

Werner Gross

Don't Believe, What You Think

Sense and Nonsense
of Religion
and Religiosity



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 Springer

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Preface

*Being able to believe, can be a grace.
However, it is often our doubts that move us forward.*

What do people believe in—and why actually? What benefit do they get from their religion? Is it different for Christians than for Buddhists, Muslims, or followers of nature religions? Does it matter whether we believe in the Christian “God the Father in Heaven” or in “Mother Earth” (Gaia)? Why are so many people flocking to the esoteric scene or the psycho market in search of meaning? What is truth for them? What is credible for them? What is sacred to atheists—what do they actually believe in? Generally—when is belief in religion(s) helpful—when does it become problematic?

This book is precisely about such questions. But not only that—the emotional processing also plays an important role: What happens intrapsychically when someone experiences their “enlightenment”? What happens in their psyche when someone loses their faith?—And what if they find a new faith?

Essentially, the topic is about the search for meaning in life: What do I orient myself by? What is a meaningful and a sensual life for me?

But somehow, the question of meaning is not quite so simple for us humans. If we are somewhat reflective, we can hardly escape the question of the meaning of our life. Does life have a meaning? Is it predetermined? And if not—can we give it a meaning?

Or are we humans perhaps “incurably religious”, as the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski thought? Because—whether we admit it or not—we are

beings in search of meaning and try to make sense of why we are here, what we are supposed to and want to do in this world, in this life.

“When it storms and snows around the hut—that’s the great time of religion,” a wise person once said. Especially in crises, we often ask: Why is this happening to me—especially in the current situation? Is it coincidence? Or fate? Have we done something wrong—so are we to blame? Or is it even God’s will?

For indeed, there is something greater and more powerful than us humans. Whether one calls it “Evolution”, “Nature(laws)”, “Energies”, “(super)natural powers”, “God/gods” or whatever else, is ultimately a question of the respective personal worldview. And despite all the differences between the individual religions, there are a whole range of similarities between them. However—which religion we end up with largely depends on the perspective that is prevalent in the respective culture and is passed on to us and the following generations through education. In most societies, the religious interpretation of this worldview is currently (still) predominant. Religions in particular like to speak of God—or at least of images of God and gods. And everyone has—more or less consciously—their subjective perspective on this. What can we know—what must we believe?

“Deluge of Meaning”. In the market of freely floating systems of meaning, almost all claim that their truth is the only correct and genuine truth. Because in today’s time of the deluge of meaning, where the eternal truths are dumped into our living rooms daily through the media, each individual can believe what they want—whether it is reflective and thoughtful or absurd and bizarre. Because even the belief in a—according to objective criteria—misguided system of meaning and worldview can be fulfilling and coherent for the person concerned and give them something.

Refuges from reality. In the attempt to unravel the mysteries of life, religions often oscillate between the ability to give people hope and the danger of producing illusions in them. But where does hope end—and where does illusion begin? The transition, unfortunately, is fluid. As a proverb so beautifully puts it: “Hope is a life jacket, but not a lifeboat.” For many religions assume that God has a plan for each individual, for this world, and the universe. Others believe that God even intervenes in the life of each individual and that one can persuade him (“the dear God”) to act in their favor through the right faith, appropriate prayers, rituals, services, or vows, etc. Thus, for some, religions are like refuges from the daily downpours, the banalities of life, and the cruelties of the present.

Others rather say “If God wills” (Islamic: “Inshallah”) and submit to fate (“Kismet”). As if God would set it right: “Trust in God” was the

term—when religion had a greater significance for many even in our latitudes. But it always revolved around humans and the human perspective. Because all religions seemingly elevate humans from their biological desolation. They give him the feeling of being sublime (“Crown of Creation”)—or at least better than the predator.

Three Humiliations. “Man is the image of God”—this creed has been followed in the Christian cultural sphere over the past centuries. However, this view of the central role and uniqueness of man as the crown of divine creation had already received several setbacks from the sciences a long time ago:

For the *first narcissistic injury* to the special position of humans and the Earth in the cosmos dates back a few centuries:

In the 16th century, *Copernicus* indeed proved that it is not the sun that revolves around the earth (as had been thought until then), but rather the earth was demoted to a satellite of the sun and our home is by no means the center of the universe: A first severe insult to the anthropocentric fantasies of grandeur, as the medieval Christianity always invoked, proclaimed, and defended.

The *second humiliation* was taught to mankind by *Charles Darwin* in the 19th century. He viewed humans as the result of evolution and not at all as a unique and unchangeable crown of creation.

