

Did Jesus Really Exist?

AND 51 OTHER
FAITH QUESTIONS

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**TWENTY-THIRD
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INTRODUCTION

What do Christians believe? What is typical of Christian faith and of how Christians live out their faith?

With fifty-two questions and answers, this book gives you an overview of the Christian faith. You can read it as an introduction to Christianity. If you are already familiar with Christianity, then this book is a deepening refresher course on the basic elements.

The questions are taken from life: Is faith for simple souls? Did Jesus really exist? What do people do in heaven? Is God a judge who condemns? Why should you forgive? Does suffering make sense? Can Christians learn from other religions? Has Jesus laughed?

Each answer takes no more than two minutes to read. The answer is always followed by two questions to work on individually or with others. There are also references to five other questions relating to the subject under discussion. At the end of the book is a list with a short description of fifty-two common words, such as prayer, grace, heaven, Easter, sin, sacrament, and devil. In the text, these words are marked with an asterisk.

Happy reading!

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QUESTION 1

Is believing exceptional?

Every human being believes, for believing is just as normal as eating, drinking, and breathing. Think of a child who learns to ride a bike. The child firmly believes that their father or mother will intervene immediately if something goes wrong. Think of a young man who is going to marry his girlfriend. He can never be one hundred percent sure that she really wants to live with him all his life. He dares to embark on this adventure anyway because he believes in it. He trusts her. It is no coincidence that both Latin and Greek—two languages that are important in the history of the Christian faith—use the same word for trust and faith.

Complete certainty *is* exceptional. There are always things you do not know and that require you to take a leap into the unknown. Often you do this with your eyes closed; more often, you don't even realize that you are jumping. Trusting in others is essential to being human. From day one in this world, life teaches you that you have to trust others to carry on.

When it comes to believing in God*, things get a bit more complicated. The child who learns to cycle sees

and feels that their father or mother is close. You cannot see God, and that makes the jump into the unknown a lot bigger.

Maybe you've heard people say, "I wish I could believe in God." Believing is not something you can just decide on. It takes more than that. Believing in God—but also trusting people—is something you have to experience over and over again.

- Do you find believing easy or difficult?
- Have you noticed any change in this over the years?

See also questions 2, 6, 26, 49, 52.

QUESTION 2

Is faith for simple souls?

Faith is for all souls, simple or otherwise. People with little study or education behind them can be profoundly religious or not religious at all. Young children can have an amazing life of faith, or not. Quite a few political leaders and successful entrepreneurs are convinced Christians, while others are not. There are those who, by studying, discover their faith, while others find themselves losing their faith in God* during their time as students.

Faith is not about knowing or not knowing, or about greater or lesser intelligence. Yet, Christians do not believe in just anything. That is why it is important to try to understand what faith is about. It is normal that children are taught languages, math, history, and many other subjects at school. Many people study such subjects for a long time. In the same way, there is a lot of knowledge to be gained about the Christian faith, and some of it requires study. The study of Christian faith often results in enlightening and important insights about life.

However, many people's knowledge of the Christian faith does not go much further than a few generalities and prejudices. Some hardly know anything about it. They know Christmas is about the baby Jesus*, and Good Friday is about his death, and Pentecost is the birth of the Church*, but they are confused about what all this means. Without some knowledge, it is not surprising that for many, everything that has to do with Christianity seems unbelievable, and at most, good for simple souls.

- Do you think it's important to increase your knowledge of religion?
- What or who helped you to know more about your faith?

See also questions 1, 14, 30, 42, 49.

QUESTION 3

Can you be a Christian and yet doubt your faith?

Doubt is part of the Christian faith. Believing is not the same as knowing. When your stomach rumbles, you know you are hungry. You also know that this feeling will stop when you eat. People want certainty. What you know, you can control. People like that. It gives them a sense of security. With God*, that doesn't work. Believing in God and in the risen Jesus* is believing in something and someone you can't reach with your common sense. The mystery of God is reached in the mind and heart.

You can believe with your heart and soul that God exists and that Jesus lives. That doesn't mean that doubt can't strike. Is it all true? Don't I confuse my dreams with reality? This can hurt. Don't worry too much about it. Doubt comes, doubt goes.

