

## **Story idea #2: Thomas and the non-existent God** (*working title*)

### **Blurb**

Thomas Newton is angry at God and can dismantle anyone who believes. As a senior lecturer and rising star at Clarendon University, his psychology lectures veer into thinly-veiled attacks on religion. His caustic brilliance dazzles his students but not the threatened Professors and his Christian neighbors who insist on trying to convert him. The other exception is the woman he is interested in – Assistant Professor Sarah Wright, who is perfect except for one glaring flaw. She believes in God.

Thomas jumps at the chance to appear on a celebrity streaming network debate about God's non-existence will give him the chance to unveil a razor-sharp intellect to the nation and shoot his career into the stratosphere. But then one day the God he is certain doesn't exist starts to speak to him and carries a dire warning.

### **Central theme**

“If we would just pause, turn inward, and gaze at His magnificence, we would be enriched, strengthened and at peace. (p36, *The Awe of God*)

“We are promised: For God, who said, “Let there be light in the darkness,” has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:6)”

The God some people believe in bears little resemblance to the *actual* God. The ‘non-existent God’ referred to in the title has a triple-meaning:

1. Thomas believes God is non-existent.
2. The God he used to believe in when he was a Christian was non-existent as well as he was brought up to believe He was some kind of genie who granted wishes and looked after His children all the time.
3. It also describes the God Sarah believes in – a God who demands your service and your activity but not your relationship.

### **Subsequent themes**

- “How many believers today only know God by answered prayers? Their relationship with Him is more transactional, not intimate. They know His words, but not His heart.” (p212, *The Awe of God*). Both Thomas and Sarah don't know God – they simply react and respond to God's answers to their requests.
- “If you fear God, you'll obey God. If you fear man, you'll ultimately obey man's desires. ‘Fearing people is a dangerous trap’ (Proverbs 29:25)” (p92, *The Awe of God*). Thomas is living a life based on his desire for fame and progress, and it isn't working.

- “Barna did a study between 2000 and 2020 (one of his biggest studies) and he discovered over 20 million American, practising Christians in that 20 years are now non-Christians, many of them professing to be agnostics and atheists ... that’s more than 5% of America’s population.” John Bevere, The Awe of God: How to TRULY Get Close to God [FULL SERMON], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24d6y34tF9k>

## Story outline

Thomas Newton is angry at God and can dismantle anyone who believes. As a senior lecturer and rising star at Clarendon University, his psychology lectures veer into thinly-veiled attacks on religion. His caustic brilliance dazzles his students but not the threatened Professors and his Christian neighbors who insist on trying to convert him. The other exception is the woman he is interested in – Assistant Professor Sarah Wright, who is perfect except for one glaring flaw. She believes in God.

Sarah is frustrated in her life because God has been very silent. She loves her job and her students adore her, but she wants to fulfill God's purpose for her life although she doesn't know what that is. She has tried so hard in her faith but struggles to hear Him the more she's thrown herself into work. And while Thomas is a good friend, one who Sarah suspects used to be a Christian, he can't be any more than that while angry at God. But she would love to win him over.

Clarendon University is selected to host a debate on a streaming network on how God can't exist in a modern world and Thomas talks his way onto the program, beating his rival Professor Bishop. The debate is the career break he desperately needs and will showcase his razor-sharp intellect to the world while connecting him to celebrity culture.

Sarah wants to be involved but is told her faith makes her biased in the eyes of the University, and her arguments that atheist late-night hosts are also biased fall on deaf ears. The Dean tells her to tone down her faith as it's perceived as offensive. Sarah prays about how to go along with it, because she doesn't want to lose her position or let down her students. She returns to losing herself in her work and throwing herself more and more into her church.

In class, Thomas has regular easily-won debates with three Christian psychology students unhappy with his constant sniping at their faith. Then he receives three separate, subtle warnings (via spam, overheard conversations and the radio) to 'watch out for his neighbors', but like any solid, rational thinker, doesn't think anything of it.

Planning for the debate continues through a succession of exciting Zoom calls. Undeterred by Bishop's undermining, Thomas is promised promotion by the University President, who states the University rushed the building of its new Great Hall to take advantage of being on a global streaming platform. The network dangles the idea of his own show. Thomas excitedly shares his success with Sarah, who complains the debate will be a farce – all of the people arguing for God's existence don't believe God is real!

