

## Prologue



# The Night God Fell from the Ceiling

I was dozing through art history class in college when something woke me up and planted the seeds of a Big Dream. We were studying the magnificent frescoes of Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The slides—that’s what we used in those days—dropped into place as the Kodak carousel clicked around, humming with the white noise of the fan. My mind wandered as the professor described the chapel’s creation. Many people think Michelangelo painted the frescoes on his back, he explained, but that’s not true. Instead, the artist stood atop a rig of scaffolding, constructed specially for the occasion, craning his neck at the ceiling for hours just a few inches from his work. He complained often about the pain, about the fact that he was a sculptor, not a painter. Yet somehow he managed to achieve perspective without seeing his work from below. “A magnificent accomplishment,” as the professor put it. My mind still wandered.

Michelangelo started painting in 1508, commissioned by Pope Julius II. The chapel, which often appears smaller than

expected to the hordes of tourists, is built to the exact biblical dimensions of the Temple of Solomon on Jerusalem's Temple Mount. "Did anyone know this?" the professor asked. Silence. Lots of minds were wandering.

The lecture droned on. "It has always been the pope's private chapel. Along with frescoes by Botticelli, Perugino, and Pinturicchio, it is dominated at one end by *The Last Judgment*, which Michelangelo filled with nude males reportedly inspired by his visits to Rome's brothels. The nudes so offended subsequent popes that, in 1564, the Council of Trent demanded that the more 'prominent' nudes in *The Last Judgment* be made more decent, and the artist Daniele da Volterra was commissioned to paint underwear, or *braghe* (draperies), to cover them."

The mention of nudity stirred a few students to attention. "For a church that is based on the incarnation, the Word becoming flesh, we haven't been very good at loving the body," he continued. The class leaned forward.

That's when it happened. The last slide dropped into place, and the chapel's most famous painting appeared on the screen. *The Creation of Adam*. Perhaps the most replicated and parodied image of all time. In it, God appears as an elderly white and bearded man, wrapped in a swirling cloak. He reaches his right arm toward a reclining Adam, who is completely nude and reaching back—albeit half-heartedly. Their fingers do not quite touch.

In that *separation*, that small yet cosmic gap between God's finger and Adam's, Christian theology pitched its tent. People have wondered: Does the gap represent a divine spark that Adam has not yet received? Does it stand for the tragic

separation between humans and God that is the root of all sin? Or is it the artist's rendering of the essential message of creation in Genesis 1:27: that humans, although lower than God, are made in God's image and likeness? I could not take my eyes off that "gap" and wondered what, if anything, could ever close it. "Mind the gap," I remembered hearing on a subway platform on the London Underground. But this was something deeper and more compelling than personal safety. As it turned out, this was the first stirring of a call to ministry. But that comes later.

Our professor turned to the class. "Look at the twelve figures surrounding God." He trained his pointer on one female figure in particular. "Who is that woman under God's arm?" More silence. "Is she Eve, gazing toward Adam and about to be offered as a gift? Is she the Virgin Mary or Sophia, the goddess of wisdom? We don't know because art historians are still arguing about this."

A young woman raised her hand, but when the professor called on her, she hesitated to speak and seemed almost embarrassed by what she was about to say. "I don't know the identity of the woman," she offered, "but I can't get over how buff God is."

"How *buff*?"

"Yes, he is old, but he's in great shape! Check out the arms. God must go to the gym. He's ripped." The class rippled with laughter. Then, for a few minutes, we all just stared at the image, and the power of it lingered.

"It was the Renaissance," the professor said, trying to recover. "The world had discovered the body to be beautiful, and in particular Michelangelo, who is widely believed to

have been homosexual, drew and sculpted far more male nudes than female nudes.”

“That’s a shame,” said a frat boy in the class. More laughter.

Then, just as the class was about to end, the professor pulled out a clipping from *The New York Times* and read it aloud:

Dateline Rome—Pietro Bonatti, caretaker of the Vatican’s Sistine Chapel and of the Pontifical Sacristy, died of a lung ailment in his Vatican apartment this morning. He was 83 years old. Following a four-century-long family tradition that started under Pope Sixtus V, Mr. Bonatti inherited the caretakership of the places of worship adjoining St. Peter’s Basilica from his father, Antonio, who died in 1938. He served in that capacity under four Pontiffs, including Pope Paul VI, who named him “Gentleman of His Holiness” in 1963.<sup>1</sup>

There was a moment of awkward silence, after which the frat boy spoke for the class.

“And why are you telling us this?”