The *third humiliation* was finally inflicted on humans by *Sigmund Freud* and his psychoanalysis at the beginning of the 20th century: Freud proved that the individual human is not even “master in his own house”, he is thus all too often at the mercy of his unconscious, his instinctiveness, and can only control himself consciously and voluntarily to a limited extent.

“Man is the crown of creation, if he knows that he is not,” Carl Amery said, if man therefore does not assess himself in a megalomaniacal self-aggrandizement.

For despite these affronts, human hubris continues to celebrate again and again, wallowing in the old illusion of being at the top of evolution, and proclaiming the “Anthropocene”, the human-made era. Religions contribute a significant part to this: “Subdue the earth,” it says in the Bible after all.

If humans still consider themselves to be the image of God, perhaps it’s worth taking a look in the mirror ...

Interpretive authority and power of definition. On the one hand, the development of almost all cultures without the emergence and influence of religions is hardly conceivable. How they found (or dreamed) their beginnings and their images of God, religions were guiding stars for many centuries, by which first tribes and later entire peoples have aligned themselves

(for more on this, see: Chap. 5: The past gods), by providing people with orientation in their respective time and cultural circle. Religions are therefore culturally mediated sets of rules that provide the framework and guideline for what is conveyed as appropriate in the respective culture, what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong, what is allowed and what is forbidden.

For many centuries, religions held interpretive authority and the power to define in society and culture, in cities and communities, in clans, cliques, peer groups, and families. As a result, they (sometimes) provided each individual with help and support in difficult situations and times of need. For many, their faith was a “balm for the soul”. Apart from that, religion was and still is the glue that holds many societies together. In earlier times, it was like this: Besides the political authorities (princes, counts, mayors, senate, councils), the most important people in a city or region were the doctors, the judges, the teachers—and the **priests**. The latter had—through their (supposed) connection to higher powers—a special role as open (or covert) advisors to the powerful (for more on this, see: Chap. 8: Gods, Prophets, Angels, Saints and Priests).

Appeals to the good in people. Despite all the differences between individual faiths,—understood benevolently—all religions (whether Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, or Judaism) are something like appeals to the good in people: So behaving well, decently, socially, justly, approaching one’s own positive ideal self, rather than giving in to one’s short-term instinctive egoism, is the implicit goal of most religions. In Islam, the “true Jihad” is also understood as the “holy war” against one’s own short-term egoistic instincts.

The fact that the lived reality of religions is only limitedly identical to the ideal conceptions is another topic. Because fundamentally, this is about a cultivation process initiated by the religions, to orient oneself towards a good long-term (social and possibly even ecological) goal, instead of simply giving in to short-term egomaniacal satisfaction. “Like a drop in the ocean,” as Buddhism says, we should fit into the course of the world. Whether one needs a god and/or a religious belief system for this, however, is another question. The fact that some climate activists (“Fridays for Future”, “Extinction Rebellion”, “Last Generation”...) no longer believe in the Christian “God the Father in Heaven”, but rather have “Mother Earth” (Gaia) in view, may be something like their religious-ideological underpinning of their actions against the supposed “ecocide”. Despair is usually good nourishment for illusions. Religion may be helpful (because it gives

hope)—especially since there is something unquestionable (and thus providing security) in many religions, which is usually called God (or Allah, Jehovah, Brahman, Manitou...).

However, (religious) truth has become a perishable commodity today—and anyone who believes they possess this truth must reckon with its ever-decreasing half-life. Because eternal truths—as religions often claim for themselves—are becoming increasingly unbelievable for many—because it's a matter of opinion: some say one thing, others say another.

After all, religions deal with something invisible and have always oscillated between hope and illusion back and forth.

Narratives and Myths. Certainly, religions are more than narratives (stories) and myths that have been passed down over many generations. However, the crumbling reliability of religious faith has led to the churches losing the trust of many today. They have bound their members primarily with fear of hell and the devil for centuries, and where they held the dominant majority opinion, they kept the flock (also socio-psychologically) together with the fear of punishment for rule violations. In today's multi-option society, this only works to a very limited extent.

Twilight of the Gods. For religions are no longer what they once were. Due to globalization, all religions must undergo a process of relativization. Their respective monopolistic positions, which individual religions held for centuries in their respective regions, have crumbled in recent decades. They must (except perhaps in Afghanistan, Iran, and the Vatican) contend with competitors and rivals in a multipolar world on the market of worldviews. Therefore, religions have long since lost their innocence, and the credibility has often slipped away from them. More and more people—at least in our latitudes—are distancing themselves from religions—especially when they are preached in churches.