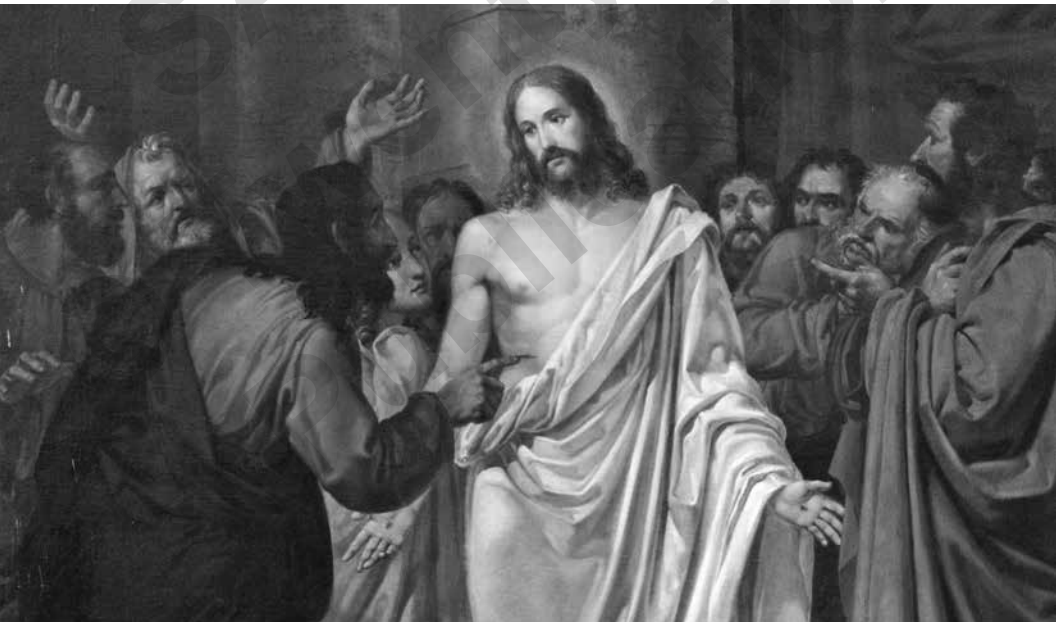
A special example of doubt in faith can be seen in the stories of the apparitions*, at the end of the Gospels*. They describe encounters between the risen Jesus and his friends. In almost all these stories, doubt plays an important role. They can hardly believe that the man who died on a cross is alive again, and that they can see, hear, and touch Jesus. Some even eat with him. If there was any doubt among those first believers, then it is

normal that Christians today sometimes doubt that the whole story is true.

Doubt also has good sides. It prevents you from believing on autopilot. It can be an incentive to pay more attention to your life of faith and to keep looking for the core of it.

- Do you sometimes doubt?
Which beliefs in particular?
- How do you deal with this doubt?
What helps you with it?

See also questions 1, 4, 19, 46, 48.



QUESTION 4

Can a believer be critical?

Believing has nothing to do with gazing at the sky and letting your mind go blank. Faith and a critical attitude go hand in hand. Faith is about God* and therefore about life's deepest mystery. Believers want to entrust themselves to this mystery, even if it sometimes goes beyond their understanding. At the same time, it is necessary to purify faith from superstition and therefore from unbelief. That is why Christians find it important to understand the Christian faith as much as possible with their mind, knowing that the starting point of Christianity*—the resurrection* of Jesus*—completely escapes the laws of nature and human logic. However important the critical mind may be, it does not have the last word for the believer.

The critical attitude has a major pitfall: suspicion. We need to recognize this pitfall because it can kill trust. Without trust, there is no faith. Therefore, moderation is key, including with regard to the desire to understand, a desire that in itself is good. You'd better not wait for the moment when you understand everything with your mind before you can believe. That is simply not possible.

Faith in God is not about sorcery or fairy tales. Just look at the harshness of the life and death of Jesus. But experience shows that people sometimes use faith as a

shield against life, quietly hoping that God, as a wizard figure, will solve all their problems. We need to remember that this is not how it happened in the life of Jesus. Yet, in the name of faith, strange things are still being said and done today, sometimes with the best of intentions, sometimes with less grand intentions. That is why critical thinking is so important. The critical eye can unmask the weeds in the garden of our faith.

- Do you deal critically with what you believe or do not believe?
- Have you ever weeded your garden of faith?

See also questions 2, 5, 6, 26, 48.

QUESTION 5

Can faith and science get along?

Faith and science are not mutually exclusive. They are not competitors. The reason is simple. Faith and science answer different questions. It is therefore not surprising that among great scientists you find both believers and non-believers. Georges Lemaître, who formulated

the theory of the Big Bang, was a learned professor and a Catholic* priest*.

Faith gives an answer to questions like: Why do we exist? What is the meaning of life? Why is there something instead of nothing? Nuclear physics, chemistry, or mathematics can't answer those questions. That is not their domain. The question the scientist wants to answer is *how* our world works. For centuries, people thought and believed they could find the answer to that question in the Bible*. It has only been a few centuries since Christians started to disassemble these questions, an unraveling that is still going on.

Many people say that they believed as a child but lost their faith when they discovered science. One of the reasons for this is that their knowledge of faith has been limited to what they learned as children. It is not surprising that such a belief is undermined by the confrontation with scientific thinking. For others, it is precisely the practice of science that is the starting point of a path of faith: Who or what is at the origin of this incredibly beautiful cosmos?

- Do you think there is a contradiction between faith and science?
- Does science influence what you believe?

See also questions 1, 2, 4, 8, 17.