

FROM ROMAN CATHOLICISM...  
THROUGH ATHEISM...  
TO CHRIST

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October 1989

I want to share with you how after years of living in an atheistic belief system I came to faith in Jesus Christ. My testimony describes many of my former views of the world in order to illustrate how I chose to deceive myself into thinking I had the purest motives while in reality I was just stubbornly refusing to listen to God's truth. It also shows how patiently God arranged a chain of events that finally broke my pride, opened my eyes, and made me trust in His word instead of what I would call the "Materialistic Religion".

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Like nearly half of the German population I grew up in a Catholic family and became involved in that church very early. I was baptized as a baby, introduced to Eucharist and to confirmation and started serving as an altar boy during the mass. So, as a child, I followed the traditions of the Catholic church and my thinking was formed by it.

But later, about at the age 12, I began to lose interest. Proud as I was of myself, I considered myself now to be a very intelligent and highly logical person and began regarding the teachings of the church as just a collection of myths which had nothing to do with reality.<sup>1</sup> Over the years this thought grew stronger in me until finally I did not believe in the existence of a god at all. "The material world is all there is", I thought, "and God is just a crutch for irrational people who believe in stories that cannot be true. I can do without Him". Slowly I moved farther and farther away from the influence of religion.

Nevertheless, from time to time I got into discussions with Christians. But these rather seemed to confirm my point of view. I thought I should be able to live a good life without running after an illusion. My behavior would be much more rational then and I would definitely not make the mistakes of people controlled by religious emotions. Searching for faults I found, of course, lots of examples supporting my point. Many "Christians" always talked about the Bible and a better life but apparently they were unable to live up to what they were saying. Did this not prove that their beliefs were wrong? Why then should I need to believe in such a myth? Was not my life at least as good as that of the Christian people? Would not it be worth even more if I live to the high standards just out of my own strength without the help of a God? And - even if God were to exist, should not he have to accept my righteous life? Is not that true justice?

Little did I know what I was talking about. I had never cared to read the Bible myself and did not know that without God's grace I would by no means be able to stand righteous before Him and that the greatest of all sins is refusing to accept Him as Lord. I had my own narrow world, valued myself much higher than others, and I would let nobody convince me that I was wrong. In every argument I was looking for faults and insufficiencies and surely I found some. There was no proof for the existence of God brought before me which could withstand my "scientific" treatment. I did not want to accept that there should be someone having the right to tell me what is right or wrong. I was too proud of myself to freely submit to God and therefore simply denied His existence.

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<sup>1</sup>Actually, it was not the case that I had already found the faults of the Catholic teachings. I was simply looking for an excuse not to obey what was asked of me and deceiving myself into judging *all* of religion as irrational was the best I could find.

However, the question whether there is really a God never left me completely. Even after I started studying Computer Science which focused my mind even more on abstract thinking without space for "irrational things like religion" it always returned bothering me. Could I be wrong? What if there are really beings outside the material world? Strangely enough, church buildings began making me feel really unwell once I entered them. Searching for an explanation I thought my respect for Christians and their religious feelings which I did not want to hurt by hanging around in what is holy for them would have caused these feelings. The true message behind that I did not understand.

Then came the days when I began evaluating my life. What did I want to achieve? What would make it meaningful? In what would I find fulfillment? I had lots of these questions but an answer to them I could not find. The amusement which most people considered to be satisfying looked empty to me. Neither could work, success, or career give me the fulfillment for which I was looking. Being extraordinarily successful in my studies I had already experienced that. Relating to friends, which I had enough, I found, would not do it either.

Finally I came to the conclusion that life must be meaningless. A terrible thought: everything is absolutely meaningless. And consequently one question started bothering more and more. Does it really make sense to continue life? Why not make an end to it? Since I trusted nobody to understand me I did not tell anybody about the problem. Instead I began withdrawing from people (except for superficial contacts) and tried to handle it all by myself. First, I could avoid thinking about it but after awhile it became stuck in my mind and there was never a day where it did not come up: "Life has no meaning. Give it up!" Twice I made an attempt to kill myself but could not complete it. I feared to survive as a mental cripple which was even worse than the current situation.