Loss of credibility. The problem is: credibility can be destroyed with a few wrong sentences or behaviors. The rebuilding of credibility requires (like a growth process in nature) usually a long time—and above all trust: And just as you can't squeeze the toothpaste back into the tube, you can't force Christian believers back into the churches. Because on the path of liberation from religious dogmas, many sacred cows have been slaughtered by now. And for quite a few today, it is something like a liberating redemption from the violence of gods and priests, from the fear of hellish punishments, if one no longer has to submit to the compulsion of religious dogmas and cultural traditions that dictate how one should live:

Today, especially young people are seeking, developing, and pursuing their own way of life. And these search movements are increasing. How do I want to live? What kind of meaning can I give to my life? Can I simply adopt the traditional religious offerings of meaning from religions? Or do I have to construct or search for my own meaning? For many, this search is open-ended: Sometimes you only know what you were looking for when you have found it.

While for centuries in this country believers were kept in the flock with the fear of hell (and the social pressure of the majority religion), this no longer works in today's multioptional society, where each individual has the choice between different systems of meaning. Whether influenced by Buddhism, linked with nature-religious practices or esoterically toned—believers want to be positively bound (if at all) today and no longer through threats and fear-mongering. Thus, the image of God in the Christian churches has changed quite dramatically over the last few decades—away from the punishing, threatening judge God, towards the merciful-loving God who accepts and understands: From the message of threat to the message of joy (for more on this see Chap. 6: Concepts of God).

Patchwork Religiosity. No question: Established religions can still contain many traces of meaning. Because these traditional systems of meaning of religions are still often unquestioningly adopted and passed on through education from generation to generation—even though many modern people currently do not discover this meaning in the major religions, but prefer to assemble their system of meaning themselves ("Patchwork Religiosity"). Because especially in the more developed regions of the world (Central Europe, USA, Japan), something is emerging that could be called "Twilight of Religions": Religion is only really important for a few—especially if it is church-dogmatic. While in the so-called "3rd world" even the Catholic Church, apart from the charismatically oriented Pentecostal communities, is still recording growth rates, the traditional religions and religious views in the highly civilized areas are of some relevance to at most a third of the population—with a downward trend: The sheep are leaving the shepherds. The dazzling power of religions has—at least in our latitudes—decreased and the demythologization of religions is in full swing. Religions may still have a calming effect on children—but fewer and fewer adolescents trust the religious beliefs.

Seekers of meaning. As mentioned: We humans are "seekers of meaning". Not only in crises do we want to understand why something happens to us and what sense it could possibly make. Why we are here, what we are supposed to do here (and want to do). Undoubtedly, therefore, the question of the meaning of life is good and justified—however, the preformed

answers of religions are sufficient for fewer and fewer people: “Jesus is the answer—what was your question again?”

If they still have any significance for them, for many people today religions are something like the illusionary giant “TurTur” in Michael Ende’s children’s story “Jim Button and Luke the Engine Driver”: The closer you look, the closer you get, the smaller the once immeasurably huge and inexplicable religions become in the fog of mysticism.

Off-the-rack worldviews. Religion elevates humans from their biological desolation. It gives them the feeling of being sublime (“crown of creation”) and being better than the predator. Soberly considered, one could say: religions are systems of meaning with off-the-rack worldviews and images of humanity. And these traditional suits seem to fit fewer and fewer people today. More and more people—(e.g., “unbelievers”, non-denominational, naturalists, rationalists, atheists, Marxists, etc.)—even claim that religions are something like “collective systems of madness”, and in the worst case call believers “Religiot”, who adhere to “conspiracy theories”. Even the publisher of one of the formerly most important spiritual scene magazines “Connection”, Wolf Sugata Schneider, writes in his circular 226 from 16.11.2022: “The so far most widespread conspiracy theory is that the world was created by an all-powerful old man in seven days, who lured us into believing in him by promising us his love.”

Religions deal with something invisible. What one must not forget: All religions deal with and about something invisible—namely God. This is codified in the revelation scriptures that emerged centuries ago (Bible, Quran, Torah, Bhagavad Gita etc.), which were originally only orally transmitted and at some point written down and declared to be “God’s Word” (more on this in Chap. 7: How the holy books became holy). And in the face of the invisible, they discuss different perspectives and interpretations of what one cannot see at all. But—the closer one looks, the greater the “questionability”—which means nothing else than questioning the worthiness: Dare to know (“Sapere aude”).

I have always been amazed at how some people—be they theologians, priests, bishops, the Pope, or free-roaming prophets—have the courage to claim that they know what God wants ...

How I came to the topic: The topic of religion and religiosity has occupied me for many years—what is good, helpful, and supportive about religions, but also what is problematic, unnatural, inhumane, and restrictive about them. I oscillate back and forth between these two poles—essentially since my childhood.

