results of biblical critical research would surely upset many people who could make life very difficult for anyone not living as though this were seventeenth century Europe. It may be downright dangerous for those who know more than they should to rock the boat and come out as ex-fundamentalists.

As noted above, the view of the Bible with which one is indoctrinated in Sunday school materials can only be classified as “fundamentalist”. In addition, if like me, one also reads a lot of the spiritual literature found in public bookshops, one also gets a generous dose of conservative evangelical theology from America and Britain. In short, along this route and by the time you enter the faculty of theology at the university, your beliefs about God, the Bible and reality is totally fundamentalist.

Then, at varsity, the student eager to learn more about the Bible is exposed to biblical criticism. He learns about the discoveries of the historical-critical approach and that of comparative religion. For the average student of theology, being exposed to these perspectives after a lifetime of fundamentalism can be very disorientating.

Most students, of course, prefer to either ignore the critical approach, as it appears to be detrimental to their spirituality. Those who do try to make sense of it and internalise what they read – as opposed to merely memorising it for short-term memory to pass the test the next day – may be in for a hard time. Of course, if all one reads is conservative evangelical apologetics against higher criticism, one will come to believe that there are no serious problems about the belief that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God. However, neither will one really understand what is actually involved. If, however, one does delve into the details of the critical research itself rather than merely noting its findings, one soon discovers that the Bible is not exactly the inerrant, infallible and dogma supporting book the Church proclaims it to be.

Now what is one to do? You want to keep the faith but you also want to accept the Bible on its own terms. After all, is not this exactly what the tradition always suggested should be done – *sola scriptura*? Yet now the problem is that reading the Bible on its own terms seems to lead *away* from the dogmas of tradition about the Bible!

Consider the following scenario: One's life begins with eighteen years of being indoctrinated with fundamentalist theological dogma. This is followed by six years of exposure to the critical approach to the text. After having to deal with the kind of intense personal anguish resulting from changing from a pre-critical layperson to a critical theologian, the student expecting to become a minister in the Church has to be prepared to become a hypocrite. He must sign in acceptance of the claims made by seventeenth century Reformed confessions thus implying that those texts have correctly interpreted the Bible. This after six years of being told that the ways in which texts like the confessions have read the Bible are no longer acceptable. One cannot be blamed for feeling that those responsible for the present structuring of theological education goofed big time.

Of course, many soothe their consciences by deliberately reinterpreting and relativising the contents of the confessions with its outrageous application of proof texts to support its ideology. Yet the fact remains that no one who has a sense of integrity and has read both the confessions and biblical criticism will have total peace of mind on the matter. In any case, all this is a sure recipe for theological "schizophrenia". If one does not decide to abandon the idea of ministering to a congregation then the only option is a life of repression. That is, repression until the demands of ministry and the company of fundamentalists allows one to think that the critical approach to the text is of no value at all and might just as well be forgotten. In many cases, time heals all wounds.

But let's get back to the story of my untimely demise. In the end, I do not know if I will find out what the truth is; and I may be sorry if I ever do. Truth has become a 5-letter word, full of fury and signifying nothing. It hurts and I can't handle it. It feels as if the whole history since the reformation has a micro-counterpart in my own spiritual psychological experience.

I started out as a reformer, without too much dogma and overwhelmed by my experience of grace. Soon it all crystallised into orthodoxy but at least I knew the divine truth and had an identity. Then came the critical phase characterised by a modernist mindset starting with deism and, after developing through nineteenth century historicism and positivism, culminates in the twentieth century post-theistic and post-modern form of anti-realist Christian theology. The mutation from pre-modern through modern to post-modern in a matter of years may be too much for any normal psyche to bear unscathed.

A once unshakeable perception that GOD IS NOW HERE blurred into an ambiguous and confusing understanding that GOD IS NOWHERE only to result in a horrible suspicion that GOD IS NOWHERE. My situation was no longer one of “faith seeking understanding” but rather “understanding seeking faith”. How disconcerting it was to discover that many cherished readings of biblical texts and subsequent periods of spiritual highs were based on gross misinterpretations and illusion. It is not easy coming to terms with the fact that the discourse of favourite biblical passages actually meant something quite different than what I thought the “Holy Spirit” revealed to me.

How soul wrenching it is to hear others speak of how the text totally changed their lives when it was obvious that they too had completely misunderstood the actual meaning the author intended to convey. Alas, I did not have the cheek to point out that the emperor had no clothes and that it was all a farce kept in tact by a socially constructed illusion based on years of systematic and unwitting socialisation, indoctrination and well meant brainwashing.

At times, one is gripped by an extreme and fearful sense of nihilism, historical change and epistemological relativism. Carried on the wings of time and change, against your own choice, one feels powerless to do anything about it.

I used to hear stories of people who started their studies as Christians and left it as atheists. I used to laugh at those impossible fictions. After all, as a sound and orthodox reformed theologian, I genuinely believed in the endurance of the saints and the impossibility of a true Christian losing faith. Becoming an atheist was the last thing that could happen to me, a true Christian, especially from studying the Bible. It

was simply a preposterous and inconceivable notion.

But somewhere along the way something happened. Something went horribly and frighteningly wrong. Today I no longer laugh at those stories. To be sure, I have become a character in my own impossible horror story. I would like to cry but there is no more tears left to do so. Now I am not even post-modern. I am nothing. I cannot be labelled. I have no mentors. I have no heroes. All scholarship seems like a game without any capital T Truths, any real progress or *telos*.

Even God seemed to have become a three-letter word. Reality has become a white empty canvas messed up by running watercolours. My world has melted. I have graduated from the faculty of mythology.

What is truth? I thought that the truth would make me free but not *that* free. Coming from a background where I was completely happy with conservative evangelical theology and spirituality, the discovery of the problems generated by biblical criticism and the philosophy of religion was like dying all over again. I sure wish there was a local chapter of *Fundamentalists Anonymous* or something like “The Fellowship of Died-Again Christians”. Trying to find one’s way through the half-life that was now my fate can be terrifying...absolutely, bloody terrifying. I am confused and do not know what to believe about anything anymore.

