

## INTRODUCTION

# The Rise of Religious Interest Among Men

Something weird has happened in recent years. Modern men are finding themselves strangely interested in Christianity. In restaurants and bars, a droll question is being repeated with increasing seriousness: “What if the crazy Christians are right?”

I feel confident in saying that very few experts anticipated this trend. Whether looking at large-scale trajectories since the Enlightenment or listening to the shrill barking of the new atheists of the early 2000s, most critics have assumed that Christianity was taking a last gasp before giving up the ghost. Yet, like Jesus Himself, Christianity seems to have the propensity to resurrect as soon as it dies. No matter how vigorously tyrants and philosophers try to seal the cave and bury the body, the stone always ends up rolled away and news spreading that there is more to Jesus than meets the eye.

And thus it seems that a lot of men today find themselves unexpectedly curious about the faith of their forefathers. They may not yet believe in Jesus, but they respect Him and want to learn more about Him. They have the niggling feeling that somewhere tucked away under the floorboards of Western

civilization is a dusty Bible and an old, wooden cross. In fact, the suspicion is even greater: men are wondering whether these old relics might not just be the pillars holding up the moral fabric of the modern world – at least the part of it that is worth conserving.<sup>1</sup>

But, flirting with Christianity is one thing; becoming an actual Christian is something else. The interest of a lot of guys might be compared to seeing an attractive girl on the opposite side of the street. They admire from a distance; however, walking over and making a connection is a step they are hesitant to take. In the present moment, men are open to thinking about principles of traditional morality or about how the demise of Christendom may account for the social decay of the world around them. But here they stop and sit comfortably on the fence. In most cases, men are not finding their way into churches, and they are not staying up late at night reading a Bible. Instead, like teenage boys feeling a first crush, they are admiring Christianity from afar without understanding much about what is attracting them.

In many ways, such reluctance is not surprising. Men today are distanced from Jesus not just by time but by multiple layers of culture. To pick up on a famous image, there often appears to be a broad and ugly ditch separating the modern world and the truth claims of the New Testament. This can leave a man feeling as if he is looking at Jesus from afar through a telescope, but uncertain of how to bridge the abyss so that Jesus and he are standing on the same soil. A man looks out of his window and sees paved roads,

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1. David Brooks, Douglas Murray, Tom Holland, Jordan Peterson, and Russell Brand are all intelligent, popular voices that have stirred renewed interest in Christianity among men. There is also a growing number of “cultural Christians,” a list which includes Elon Musk, Peter Thiel, and, strangely, even Richard Dawkins.

plasma screens, fancy gadgets, and busy commerce. He then picks up a Bible and reads about priests, sin, blood rituals, and crucifixion. The first set of items is incontestably real, tangible, and important. The second feels foreign, detached, and of little consequence. Therefore, for a lot of guys, Jesus is something like a cloud – an object nice to look at for a minute or two, but utterly disconnected from the turf where the game of life is actually played.<sup>2</sup>

This distance between Jesus and modern life can leave a man with little motivation to go out and investigate what it means to be a Christian. Sure, he might listen in to a spiritual conversation if an internet celebrity like Bishop Barron is featured on Jordan Peterson’s podcast. However, such interest is, at most, casual. When it comes to the business of a normal day, working through questions about the resurrection of Jesus is located on the to-do list just beneath “brush up on Spanish” and “learn the bass guitar.” Most men live by the assumption that a good and successful life does not require any nailed-down religious convictions. Wealth creation, life management, health and fitness – even politics and sports – these are the topics that matter on a Thursday afternoon. The fine points of God, ethics, and salvation are like bar nuts at a pub counter: one can take them or leave them according to appetite.

And yet, this lukewarmness of interest does not cancel the remarkable phenomenon that is happening on both sides of the Atlantic. The amazing thing about the present moment is not that a lot of men are minimally concerned about religious topics; historically, that is the norm. What is surprising is that there is a spiritual ember in the hearts of

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2. Tom Wright has diligently worked to explain the history behind this gap and to dismantle it. See N.T. Wright, *History and Eschatology* (SPCK, 2019).

swathes of men that did not exist ten years ago.<sup>3</sup> Even if the curiosity amounts to little more than a bare coal, it is there and glowing. There is something about the modern world that for the first time in decades – in some cases centuries – is stirring the ashes of faith. Guys dotted across the Western world are warming to faith rather than cooling. This is something most pundits did not see coming.

Now, this book is a guide for men who feel themselves drifting in the direction of the Christian faith. The word “guide” is worth pausing to reflect on. Often, guide-books are resources that offer a general overview of a subject to people with no prior knowledge on the topic. Thus, if one sees a “guide to Italian cooking,” he might assume that the book provides a user-friendly summary of the common recipes and practices that go into making Italian food. In line with this, a man might pick up this book thinking that it will be something like an extended encyclopedia entry outlining the common beliefs and practices of Christians – of one variety or another. This is *not* the case. Few men have the stamina needed to finish any encyclopedia entry, much less an extended one!