“Because,” the professor replied, “it is important that you know that art is not just created—it is also preserved by caretakers. By people who sweep the floor, check the humidity in the room, and clean up after the crowds. It is their job to protect art from the millions of tourists whose skin and hair follicles flake off, rise to the ceiling, and coat the frescoes. Someone has to tell them to hush, to stop taking pictures, and finally to leave, especially the loud ones who are drunk. These

caretakers are the only ones who see the art when no one else is in the room. The eyes in the paintings follow them on their silent rounds. They whisper their secrets in the darkness. What I am saying is that everyone knows the names of the artists, but no one ever knows the names of the caretakers. Now you do. His name was Pietro Bonatti.”

The bell rang. We still had bells in those days, and I walked out of class thinking more about Pietro than about Michelangelo. Little did I know that many years later, this germinal idea would disturb my sleep in the form of a very strange dream. I had my life all planned out. I would get certified to teach high school English in some mythical classroom where all of the students were eager to learn. Except something else was tugging at me, something that was difficult to explain to my friends, much less to my fiancée.

One lazy afternoon, sitting alone in a tiny garage apartment studying for finals, I looked out the window at nothing in particular. A solitary bird was calling, but not to me. Something stirred. The world seemed at once both utterly indifferent and indescribably beautiful. As much as I loved literature, bigger questions were calling, some without any answers at all. So without hesitation, and with a kind of reckless disregard for a lifetime of consequences, I ditched the idea of teaching and decided to go to seminary.

When I got there, we talked a lot about dreams and their possible meanings. Not the kind Freud attributed to people’s repressed desires, but the kind that makes a “thin place” between heaven and earth, between what is and what ought to be. Prophetic dreams, instructive dreams, apocalyptic dreams—the kinds many Christians believe are messages from

God. None of the dreams, however, were thought to be messages *about* God. That is, until one night I dreamed about my old art history class, and the forgotten lives of caretakers.

My dream was about Pietro's successor; let's call him Francesco. Every morning, he would grab a broom, look up at that image of God reaching out to Adam, and start sweeping the floor. He lived out his life doing this humble work beneath those masterpieces—beneath that gap between man and God.

One night, something terrible happened. It was four in the morning, and in the dream, I had become Francesco. I *was* the custodian of the Sistine Chapel, doing my rounds in another room, when a crash from the chapel jolted me awake. I dressed and ran into that sacred space, the room smelling of dust and plaster. And that's when I saw it. In a pile on the floor, in a thousand pieces, was all that remained of the most famous fresco in the world.

I looked up to the ceiling and saw a dark gash where the painting had been. Adam's reclining body remained, but his hand now stretched toward nothing. The plaster where Michelangelo's image of God and his heavenly host had been fixed for five hundred years had broken loose and fallen to the floor. God had fallen off the ceiling.

I looked in horror at the wreckage. *This can never be repaired*, I thought to myself. Then I realized that everyone was still asleep, so I sat alone in the chapel for a long time, looking up at the void and then down at the pile of rubble on the floor. Strangely, a verse came to mind that I'd never thought could apply to God. *Dust we are, and to dust we shall return.*

Just then, a gaggle of priests came wafting into the room,

their frantic voices babbling out a song of grief and indignation.

“Francesco, how could this happen?” one of them said, looking at me as if I were to blame.

“I am only the night watchman,” I replied. “I heard the noise, just like you did, and came running.”

“So what on earth could have caused this?” said a puffy, red-faced prelate—his crucifix resting almost horizontally atop an enormous belly.

In the silence that followed, I said the first thing that came to mind.

“Tired, perhaps?”

“Tired?” responded the portly priest, incredulous. “What on earth do you mean?”

I went back to sweeping up the broken pieces of God with a broom and thought for a moment about the irony of a church that has for so long talked about the “fall”—but only of man.

“Tired of being up there,” I said. “Maybe even lonely?”

“Lonely!?” the big man bellowed.

“Look, you’re a janitor, not a theologian,” his assistant said. “This is just a structural failure, that’s all—it’s old plaster. We will put God back where he belongs.”

“Maybe,” I replied. “Or maybe that’s not where he belongs.”

I tried handing the dustpan and a spare broom to his assistant.

“Can I get some help here?”

The big priest looked incredulous. “Excuse me? It’s not what we do.”

“Well, you should try it. Because—”

“Because why?”

“Because God has always been down here.”

## Disclaimer of All Disclaimers

Dear reader, let’s get the most obvious question out of the way. *Who writes a book about God?* An aging seminary professor in an ivory tower, perhaps? A theological narcissist who has God on speed dial? A hip young pastor who jots his sermons down on a pub napkin late Saturday night? Or is it perhaps one of those self-appointed coffee shop gurus who thinks she can prove the existence—or nonexistence—of God while waiting in line for a pumpkin spice latte?