I had lost reality. It was not merely the death of someone or something within the greater scheme of things. The entire scheme of things of things itself seemed awry and was slipping away like water through my clutching fingers. The experience of being a born again conservative evangelical biblical Christian who can no longer believe in an inerrant Bible or in any of those cherished theological dogmas he once held dear can only be described as a daymare. You do not know if you are dreaming or not and keep hoping that it might all just be a nightmare and that you might wake up – late for class but with faith in tact.

Alas, you do not wake up. As expressed in the vulgar lyrics of a song I once heard, reality seemed to have mutated into a “fu\*\*\*\*d-up dream”. It is a reality that has become frighteningly *strange*. The sky shines with a different kind of blue. The

neighbour's dog doesn't bark like he used to. The world suddenly seems a very lonely and very scary place to be in. It can be extremely anxiety provoking to contemplate the idea that your life does not have the kind of cosmic back-up from a personal and favourable Source that you once thought it did. In the absence of this comforting belief you must now live with the knowledge that you must fend for yourself in a wholly indifferent universe where, in nature, there is no place for sentiment.



**“Go back to sleep, Chuck. You’re just havin’  
a nightmare – of course, we are still in hell.”**

The thought that the world at large is a vast impersonal, unanimated environment with no concern for one's hopes, fears, dreams, expectation, needs, desires, ambition and expectations can be immensely disconcerting. The realisation that one is a wholly contingent microbe fighting for survival in a hostile world where no built in meta-narrative exists is frightening. Coming to terms with a reality where there is no God and where, if other *people* do not give a damn, nothing and nobody will – now that is scary! With a realisation of the death of God, an existential crisis of the worst sort of angst mixed with generous doses of ennui, ahedonia, depression and multiple phobias



ensue with a vengeance.

The “world” out there seemed to be constituted by nothing more than the essential elements. It appears as a mundane world, now bereft of its former enchantment and consisting of nothing more than earth, water, fire and air (and bullsh\*\*\*?). There was nothing to be happy or excited about; everyday became just “one damn thing after another”. In the words of every song about lost hopes, nostalgia, missing a loved one, broken relationships or faded dreams, I could find an allegory of my own tragic experience with a God no longer there. On many occasions, I wondered whether I could survive psychologically or whether something would snap and that I would go completely insane.

In fact, there were times when I wished I *would* lose it so I would no longer be so obsessively aware of the sheer horror I experienced at having my consciousness transformed. What has happened is a most inexpressible calamity. It is a brutal form of tragic irony when studying theology does not help you to grow spiritually but leads to spiritual suicide. But, alas, you are not so fortunate as to die and finish the farce.

You know something is wrong when your life begins to resemble scenes from movies like “The Matrix (Part I)”, “Groundhog Day”, “The Truman Show”, or even some episodes of television stories like “The Twilight Zone”, “The X-files” or “Ripley’s Believe it or Not”. The truth hurts and you can’t handle it. Reality bites and the poison of its venom is slowly but surely divesting you of everything that once gave meaning and purpose to your existence. Who would have thought it? If only I was never born. If only I never studied theology. Who would have thought that one so certain – a born again Christian – could discover the impossible – that, despite whatever divine reality there may be, the God he always believed in does not exist?

From this perspective, the myth of Eden gains new meaning. You have eaten from the tree of knowledge. Your eyes were opened. You saw that...that you were *naked*. Something has died inside of you. You are banished from Eden. You no longer have any access to the tree of life. Life east of Eden is thoroughly miserable. You feel as though the rest of your days will be spent as an outcast wandering aimlessly, like Cain.



If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do? Vanity of vanities, it is all vanity. You are hanging on a cross of the mind, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” No one can see God and live...

You feel as confused as a chameleon on a box of “Smarties”. I used to worry about my looks but now I am complaining about my intellectual ability, i.e. the lack thereof. Damn my feeble brain! Why can I not finally be absolutely sure about what is what in the world I have constructed in my mind and in which I am now an exile in what was once my God's kingdom?

There are so many mysteries, so many unanswerable questions; yet we all keep trying like fools. We try to capture the truth but, in doing so, we are, on the one hand, like a man trying to reach the horizon only to find it forever receding beyond our grasp. On the other hand, we are like dogs who chase after cars trying to bite their tires without thinking what we would do should we ever succeed in catching the vehicles.

Everyday now, when I look in the mirror I ask myself, “ Am I... a *fool*?” Whatever possessed me to make my life come to this? Was it all just a mistake? Surely, for a mistake, this is too big. What would I say to myself if I could speak to my younger self from ten years ago? Surely, he would not possibly recognise or understand what I have devolved and mutated into. Of all the outcomes I envisaged for my theological education, atheism was not on the list of possible destinies.

To be sure, few in this world could appreciate my predicament. Those who still have the faith cannot understand the problem and trying to explain everything in detail only lead to judgements and sermons of repentance. And who could blame them. Surely only a year or so ago I myself would have had little sympathy with the sort of apostasy that I have blundered into.

Neither can all critical scholars understand the predicament. At least one can talk to them – but they fail to grasp the nature of the catastrophe. All they can do is to talk about reaching a second naiveté and about how liberating it was for them to leave their conservative background behind and become more critical. Liberating? That is the last concept that I would use to describe my experience. I was *happy* in my

conservative fundamentalism. The only liberation I feel is from reality and it is anything but pleasant. To be sure, if hell is separation from the presence of God...well this is it. I really *am* in hell!

Sometimes, as is human inclination, I feel the need to blame someone for what has happened. But *who* can I blame? My parents? Surely not, they did nothing wrong. My Church? No, she witnessed to what she believed. My Sunday school teachers or the local minister? No, they were all sincere and just doing their job. My professors? No, what else could they do but teach me what they know? Myself? No, how could I have known what was what and how things would turn out? God? No, for it is meaningless, irrational and unsatisfying to blame something that one no longer believes actually exists. So whom shall I blame? How shall I vent my pent up frustration? I do not know, I am not that kind of person. Suppression is the only option left.

Of course, the fact that what I believed in was wrong, that what I felt to be the most real was not – this definitely *needs* to be repressed for the sake of sanity. It is almost as if my eyes have opened to a lifetime of brainwashing by an eccentric religious cult. After all, there is little difference between churches and cults. Christianity started as a cult and only social statistics turned it into an acceptable and respectable institute. The brainwashing and pressure to conform in the church may be less cohesive and more subtle, but it's all nonetheless still very real.