A different kind of “guide” is what a person might purchase if he is about to take a trek through the Grand Canyon. The goal of such a book is not a general overview, but a safe and successful passage. Such a guide will carefully curate information according to the criteria of what is useful and necessary to prepare for, undertake, and complete the journey from start to finish. More than likely, such a book will create a sense of movement and pace. There will be a way in which the structure of the book itself will map out

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3. Who would have imagined a decade or two ago that there would be millions of men on YouTube watching academic lectures on Old Testament books by someone like Jordan Peterson?

an itinerary that is meant to be put to use by the reader as he ventures forth, plodding his way into the wild.

This sense of offering an itinerary captures the essence of this book. It is written with the expectation that the average man will be starting from a common “location” and needing guidance to progress toward a targeted “destination.” The starting point is what might be labeled a secular identity. Men are not just inhabitants of the modern world; they have unconsciously put on a modern mode of being. In other words, they are caught up in patterns of belief and behavior which distance them from being able to understand and embody a very different way of life. It’s this gap between a secular existence and a Christian existence that creates the need for a book that is not just an overview, but an itinerary. Men need a guide that does more than merely explain what Christianity is – as if the religion were some dusty artifact in the back room of a museum. They need someone to dress them up in what the New Testament refers to as the “gospel” so that, perhaps for the first time ever, they can feel what it’s like to live in a world in which holiness and sin are as real and impactful as gravity and light.

If this sounds confusing, a different way of thinking about the needs of modern men is this: Men are not starting from a position of neutrality. They are not blank slates that just need Christian doctrines to be inscribed on them. Instead, there is a kind of deficit that results from participating in a spiritually decadent culture. To move toward faith, two things are therefore required. Men must be unschooled of certain beliefs and practices while, at the same time, being re-schooled in what amounts to something closer to a form of life than a mere set of beliefs. The aim of this book is to guide men through this deep transformation.

Now, it's important to be exceedingly clear about who will benefit from this book – and who will *not*. First, this book is not for committed atheists. There are numerous books written by very bright Christians that take up the trench lines dug by amateur philosophers and combat them. The end result of such bombardment tends to be a stalemate. Skepticism, if entrenched, only burrows more deeply when assaulted. The reason for this is not difficult to grasp. If the pursuit of truth is imagined to be a battlefield with pre-established positions, there is little openness to fresh perspective. The opposing voice is perceived to be a threat, not an asset. Thus, everyone ends up protecting a heavily fortified citadel rather than locking arms on a common quest.

Second, this book is not for men whose religious interests are only roused by the sight of the most recent flag hoisted by the culture wars. A person can no more discover wisdom by thinking at the level of the headlines than he can explore the ocean by standing at the shoreline. Real encounters with truth require something more immersive than splashing in the foam of whatever washes up on social media. If men are looking for a book to justify political anger or social disgust, this is not it. This book is about discerning truth, not fomenting what Nietzsche dubbed *ressentiment*. Such discernment always requires diving beneath the spume of “issues” and “topics” in order to see things from the depths of submerged principles. Our challenge throughout the book will be to swim deep enough to appreciate broad currents of thought without plunging so deep that we end up being drowned in the fathomless trenches of academic discussions.

So, what kind of man will benefit from this book? The answer is anyone who has a flicker of interest in Christianity and who is willing to undertake what amounts to an intellectual pilgrimage of faith. The two entry requirements

for pressing on are nothing more than a curious mind and a willingness to second-guess the habits of a secular heart. If you can tick these boxes, then *tolle lege*, take up and read.

There is one last thing to be said by way of introduction. The itinerary outlined is going to begin at an unusual point of departure. One would suspect that a journey of faith would start with overtly religious questions or topics. Thus, for example, one might think that the first rule of belief would be something like figuring out the meaning of the word “god.” Yet, as was alluded to earlier, men are not just needing to journey toward faith, they are needing to exit out of what constitutes a modern identity, even more specifically, a modern *male* identity. One implication of this is that the barriers to faith are not restricted to the intellect. It’s not just that doubts and questions need to be overcome; apathy and indifference also need to be overcome. It’s not just that truth needs to be understood; in some cases, truth also needs to be felt. It’s not just that men need to figure out what they believe; a lot of men need first to be prompted to think. All of this means that the journey to faith starts much further back than might be expected. We can’t get to the foothills of religion until we first find a way out of the spiritual malaise that is endemic among men raised in the backwaters of therapeutic consumerism.

A final word before the journey begins: Christians often refer to Abraham as the father of faith. There is a passage about Abraham in the letter to the Hebrews that says, “And he went out, not knowing where he was going.” This remark should comfort you at the outset of this book. If the great Abraham started his spiritual itinerary in a state of confusion, we should not be surprised if we begin in a similar condition. When it comes to the quest for truth, our launch point is of little significance. What matters is that we

listen for the voice of wisdom and, once that voice is heard, that we follow her trail like hounds on the hunt.

There are two kinds of people one can call reasonable; those who serve God with all their heart because they know Him, and those who seek Him with all their heart because they do not know Him.

—Pascal