Authors are told to write about what they know, which makes any book about God inherently absurd. We do not “know” God in the way that we know about other things, even though we often talk about God as if we did. Indeed most of us talk about the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (the transcendent mystery before which human beings tremble and are fascinated) as casually as we would talk about a next-door neighbor, a rich uncle, or a box of soap.

One of my seminary professors mused in class one day that clergy seem to think that chatting about God as if the two of them went “way back” was a sign of faith instead of a symptom of idolatry. Sermons are filled with God language that is so casual and familiar as to render the Almighty a kind of tourist attraction, not unlike a giant green bird sitting in the branches of a tiny tree in the preacher’s backyard. Its enormous weight bends the sapling branches almost to the ground.

Whatever one thinks about, or feels, when the word “God” is spoken or written, the last association that should come to mind is the word “obvious.” Perhaps it would be better to refrain from speaking the name of God at all, or to leave out the vowels when writing “YHWH” to show respect, as the rabbis did. Because let’s face it, speaking of God as if He were a life coach or She were a BFF—or assuming that God has a gender to begin with—has not helped a dying church to catch another breath. I have wondered if the decline of organized religion has less to do with secular humanism and more to do with the suffocating way in which people of faith speak about that which they do not know.

When church attendance first started to wane, pundits claimed that liberal churches were shrinking because they were not sufficiently conservative, unambiguous, or doctrinal. But in the last decade, the Southern Baptists have lost more than a million members.<sup>2</sup> The fact is that organized religion of almost every stripe is declining and graying across the board. It’s an equal-opportunity disappearing act, and it’s complicated, except for one universal thread. The *young* are leaving religion in droves. Four out of ten younger millennials (eighteen to twenty-nine) are “nones” (no religious affiliation). That is four times higher than it was in 1980. “In fact, the fastest-growing religion in America is . . . no religion at all.”<sup>3</sup> Today there are clergy who confess to hearing a very strange question from people considering membership: “Can I join your church even though I’m an atheist?”

Against this backdrop, writing a book about God is literary presumption on a cosmic scale. The subject matter is both the most important and the most impossible. Yet the world has

changed so much since the days of Michelangelo that a new conversation about God is long overdue. Our discussion in this book will not be couched in the familiar (and often hypocritical) dichotomy of religious versus secular fundamentalists. We will be looking for what Catherine Keller calls a “third way.” Something that preserves the mystery by knowing better than to call it one.

To begin, here’s what we did not know when human beings first began worshipping what we now call God. Our best guess is that the universe is thirteen to fourteen billion years old, and our beloved earth is but a tiny, fertile outpost in the suburbs of a minor galaxy—what the late astronomer Carl Sagan called “a pale blue dot.” Then there is dark matter, and black holes, and something called M-theory, a shadowy concept posited to lie at the end of a mathematical labyrinth known as superstrings. In short, the age of science has given us a lot to feel very small and humble about.

Even so, this has not changed our capacity to practice spiritual pride or turn the Mystery of Mysteries into a kind of cosmic bellhop. We don’t mean to diminish the idea of the holy, the transcendent, and the numinous. But in our desire to capture and express this mystery, we talk about God as if we had written God’s job description. We make God the default explanation for almost everything that happens, the good stuff and the stuff that horrifies us, even if those claims make no sense at all. Much of this language assumes that God is like the CEO of creation, running the universe from a celestial throne before which mere mortals cringe in fear and supplication.

Even so, we are hesitant to challenge our assumptions

about God, because, after all, faith is such a deeply personal thing. Who are we to question it or express our frustration over it? We admit that we are all walking around a mountain too high to climb, so we just freeze up, or look away, or change the subject when our friends and loved ones tell us matter-of-factly what God is up to, whom God has chosen, and which side of the latest bloody war God is on. Just listen to the soundtrack of our prayers or the elevator music of our culture.

God chatter is ubiquitous, based on unchallenged assumptions that the featherless bipeds on this pale blue dot are really the apple of God's eye; favorite children in the infinite darkness; even the recipients of partisan favors to help our favorite sports team win the big game. God has a personality, of course, because we do. And the eternally durable image is that of a strict father trying to control wild kids, not unlike the "great and powerful Oz"—all special effects and no soul.

The real unchallenged assumption is that God is an agent who is busy doing things, *acting* in human history to honor and reward those who worship correctly and believe the right things, while punishing those who don't. Indeed the Western Christian God is a heavenly vending machine. We deposit our prayers, push the right doctrinal buttons, and wait for something we want to drop down. If the prize is not forthcoming, we may shake the machine, curse God, or be told by the preacher that we must "deposit" more faith.

