

AMEN?

Questions for a God
I Hope Exists

JULIA ROCCHI



lakedrivebooks.com

Lake Drive Books
6757 Cascade Road SE, 162
Grand Rapids, MI 49546

info@lakedrivebooks.com
lakedrivebooks.com
@lakedrivebooks

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What's It All About?

Way back in 2006, I was an earnest, idealistic twentysomething working my first full-time job and living at home to save money. During the week I pursued a few hobbies and, on weekends, I hung out with my friends. I went on lackluster dates, ate dinner with my parents, and got a head start on experiencing a quarter-life crisis. In short, I was a not-uncommon recent college graduate except, perhaps, for one detail: I regularly attended Catholic mass at my childhood parish.

Now, I do not expect you to gasp at that statement. Being a practicing Catholic is not that unusual. But my religious observance as a young adult *was* somewhat rare among my religion-eschewing peers. “But the abuse scandals,” people would say to me. “The misogyny. The hypocrisy of it all.” They weren’t wrong. I knew I was part of a complicated tradition, one filled with as much sin, pain, and shame as it was with beauty, creativity, and mystery. I stuck with it not only because it was the liturgical language I spoke best but because I stubbornly believed in the idea of small-*c* “church”: God embodied as a community of seekers, a group of people who desire to orient their lives around love.

My presence there, however, didn’t always mean I was thrilled about religion, especially as a young adult. Even though I ran in slightly more progressive Catholic circles, it was hard to shake the feeling that the church considered my current stage in life unworthy of its time and focus, seeing it instead as a negligible pit stop on the way from teen-focused charismatic worship to middle-aged involvement in family masses and religious education. Out were the overwrought youth conferences and fevered guitar group sessions; in were awkward “young adult socials” that doubled as Catholic singles’ meat markets where

women outnumbered men four-to-one and those few men were pushing forty.

Eventually I got involved with a local food pantry and soup kitchen where I served meals once a month alongside other “young adult” Catholics who were, on average, fifteen years older than me. And at the invitation of a friend, I joined a vibrant Young Franciscan group (a lay community based on the teachings of St. Francis of Assisi) in downtown Philadelphia, which became the first—and only—young adult activity in that era of my life that focused on contemplation, nurtured participants as individuals, and included only people under thirty.

Getting to this level of participation, though, took a solid year of dogged searching and trial runs. As each fruitless month ticked by, I grew increasingly frustrated that finding connection within the church wasn’t simpler. For God’s sake (literally), I wanted to be there! I had enthusiasm and willpower and a 1990 Ford Taurus that could take me and at least three other young adults—four if they didn’t leave room for the Holy Spirit—anywhere. But I wasn’t becoming a nun, nor was I married, nor did I have children. As a result, the church didn’t seem terribly interested in me despite my keen interest in it.

I began asking questions. Did my commitment to the church matter? Could my restless energy be addressed or harnessed? Were my inquiries, needs, and desires valid? I felt that no one should ever beg another to stay, to listen, to tend, only to discover that the other cannot—or will not—cross the room to meet the petitioner where they are. Soon I realized I had to channel my frustration somewhere. So I did what any self-respecting millennial did at the time: I went to a blogging platform, selected a template, and began a long run of sincere, navel-gazing entries.

What was my hope with that first desperate stab into the void of the internet? As my earliest posts baldly indicate, I was seeking a community of young adult Catholics who were nurturing an “active and deeply felt” faith beyond the cultural tradition and dogmatic canon. I wanted to meet others who were

wondering and wandering. Then, as the years went by and I grew older and—well, not wiser, but wise enough to know I wasn't wiser—I came to understand that I was not alone in my search, both within Catholicism and beyond it.

We receive steady reports about changes in religious affiliation, especially from the Pew Research Center, that as of this writing show almost one-third of U.S. adults now say they have no religious affiliation, a percentage that continues to rise. In Pew's parlance, this group is classified as religious "nones": people who describe themselves as atheists, agnostics, or "nothing in particular." Who's leading this shift? Millennials. My peers. The people I seek out in shabby church halls, the people I write for on the internet, the people I've learned feel increasingly isolated from fellow seekers, doubters, questioners—the body of loving humans that keeps me fumbling for communion even in troubled times.