In the same way I was both oddly amused and horrified at beholding the mechanics of other cults from the outside, so too, I have now come to see the Church in the same light. The leaders in the church may be sincere and believe they are communicating God's will but it is very difficult from an outsider's point of view not to perceive everything as brainwashing and indoctrination based on superstitious and discriminating ideologies.

Focussing on, or seriously contemplating just what exactly happened to me, what the implications are and how I now relate to the world out there drives me crazy. Repression is definitely compulsory if I am to survive. Maybe I should taper off. Going cold turkey after years of being a god-addict is unthinkable. I will never make it. I still have trouble admitting my problem. I still have trouble talking about the

experience. After all this time I cannot bring myself to say it out loud, to admit that I am an atheist...

Could my religious beliefs really all have been built on an illusion? Am I really chaff in the wind and no more closer to the truth about ultimate reality than the myth saturated pagans of far away and long ago? Could so many millions of people, so many sincere individuals, all be hopelessly deceived? Are Yahweh and Jesus really mythology's last gods? Am I an anonymous character in a Hegelian history of religion that will become a cipher and an object of pity and ridicule for future generations?

When Job, Qohelet and Psalm 88 become your canon in the canon, you know you are in trouble. Where am I? Who am I? Why am I here? Why are things the way they are and why are they at all? Once I had the answers. Now all I know is that I don't know. I cannot be certain about anything anymore. I can never commit to a point of view for fear of being disillusioned once again. Not even about my own unbelief. That is why I cannot commit even to atheism.

If life can spring upon me the most nasty of all surprises – that of finding out that what you believed to be the truth about everything was just another all-too-human story with no relation to reality (whatever that is) – who knows what else may happen?

Maybe being an atheist would not be as unbearable as I fear it might be. After all, as a new born baby I used to be an atheist. If nobody told me about God, would I even have known or cared whether He existed or not? And was I not always an atheist in the relative sense of not believing in the deities of other religions or the versions of God as constructed by other denominations of my own religion? Would it really be impossible to go on with life if I were to add only one more God to what was already a long list of unbelievable deities?

These days, all I own are questions. Where others see answers, I see problems. All advice given to me leaves me with more questions than the answers it purports to supply. Though I now know more than ever about all the answers to the perennial

questions that people have in all sincerity preached throughout history, I am sadly none the wiser. Sure, I can tell you what this or that person thought, but with regard to what is really what – I haven't the foggiest. That unacceptable reply – I don't know – now constitutes the sum total of my sagely vocabulary.

When you see how everyone seems to be hopelessly a product of their historical and cultural context and how they project their psycho-social imagination onto the whole cosmos you can no longer do it for yourself. Yet neither can you believe that whatever you *do* engage in will allow you any more privileged access to what is really going on. I do not know what is what. All I do seem to know are some of the things that are demonstrably *not* the case.

All I know is that I do not know and that is the highest flight of my reason. History has become “his-story” and that is how I feel: The world is not made up of facts but of stories. It is all a game without any purpose other than what people make of it. Any awareness of the history of ideas, morals and whatever else shows the need to repress the fact that it has always been we ourselves who made up the rules as we go along. And for me the game is over. I have run out of credits. I have run out of lives. I am in the middle of nowhere. Once adrift, I am now drowning in the grossly polluted ocean of truth. I feel as though I am running my heart out on a treadmill to oblivion. I am seriously contemplating the option of emigrating to never-never land.

God is dead and I am not feeling so good myself.

They say losing a spouse is the most stressful experience most people will have. They say its like living in a reality with a part of oneself gone, or with a hole in the fabric of one's existence. Well let me tell you, the death of one's God is no picnic either. In fact, what you lose is not simply a *part* of reality – it is nothing short of what used to be reality itself.

You will not be left with merely an absence of someone but rather with a collapse of the entire scheme of things. At least when you lose a spouse you can see things in perspective against the background of a larger reality and eventually the gap can be filled. But what do you do when you lose not merely a part of yourself but everything

you once considered to constitute The Real and that which gave meaning and purpose, hope and inspiration to your existence?

According some psychologists, when informed that one is about to die the patient goes through five stages: shock, denial, anger, depression, and finally, acceptance. These phases are not to be seen as rigid and immutable nor does everyone experience every stage equally intensely. Some individuals may even skip some stages. Others may get stuck in one of them. Then there are the possibilities of regression and the re-experiencing of phases one already went through.

