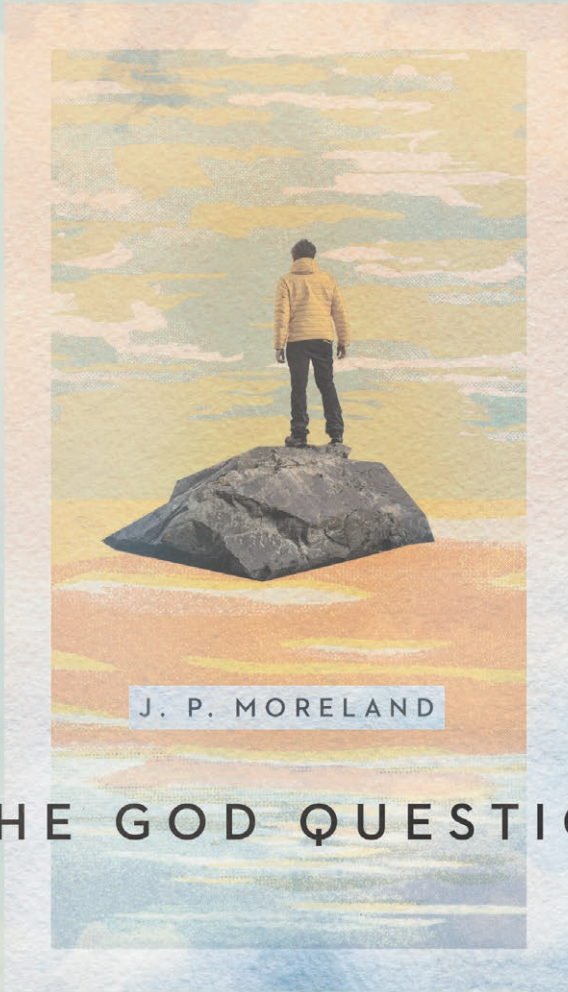


REVISED EDITION



J. P. MORELAND

THE GOD QUESTION

AN INVITATION TO A LIFE OF MEANING



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CHAPTER ONE

WHY CAN'T I BE HAPPY?



IN THE MID-1980s, hard evidence revealed that something was seriously wrong with the American way of life. Rumors about the problem were prominent since the 1960s, but when the evidence was published, the rumors became public knowledge, though few today know what is going on. And more evidence has piled up in the past twenty years.

Some of the causes and symptoms of the problem shape the way we approach our lives and make it difficult to face this evidence. Not long ago, I was watching reruns of television commercials of the 1950s. In one quite typical ad, a medical doctor encouraged viewers to smoke cigarettes for their health. Smoking, he assured the viewers, calmed nerves, aided appetite, and helped one sleep better. This widely accepted belief hindered Americans from realizing that cigarettes actually harm one's health. Similarly, the conditions of contemporary life make the evidence mentioned above hard to accept.

And even if someone accepts this evidence, it is very, very difficult to know what to do about the situation. And I say to you with all my heart that you have been hurt by what the evidence shows. No, it's worse than that. You and your loved ones have been harmed, not merely hurt. In the following pages I have some good and bad news. Let's start with the bad news. What are the problems and the evidence to which I have been referring?

What are the causes and symptoms that have hindered us from facing the evidence and overcoming our dilemma? Let's look at these in order.

AMERICANS DON'T KNOW HOW TO BE HAPPY

The cover story of the December 2006 issue of the *Economist* was about happiness. The *Economist* is about as far from a pop psychology magazine as you can imagine, so the topic must have been something of great concern to the editors. Based on research data from 1972 to 2006, the article concluded that people in affluent countries have not become happier as they have grown richer, had more leisure time, and enjoyed more pleasurable activities and a higher standard of living.¹

In 2005, the results of extensive study on American happiness were released with similar findings: Americans are on average twice as rich, far healthier, more youthful, and safer than they were fifty years ago, but they are not as happy.² Since the 1960s the percentage of Americans who say they are “very unhappy” has risen by 20 percent, and depression rates are ten times higher than they were during and before the 1950s. Each year, 15 percent of Americans (approximately 40 million people) suffer from an anxiety disorder.

For decades, University of Pennsylvania psychologist Martin Seligman has been the nation's leading researcher on happiness. His study released in 1988 sent shock waves around the country. Seligman studied the happiness quotient and depression rate among Americans at that time compared to those of their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. Are you ready for this? He discovered that the loss of happiness and the rise of depression were tenfold in the span of one generation—the baby boomers. Something has gone terribly wrong with American culture, said Seligman, and the tenfold, short-term explosive loss of happiness and growth of depression—a factor that has continued to increase since the 1980s—is clearly epidemic. What is going on?

