

The God Who Doesn't Exist

'Kill some more, steal some more.'

'Pyotr Stepanovich is handin' me that same advice, in them same words as you, 'cause he's a real stingy and hard-hearted man when it comes to givin' assistance. Besides which, he ain't got no belief at all in the heavenly creator, who fashioned us out o' the dust of the earth. He says it's jes' nature made everythin', even down to the last animal, and besides, he ain't got no understandin' that the likes of us jes' can't get along unless we get some beneficial assistance. You start tryin' to explain to him, he stares at you like a sheep at the water, you can't do nothin' but marvel at him.'

[Fedya the convict to Stavrogin in *Demons* by Dostoevsky, 1871-2, Chapter 2¹]

Introduction

It is 2024, late in the year, as I write. The world is facing a remarkable conjunction, a veritable 'polycrisis'.² On one hand, global events which seem to present an existential threat to humanity: the continuing climate crisis, the Russian invasion of Ukraine grinding on into a third year with the real threat of nuclear conflict, the powder keg of Israel/Palestine suddenly exploding, global economic disruption, social and political polarization in the west, threats to democracy with the rise of authoritarianism and the uncontrolled development of AI, the continuing fear of rogue viruses and pandemic. Help! On the other hand, a situation which has developed with increasing rapidity over the last hundred years or so in which, for the first time in human history, a very large group of people, the majority in the global west, have ceased believing in God.

You are probably not so worried about the second thing, the rise to cultural dominance in the west of atheism, I would hazard to guess—does it really matter what people believe in the abstract, when you have a concrete situation of such dire proportions facing you? But I think you should be, or should at least hear alarm bells going off in your head, because the apparent departure of God leaves us existentially alone in the world, to fend for ourselves and solve our own problems, just when we're facing the first thing, challenges of a global nature which threaten our very existence. We are the ones who have got ourselves into this pickle in the first place, courtesy of a whole lot of thoughtless, careless, self-serving behaviour, on behalf of most or even all of us, over a long period of time, and now we imagine we can save ourselves with no outside help?!

Hang on, I thought all these problems were caused by other people or other things, not me—greedy capitalists, for example, the ruling classes, the patriarchy, the 'system'? Yes,

¹Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons* [1871-2], English translation by RA Maguire (London: Penguin, 2008).

²An expression first used by French complexity theorists Edgar Morin and Anne Brigitte Kern in their 1999 book *Homeland Earth* (New York, Hampton Press), now the buzz word of the moment: "As the world navigates the polycrisis – climate change, pandemic, the war in Ukraine, economic slowdown, inflation, food insecurity, monetary tightening and debt distress—we need multilateral cooperation and solidarity now more than ever." WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, *Weekend Australian*, 24-25 December 2022.

fearful systemic, collective, cultural forces have developed over the long timespan of human history, forces whose real power and intentionality can only truly be captured by the term 'evil', which are far beyond the best possible efforts of mere individuals to combat. It is these forces that right now seem to be conspiring to bring about our polycrisis. No wonder we're all so freaked out!

But no, the origin of even the most powerful cultural evil is always in individual selfishness and self-seeking—or do we imagine real devils and demons out there, or perhaps aliens, luridly grinning, mocking us, conducting the mayhem?! You and me, in other words: we are all complicit. It is *my* inner narcissist, therefore, my inner racist, materialist, sexist, bigot, that needs dealing with first—my natural-born self-centred self. Best of luck with that, however: it is beyond the power of any one of us to change even just ourselves deep down inside, let alone the collective of the entire human race!

Welcome, then, to *The God who doesn't exist*—the God we created ourselves long ago, unwittingly perhaps, believed in just about forever, then only very recently dumped. It was a God we tried so hard to inveigle into saving us, which never really worked, because all along we had the wrong idea of what we needed saving from! Fortunately, however, it turns out that God does exist, as we will unfold in this book—a different one to the one who doesn't exist, obviously!

The God who exists: if you hang on to your hats, we are going to attempt some *anti-theology*, conventional theology in reverse. Thus, rather than starting by assuming God exists when they clearly do not, then vainly trying to work out what they are like, we are going to work in reverse: start from the obvious fact of God's non-existence, then attempt to show that God must, nevertheless, actually exist. An ambitious, if confusing project, I'm sure you will agree!

There will be some *anti-science* too, because, like theology, modern science also starts by assuming too much. We will attempt to get behind the prevailing scientific assumption that the universe is purely physical, a view of the world that, far more than the proclamations of the great ones like Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Dawkins and Hitchens, has sounded the death knell of God in the modern era. Like the God who doesn't exist, we will see that the purely physical universe is a human fabrication, amazingly useful when it comes to solving the world's practical problems and developing marvellous technology, but not a universe in which there is any place for a God who exists.

Anti-theology and anti-science: the task of the first three chapters. As we'll see, God's real existence is the only possible explanation for the one and only human capacity that will enable us to dig ourselves out of the current hole we're in, namely the capacity to be, contrary to our nature, considerate, respectful, caring of each other—the capacity, dare I say it, to practice, at least some of the time if not a lot of the time, a little selflessness or selfless love. A capacity, by the way, which is the only thing that has prevented us, *homo sapiens*, from tearing ourselves to bits long ago, and, for that matter, has enabled us to do anything good with our (human) lives at all, ever.