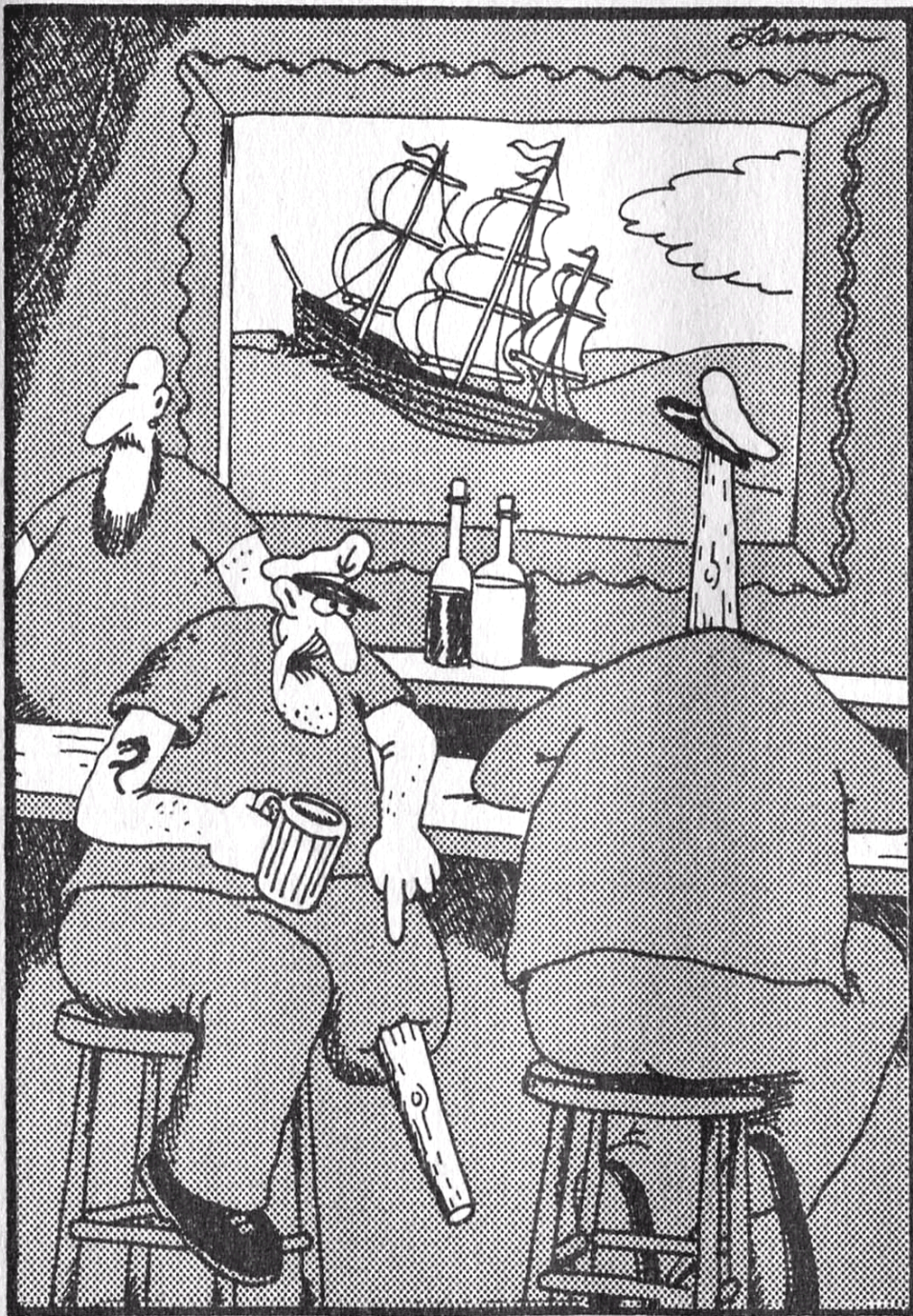
Now this scenario conveys something of experiencing the death of one's God, which by the way, also inevitably seems to lead to the death of the Self (in a psychological sense). I too went through stages of shock, denial, anger, depression and acceptance. I too do not experience all stages in equal proportions. I too go to bed one night filled with acceptance only to wake up the next morning in shock, denial or repression. The fact that this is not the death of one's physical self (although that part certainly does not remain unaffected) allows for an endless reliving of the entire cycle of coming to terms with the subjective reality of the death of God.

One may eventually think that the loss has been accepted but this is an illusion. Hearing a familiar melody, reading a text that alludes to biblical discourse, eating certain foods associated with religious occasions, smelling certain flowers, watching a sunset, having a dream, etc., -- all these can trigger a wave of nostalgia. Anything at any time has the potential to plunge one right back into the cycle of shock, denial, etc...all over again.

There is nothing more to say except to finally acknowledge that "sh\*\* happens". My heart and my mind can find no rest. I cannot rest in peace. I rest in pieces. Reality has shattered.

\_\_\_\_\_The end???????





“Well, I guess that ain’t a bad story—but let me tell you about the time I lost *this!*”

The fact that this abstract adapted from my hypothetical diary reads almost like a horror story is precisely why this study represents more than just a piece of research completed for the purposes of obtaining a PhD degree in theology. It is at once an expression, an imperfect articulation and a desperate attempt to make sense of what has been an all-consuming obsession for last five years since the Big Death. Personally, I would like to believe that this thesis represents not the vehement heresy of a hostile infidel but rather a cry for help from someone who painfully discovered that the more he tries to understand what is what the more reality seems to recede beyond his grasp. It is not easy being a born again believer who feels as though he died again.

There have been countless times during the writing of this thesis when I became nostalgic of my earlier untroubled and happy faith experiences. On many occasions the realisation of my identity mutation from believer to doubter dawned on me with a vengeance. Thinking back on who I was when I started out in theology, how my religious beliefs totally defined who I used to be and also enchanted the world I considered reality, how something went horribly wrong and everything changed – these things bring about an mindset of infinite sadness.

These are the times when I cannot believe how my views and identity have devolved – times when I do not want to believe it. I just cannot believe that I – a genuine Christian with once unwavering faith in God now spend my time reconstructing devil's advocate arguments against His existence. When I remember who I was – the same person who I still wish to be but am no more – I cannot help but wondering what the hell am I doing writing this trash.

Then again, maybe I'm just living in denial. Maybe there is no way back. Whatever the case may be, I am after all this time still too weak and confused to be dogmatic about anything. It would seem, therefore, that the only way forward is to continue struggling with the issues that haunt me without cessation. This study is therefore a type of catharsis – an experiment of articulating worst case scenarios so that they can be faced for what they are instead of leaving them inside where they eat away like cancer.



I would thus prefer to think of this study not as the ranting of an embittered and hardened atheist but as a modern version or *typos* of Job 3-31. Like Job I cannot understand my plight and I utter what many would consider heresy and blasphemy. Like Job, though I know what my friends know, I find all traditional apologetic as absolutely worthless in accounting for the particular problematic addressed in this thesis. I remain sceptic and perplexed as long as all I know about God remains based on hearsay. Like Job I may need a theophany to recant. Like the book of Job, I doubt whether even a theophany can solve all the problems my alter ego, the devil's advocate, has reconstructed.

Of course, the sad thing is that very few people will ever learn of my plight. If the side effects of the information explosion of our time remain true to form, after this study has been evaluated by a handful of scholars, few others and no one from the public will ever know of its existence. If a thesis falls in the library and there is nobody who reads it, does it make a sound?

Then again maybe it is better that this study is doomed to oblivion. I fear the response of those who have an untroubled faith. I fear for misunderstanding, broken relationships, locked doors and burned bridges. I know that if all this had not happened to me, I myself would have little patience or sympathy with anyone inside the church vomiting the kind of verbal diarrhoea that I have regurgitated in the case against realism.

That is also the reason why I did not write a book for public consumption. I do not want to be responsible for destroying the faith of others. I could never live with myself knowing I caused many sincere and good people to fall into major depression or, as I have contemplated on more than one occasion, to commit suicide.