DIGGING DEEPER

Without being harsh, I must say that we would be naive if we didn't believe this epidemic has affected all of us. There is a way out of this mess, and the chapters that follow are my best offerings for embarking on a

journey to a rich, deep, flourishing life. In fact, I would like you to read this book as my invitation to you for such a life—one that is brimming with drama and adventure, flowering with meaning and purpose. However, I am not interested in merely offering you an invitation. I also want to give you wise counsel that has been repeatedly tested and found trustworthy and helpful for the journey.

A journey has to start somewhere, and the best place to start this one is by digging more deeply into the causes and symptoms of our cultural crisis. We are looking for broad cultural factors that have generated a shift in the way we do life, a shift that has caused the epidemic. These factors are not likely to be things we regularly think about. If they were, most people would have made a priority of avoiding them, and that is not the case. I am not suggesting that people will reject the alleged factors once they are made explicit. Quite the opposite. I believe that once they are laid bare, most folks will experience an ah-ha moment and readily identify with them. No, in order to do their destructive work, these factors have to fly under the radar. They must be so pervasive that they are hardly noticed.

In their excellent book on anxiety and depression, psychologist Edmund Bourne and coauthor Lorna Garano identify three causes for the epidemic: (1) the pace of modern life, (2) the loss of a sense of community and deep connectedness with others beyond the superficial, and (3) the emergence of moral relativism.³ The increased pace of life does not merely refer to more work and less free time, though those are certainly factors. Well into the late Middle Ages, Europeans had 115 holidays a year!⁴ Besides free time, the sheer pace and speed at which we live—our language is filled with terms like *rush hour*, *hurry up*, and *fast food*—and the technology we use (including iPods, email, television, and cell phones) make it difficult to be quiet and hear from ourselves. As a result, we feed off adrenaline, our brain chemistry is not normal, and we are incapable of handling the stress of ordinary contemporary life. Maybe we were never intended to, but I get ahead of myself.

On the surface, the loss of community reflects two things: Western individualism (which is a good thing in moderation) gone mad, and the supposed lack of time required to cultivate deep friendships, especially

among contemporary men, who have often been described as “the friendless American males.” On a deeper level, it reflects misplaced priorities due to a shift on our view of the good life. I will say more about this in the next chapter, but for now I simply note that we define success in terms of the accumulation of consumer goods and the social status that they and a culturally respected line of work provide. We seldom measure a successful life by the quality of family and friendship relationships we cultivate.

Regarding the factor of moral relativism, Bourne and Garano make this note:

Norms in modern life are highly pluralistic. There is no shared, consistent, socially-agreed-upon set of values and standards for people to live by. . . . In the vacuum left, most of us attempt to fend for ourselves, and the resultant uncertainty about how to conduct our lives leaves ample room for anxiety. Faced with a barrage of inconsistent worldviews and standards presented by the media, we are left with the responsibility of having to create our own meaning and moral order. When we are unable to find that meaning, many of us are prone to fill the gap that's left with various forms of escapism and addiction. We tend [to] live out of tune with ourselves and thus find ourselves anxious.⁵

I cannot resist making an observation about their insightful point concerning moral relativism. The damage it does is one reason why the contemporary idea of tolerance is really an immoral, cold, heartless form of indifference to the suffering of others. The classic principle of tolerance is both true and important: we take another group's views to be wrong and harmful, but we will treat the (alleged) errant people with respect, will defend their right to promote their views, and will engage in respectful, civil debate in attempting to persuade them and others to reject their viewpoint. The contemporary idea is grotesque: we are not to say others' views or behavior is wrong. This is immoral because it allows for genuine evil, such as racism and child molestation. We must judge the behavior to be evil before we can stop it! Bourne and Garano show us that it is also cold and heartless: if you think another is engaged in a lifestyle that is deeply immoral and flawed, the most loving thing to do is to help that person face and get out of that lifestyle. Even if you are

wrong in your assessment, at least you cared enough to try to help. By contrast, contemporary tolerance creates indifferent people who don't have the moral vision or courage to intervene in the lives of others and try to help.

We might summarize Bourne and Garano's insights this way: First, our resistance to depression and anxiety is weakened by the pace of our lives. Second, we don't have the relational connection we need for support and strength in finding a way out of unhappiness. And third, we lack the intellectual framework required to admit that there is a right and wrong way to approach life and to fuel the energy we need to seek, find, and live in light of the right approach. In fact, believing that there actually is a right approach seems intolerant to many.