Back to 2006 for a moment. During that period of frustrated seeking, one night I experienced a dream so visceral that I woke up crying. In the dream I was frantically searching for a beloved youth minister. As I looked for him, I pushed through formless herds of people. Many in the crowd tried to tell me how to feel; I struggled to tune them out. After wandering through several church basement-like rooms, I finally found the minister seated in front of a huge sheet of paper inviting people to write messages and draw pictures. I grabbed a marker and sketched a church with a crooked steeple. I knew what I wanted to add over it: huge, thick, forbidding bars. The thicker, the better. But then I caught my youth minister's eye—his sympathetic gaze, a look that said "I understand"—and I couldn't do it. Instead, I put my head in my hands and sobbed.

All these years later I still feel deep in my chest the frustration, grief, and—unexpectedly—hope contained in that dream. Frustration because I felt no one was listening. Grief because I was leaving the unquestioned church of my childhood and entering a more rigorous and mysterious adult faith. Hope because I couldn't draw the bars. Turns out I hadn't given up on

church with a little c, even if it felt like it had given up on me. I didn't want to excise my spirituality, my searching, my own little wick of divine spark flickering inside me. Instead I wanted to participate, ask unanswerable questions, and find others eager to do the same.

In her first book, *Faith Unraveled: How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask Questions*, the late Rachel Held Evans wrote, "Most of the people I've encountered are looking not for a religion to answer all their questions but for a community of faith in which they can feel safe asking them." This has been my experience as well, and a key reason I've come to believe we are wired for connection with forces greater than ourselves. In my life, that wiring leads to the desire to believe as much as belief itself.

That's what the book you're holding is about: the urge to cultivate a mature and examined relationship with a God we might never fully understand or know. Through essays, reflections, poems, and prayers, I have attempted to transmute my doubt into curiosity and punctuate my faith with question marks. It is the written equivalent of crossing the room to sit beside a fellow seeker, creating a sacred space where a moment ago there was none, and inviting everyone gathered to explore mystery and meaning together. With every question I ask, every prayer I write, every answer I relinquish knowing, I move beyond any one denomination, service, or minister into a liminal space of discovery and transformation. And to every person who raises their hand and says, "That's what I want, too," I say, "Join me. Where we'll end up, I don't know. But let's find out together."

ONE

Do I Gotta Have Faith?



Doubt:

What If I Don't Believe in You?

A Profession of Faltering Faith

My brother told me he was an atheist at the start of a car ride. He opened up the conversation as if he were coming clean. “I want to have faith,” he said. “I really do. But I have to be honest and say I don’t.”

At first I was taken aback. I knew my brother wasn’t following any religious doctrine, but I had never stopped to think that might imply his total lack of belief in any deity. I’m a person of faith. A person *with* faith. Imperfect faith, variable faith, doubtful faith—but still faith in a Higher Power.

Then I felt naive, almost narrow-minded. Why had I assumed my brother believed in God? Because he was a good person? Because he expressed morals and values similar to mine? Because believing in God is what our observant Roman Catholic family was supposed to do? Because I believed in God?

Then I wondered: Did his not believing in God make him any less of a kind or worthy person? Did it prevent me from seeing him as a child of God? And if my personal, honest answer to either of these questions was yes, then what did that reveal about me and the quality of my own belief?

I was upset. Really upset. Heart-on-the-floor-mat kind of upset. But I couldn’t cry because we were in the car together having this talk and I didn’t want to dissuade him from sharing his thoughts. I wanted to hear what he had to say, which turned out to be thoughtful, well-reasoned. My brother had not

reached his conclusion quickly or lightly. He had examined all sides and discerned where he stood, a practice to admire in anyone of any tradition.

We went back and forth on various points. To be clear, I wasn't trying to convince him of anything. I believe God works within people individually and each person's spiritual journey is theirs alone. (Plus I'm a terrible debater and fold like a pile of laundry.) Instead, we talked about the constructs of the atheist vs. theist debate. He said he didn't understand why the burden of proof is on the atheists. I said believers and non-believers alike have a faulty premise: that trying to wrap scientific laws around something as intangible, amorphous, and stubbornly unscientific as faith can't help but lead to circular arguments and insufficient evidence.

Then we talked about the meaning of life without ever really using those terms. He said he's in awe of the earth and the wondrous complexity of human existence without needing a Creator behind them. I said that mortality terrifies me and the idea of an afterlife brings a measure of peace.

Then it was my turn to come clean. Really clean.