From the point of view of a believer open to follow truth wherever it may lead, the contents of this thesis may indeed seem to articulate a secret so terrible that it would destroy most religious people learn. This "secret", i.e. the collapse of realism and the repression of anti-realism in all forms of biblical theism, is something not even Old Testament theologians can often talk about openly.



In many respects, Old Testament theology is a farce. Most scholars will present themselves as realists to everyone who does not bother to read between the lines. In whatever heated academic and public debates will follow in the years to come that somehow pertain to the issues in the case against realism, one can be sure that only a minority of the people involved will ever really know the extent and nature of the problematic.

Given my own background as articulated in the biography, critique against the devil's advocate's arguments will be much appreciated. I also want to apologise to any reader whose faith may have been shaken as a result of reading this document

On a brighter side, if the relativity of what counts as facts as illustrated in the history of research counts for anything, no one should make a fetish out of the case as it was reconstructed here. Besides considering it to be a devil's advocate argument rather than an a inerrant and infallible "recipe" for atheism, I myself have no idea what my own views on the matter will be in the years to come. Though at present, I fear that the devil's advocate's arguments might very well be irrefutable on some points, I have no intention of clinging dogmatically and stubbornly to the point of view reconstructed in this thesis.

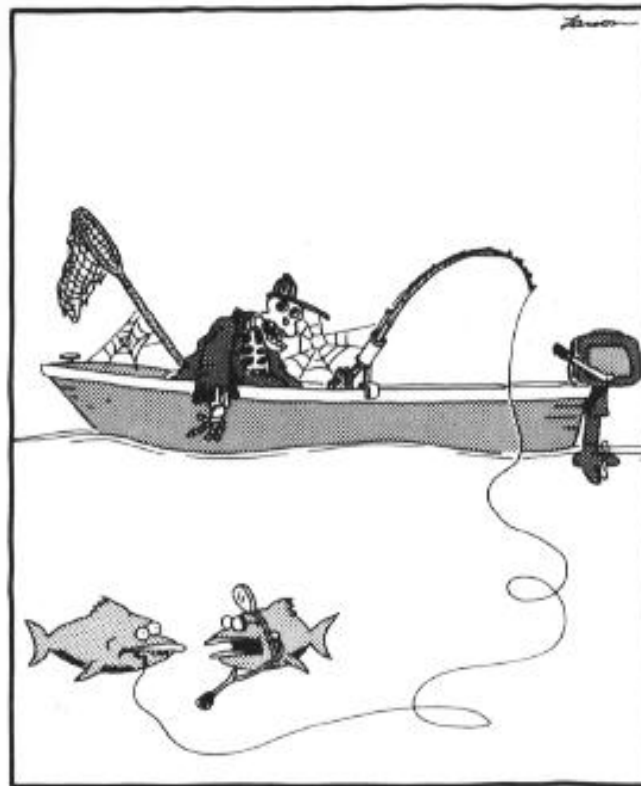
To be sure, I consider myself open to new ideas, perspectives and legitimate objections to the devil's advocate's arguments. This may indeed be prudent as being an Old Testament scholar in today's world where theories and the truth they purport to sell come and go like fashion sets many like myself up for a lifetime of recantations. This is therefore not the kind of thesis that, after being read, should be lightly tossed aside. It may be thrown, with force.

## APPENDIX B

### THE COLLAPSE OF REALISM, COGNITIVE DISSONANCE AND THE “DIED-AGAIN” CHRISTIAN SYNDROME

*Yes, if I think about it I am speechless and fear grips my flesh...*

(Job 21:6)



“Well, first the bad news —  
you’re definitely hooked.”

Since most Old Testament scholars are also Christians it is to be expected that they think of themselves as realists or at least semi-realists when it comes to the ontological status of Yahweh-as-depicted in the text. As a result, when confronted with the case against realism they will encounter arguments that might seem to run

counter to all that they believe regarding the nature of reality.

When it comes to the reaction of people when they are confronted with rational discourse that seems to disprove their most sincere and cherished beliefs, a lot would depend on how convincing the counter arguments are. Or so one would think.

In the 1950's, social and cognitive psychologist Leon Festinger did extensive research on scenarios where people are forced to react on being confronted with what appears to be incontrovertible proof that their beliefs about certain issues were mistaken. To the surprise of many, it was discovered that, in most cases, the more irrefutable the proof, the more stubbornly the subjects clinged to their initial cognitions (cf. Festinger 1956, 1957).

The end result of the research by Festinger was his theory of "cognitive dissonance". This theory predicts that people who are confronted with evidence contrary to what they believe and want to believe will not only refuse to revise their beliefs, they will actually irrationally seek to promote them more zealously than ever before (cf. also Batson 1982:50; Carroll 1979:86-109).

The theory of cognitive dissonance shows that people in general have a strong need to maintain cognitive consistency. When it comes to the deepest and most meaningful beliefs people have regarding the nature of reality there exists an aversion for discrepancies in the framework of cognitions. In order to ensure the survival of their own constructs of reality there must be sufficient harmony between the various beliefs one holds pertaining to what is perceived to be the facts.

Cognitive dissonance ensues when a person entertains two equally convincing cognitions/beliefs/facts that nevertheless seem to contradict each other. In order to decrease the psychic tension produced by the discrepant beliefs dissonance needs to be lessened. This can happen in one of two ways:

1. One of the cognitions must be rejected and considered to be false.
2. Additional cognitions (ad hoc hypotheses/rationalisations) must be added to the

cognitive matrix so that the discrepancy is harmonised on another level or its maintenance temporarily justified to a satisfactory extent.

Opting for the latter strategy may lessen the dissonance but cannot ultimately banish it from the psyche altogether. This strategy is one of psychological survival where the additional cognitions allow the subject to relativise the problem and to dampen the effect of the dissonance. According to Festinger, human creativity and the need for psychological survival override the need for a rational justification of beliefs in the face of cognitive challenges.

Consider the following scenario in which a person:

- believes something with his whole heart;
- made a public commitment to that belief;
- made crucial choices dependent on the veracity of that belief, which in turn decided the course of his life;
- construed personal identity and self-image on the assumption that the belief is true;
- created a personal and satisfying worldview and understanding of reality as a whole in such a way that the particular belief constitutes an essential and foundational element therein;
- answers his existential questions from a frame of reference provided by that belief to the extent that holding on to the belief provides meaning and purpose to life;
- could cope with severe personal crisis and suffering because the particular belief was assumed to be true.