What we can no longer deny, however, is that organized religion has a God crisis on its hands. Traditional theism, the idea that God is a kind of superperson who dwells outside the world as we know it and occasionally intervenes to answer

prayers or impose the divine will, has run its course and been rejected by millions. To an entire generation of disillusioned young people, and millions who came before them, the God spoken about in church has become little more than a projection of human hopes and fears. We need new ways to conceive of being human. New ways to be in relationship to the sacred and to one another.

## A Different Kind of Book

So this will be a different kind of book. I will not attempt to persuade you that God exists, does not exist, or cannot be known to exist in the same way that your cat does. Instead, it will be a collection of *stories* told by a parish minister after a lifetime of listening and learning from people who are struggling to believe.

There is no more painful moment in parish ministry than to see a lost soul come to church looking for mercy, only to find legalism. My father once told me a story about the insanity of his denomination's insistence that no one goes to heaven who hasn't been baptized—and baptized by full immersion. A young man he knew had Lou Gehrig's disease. It had progressed to the point that it was impossible for him to walk, much less get baptized. He was terrified that, having not been baptized, he would go to hell. My father told him that no loving God would punish anyone in his situation, and to rest assured that he was loved and accepted.

As the man neared death, however, a traveling evangelist came to town and told him that there are no exceptions, even

hinting that his disease must be a form of punishment for sin. “You must be baptized if you want to see your loved ones in heaven,” he told the young man, “and we can make it happen.” Hospital staff were asked to bring in a giant mechanical sling that would lift his ravaged body above a large tank of water and slowly lower him down. As he screamed in pain, the evangelist spoke the magic words, and the young man was baptized. Later, as he lay exhausted in his bed and weeping, the evangelist told him that all the pain was worth it, and that now he could better understand the suffering of Jesus. “Rest assured that your reservation in heaven is ready, and that you will be given a new body as well.”

Such stories raise the question: How does religion survive its own practitioners? Is it because we are all hardwired to seek transcendence? Is it because we can't help but wonder where we came from, where we are going, and to Whom or to What we belong? Either way, I believe our choice is not between orthodox beliefs about God on one hand and radical nihilism on the other. The choice is between one view of divinity as expressed by religious orthodoxy and many others that are emerging now in the age of science and spiritual hunger. *This book is written for everyone who is struggling with the old and narrow definitions of God but has yet to see any coherent and comprehensive way to reimagine the Ultimate Mystery.*

This will not be easy. Those of us who grew up in the church still carry old and beautiful words in the backs of our throats. Some of them feel like orphans now, not to mention the ideas that go with them. We need to redefine them, or swallow them and form new ones, because we long for a faith that is more than judgmental certainty, more than “believe

and receive.” In a world where everything is entangled, woven into what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called a “seamless garment of destiny,” we are hungry for new ways to heal and transform the broken world we inhabit.

This project comes at a critical moment in human history. We are a species headed for extinction, the first generation to know the truth about global climate change and the last to have a chance to do anything about it. This is not just a political crisis; it is a theological one. Our ancient longing for a supreme leader in heaven mirrors itself in our choice of worldly leaders. We may hate what Daddy dishes out, but in the end we have been conditioned to believe that it must be good for us—because, in the words of the 1950s sitcom, father knows best.

Grown men have approached me after a sermon on the parable of the Prodigal Son to say that their fathers never once said, “I love you, son.” Women have confessed that their appearance was so critical to their self-image that they spent years battling depression and eating disorders. Each time they walked past the window displays at Victoria’s Secret, they were confused about the true meaning of the word “angel.” Our conspicuous consumption, our mindless consumerism, our “enough is never enough” idolatry, causes us to fashion a God of the so-called prosperity gospel—a God who shows his love for us by making us rich—even though the real message in the Bible is that wealth is spiritually debilitating.

The deep, dark secret of organized religion is that abusive earthly fathers have often compromised the idea of a Heavenly Father, handing down the teaching of a God who loves us but is also perpetually *disappointed* in us. This divinely in-

spired shame has made it impossible for millions of followers to love themselves. Would a Heavenly Mother be better? Depends. Perhaps it is the very idea of a *personal* God that is most in need of revision. Something beyond gender and gerrymandering altogether. Perhaps something that is not “out there” so much as “in here.” What Paul Tillich called a God of the depths instead of a God of the heights.

At least this much is now clear. Marketing an old God with better signage and parking won't work. Offering classes in Christian aerobics (whatever that is, exactly) won't work. Preaching about “muscular Christianity” (whatever that is, exactly) won't work. Turning the gospel upside down, claiming that wealth is a sign of God's favor (instead of a spiritual hazard), won't work. So where do we begin?

To put it plainly, we need to stop looking up—at a God who lives on the ceiling, directing and pronouncing judgment upon everything below—and start *looking around*.