Shortly after the second attempt I became friends with a young woman whom I knew from classes. She was more serious about Christianity than other people I met before and made me open up a little bit. Naturally, we had lots of discussions about Christianity but still I was too stubborn to admit that my views could be wrong. Of course, I tried to disprove her by showing up weak points in her faith which was not very strong at that time. Finally she realized the danger of getting drawn away herself and broke off our engagement for exactly that reason.

I was unable to understand this. Does religion count more than an engagement? Why in the world could Christian faith be so important to her? Why then did she never take me to other Christians who were stronger and maybe more convincing than she was, I asked her. Well, she did it now and thus I was confronted with "real" Christians for the first time in my

life. Though they believed in Christ they did not seem to be so “other-worldly” or inconsistent as the Christians I had met before. What they told me about God made much more sense than everything I had heard so far. However, it takes more than one evening to convince me. So my friend and I went home at night and I stayed at my friend’s house for a “brief” continuation of the discussion.

That night something happened that definitely shook my belief that there could be no supernatural being. Somehow, during the discussion I could not stand hearing the word “Jesus” anymore which, by the way, I was not able to speak by myself. It began giving me a great pain, and a fear that I could not explain grew in me. I asked my friend to stop speaking but she did not. A part of me wanted to jump up and make her be quiet no matter how but I could not move at all. My fear grew even more and suddenly I was reminded of a movie I had seen 9 year ago. It had been about a demon-possession and that was just the way I felt. But, could such a thing be possible? Was not that just fantasy? I tried to calm down and rationalize those thoughts away. But there was more that came to my mind. What about my fear of churches? What about the desire to commit suicide that never left me the last years? What about my being closed up totally to everybody? And finally, why am I horrified by a mere word?

My friend began to pray quietly which eventually brought us out of the situation. The next morning I tried to forget what had happened. “It must have been the psychological stress that has caused a very irrational experience”, I reasoned. This, however, could not totally explain it.

I continued talking with the people I had met the day before. I wanted to find out more about what they believed and why. The discussions we had were quite enlightening but did not cause any change in my views. Finally they recommended my attending a “conference” where I would find the basic concepts of Christian belief presented in a very rational way without any emotional pressure. In addition there would be plenty of time and people for further discussions. Expecting something similar to the scientific conferences to which I was accustomed, I agreed to do so. Maybe I would have objected, had I known what really awaited me there. But I went unknowingly which, in the end, was the best I could do.

The conference was held during the 4 German holidays of Easter 1984. There were about 40 “guests” and 20 members of the staff responsible for presenting what Christianity really meant and ready to discuss specific questions and problems individually or in groups. And strangely enough from the first day on they created an atmosphere which made it easy to open up and talk even about rather personal matters.

On the first day they started the subject by talking about sin and its destructive consequences for each ones lives.

- **Dishonesty** (lies, theft, betrayal, etc.) destroys our society and our relationship to it.
- **Sexual immorality** destroys our relationship to our own body.
- **Acting without love** destroys our relationship to the people next to us.
- **Egoism and Selfcenteredness** destroys our personality itself.

To clarify this they did not just give theoretical explanations but also presented experiences from real life. During each of the lectures some members of the staff got up and told to the audience a “small” sin they themselves had committed and what had happened as a consequence of it. That was extremely convincing. Even without believing in any religious definition of sin it was now plain to me that sinful behavior indeed causes a lot of damage, that there was a need to avoid it and to follow some unalterable rules instead of temporarily changing feelings.

The real shock for me came at the end of the day. So far I had just considered whether I should agree to a certain view of the world or not. But now the speaker of the last lecture offered a practical step for those who really wanted to make progress. “Take the chance to consider your own life so far”, he said, “and go to a place where nobody will disturb you. Then take a sheet of paper and - considering the measure we have talked about today - write down all the sins that come to your mind. Ask God to show you your life as it is and I am sure he will do so”.

“He should not have mentioned God”, I thought, “maybe I would have done it then.” But, although I tried to refuse the offer, immediately an incredible list of sins I had committed appeared before me. No, I was by no means the righteous man I always believed myself to be. There were so many sinful actions where I had made up excuses for in order to feel justified. But there was no excuse for what I had done and I could not get away from the guilt that remained. I did not sleep very well this night - like most of the others.

The following day presented a solution for the miserable situation in which most of the guests had found themselves. “What can we do with the sins we have discovered?”, the lecturer asked. “Simply forget about them? Try to make them undone by good deeds?” Obviously that would not help us at all to get rid of the guilt.