Sarah challenges him - why is he angry about something he claims doesn't exist? Thomas is in a quandary, wanting to get close to Sarah but unable to share her faith. He reveals he used to be a committed Christian years ago, who became angry at God when He allowed his mother to die from cancer. Heartened, Sarah tells him the God she knows isn't a genie who grants wishes. The God he left behind is non-existent, even moreso than the God he currently sees.

Thomas comes home to find his neighbors have been severely injured in a car accident. He sees the tract they left under his front door, whose cover asks: "Is God trying to talk to you?" He mentions the co-incidence of messages about his neighbors to Sarah, who believes there is more to it.

Thomas has another run-in with his three Christian students, who complain about the debate being an anti-God sideshow. After class, he is sure a voice in the corridor says ‘watch out for your neighbors’. He races out to an empty corridor and hears the voice again, but this time it says: ‘how can I get your attention?’

Thomas is on a Zoom call with the Network and celebrities when he hears the voice again in his headphones asking ‘how can I get your attention?’ The other participants hear nothing so he unplugs his headphones to check them and he hears the voice again, but he can’t say anything.

Thomas doesn’t mention the voice to Sarah, which is now persistent throughout his day, asking that same question. Squeezed between the pressure from the TV network, the University President and Bishop’s constant undermining, Thomas believes there can only be one rational explanation for this voice: stress. But he cannot take a break or walk away from this opportunity of a lifetime.

Thomas’ Christian students try to engage with Thomas in debate about the fact that God is real to them because they have heard His voice in their hearts. Thomas loses it and screams at them to leave. As he unravels, it looks like he hasn’t slept and is dishevelled. Sarah wants to help - the students came to see her and she knows he lost it. But he can’t afford to say why. He’s invested so much in saying God doesn’t exist, so in Thomas’ mind he clearly can’t.

As Bishop continues to undermine him, Thomas visits a psychologist off-campus, his only hope of speaking to someone on the quiet. The psychologist is quite concerned he is hearing voices but agrees with Thomas’ self-diagnosis that he is under enormous stress and suggests a long break. He can’t afford to. His career will take off after this debate and a rival will take his place.

Sarah tries to find out why Thomas has been to the psychologist. In his office Thomas again hears a voice, but this one is different. He uncovers a speaker planted by Bishop - Thomas’ visit to the psychologist wasn’t as confidential as he needed it to be. The psychologist is a friend of his rival. The University President has been tipped off about Thomas’ visit to the psychologist and reminds Thomas his future is on the line, along with the reputation of the University. He fails, he’s finished.

As Thomas again hears the voice, he challenges it: ‘if you *are* God, prove yourself with a miracle.’ The voice responds Thomas already has enough proof, starting with the warning about his neighbors. The voice is revealed to be God, who points out Thomas doesn’t lack belief. He lacks the true picture of who God is. The God he grew up with – one to be scared of otherwise He wouldn’t give Thomas what he wanted – doesn’t exist. And He reveals that Sarah is in danger.

Thomas is now over-concerned with Sarah’s safety, which scares her as he won’t reveal why. After a late-night meeting, Thomas walks Sarah to her car and insists that she leave her car and drive home with him. Sarah demands to know what’s going on, before an out-of-control car careens through the parking lot and flattens her car, which she would have been sitting in.

Sarah confronts him – how did he know this would happen? Thomas admits hearing God’s voice. He ignored the first warning and asked God to prove Himself, so he warned him about this. This is bittersweet for Sarah – as a Christian she yearns to hear from God, instead her angry-at-God friend does. She challenges him to use the debate to prove God’s existence but Thomas’ instincts kick in as he would need to admit that for all these years he has been wrong. Very wrong.

Now Thomas is under pressure from two sources to have real conversations – Sarah, who is desperate to know how he's hearing from God, and God himself who has longed to talk with Thomas. Thomas can't help but challenge everything, no longer afraid of the punishment he was brought up to believe would come his way if he did. God is big enough to handle it after all ... who gave Thomas his intellect in the first place?