I have spent hours thinking about these three points and how they inform my own journey.⁶ If I may say so, it wouldn't hurt if you set the book down, took out a sheet of paper, jotted down these three factors, and brainstormed about how they have had a negative impact on you or your loved ones. Nevertheless, I do not believe that Bourne and Garano have identified the heart of the matter. We must probe more deeply.

DIGGING DEEPER STILL

Psychologist Carl Jung once observed that “neurosis is always a substitute for legitimate suffering.”⁷ Jung is referring to our tendency to avoid feeling genuine emotional pain and facing real personal suffering and dysfunction by creating, usually subconsciously, a neurotic pattern of thinking or behaving that allows us to be distracted from our real issues.

When I was attending seminary, my roommate was in constant fear that he had committed the unpardonable sin, an act for which there is no forgiveness. Try as I might, I could not reassure him that he had done no such thing. One day while probing him more deeply, I realized that his real issue was fear of abandonment, loneliness, and feelings of inadequacy due to harsh treatment in his early years by his father. However, it was too painful for him to feel and face these—something he needed to do to get well. Such self-awareness would have been legitimate suffering in Jung's terms. Instead, he projected his anxiety on something more manageable, on something that distracted his anxiety from the real

issues—the unpardonable sin—and neurotically worried about this repeatedly throughout his daily life.

I am convinced that this inability to face our deepest anxieties is at the heart of why we have trouble being happy. In chapter two, I will expose why this inability is a distinctively contemporary problem for Western culture since the 1960s. For now, I want to mention two forms of “neurosis” characteristic of many of us. Just as my roommate obsessed about the unpardonable sin, we use these two items to manage our anxiety and cope with life while avoiding the deeper issues we have trouble facing.

The two items to which I am referring are *hurry* and *worry*. When I speak of hurry, I am not simply referring to the (sick) pace at which we live our lives. That’s a problem in its own right. No, I am referring to the role that busyness and being in a hurry plays in coping with our fears in an unhealthy way. People are afraid to slow down and be quiet. As one thinker put it, the hardest thing to get Americans to do today is nothing. We fear solitude, silence, and having nothing to do because we fear what will happen if we aren’t busy. What do we fear? We fear that our anxiety will bubble up. We dread feeling insignificant. We fear hearing from ourselves because we might experience pain if we do. We all have responsibilities in which we invest time and effort. But if you compare our lifestyles with folks in earlier generations, it becomes apparent that our busyness and hurried lives are avoidance strategies.

We all have worries and things that could hurt us. But the degree to which we worry is, again, symptomatic of something much deeper. When I refer to worry as a coping strategy, I am not referring to worry about a threatening situation—losing one’s job, being sick, not getting married, and so on. I am talking about worry as an approach to life. In this sense, worrying is actually a learned behavior. As dear as she was, my mother was a very anxious person who worried about everything. I lived around her and absorbed her approach to life, so by the time I was a young adult, I had learned how to worry from an expert. And now I was the expert!

What roles do hurry and worry play in your life? I encourage you to spend some time pondering this question. As a help to you, I suggest you find some safe friends or family members and ask them to give you

honest feedback about this. This issue is so deep and so much a part of the warp and woof of American life that it is hard to get in touch with the way we neurotically use hurry and worry to avoid problems.

One of our main fears is boredom and loneliness, and hurry and worry keep us from facing these fears. In fact, some patterns of ideas and beliefs that permeate the arts, media, and educational institutions of our culture make it all but impossible to face boredom and loneliness. More on that in chapter two. Here I want you to ponder an additional fact: it takes a lot of emotional energy to “stuff” our real problems and manage appropriate anxiety by the hurry and worry strategy. And given the three pervasive cultural patterns we mentioned earlier—our pace of life, the loss of community, and the emergence of moral relativism—we have a very dangerous situation in our culture.

To live the way many of us do takes a lot of energy, so we are vulnerable to addiction. Various addictions provide some form of relief from a neurotic life and offer some reward on a regular basis in the form of the satisfaction of desire, usually bodily desire. However, all such addictions obey the law of diminishing returns. The more one turns to addictive behavior, the less it pays off and the more one must turn to the addiction. It may be social recognition, sexual stimulation, drugs or alcohol abuse, eating, acquiring consumer goods, and so on. Over time, we shrivel as authentic persons, and we become less and less in touch with our real selves. Instead, we must project a false self to others—a self we wish others to believe about us, a self that is a collage of parental messages, strategies for remaining safe and hidden, and behaviors that avoid shame and guilt. The range of our free will diminishes, and we become enslaved to safety, social rules, and bodily pleasures and their satisfaction.