For my relationship with religion has always been tense and ambivalent. On the one hand, as a 10-year-old Catholic, I received the “holy communion” and was later also provided with the sacrament of “confirmation”, even was—albeit very briefly—an “altar server” in the Catholic parish of St. Nazarius. On the other hand, I left the church in protest at 16 because I simply could no longer bear the narrowness and Catholic bigotry.

The ambivalence actually started much earlier. For example: As children, we were regularly sent to the Sunday (children’s) early service, while our parents turned over in their warm bed and we had to go through the cold. The result: We did indeed leave the house, but rarely participated in the church service. Instead, we skipped the church visit and preferred to play “Old Maid” in the small alley next to the old Kolpinghaus, rather than listening to the priest’s sermon. Even if it was with a guilty conscience. Until the mother then asked what the priest had preached about...

Nevertheless—or perhaps because of this—religion has always held a great fascination for me: As a journalist, I have produced a multitude of radio broadcasts and reports on various aspects of both the major churches and many different religious communities, subcultures, and sects. I still remember well my stay at the Cistercian Monastery Marienstatt in the Westerwald, where I was particularly impressed by the early morning chants (“Laudes”) and prayers of the monks. But I also remember reports on Bhagwan disciples, Islamic Sufis, and Hare Krishnas, about psycho-sects (“Poisonous Paradises”) and “mini-gurus”.

Even before I became a psychologist, I was on the “hippie trip”, hitchhiking all the way to India, spent a considerable amount of time in Benares (now: Varanasi), the holiest city of the Hindus, visited several ashrams and practiced yoga for many years. Later, I practiced Za-Zen in the Zendo against a white wall, sang Christian hymns, and performed the Sufis’ “dhikr” and whirling dances a few times, chanted Manitu songs in sweat lodges with the Indians, and subjected myself to various esoteric practices—from gemstone therapy and Bach flowers to astrology, tantra, Watsu and Wata, rebirthing, all the way to Reiki and Native American ear candles.

The results were not final answers, but rather more questions that I was seeking answers to: What are they/we actually doing there? What is happening there? What’s the point? What is the meaning? One could summarize the whole thing with the question: “Experienced a lot—but did you also understand something?”

Somehow, I never really understood God’s will. And no one could really explain it to me. Or those who wanted to explain it to me were not credible to me. Thus, for me, religious faith oscillates between life help and delusion.

I rather agree with the old Jewish saying: “You are closer to God when you ask a question than when you give an answer” (for more on this, see Chap. 3: “Faith and Doubt”).

“Religion can help, religion can harm.” This quote begins an article in the “Journal for Religion and Worldview” (4/2023, p.284), published by the Protestant Central Office for Worldview Questions. And the article continues: “After the health-promoting effects of positive faith convictions and practices have been proven in the German-speaking area, reports are accumulating about the effects of toxic communities, religious violence, or spiritual abuse.”

Psycho Market—Sects—Destructive Cults. In dealing with the two sides of religions, this ultimately led me, as a psychologist and psychotherapist (after some professional political struggles), to conduct a widely noticed BDP colloquium titled “Psycho Market—Sects—Destructive Cults” for the “Professional Association of German Psychologists” (BDP) on 24.01.1994 during the peak of the then “Scientology hysteria” (for more on this, see my book: “Psycho Market—Sects—Destructive Cults”, Bonn 1998, 3rd edition). There was a multitude of articles, reports, and discussions on the topic: “How dangerous are sects? Why do people get involved? What can be done to get out? What do psychologists actually say about it?”—But other questions also arose: “What is actually the difference between a church and a sect? And what happened (and happens) in the churches? Is everything kosher there?”, “What is the difference between belief and superstition?”.

After I had developed the leaflet “What makes an alternative-spiritual group a problematic cult” for the BDP, the BDP working group “Psychomarket—Sects—Destructive Cults” was created in 1994 due to the many inquiries, which I led for over 23 years until 2017 (with several name changes: most recently it was called “Religion Psychology—Spirituality—Psychomarket”). In the over 60 mostly full-day meetings, we dealt with all possible topics:

- What is Shamanism?
- Effect of meditation on the brain.
- What characterizes dogmatism?
- What is spirituality?
- Religiously motivated suicide bombers.
- Exorcism in the Catholic Church—nowadays.
- What are enlightenment experiences?
- Psychotherapy and Buddhism ...
- Etc.

Federal Enquete Commission “So-called Sects and Psycho-Groups”.

