

ORDINARY EVERYDAY UNBELIEF

What Average Americans Say About God

Lu cilio Vanini

David

Car Mechanic / Des Moines, Iowa / Age 34

I came up in a Methodist church. Sunday school. Summer camps. The works. I have some fond memories of those days. But I wonder if I ever really believed in God as a kid. I mean I think even back then I had my doubts. The Old Man In The Sky who Always Was—that's hard to bend your mind around. When I actually admitted to myself that I didn't believe in God, I must have been in my early twenties. I started thinking about all the religions in the world. I don't just mean all the ones right now either, I mean all the religions in the past too. There must be hundreds. Heck, thousands. Most of us would agree that those religions were just flat out wrong. Those Egyptian gods. The Roman ones. And I believe the Indians in India had lots of gods too. Still do. But it's not just those religions of the *past* that we all disbelieve. We think most people on the planet *right now* are wrong about their religion! Every religion is a *minority* religion because each religion is out-numbered by all the others combined. That means that everybody on the planet—while they're thinkin' that their minority religion is the right one—they're thinkin' the majority of folks in all the other religions are wrong. Well, I started thinking like this, and I started thinking that the Moslems think I'm wrong, and I think they're wrong. The Buddhists think I'm wrong, and I think they're wrong. Then it dawned on me—it's *more* likely that *all* the religions are wrong. That's more likely, ain't it? Ain't it more likely that all 10,000 religions are wrong than that 9,999 are wrong and one is right?

A n g e l a

Retired Accountant / Harrisburg, Pennsylvania / Age 78

Look. I can't believe in an all-loving father God in a world where animals and people suffer so much. Hello?! Is anybody acquainted with the blood-soaked history of this planet? Has anybody ever read a book or heard a story about all those wars and diseases and cataclysmic natural events? Does anybody watch the nature programs? Do you see those children born with horribly disfiguring maladies? Or the millions of kids who die yearly because a *mosquito* bit them? A mosquito! Who made that mosquito? God! The all-good God! Have you seen a lion chase down and eat a hapless gazelle or a terrified wildebeest? An afternoon of watching wild creatures would cure you of belief in God. What kind of a God places animals and humans on an earth that is brimming with natural disasters and pathogens? Answer: No kind of god. That's that, as far as I'm concerned.

T h o m a s

Minister / Tallahassee, Florida / Age 57

I lost my faith probably fifteen years into my ministry. But it took time. It probably took several years before I would admit it to myself. There were many causes. But one sticks with me. I did a lot of funerals for small children and I witnessed the paralyzing grief of young parents. I suppose it's the old 'How can God allow this?' query. But it's true. It gets to you. And through this I began to wonder about prayer. Petitionary prayer. The type of prayer where you ask God something. I began to think of prayer as *begging* God. I begged God to spare the lives of those children. I got down on my knees with the parents—at hospital bedsides, at car-wrecks, in homes—and we begged God. Eventually, this struck me as a pathetic understanding of God. God has to be *begged* to save a precious child? And then, to top it off, the begging is rebuffed! Sometimes a fatal arrow pierces the smallest chink in the armor of faith. And that was the chink in my armor: rebuffed begging. I can't leave the ministry. I can't afford it. What would I do for a job? I have kids in college. Yes, I fake it. I fake it every Sunday. I haven't even told my kids or my family, though my wife knows. It's taking its toll on me. My deceit. But I mean well—for my congregation. I think I do right by them. I still feel tenderness toward them. I'm keeping a diary. After I'm dead, maybe my wife will publish it.

Marbelle

Professor of Literature / Austin, Texas / Age 47

Graduate school is corrosive to faith. I suppose it's because in graduate school you become willing to question all your presumptions in a *radical* way. Before graduate school you might have questioned whether a city's roads should be laid out in a north-south, east-west grid. But in graduate school you come to question whether there should even be roads at all! I took a graduate course on the Bible as translated literature. Whatever residual piety I brought to that course—and I had a fairly devout upbringing—I lost it in that term. I was twenty-five years old. And it was a ten-week course that ended shortly before my twenty-sixth birthday. So, I lost my faith shortly before my twenty-sixth birthday! These kinds of courses in the Bible—and they're offered in religious studies programs, and I suppose even in seminaries—these kinds of courses expose the artifice of the biblical texts. That is, you become aware of human hands in the construction, in the writing, of the documents. You begin to see the biases of the writers, and their ignorance too. You see the events that moved them to write. You see the editorial seams. You see the contradictions. Then you learn that *none* of the original biblical books survive. They were written on reed or animal skins, both of which decay. All we have are *copies*. Or, more accurately, copies of copies of copies. And none of the copies dates to the same century as when the originals were written. And then you learn that not *one* of thousands of ancient and medieval copies of the various biblical books is perfectly identical to any *other* copy of the same book! Those scribes! Those scribes, in the long ages of the manuscript, *hand* writing, made copy errors, but

they also *intentionally* altered the texts to ‘fix’ some theological problem. Anyway, this is all very intricate and arcane. But one question surfaced for me during that course. If God wanted to give humanity an eternal message in the form of biblical books, why didn’t God make provisions for the preservation of the *original* documents? Because, you see, the *copies* are flawed. Meanwhile, curators in various museums all over the world have collected *original* religious documents from ancient India and Mesopotamia. Documents written thousands of years before the Bible was written. Documents written onto *stone* tablets. Couldn’t God have done the same?

L u p e

Student / Fullerton, California / Age 14

You've read about Hercules and Zeus and Apollo. We call them mythologies. But the Greeks didn't call them mythologies. The Greeks believed these characters existed. Over time people came to see that the Greeks made it all up. Curious, huh? They made up their religion and lived by it for a couple thousand years. That's like putting puppet strings on yourself, then letting something or someone else manipulate those strings to make you dance your whole life long, and all the time forgetting that you put the strings there in the first place! It occurred to me that if enough time passes, people in the future will see that we have done the same thing with our God and our religions. We take our religions for truth, but the future will see they are fictions. I guess you could say reading Greek mythology undid my belief in God. It doesn't happen that way for most kids. I don't know why it did for me. I don't think I'm smarter than most kids. But I did cut the puppet strings myself.

[to be continued]