It's time to summarize. For at least sixty years, Americans have become increasingly unable to find happiness and, instead, are ten times more likely to be depressed and anxiety filled than Americans of other generations. Clearly, something about our culture is deeply flawed. As a first step toward identifying the flaws, I noted the adrenalized pace of life, the loss of a sense of community, and the emergence of moral relativism in American culture. Digging more deeply, I noted that for these and other reasons, we find it hard to face our real, authentic emotional pain and,

instead, opt for lifestyles of hurry and worry that allow us to cope with our boredom, emptiness, and loneliness without having to face our true situation. Such an approach takes a lot of emotional energy and, partly to comfort ourselves, we turn to addictive behaviors that increasingly turn us into false selves who no longer know who we are.

AN INVITATION AND A WORD OF CONCERN

I have received much help from others in my own journey, and I believe I have some genuinely good news for you in the pages to follow. I invite you to read on with an open mind and heart. However, I'm concerned about something. I am troubled that you may not be willing to think afresh with me about what follows and won't benefit from whatever wisdom is offered. Why am I so concerned? It's because of my topic and the two primary types of people with whom I want to travel.

Beginning with chapter two, I am going to mention the *G* word—*God*—more specifically, the Christian God and Jesus of Nazareth. As we will see, whenever we focus on living a rich life and face our inability to be happy, broad questions about the meaning of life inevitably surface. This is as it should be. And lurking in the neighborhood will be questions about God. It has been said that the single most important thing about a person is what comes to mind when he or she hears the word *God*. This is a trustworthy saying.

So why am I concerned? Because it is so very hard to invite someone in this culture to give this topic a fresh hearing, especially from my two audiences. The first person to whom I am writing is not a follower of Jesus. You may be an aggressive atheist, mildly agnostic, or inclined to think that religion should be a private matter and that “Live and let live” should be one's motto. If you fit this category, you may have picked up this book at a bookstore or found it online, or a friend or relative may have given it to you. If the latter is the case, you may feel defensive about reading the book. You may feel that your friend or relative wants to fix you or to “win” in your longstanding dialogues about Christianity. If you read this book with an open mind and fresh start, and if you come to agree with some of my offerings, you could lose face, as it were. Others could say you were wrong all along and this proves it.

I completely understand such defensiveness, having practiced it myself in various contexts. But to be honest, if you are concerned about such matters, you are actually not being true to yourself. Instead, you are letting others control you. You are giving them free rent in your mind. It's as though they are looking over your shoulder as you read, just waiting to jump on you if you come to see things as they do. My advice is that you not let others have such power over you. Be yourself. Think for yourself. Give me a hearing, and when you have read the entire book, step back and decide for yourself what you think about these matters.

Besides friends or relatives, if you fit into this first group, I actually have a deeper concern—really, two concerns—about you being defensive in reading what follows. Having talked to atheists and agnostics for forty years, I've seen that many of them don't want God to exist. In a rare moment of frankness, atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel makes this admission:

I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, I hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that.⁸

Such an approach to life is hard to sustain. Influential atheist Douglas Coupland frankly acknowledges how difficult it is:

Now—here is my secret: I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.⁹

Fathers and freedom. If you are an atheist or something close to it, I believe there may be two reasons why you think this way. I am sharing these with you to be helpful, not to throw this in your face. No one is here but you and me, so please see if these describe you. The first reason you may approach the question of God with anger or rejection is unresolved conflict with your own father figure. I have spoken on more than two hundred college campuses and in more than forty states in the last forty

years, and it has become apparent to me that atheists regularly have deep-seated, unresolved emotional conflicts with their father figures. To think that this plays no role in their atheism would be foolish. Paul Vitz, a leading psychologist in this area, claims that, in fact, such conflict is at the very heart of what motivates a person to reject God or be indifferent to religion.¹⁰

Let's be honest. You owe it to yourself to see if this is causing you to be defensive about the topic of God. If it is, I urge you in the safety of our conversation to follow, to try to set this aside.

The second reason you may not want the Christian God to be real has been identified by Dinesh D'Souza: people want to be liberated from traditional morality so they can engage in any sexual behavior that satisfies them without guilt, shame, or condemnation.¹¹ The famous atheist Aldous Huxley made this admission:

I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning; consequently I assumed that it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption. . . . For myself, as no doubt for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation. The liberation we desired was . . . liberation from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom.¹²

If you have a vested interest in wanting to look at pornography or to engage in sexual activity outside of a traditional marriage, your hostility to God may well be a way of enabling yourself to sustain your lifestyle while flying in a no-guilt zone. I take no pleasure in saying this, and I am not trying to be harsh or judgmental toward you. The opposite is the case. I have help for you and will offer it in the chapters to follow. All I ask of you is that you give me a hearing and not allow these factors to fuel your defensiveness in such a way that you are not teachable and open to exploring these issues together.