"Fran," I said, "I have to be honest too. I believe because I want to."

"I appreciate that," he said. "I wish more people would admit it."

Why was I ready to burst into tears then, and for the next 24 hours, and even now as I remember it?

Because questions about suffering, death, and the meaning of life are the waves that rock my little skiff hardest. Because my brother made me realize (admit?) how much I want people I love to share my beliefs. Why, I'm not sure. I think because for all the struggle that believing entails, it ultimately brings me joy, and I want others to experience joy, too.

Because I've never been able to conceive of nothingness without fear creeping in.

Because pondering whether people can end up in a heaven they disavow makes my head and heart hurt.

And because of many other big, daunting, mysterious, sentimental, melancholy, confused reasons I could not articulate right then in the car and still cannot today.

When the waves of questions and doubts threaten to sink me, I recall a memory from my early childhood when my brother and I would play hide-and-seek with our mother. I hadn't yet learned the art of silence, so my mom usually followed my laughter to find me. My brother, three years younger, thought that sitting in a corner, putting his hands over his eyes, and saying "I am nowhere to be found" rendered him invisible. When it was Mom's turn to hide, she played her ace: the ability to remain quiet.

I'd take one floor. My brother would take another. I'd peer in all the spots a big kid could reach. But my brother would play the baby card: a plaintive, repeating refrain of "Mommy, where oo?" that never failed to touch her heart and call her forth from her hiding spot.

Sometimes I think I'm playing the baby card with God. How much easier it feels to wander around in a sad daze, sucking my thumb and tugging at God's heartstrings—"God, where oo?"—until my longed-for subject appears.

But the easiest path is not necessarily the most enriching. Certainly I can ask God where they are, but I too must be out in the open. No covering my eyes. No pretending I'm invisible. If I am going to profess my faith—to declare that I am a person who wants to encounter and experience a force greater than my own self—then I must say it out loud and not in hiding, so that people can hear, disagree, and help me cultivate a mature, examined, freely chosen belief.

My response to the atheist I love may not seem enough to those of you with greater conviction than I. But I could answer only from my heart, and it continues to answer the truest it can.

Suspension of Disbelief

Perhaps there's nothing in the dark to fear.

Perhaps there's nothing in the dark at all.

Still, I prefer a glimmer, at least along the path.

For that, give me a faith that flickers but never quite goes out.

Amen.



Keep on the Wait

How will I know you when I see you?

The darkness shadows your face. The rain obscures your voice. The cold keeps you at arm's length. How will I know if I cannot see? Or hear? Or touch?

People always seem to be asking you this question. From prison cells and upper rooms, along country paths and city sidewalks, in flights of joy and pits of despair—it doesn't matter. We all have to ask. And very few of us seem assured in the answer.

I'll ask again anyway, though. Even if asking appears to waste time, it helps me lead a life that seeks the answer. To me, that's worth the wait.

Amen.



Questions That Come in the Night

Questions that come in the night are drawn in black ink—insistent, bold, stark. Though they may fade from view in broad daylight, their impressions mark my eyelids, faint memories of blank answers.

Trace those imprints on my heart, God, and grant me the dogged faith to follow their loops and squiggles until life's grand design is revealed.

Amen.



Mystery:

What If I Don't Understand You?

“The Universe Wants to Be Noticed”

I believe the universe wants to be noticed. I think the universe is improbably biased toward consciousness, that it rewards intelligence in part because the universe enjoys its elegance being observed. And who am I, living in the middle of history, to tell the universe that it—or my observation of it—is temporary?

... I was thinking about the universe wanting to be noticed, and how I had to notice it as best I could. I felt that I owed a debt to the universe that only my attention could repay, and also that I owed a debt to everybody who didn't get to be a person anymore and everyone who hadn't gotten to be a person yet.

—John Green, *The Fault in Our Stars*

Am I living in a way that notices the universe?

Am I living in a way that gazes through both ends of the telescope?

Am I living in a way that pokes around dark corners with bare hands?

Am I living in a way that cannonballs into the pool of human consciousness?

Am I living in a way that admits the possibility of a soul?

Am I living in a way that admits the possibility of oblivion?

Am I living in a way that acknowledges the end of living?

Am I living in a way that digs for the few golden, permanent threads?

Am I living in a way that leaves me choked up, because no matter what I believe, this beauty is undeniable?