If this person is confronted with seemingly irrefutable proof that his most cherished

belief is erroneous, chances are that not only will he emerge from the encounter unscathed but that he will appear to hold more zealously to his belief than ever before. Despite the inability to refute the counter evidence he will be convinced that somehow, in ways presently unknown to him, he is right after all. He may even seek to engage in special pleading or ad hominem rhetoric in order to convince the other party of the veracity and merits of believing in what he does.

The way in which possible cognitive dissonance is lessened in such scenarios is thus not via an in-depth analysis of the counter arguments and an honest unbiased willingness to be open to change opinions in the interest of what may be true. Instead, the discourse containing the apparent refutation of the cherished belief will be approached with brewing conspiracy theories.

The need for creating a straw man for the purposes of refutation, suspicions about the other person's intentions, and constant fideistic rationalisation of why personal beliefs are in reality not really problematic at all will be great. Yet the person experiencing the dissonance may not even realise how irrational his strategies of evasion may be. Introspection is only allowed insofar as faltering personal loyalty to the cherished beliefs can be detected. This is also only done in order to postulate possible personal intellectual shortcomings to justify the discontinuation of considering the counterarguments with an open mind (cf. also James 1902:27; Berger 1967:93).

Festinger demonstrates that deep-seated convictions and cherished beliefs, especially religious beliefs, prove to be extremely resistant to revision and reformulation or rejection for several possible reasons:

1. Holding on to the particular belief carries personal benefits, e.g.:
  - it answers the existential and other deep questions of life;
  - it provides a feeling of self-worth and also gives a sense of personal identity;
  - it provides cognitive security and harmony in aid of psychological survival.

2. It exists in relation to a public commitment, e.g.:

- it is presupposed in family relations;
- friendships originated because of it;
- social standing and status are possible because of it;
- social identity and image are construed by it;
- satisfaction in one's profession and in life in general depends on it.

3. The belief does not exist in isolation, e.g.:

- society or peer groups condones it, expects it and rewards it;
- the survival of the group sharing the particular belief is dependent on it;
- the group in which the belief is maintained provides support, identity, security and the perception of self-worth since it caters for the need to belong;
- others who share the same beliefs provide company, motivation, legitimisation and friendship.

Consider, for example, the case of a conservative believer like myself who was exposed to the findings of critical scholarship. At first I ignored it and dismissed it as satanic heresy. As dissonance theory predicted, I refused to accept the results of research not because I could point to clear-cut fallacies in the particular arguments but merely because I did not like what it implied for the credibility of the beliefs I had come to cherish.

Of course, the findings of Festinger have not escaped criticism (cf. Oates 1973:70-75; Abelson 1988:27-34). To be sure, the theory fails to account for many alternative

possible strategies in dealing with cognitive dissonance. Festinger has subsequently modified his views to some extent and social and cognitive psychology have in the meantime witnessed the proliferation of more theories pertaining to the way people deal with challenges to their belief systems (cf. Ellis 1967:30-53).

Festinger, however, was not dogmatic and admitted that some people do indeed change their belief system when confronted with incontrovertible evidence that against the truth of their ideologies (cf. Festinger 1957:11). In my own case, this took quite some time and eventually only happened because I discovered fatal flaws in my own ideology and not because alien critical theories seemed attractive or convincing.

Only *after* I realised that my own views were untenable could I even begin to try and take other views seriously. As long as I still believed my own ideas to be true and irrefutable I took cognisance only of the unacceptable conclusions of other views (instead of acquainting myself with the details of the arguments that led to those conclusions). As long as I knew the views of critical scholars and atheists only from stereotypes, straw men and secondary sources, there was no way I could even begin to consider modifying my own point of view.

It is arguably the case that, like me, most people who begin the critical study of the Old Testament do so as part of their general studies in theology. Like me, the vast majority of people who are interested in biblical theology are so because they are Christians committed to realism with regard to the ontological status of the God of the Bible.

Like me, the majority of students who have a background in Church theology will approach to the problems of realism in Old Testament scholarship with suspicion and concern. Like me, most will come from a background that can be classified epistemologically as naïve realism and theologically as fundamentalism. Like me, due to expectations generated in the context of the Church where the Old Testament is often neglected yet idealised as a fetish and as part of the precious “Word of God”, most prospective theologians probably expect the study of the Old Testament to strengthen and enrich their faith.

Unfortunately, it is often the case that those who take their studies in biblical criticism seriously and come from a background in conservative or fundamentalist religion are given a rather rude wake up call from their dogmatic slumbers. A most extreme crisis of belief can be encountered by conservative students of Old Testament theology who, like me, conform to the following diagnostic profile.

**A The initial profile and belief system of the subject**

- The subject comes from a religious tradition where the Bible is believed to be the inerrant or infallible word of God.
- The subject views the ideal belief system as one that can be designated as 'biblical'.
- The subject believes that only "biblical" Christians are true Christians.
- The subject believes that the Bible is unique, special and quite different from the mythologies and superstitions of other pagan religions.
- The subject believes that the Bible is historically and scientifically inerrant.
- The subject believes that the Bible is essentially coherent and contains all the dogma that the church believes.
- The subject believes that the Bible is theologically and morally perfect and complete.
- The subject believes that the Old Testament is a Christian document pointing to Jesus Christ in the way the New Testament authors claimed.
- The subject believes that Bible study is essential for spiritual growth.
- The subject believes that his own religious tradition's dogma is the only accurate



and complete version of what the Bible actually says.

- The subject's knowledge of the Bible is based not so much on serious study of the text but on occasional selective readings thereof in the company of devotional books distributed by the popular media.
- The subject believes that his beliefs about God and the Bible are based on and supported by the Bible.
- The subject believes that the veracity of his faith is dependent on the supposed inerrancy, truth, uniqueness and infallibility of the biblical texts.
- The subject is happy in his conservatism and proud of his fundamentalist identity.

#### **B Types of subjects involved**

- The undergraduate student in a seminary, faculty of theology or divinity school where critical views are promoted.
- The post-graduate student who, for the purpose of doing research, has to read from a wider selection of viewpoints than those supporting his own or has to go abroad to study in a different ideological and cultural academic environment.
- The minister or priest who reads widely and consistently ponders the implications of critical research for his faith.
- The scholar who has to familiarise himself with all the viewpoints in his discipline in order to be able to engage meaningfully in academic debates.