God speaks again and this time both Sarah and Thomas hear Him. Sarah cries with joy and Thomas is relieved that Sarah now believes him. But God delivers them both a warning – the debate can't go ahead. Thomas and Sarah both presume it's because God is unhappy about the topic. But God continues: I gave you free will to debate whatever you like, but tragedy will come to this event. And you need to warn them.

Thomas and Sarah now work together to uncover the source of danger. He believes he is smart enough to work out this problem, trying to identify the danger and neutralize it. The pressure squeezes Thomas as he questions everyone from the Network to campus security without giving away why he is asking ... all the while preparing to speak at a televised debate.

On the night of the debate Thomas is on stage with five other participants in a great hall full of the buzzing of students – more to see the celebrities than consider the arguments about God's existence. His rival Bishop sits in the front row, glowering next to the University President.

Several loud noises and near misses have Thomas's nerves on edge then he gets up to speak. He stumbles in his speech that God can't exist, as if torn by his cutting comments about it being impossible God is really there. He finally, almost in defeat, stops talking and explains why. He's been hearing from Him. In that moment, the PA system – overloaded because of the rush to finish the Great Hall to secure the streaming network debate – starts a fire. Thomas sees the smoke from the stage and announces that everyone needs to evacuate, he's been warned this will happen. It's actually proof that God exists. A few run for the exits, most don't, believing it's part of the production.

And now Thomas – joined on stage by Sarah and with the Network's cameras rolling – tries to convince people to listen to the voice of the God they believe is non-existent. They can't believe people are glued to their seats even though the smoke is thickening. Together they rush out, as the fire breaks out and people rush for the exits in panic.

After the debate, Thomas is now in the spotlight for different reasons – a celebrity for delivering a warning from God in a debate about God's non-existence from a guy who said he was an atheist. But no-one wants to talk about the point this proves: Thomas may have found evidence that God indeed exists. His job is under threat because the University President discredits his assertion that God warned him. They need to appear 'unbiased', so they send Thomas on stress leave and tell the media that it was just co-incidence.

For Thomas, the barrier for belief has been lifted and Sarah wants to take him to dinner and talk more. She's waited for the day when she could talk to him about God. And with his career now in jeopardy, Thomas prays for direction. God tells him He's been waiting to hear Thomas say that for a long time, and this is the start of something great.

## **Book idea #2: Thomas and the non-existent God** *(working title)*

### **Chapter One** *(first draft)*

A sly grin slunk across Thomas Newton's face as he stared down the University student who wobbled on unsteady legs. A lamb before a fox which, intellectually, he was. "That is why this 'God' you believe in is nothing but a figment of your imagination."

The young man flushed as he folded his arms across the t-shirt parading another Christian slogan. Today he was a "Crazy for Jesus."

He was half right.

Thomas stood at the front of the lecture theatre and surveyed his classroom. His kingdom. Hands on hips, he pushed open a suit jacket to reveal his own fashion ideology. A t-shirt with simple white text: *Where is your God now?*

The student clutched at the seat in front as he opened his mouth to speak. His words trapped in a constricting throat.

Thomas challenged the student with a raised eyebrow. *Come on Michael, keep arguing.*

"But God... is a God of love..."

Thomas raised the other eyebrow and paced across the lecture theater filled with fifty young pliable minds keen to tap into the academic reputation and hip street-cred that Thomas wielded like an epee.

"We've debated that before Michael, and my response will always be to ask why your God of love would allow people to die from cancer."

Thomas spun on his heel and lasered a look over the sea of heads who stared at Thomas with awe. And, in more than a few cases, hero worship.

The young man gaped but the words wouldn't come.

Thomas cocked his head. *Well?*

Michael folded back into his seat, a familiar ending to a professor-student debate.

Thomas's eye roved a front row bursting with preening female students. He appreciated the energy of Clarendon University, an elixir that kept him young. He ran a hand through his thick mane of black hair and adjusted rimless glasses. "Any other challengers who would like to step up to the plate?"

Heads glanced to the left and right to see who would take on their razor-sharp professor. The room was silent.

Thomas rubbed his hands together. "No one? Okay, for the rest of the semester we will explode a few myths in our society, starting with next week's topic." He flicked his final slide into life on the screen with a flourish: Week 10: The Psychology of Religion. Another finger tap drew a chuckle that rippled its way across the class and crashed into the frowns and disapproving folded arms of Michael and his two friends in the back row. Delusion or Just Plain Dumb?