Caricatures of Christians. My first concern about defensiveness, then, is due to the role that unresolved father issues and sexual practices may play in preventing you from facing this topic honestly and with a good and open heart. My second concern is the associations that come to

mind when people in our culture think of conservative Christians, most of whom would be called evangelicals. You may see red at the very thought of Christians. They are hypocrites, intolerant bigots, nosy members of the Religious Right who try to tell others what to do and how to think. Christians are irrational, unscientific, nonthinking sorts who will gullibly believe anything. Comparing Christians (and other religious zealots) and secularists, University of California at Berkeley professor and former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich gave this warning:

The great conflict of the 21st century will not be between the West and terrorism. Terrorism is a tactic, not a belief. The true battle will be between those who believe in the primacy of the individual and those who believe that human beings owe their allegiance and identity to a higher authority; between those who give priority to life in this world and those who believe that human life is mere preparation for an existence beyond life; between those who believe in science, reason and logic and those who believe that truth is revealed through Scripture and religious dogma. Terrorism will disrupt and destroy lives. But terrorism itself is not the greatest danger we face.¹³

With friends like that, who needs enemies! Reich needs to lighten up a bit. Still, you may share his opinion of what it means to be a Christian. May I suggest two counterarguments that may help you get something out of this book? First, Reich's statement and the description of Christians in the preceding paragraph are gross caricatures that are far from the truth. It's a cultural lie that the more educated you become the more you reject Christianity. In 1998, University of North Carolina sociologist Christian Smith published what may be the most extensive study to date of the impact of contemporary culture on American evangelicalism. Smith's extensive research led him to this conclusion:

Self-identified evangelicals have more years of education than fundamentalists, liberals, Roman Catholics, and those who are nonreligious . . . Of all groups, evangelicals are the least likely to have only a high-school education or less; the nonreligious are the most likely. Furthermore, higher proportions of evangelicals have studied at the graduate-school level than have fundamentalists, liberals, or the nonreligious.¹⁴

Sure, there are a few bad (ignorant and bigoted) eggs in our basket, but the whole basket should not be judged on this account.

Even if this demeaning picture of Christians contains more than a small grain of truth, becoming a follower of Jesus doesn't have to make you like this. And there's still the issue of you and your own life and welfare. You have a life to live, and if you are anything like me, you need all the help you can get to live it well. The real issue is whether the Christian God is real and can be known, whether Jesus of Nazareth was really the very Son of God, and whether the movement he started is what you need and have been looking for (consciously or not). At the end of the day, the issue is not whether Christians are hypocrites, Republicans, or whatever. The issue is Jesus of Nazareth and your life.

Familiarity. The second person to whom I am writing is a Christian who has become too familiar with the form of Christianity often present in our culture. If this is you, you may have become inoculated from the real thing. You are bored with church, you don't like religious games, and you believe you have given the Christian thing a try and it isn't what it was cracked up to be.¹⁵ In a way, you've lost hope. The fire in your belly has dimmed, and you despair of finding more as a Christian. You think you have already heard and heeded the invitation I am about to unpack, and you are not interested in hearing the same old stuff again. Been there, done that, bought the T-shirt.

Dallas Willard puts his finger on this problem: "The major problem with the invitation now is precisely overfamiliarity. Familiarity breeds unfamiliarity—unsuspected unfamiliarity, and then contempt. People think they have heard the invitation. They think they have accepted it—or rejected it. But they have not. The difficulty today is to hear it at all."¹⁶ I'm asking you to listen again to the invitation as though for the first time. In some cases, that won't actually be true. You will likely read things in subsequent chapters that you have heard before. If so, I promise to try to give these things new life, to cast them in a new light. In other cases, that may actually be true. Some brand-new insights may follow. If you are a Christian who fits my description, all I can do is to ask you to read on with an open heart.

So let's move on. You and I have lives to live. How can we get better at it? In chapter two, we jump out of the pan and into the fire. We move to

what I believe is at or near the bottom of why you and many of our fellow Americans can't find much happiness in life. The central issue revolves around broad cultural ideas about life, reality, and confidence. The fundamental issue involves the mind and how we think about and see things. But before I can tell you that story, I'll need to let you in on something about your brain.

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