#### **C Variables that prevent the occurrence of cognitive dissonance or a crisis of belief**

- The subject has an overcrowded social life that leaves little time for reading or

serious contemplation.

- The subject pursues a way of life in a context where challenges to his faith are avoided as these may put his career, personal happiness, finances and relationships in jeopardy.
- The subject has access to only conservative points of view and/or confines his reading to those materials which are considered spiritually uplifting or sound/orthodox.
- The subject deliberately avoids certain types of scholarly literature and is biased against other viewpoints which he knows only as stereotypes and without ever having made a genuine effort to understand why such views are considered to be convincing.
- The subject reads critical scholarship without actually becoming introspective or considering the possibility that personal views might need any revision whatsoever.
- The subject is unable to be critical of himself and has never analysed or relativised his own religious self from the viewpoint of critical theories of philosophy, theology, history, anthropology, psychology and sociology.
- The person takes pride and pleasure in his conservative ideologies and is non-negotiably committed to fundamentalist views of biblical inspiration.
- The subject is naïve when it comes to the dynamics of his own hermeneutical processes and approaches the text with an idealistic positivism.
- The subject is, for the most part, unaware of the epistemological and logical problems pertaining to his particular ideology as a reader of the biblical text and a realist in theistic metaphysics.

**D Variables conducive to the initiating of a crisis of belief**

- The subject is exposed to the methodologies and findings of critical scholarship.
- The subject is introspective and open to change.
- The subject reads often, widely and contemplates what he reads.
- The subject contemplates the possible ontological implications of the results of critical biblical research.
- The subject is able to transcend himself and view his self as a construct relative to a particular historical context, theological tradition and socio-cultural matrix.
- The subject is aware of philosophical problems pertaining to matters of epistemology and hermeneutics.
- The subject is aware of his own psychological strategies of evasion when it comes to the acceptance of new beliefs and when dealing with cognitive dissonance.
- The subject is acutely aware of the tension between church theology and critical scholarship.
- The subject can be self-critical and does not believe everything he reads.
- The subject does not limit his reading to what is spiritually uplifting and merely those views that support his belief system or simply reiterates what he already believes to be the case but seeks to understand the viewpoints of others.

**E Types of literature initiating the crisis of belief**

- Critical theology (e.g. critical commentaries, history of religion, comparative religion, non-fundamentalist biblical theology, the problem of diversity in the

texts, the problematic relation between Old and New Testaments, the history of Israel, the quest for the historical Jesus, the Synoptic problem, comparative mythology and myth in the bible, critical perspectives on the development of beliefs and history of dogma, ideological critique of biblical writings, problems in biblical ethics, critical perspectives on the origin, formation and history of the biblical books and canon, critical perspectives on one's own tradition, the bible and science, biblical archaeology, alien cultural phenomena, Bible contradictions, the history of interpretation (especially the nineteenth century), etc.)

Also:

- Philosophy (e.g. philosophy of religion (especially atheist perspectives), European philosophy since Descartes, post-modernism, logic (informal fallacies), etc.)
- Psychology (atheist theories in the psychology of religion, e.g. Freud, Ellis, etc.)
- Sociology (critical theories in the sociology of religion, e.g. Comte, Feuerbach, Marx, Durkheim, etc.)
- Other (anthropology, archaeology, astronomy, biology, etc.)

**F      Variables that determine the extent of the crisis**

- The status of cherished religious beliefs in the construction of personal identity.
- The possible effects and implications of the problem on personal spirituality.
- The amount of cognitive restructuring necessary to deal with the problem.
- The impact of the problem on social relations and social identity.
- The extent to which the problem affects the subject's ability to deal with life's existential questions.

- The extent to which the meaning and plot of the life story of the individual is thrown out of sync.

**G Typical strategies for relief from cognitive dissonance**

- Ignoring and repressing the problem whilst deliberately or unconsciously refusing to entertain related thoughts so that the passage of time will eventually dull any awareness of cognitive dissonance.
- Quitting the study of theology and becoming more fideistic in order to limit exposure to critical theology and to move about in contexts where the problem does not surface.
- Becoming more conservative/fundamentalist and seek insight from conservative/fundamentalist scholarship and ideology on the matter.
- Becoming more liberal, semi-realist and siding oneself with critical theology.
- Becoming more radical, anti-realist and consider theology a game pursued for antiquarian purposes.
- Becoming agnostic and refusing to commit to any belief in particular whilst continuing in theological research yet living in denial that there is really anything to become unduly concerned about.
- Becoming atheist and practise theology simply for professional reasons as it is too late and too impractical to start all over again in life.
- Relativising the problem and the contradictory cognitions by viewing it from a synthesising perspective derived via meta-theological theory or a school of thought in philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, art, etc.

- Developing a schizophrenic personality or becoming prone to multiple personality disorders, reactive depression or insanity.
- Committing suicide.

## **H Symptoms and diagnostic criteria of the crisis of belief**

- **General symptoms**

Cognitive dissonance, crisis of faith, identity crisis, reactive depression, post-traumatic stress, neuroticism, paranoia, anxiety, etc.

- **Specific psychological symptoms**

An experience of profound existential anxiety (angst), temporary feelings of being strangely liberated, a deep sadness at irretrievable loss, disorientation and confusion, unexplainable loneliness, feelings of guilt, feelings of nostalgia, episodes of repression and forgetfulness, doubt, loss of self-confidence, endless deconstruction and reconstruction of the self-image, irremovable psychic tension, lack of mental vitality, nihilism, relativism, shock, indecisiveness, obsessive compulsive thought patterns, pessimistic self-talk, tiredness, unmotivated, apathy, self-loathing, anti-social behaviour, introversion, anhedonia, indecisiveness, etc.

- **Possible psychosomatic symptoms**

Passiveness or hyperactivity, restlessness, changes in appetite, chronic fatigue, insomnia, daydreaming, nightmares, a depressed immunity system, self-destructive behaviour, etc.