"The reading for next week will be Dawkins, chapters one and two. And you can always listen in to this week's podcast. See you in class and my office is open to you on Thursday mornings."

The room sprung to life. A snoring student lifted his head, sensing movement as his classmates gathered their things and charged for the door.

Thomas nodded to himself. Another job done in opening young minds. But a nagging thought scratched away at him as it did after every class.

It wasn't enough.

At thirty-seven, he was the youngest member of the prestigious School of Psychology, even if he was only a lecturer. But he had run into a roadblock built of crusty academics and

a dean who would die in his office before he retired. The office destined for Thomas. One of the three unticked boxes in his life.

Thomas turned to the whiteboard and scrubbed away his scribbled wisdom.

“Delusion or dumb?” A familiar female voice echoed through the now-empty lecture theater.

Thomas smiled to himself as he turned. Sarah.

Associate Professor Sarah Wright stood at the back of the room, brows knitted above eyes of smoky cognac. Tall like Thomas, with flowing black hair and one of the few minds that could match his. The second unticked box.

Thomas leaned against the front row. “Another batch of students finding out what *really* makes their world tick.”

Sarah raised a playful eyebrow. “You know, the way you turn everything into an anti-God rant just shows how insecure you are about Him.”

For all their similarities—their love of eighties music and Monty Python—and despite their friendship, there was one glaring difference between them. For a reason Thomas could not fathom, she just didn’t believe *of* God, but *in* God. And yet she knew almost as much about psychology as he did.

“It’s my responsibility to make these kids think, not just believe what they’re told.”

Sarah folded her arms. “You know if you declare anyone stupid if they don’t agree with you, that’s not making them think.”

And another philosophical chess game threatened to break out.

*Imagine there’s no heaven... it’s easy if you try...*

Thomas’s cellphone burst into life as John Lennon announced an incoming call. His podcast producer, no doubt to remind him he was now late for his recording. Again.

“I’ve got to go Sarah. I’m needed to deliver more truth on the airwaves.”

“Concession accepted.” Sarah smiled, licked her finger and chalked a mark on an imaginary scoreboard.

Thomas shook his head as he brushed past her and charged down the corridor. Papers tacked to the noticeboards outside each office fluttered in his wake as he thumbed in a message. “I’m on my way Jessica. See you in two minutes.”

Bubbles floated on his screen before bursting into life. “It’s just a campus podcast Thomas, don’t stress.”

But it was more than *just* a campus podcast. It was another foot on the stairway to heaven. The Holy Grail of academia. The media.

The third unticked box.

Late night talk shows, panels on streaming services, the big, important podcasts, then a best-selling book and his own TV show – hopefully on a big streaming platform. If the Dean wouldn’t get out of the way, Thomas would find a way around him to a place where his intellect would be better compensated than a measly professor’s salary.

“Thomas!”

A deep voice bounced down the corridor.

Thomas exhaled as he turned and continued his quick walk backwards out of the psychology building. An older man in his late fifties leaned out of a doorway. Thick black glasses perched on a hook nose below half a head of hair combed across in the pretense of a full one.

“Yes Peter?”

Professor Peter Bishop folded gray cardiganed arms as he sighed at another missed opportunity for respecting his rank. “Just wanted you to know there will still be room in my faculty for you.”

Thomas’s backwards gait slowed. *What was the old man talking about?*

“When the Dean retires, as the most senior academic here I’m next in line. And I would make room for you in my faculty.” Peter’s voice dripped with sarcasm. He was more than part of the furniture—he’d been at the University as long as some of the buildings.

“Got to go Peter. Very important things to do.” Thomas spun on his heel and flung open the creaking, ancient doors of the psychology building.

So Dean Russell was thinking about leaving. Excellent. Thomas had to ramp up his campaign to make sure he was promoted. Reporting to Peter Bishop would be hell on earth and Thomas would need to leave, away from the most prestigious psychology school in the country. Away from Sarah.

He quickened his pace and clipped the “Please Keep off the Grass” sign as he cut across the lush, velvet lawns that meandered their way between the centuries-old buildings of Clarendon University. Sticking to the path was what the University required, but Thomas didn’t follow the paths others took.