Now the lecturer talked about Jesus Christ. He explained that Christ had died on the cross to pay for our sins. Everyone who is willing to accept this payment will be free from his guilt. All that needs to be done is to repent, ask Jesus for forgiveness and let Him be Lord of one's life.

I understood the words but their true meaning was very far from me. Was not that just a myth, a crutch to deal with an unsolvable question? Was not the world I could see all there is? These thoughts still occupied my mind when the next step was offered: "Take a step that will bring you from death to life. Confess your sins before Jesus and commit your life to him. Make a decision to change your life - now and here." It was also explained that it had proven meaningful to do this step in front of a witness. Then there would always be a person who would be able to confirm that one had not just fooled himself. And all of the staff people would be willing to help us.

I was not ready for action. "Of course, I would follow Jesus immediately if he really existed", I thought, "but I still cannot believe that." My mind was very busy now. I wished to talk to someone about all that burdened me. But this would have meant giving up all that made me feel secure and open myself to a stranger. I was unable to begin by myself.

It did not take more than half a day until one member of the staff approached me in a way that made him appear trustworthy to me. I began talking about my problems - but only on the surface. Finally, he made me realize that there would be no other way to make progress without actually taking the step towards Jesus. I was not convinced that this would really help. But how could I find out without trying? There was nothing to lose anyway. Maybe I would fool myself for awhile before I would definitely find out that it was wrong. I would be able to bear that.

But the whole step did not feel right. It was like experimenting with things too important to play around with. Therefore I absolutely did not feel well when I confessed my sins and committed my life to Jesus the following night. I even felt worse afterwards. "What have I done? I have spoken an open lie. I have committed my life to someone who did not exist in reality." All my beliefs on what is right and what is wrong, what is true and what is false had been totally mixed up and the impression of having done something wrong did not leave me for a very long time.

*This was my first willful step towards Jesus. But it was only a halfhearted one and I had to fully commit my whole life to Christ without any exceptions before I could enter the fulfilled life he had promised.*

The Christian group I joined afterwards strongly recommended to continue the practice of confessing sins in front of a witness. I should choose a Christian partner for that and to talk with him about troubles in my

Christian life. Though I agreed to the argument that this would help uncovering and overcoming obstacles it took me more than 6 months to find someone I trusted enough to tell him about all the burdens that still had not left me: my strong unbelief, my desire to give up and kill myself, my distrust of nearly all people, and of course many sins that I could not overcome.

"From my experience", he told me, "these symptoms seem to indicate that there is still some binding to the powers of Satan. There are sins that may actually bring you in contact with demonic powers and cause these 'occult bindings', sins like divination, tarot reading, spiritism, putting faith in horoscopes, practicing astrology, and more. Is there anything that comes into your mind?". There was nothing I remembered. Only having watched the movie about demon possession seemed to have a slight relation to it. I told him. "Some people even get caught by simply watching movies which deal directly with demons or Satan", he explained, "it may influence their whole way of thinking. The one you saw is definitely of this kind. Repent from the sin of failing to avoid contact with these spiritual deceptions and ask Jesus to make you free of your burdens. That might be the solution." I did so and then we prayed. Finally he said to me: "By the power of Jesus Christ you are free from these bindings from now on until eternity". Immediately after that the heavy burdens that had been on me were gone never to return again. What I had tried to get away from in my own strength for more than ten years without any success had now vanished instantly. Jesus had made me free.

This is now about five years ago and it is still beyond my insight to explain exactly what had been going on with me all that time. But I know now that since I accepted him as **Lord** of my life Jesus has changed my life totally. He gave it a meaning and a goal for which to stretch out. He even began altering my personality which a lot of people I know have recognized before I told them about Him. Jesus is more than just a crutch or an illusion. He is a real person with whom I can talk and from whom I receive answers.

As for all the problems I had with Christianity so far he has given me a sound answer in the Bible. Today I can hardly understand how I could have ever claimed that the Christian faith is based on a book that is faulty, outdated and insufficient to answer life's questions without having read it at all. Having read it consecutively several times now I have found just the opposite. There is more than enough evidence that it is the infallible word of God, and provides the means to find answers for all I need in life and fully up to date. And it has always proved to be a real blessing to read the Bible again and again trying to put into practice what God is telling me through it.