- **Popular self-talk strategies for survival and lessening of cognitive dissonance**

Repression, denial, ad hoc reasoning, irrational fideism, fantasising,

speculation, wishful thinking, self-hypnosis, mental role playing, circular reasoning, ad hominem reasoning, scapegoating, conspiracy theorising, etc.

Once again, the diagnostic profile given above is merely a rough guide and should not be understood as a blueprint for the way *all* Old Testament students from conservative backgrounds will *always* respond when confronted with the issues presented in the case against realism. Nevertheless, the profile constructed above as a supplementation to the perspective provided by dissonance theory on the possible reaction to the devil's advocate's case remains functional as a valid and personal perspective on what is no doubt a complex issue.

## APPENDIX C

### TOWARDS THE QUEST FOR A PHILOSOPHICAL YAHWEH

*.....if this is the way things are, what am I living for?*

(Gen 25:22; cf. 27:46)

Is this it then? Is the devil's advocate's assessment of the ontological status of Yahweh the last word on the particular issue? Can we all go home now and forget about the whole business of philosophical-critical analysis? Fortunately, it is not that simple.

In biblical studies, there has been many so-called "quests"; the most infamous of which must certainly be the quest for the historical Jesus. Other examples include the quests for the historical Israel, the historical Moses and the historical Paul. Not much in the way of resolving the problematic issues pertaining to the particular characters and phenomena have come about as a result of these quests, some of which are in their third or fourth phase of re-engagement. However, in each instance, the controversial research has contributed much in the sense that it has opened the eyes of the scholarly community to the problems related to the various issues and the complexity of the latter.

In this study, in an attempt to reconstruct a case against realism via the philosophy of religion, I hope to pioneer and initiate a new quest – the quest for a philosophical Yahweh.

Though philosophers of religion have been analysing and arguing about God for many centuries, few if any have done so in the context of Old Testament studies and pertaining to the character of Yahweh-as-depicted in the text. Through the utilisation of the philosophy of religion as an auxiliary discipline and the establishment of



philosophical-critical analysis as methodological approach within the field of Old Testament studies, the quest for the philosophical Yahweh can begin in earnest.

Old Testament scholars can and should take note of what philosophers of religion have already written with regard to theories pertaining to each of the issues on their subject's agenda. However, eventually the Old Testament itself will have to determine the nature and contents of the issues and theories constructed in the context of biblical scholarship. As this study has demonstrated with its focus on the Old Testament itself, the point is that philosophical-critical analysis of the Old Testament cannot simply involve an uncritical repeat of the philosophy of (Christian) religion.

As an interpretative methodology within Old Testament studies, philosophical-critical analysis must concern itself with the discourse of Old Testament Yahwism rather than with that of post-biblical faith. Moreover, though some of the issues on its agenda might seem to overlap with other issues already addressed in Old Testament theology and various forms of biblical-critical analysis, the similarities are superficial. As should be clear from the reconstruction of the case against realism in this study, a philosophical approach to the shared concerns will ultimately be substantially different from any other presently operative methodology.

As suggested in chapter one, philosophical-critical analysis might commence by way of two new interpretative methodologies:

1. **Philosophical criticism** as a form of biblical criticism where philosophical-critical analysis features on the level of exegesis. As noted in chapter 1, this will involve a reading of individual texts for what the nature and contents of the particular discourse might yield that may be of relevance from the perspective of one or more of the issues on the agenda of the philosophy of religion.
2. **Philosophy of Old Testament religion** as a comprehensive higher order discipline where philosophical-critical analysis commences on a level pertaining to the Old Testament as a whole (analogous to the study of the history of Israel or Old Testament theology).

These two types of philosophical-critical analysis could become the tools to be employed in the project I have designated the quest for a philosophical Yahweh.

It is hoped that the devil's advocate's reconstruction of the case against realism in Old Testament theology will urge more scholars to engage in philosophical-critical analysis. If more Old Testament scholars began to utilise the philosophy of religion in the context of biblical interpretation it will assist in the facilitation of achieving official recognition for the new methodology. As such, it may one day become an independent approach within Old Testament studies that is legitimate in its own right and one that stands in both supplementary and complimentary relation to already extant interpretative approaches to the text.



The new interpretative methodology of philosophical-critical analysis should, however, not limit itself to ontological issues (e.g. arguing for or against the existence of Yahweh). To be sure, participants in the quest for the philosophical Yahweh can

and should concern themselves with *all* the issues on the general agenda of the philosophy of religion. There is an enormous amount of specialised philosophical-critical work waiting to be done on the following issues:

1. The meaning and nature of religion in the Old Testament
2. The nature of religious language in the Old Testament
3. The concept of revelation in Old Testament religion
4. The nature and attributes of Yahweh
5. Arguments for and against the existence of Yahweh
6. The relation between Yahweh and evil
7. The nature of religious experience in the Old Testament
8. The relation between religion and morality in the Old Testament
9. The relation between religion and history in the Old Testament
10. The relation between religion and culture in the Old Testament
11. Old Testament religion and science
12. Etc.

Despite appearances, such topics of analysis need not assume that there is one single monolithic and coherent answer to each of issues to be addressed. Moreover, despite the fact that some of the issues on this agenda are already hot topics in other disciplines (e.g., Old Testament theology), this by no means renders a more specialised philosophical-critical inquiry superfluous or redundant. To be sure, a philosophical-critical perspective on these issues may well provide additional interesting research results not otherwise attainable yet of great interest for other interpretative methodologies. Such an approach may also be able to do sufficient justice to these issues which are often only of marginal interest in other disciplines.

In addition, the issues noted above can and should be approached from the perspectives of both micro- and macro-level analysis. On the one hand, there is ample room for exegetical work on individual passages in the text via philosophical criticism. On the other hand, equally many opportunities exist with regard to the philosophical critical assessment of the biblical discourse on a larger scale (a book, a couple of books, the Old Testament as a whole, etc.) via philosophy of Old Testament religion.

With regard to the present study, scholars are therefore also invited to come with hypothetical arguments not only against but also for the existence of Yahweh. There is also room for a case against anti-realism. Whatever the case may be and despite the pros and cons of such inquiries, this new form of analysis poses great potential for the enrichment of the discipline that is Old Testament studies. It is hoped that this study can play a pioneering role in the initiation of philosophical-critical analysis and, as such, also in the commencement of the quest for a philosophical Yahweh.