My argument will be that selflessness, practised by humans, exists in the world, there is plenty of it around in fact, perhaps increasingly so as time goes on—even if right now we could do with an extra blast of it to get us through our present trials—but it doesn't and cannot come, naturally, from inside of us, so it must have come from the outside. Therefore, ipso facto, QED, there must be a selfless love source outside humanity; and that, of course—an amazing, radical hypothesis—is none other than the central character of this book, the God who doesn't exist!

Oops, no, I mean the God who exists—obviously! A situation has developed in human history which would be hilarious if it wasn't the source of virtually all our ills: two Gods in parallel, continually at cross-purposes, a real one we didn't create and a fake one we did. You can see this in the famous Garden story from the Hebrew Old Testament which we will get to by Chapter 4—a story which has its counterparts in many other religious traditions around the globe—with the real God, who has nothing but good things in store for his creatures, at odds with the first humans who imagine they can be mighty gods themselves—but don't take it literally, whatever you do!

Another place to see it is in the New Testament Gospel stories, with the disciples continually mistaking what sort of Messiah Jesus would be, what sort of Kingdom he would inaugurate. Jesus, in fact, was the bearer of the original Messiah complex, as we will see in Chapter 6. We'll make the outrageous claim that he was the unique, literal incarnation into the world of the real God, precisely in order to put the fake God to the sword, and, yes, proclaim a real Kingdom, very different to the one everybody was expecting, and which we're all in now 2000 years later.

Eek!—yes, completely outrageous, because, clearly, I am now daring to follow one particular religious tradition to the exclusion of all others. That won't actually be the case however, because we will realise that Jesus came to set us free from all religion, all human cultural structures that bind people up, with the God who doesn't exist his chief target. The irony is that, contrary to his intentions—another controversial claim—Jesus' followers, almost from the moment he, as the story goes, ascended back up to heaven, set about creating a new religion of their own, complete with what is now a social mega-institution, the Christian Church.

Vent your fury on the Church, and Christianity, by all means—for inventing a counterfeit Gospel, a fake version of the good news of the Kingdom Jesus came to inaugurate, setting itself up as the gatekeeper of a different kingdom, a heavenly one beyond this mortal coil, at the same time as allying itself with the very social and cultural hegemonies Jesus' Kingdom was intended to sweep away. The reality of it is, as we'll see in Chapters 7 and 8, that only in spite of itself has the Church done any good in the world, made any headway at all in fulfilling its Jesus-given task of being what I call a 'pilot-project' of the Kingdom.

Great headway has indeed been made in the last 2000 years—but now we are mired in the polycrisis and still mistaking the God who doesn't exist for the one who does. So, what exactly is this 'Kingdom' that I have now referred to five times without explaining? Well, Jesus himself referred to it around a hundred times without explaining, so why should I?!

The problem is not in the explaining, anyway, but in the getting. It is defined as much by what it is not as by what it is—as you'll see in what follows.

The Kingdom is nothing more, as it turns out, than an objective state of human relationships in the world based on selfless cooperation, inclusive of all people everywhere, all the time—and if that sounds to you suspiciously like the ideal of (dare I say it) democracy, you'd be right. No, not a theocracy: the God whom we thought didn't exist is not that sort of God! What binds the people together in this Elysian ideal is not an abstract, secular ideal of equality, but faith in an invisible God of love. A commonwealth, a republic of God if you like.

Faith in an invisible God of love: only through such faith, through no personal effort of our own, can the 'great turning', the *metanoia*, the radical inner transformation from natural selfishness to very unnatural selflessness, occur—for any one of us, for the entire human race to just survive, let alone thrive. This is the particular Kingdom that is always coming, the one Jesus of Nazareth spoke of incessantly all those years ago—even if things right now seem to be going decidedly in the reverse direction in these polycrisis days.

This will be an evolutionary tale, and we will follow three stories entwined. First, the evolution of our own species, *homo sapiens*, gradually emerging out of a background of precursor primate and hominid species, cursed seemingly with a radically new trait, self-consciousness, perhaps the real source of all our woes. Second, the gradual unfolding of God's (the one who exists) so-called 'plan of salvation' for this woebegone new creature. Third, the development of individual humans, you and me, from childhood to maturity, with our parents acting, critically, *in loco dei*, in the place of God—but make sure you channel the right God, whatever you do!

It is also my own story, by the way, nearly seven decades now of confusion and self-doubt, with perhaps some small degree of clarity only very recently emerging—but I won't bore you with that . . . Ah, false modesty, you're immediately thinking, to conceal the true offensiveness of his thesis: one place, one time, one man, to the exclusion of all others—you just can't come at it, no matter how nicely he dresses this God of love up. The man Jesus himself might have been staunchly anti-colonialist, murdered as he was by Imperial Rome, and certainly he always was on the side of the poor, the sick, the marginalized ones; but his later followers marched arm in arm with the European colonial invaders who brought so much misery and dispossession to indigenous peoples the world over. Then there is the whole notion of resurrection from the dead, eternal life, defying common sense and the scientific laws of nature we so revere—no, a thousand times, no, you swear! Yes, you'll have plenty of opportunities throughout my tale to voice your concerns, to shout at me even, please be assured. But now, if you dare, suspend your disbelief, and read on.