On Notice

God, I can't explain
why this world moves me
to tears

maybe because it's so
daring and futile
by turns

but the bare fact remains
it does

so I can only ask
the tears to magnify
my sight

and not obscure it.

Amen.



Warmth in the Stone

Suspend me in that space between “yes” and “fine,” between when I choose to choose you and when I consign myself to the glorious calamity of being bound to earth.

I am no blind-faith fool. I see what sits before me; it is a thing and I will name it as such. Yet this thing has a reality beyond its form, and I will name that as well.

Engage me, grubby supplicant that I am with sore knees and wandering attention. Come down from the pedestal, coursing with life, and gather me up.

I began by kneeling to you. I evolved by contemplating you. Let me end by embracing you—flesh around faith.

Amen.



Flaming

The black-clad leaders teach us of an evil
Housed in flame and wrapped in molten ash—
A spirit so engulfed in sin, the light
Around it never penetrates,
Just dies.

Yet black-clad leaders also teach of good
That's carried in swift flight on avian back—
A spirit so essential that its core
Must manifest in purest, whitest flame.

I stretch my palms toward both. I feel the scorch.
A miracle or curse, they burn the same.
Deceptive choice, these tongues. So warm to touch,
Seductive and beguiling . . .

But I pause
And look instead at their reflections.

On one wall, nothingness. Blank.
But on the other, I see my shadow.

Imperfect at first cast, yet tempered as
The light evolves.

In it I see my chances,
I see my possibility,
And with each lick I am more certain
That burns from this absorbing heat
Will heal, not wound—
Will not deny, but give.

I leave my palm outstretched.
I choose.

I live.

Amen.



Free Will:

What If I Don't Follow You?

What Happened When I Stopped Going to Church

One summer I didn't go to church for eight weeks. I had my reasons: travel led to an irregular schedule; I was often visiting people who don't attend church; I didn't want to put on real clothes. Thanks to my Catholic upbringing, I initially felt guilty. I knew I could have made more of an effort—scheduled flights differently, awakened earlier, researched Mass times at local parishes wherever I was. But sometimes I just didn't want to. Turns out it was pleasant not to be on a set schedule, relaxing to spend unbound time with loved ones, comfortable to be pants-less. So I justified my choices, got complacent, forgave myself the absences, and said to God, "I'll be back in the fall." And I was come October. But a funny thing happened on the way back to the chapel: I realized why I was drawn to my traditional spiritual practices in the first place. Here's what I learned.

I appreciate having a regular space for contemplation.

For years I've felt like an anomaly among my broader peer group for attending services at all, much less regularly. When I ask folks about it, they answer with some variation of "Well, church/Mass/services/organized religion doesn't do it for me, so I don't go."

What I learned over my absent summer is that church-going *does* do it for me. The desire doesn't stem from rule-following or a sense of obligation as much as from a need for

scheduled contemplative time. I lead a busy and distracted life. My prayer is sporadic. But church—and the routine of attending it—carves out time for me to talk to God.

The Catholic Mass structure in particular speaks to me, and not simply because I was raised on it. At its richest, the Catholic liturgy engages all of a participant's five senses: bold shapes and colors in the sanctuary, the sweet scent of melted wax, well-worn wooden pews, intoned stories and moving music, the bland crunch of communion wafers. The most compelling services I've attended have a subtle theatrical flair. I don't mean that the worship is performative, but rather that the liturgical ministers (clergy, lay readers, musicians, Eucharistic ministers, ushers, and more) have taken great care with every detail, weaving a compelling story the congregant can enter, absorb, and add to.

It also helps that no matter where I go in the world, the format of a Catholic liturgy remains the same, and much like a sonnet, the constraint of a set format allows for internal creativity. The whole experience is designed for contemplation, and while my mouth recites the prayers, my mind feels free to wander among bigger questions and themes, such as "God, where is my place in the world?" and "Where are you guiding me?" There's a tension between familiarity and newness, which leads to discovery.

When I prioritize my desire, the results might surprise me.

I'll be honest: sometimes my lack of attendance that summer was sheer laziness. I was in no mood to make the extra effort. Now I'll be honest-er: sometimes I really did want to go, but I was afraid to offend or inconvenience the people I was traveling with—or worse, I didn't want them to think I was a weird goody-two-shoes.