Ultimately, the working group was also one of the midwives for the Federal Enquete Commission “So-called Sects and Psycho-Groups”, which met from 1996 to 1998 and for which I served as a scientific expert (for more on this, see the publication of the German Bundestag: “New religious and ideological communities and psycho-groups in the Federal Republic of Germany”, Bonn 1998, German Bundestag).

And so I had the topic of religion and religiosity in view all my life. Sometimes with a more friendly-approachable attitude—sometimes from a more critical position.

*“One begins their life as an arsonist
and ends it as a firefighter.”
(Pitigrilli)*

Heretic. That’s why I have to admit it right at the beginning of this book: *I like heretics.* I am suspicious of people who unquestioningly (like a flock of sheep) follow a belief—regardless of whether it is Catholic, Protestant, Islamic, Buddhist, or atheistic.

For Consideration: The German word “Ketzer” (heretic) is, incidentally, derived from “Cathars”, a medieval sect whose members were annihilated, murdered, and mostly burned at the stake by Pope-loyal Catholics, particularly in France, primarily because they opposed the church’s ostentation. “Kill them all, God will recognize his own,” is said to have been exclaimed by Arnaud-Amaury, a Catholic warlord during the Cathar persecution. This later became a battle cry of the Crusaders. The term “Cathars” originates from Greek and, incidentally, means “the Pure”.

But there is an even more important reason why I like heretics: heretics have at least once thought about what they believe—or not. This cannot necessarily be said of most baptismal certificate believers (the herd), as many do not even know what they believe (should). Heretics have broken away from the herd and have—justified or not—sought their own path. Put kindly, one could also say it’s about self-discovery and self-responsibility—if you will, the (re-)wilding of humans.

I myself do not fit well into a herd and do not want to be part of a herd—and I also do not need a shepherd who watches over me and tells me what is right and what is wrong. I prefer to think for myself, rather than unquestioningly adopting systems of meaning. (*That’s why I have interspersed*

provocative “heretical objections” throughout the text—simply, so that this perspective is not completely lost.)

Because that is a goal of this book: to demystify religions. It is about fundamental questions: What are religions actually? What benefits do they have? What damage can they cause? But it also deals with questions like: Is there such a thing as God or only images of God? If he exists: What can we say about him? Why do we search for meaning? Do biological roots of religiosity exist? Or is there even a “God gene”?

Beneficial Uncertainty. To avoid any misunderstanding: I am not trying to spoil people’s positive experiences with religious faith. Quite the contrary: I want them to understand and integrate these experiences. Because miracles only exist for people who do not understand. When I understand, I am no longer overwhelmed, but can categorize what I have experienced.

Certainly, the book is still a provocation for some. And it is meant to be, because the word comes from Latin and means to provoke: I want to provoke people to find their own answers to questions of meaning. It is about—if you will—a “salutary uncertainty”.

Thus, the book can also be understood as an appeal to think for oneself and to find and clarify one’s own convictions on the subject of meaning—so to speak, to take a closer look at the stable of one’s own positions (and possibly to clean it out). After all, everyone has a choice: The religion with which one has grown up does not have to accompany one for a lifetime (or even dominate and pursue): “*Sapere aude*”, as Immanuel Kant formulated it: “Dare to use your own understanding” and to choose which worldview suits you.

It may be that the attentive reader of this book notices one or another contradiction in my explanations. This is not necessarily intended, but ultimately unavoidable in a work that is “work in progress”. After all, it is also good to ask questions whose answer one does not (yet) know—simply because this is also a book for seekers, for skeptics, for the disappointed who have nothing more to do with outdated worldviews off the peg or the creatively absurd absurdities of the esoteric scene. It is also a book for heretics, an excursion for the relentless and against the dumbing down and exploitation by religion and belief—but it is **not a book against the search for meaning and faith in the sense of primal trust**. Besides, it is also a book for (and about) laughter in religious matters—for the “cosmic laughter”. (“A god who can be insulted with blasphemous laughter cannot be a real god.”)

It is important to note: I have no missionary ambitions and so this book does not aim to lead its readers to *any* particular faith or deter them from

anything. It aims to help one find their own position on faith or—even better—develop it themselves. If someone absolutely needs an off-the-shelf system of meaning or even a dogmatic and rule-based religion, then that is also o.k. Ultimately, it is about plunging what is stupid and stupefying, or even tortures and terrorizes people, better into the abyss of oblivion. For this, there is occasionally the section: ***For Reflection***

Of course, such a book also always reflects the current state of the author's engagement with the topic. As mentioned: It is “work in progress”. So if you have suggestions, ideas, requests for additions or criticism, please feel free to contact me—preferably by email: pfo-mail@t-online.de. I look forward to your (even critical) feedback.

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