Here's a case where my fear forestalled potential growth. If I had shared what I wanted at that moment, I would have given my traveling partners an opportunity to respond. Perhaps they would have teased me. Perhaps they would have joined. Or

perhaps they would simply have asked why I go, and their question could have prompted a deeper conversation about spirituality in our lives. No matter their response, I would have learned something new about myself and about them. Instead, I let nerves and embarrassment quell the opportunity. Now I know for the future to own what's important to me and see what emerges.

Note to self: beware the easy path.

It's ok not to go occasionally. Clearly, no bolt from the heavens has burnt me to a crisp (yet) for doing that. But not going turned quickly into the easier path, and when I did recommit to attending, I felt weak, flabby, and out of practice, making it harder to get back into the habit. That summer had been the spiritual equivalent of hitting the gym once a week for 30 minutes to sit in the sauna while claiming I'd exercised. The absence of exertion rarely results in meaningful growth. I learned it's worth challenging myself to see what new levels I might attain.

I've been back at church regularly for a while now, and it feels good. I have songs to sing, sermons to contemplate, and a community to befriend. Most importantly, I have at least one hour every week where my mind is focused on something beyond myself. I'm not thinking about emails or writing goals or work projects or dinner. I'm just thinking about God, the state of the world, and my soul: the big questions that even a little time accommodates.

Spiritual Truancy

Free will means I don't have to ask permission. Free will means I don't have to provide reasons. So I won't. I'll come and go as I please. I'm an adult. I dictate my time. My terms.

But of all the terms and time to dictate, why not spend a slice—a sliver, really—on a relationship that is at once the easiest and hardest to maintain? Easy because my partner is already gaga for me; hard because I cannot grasp the enormity of that unseen claim.

No pain, no gain, they say. But the longer it takes to see gains, the more pronounced pain can feel. Still, I will try. Still, I will reach.

Amen.



Bright Spot

Dear God,

I had one moment today where I could have chosen the wrong response. But I didn't. I rose above it. For that brief and brilliant instant, I embodied what you've always asked me to be. Thank you for that grace.

Of course, in the next moment, I plummeted back to earth in spectacular fashion. And I anticipate I will remain flat on the ground for the vast majority of moments going forward as I'm unlikely to achieve a higher plane of being any time soon.

But I saw, however briefly, what I can be, and the lesson leaves the kind of light that lingers for a long time—long enough for me to follow it back to you.

Amen.



Sacreligifce

May the letter of the law not write bonds so tight I can't inhale its spirit.

May the spirit of the law not leave me so light I can't attach to the letter.

Strike this balance in my will, so that I sacrifice weakness but not meaning.

Amen.



Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat [or drink], or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?

Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you more important than they?

Can any of you by worrying add a single moment to your life-span?

—Matthew 6:25-27

Eyes Up Here

Worriers, I've noticed—mainly because I am one—spend a great deal of time watching their feet. The better to stay on a straight line. The better to avoid a fall. The better to figure out where they are heading.

But worriers, I've also noticed, waste a great deal of time watching only their feet.

God, lift my chin. When the anxiety of who and where and why and what's-it-all-about cloaks my vision, help me blink to clear the fog.

Amen.



Virtual Theology

Game on, God.

You want me. I'm right here. But first you have to track me through multiple levels of increasing difficulty, each with new villains and daunting obstacles and floating manna that racks up points when I jump to grab it.

You want me. I'm on the move. You call me to come back, to rest, to wait for you. But oh no, I'm too clever for that, Player One. Think I'm going to sit here and let you get me? Wrong! Poof! Gone.

You want me. I'm hidden. Keep hacking the vines. Ford the moat. Scale the gate. Leap the chasm. Where will all your daring get you? I'm tucked away in no-man's-land, comfortable, wondering if you can catch up.

Game on, God. It's solely in my power to hit pause and give you a breather. But I don't know if I'm ready to risk that. Because when you catch up to me, will it be game over?

Amen.



About the Author

Julia Rocchi writes prose, poetry, prayers, and a lot of thank-you notes. With an MA in Writing from Johns Hopkins University, she has garnered multiple story publications and honors, including First Place in the *Saturday Evening Post's* Great American Fiction Contest. Julia also works in nonprofit marketing, facilitates gatherings, and performs improv comedy. As an ENFJ, Enneagram 2, and Cancer sign, she's never met a personality indicator she disagreed with. Julia lives with her family in Arlington, Virginia.