

Mystagogy and Mission: The Challenge of Nonbelief and the Task of Theology

Theological Studies
2015, Vol. 76(1) 7–28
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0040563914565541
tsj.sagepub.com


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Abstract

Christian engagement with nonbelievers is problematic when believing itself proves difficult even for people of faith. A recovery of the original unity of the *fides quae* (the “content” of faith held in belief) and the *fides qua* (how faith’s content is lived) can lead to a deeper sense of believing. Rahner’s understanding of faith as a “mystagogy” that leads to mission serves as a framework for recovering that original unity, and for addressing the contemporary problem of belief, not only for nonbelievers, but also for believers themselves.

Keywords

belief, discipleship, faith, *fides qua*, *fides quae*, mystagogy, mission, nonbelief, nonbelievers, Rahner, secular, secularity, secularism

Recent communications between Pope Francis and atheists have again highlighted the problem of believing in our time.¹ The pope’s communication with nonbelievers echoes calls from the Second Vatican Council, as well as from

1. For the most thoroughgoing of recent papal ruminations on this topic, see “Papa Francesco scrive a Repubblica: ‘Dialogo aperto con i non credenti,’” *La Repubblica*, http://www.repubblica.it/cultura/2013/09/11/news/sintesi_lettera_bergoglio-66283390. The Pope touches on this topic in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* nos. 255–57, <http://www.vatican.va/evangelii-gaudium/en/index.html#190>. All URLs cited herein were accessed August 24, 2014.

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the Society of Jesus, to engage the secular cultures of our time, and especially non-believers. But, as Francis noted, this call to engagement has not moved very far within the Church as a whole since the closing of the council.²

One reason for this slow movement is that believing is a problem for people of faith as well. Contemporary Christians in the Western world inhabit the very same world as their atheist or agnostic friends, and make many of the same basic assumptions about how reality is structured and functions. In this world of shared assumptions, it is not unusual to find belief difficult and older formulations of faith inadequate.³ Does Christian faith automatically entail a firm belief in God, or is there not to be found a tension between possessing the gift of faith, even in a prereflective sense, and having the ability to believe with conviction? It is tempting to dismiss a body of doctrine built upon and deriving from a premodern and myth-laden universe that no longer lays claim on us. Some have lost the ability to believe, not because they do not know what the church has proposed for belief, but because the doctrinal “content” of faith has become intellectually incredible, as belonging to another world of meaning and reference and certainly not to the world of empirical demonstration. The Creed, for example, stands as a religious classic steeped in an ancient ontology, but for some Christians,

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2. There have been major exceptions, notably among Jesuit theologians such as Michael J. Buckley, S.J., who took seriously the call of Pope Paul VI, in his address to the 31st General Congregation of the Society of Jesus on May 31, 1965, charging the Society to counter atheism. That call was taken up by General Congregation 32, Decree 4, “Our Mission Today: The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice” no. 19; it was reaffirmed at General Congregation 33, “Companions of Jesus Sent into Today’s World” no. 37. For Buckley’s major contributions, see his *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1987); and *Denying and Disclosing God: The Ambiguous Progress of Modern Atheism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2004). For Paul VI’s address and the two documents cited and their respective page numbers, see John Padberg, ed., *Jesuit Life and Mission Today: The Decrees and Accompanying Documents of the 31st–35th General Congregations of the Society of Jesus* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2009) 231, 302, 450.
 3. For an analysis of the epistemological and sociological positioning of faith in late modern cultures that still resonates today, see Karl Rahner, “On the Situation of Faith,” *Concern for the Church*, Theological Investigations (hereafter, TI) 20, 13–33. He writes, “The reality of faith is not simply a world [un]to itself alone, separate from the world of secular experience, if only because this faith raises quite concrete claims and demands which must be fulfilled in the concrete world of secular experience and activity, in moral life and in the ecclesial society, which is a very concrete reality of everyday existence. For this very reason the desire for a synthesis, for the integration of the reality of faith and of secular reality, must be recognized as legitimate in principle” (13–14). This is a situation very different from what faith faced in the past: “Despite these elements of unresolved problems, in earlier Christian times there existed an assured, homogeneous world-vision, a completely structured worldview, which was not only that of the individual and the solitary isolated person on his own account and at his own risk, but that of a society where, despite individual heretics and dissidents, it was more or less taken for granted and undisputed, at least in its basic features” (14–15).

it does not meet the epistemological demands for belief today. These demands now belong to a “postmetaphysical” world of empirically verifiable claims and, even more, to a metaphysics falling outside the boundaries of traditional systems of ontology and causality. In short, it is difficult to integrate all the credal claims with a contemporary consciousness of reality. But more fundamentally, and even more importantly, the Creed and various dogmatic statements can fail to convey to believers the wonder of the personal experience of God’s self-disclosure in the history of grace that lies at the heart of Christian faith.⁴ Consequently some claim to have faith in the God revealed in Jesus Christ, but are reluctant or simply unable to say much more about what they believe with any deep intellectual conviction. If this is the case for believers, then how can we begin to engage self-designated nonbelievers?

Here I can address this broad question only as a task for fundamental theology, although it has many other aspects that should be explored: theology and science, interreligious dialogue, social ethics and bioethics, and aesthetics, to name a few. But as a matter of fundamental theology, the classic framework is the distinction between what is held in faith as the knowledge about God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ enshrined in Scripture and taught by the church (*fides quae creditur*). In short, the objective content of faith is transmitted in tradition. Tradition is the means by which this “content” of faith is also appropriated in and through the personhood of the religious subject, the human person who enters into a saving relationship with God through a personal faith in the God of Jesus Christ (*fides qua creditur*).⁵ These are not

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4. On this problem, Rahner observes, “Christians can only be satisfied with conformity to the articles handed on to them through the teaching of the Church and often originating in an earlier historical period, when they have as intense an awareness as possible of the interior revelation which is given with the self-communication of God and is called grace. They must experience in every part of their lives the inner direction of their being in knowledge and freedom to the unfathomable mystery of God. Spiritual instruction in this area, which embodies real vitality and energy, is rarely to be found in the Church today, so that it is hardly surprising if many people try to obtain the experience through mental techniques which either avoid the practices and scrutiny of the official Church or are found outside Christianity” (“Faith between Rationality and Emotion,” *Experience of the Spirit: Source of Theology*, TI 16 [New York: Crossroad/Seabury, 1979] 60–78, at 72).
 5. This distinction has an ancient provenance, expressed variously by medieval theologians, notably Thomas Aquinas, especially in his treatise on faith in the *Summa theologiae* 2–2, qq. 1–7. On this distinction and deeper discussion of “faith” in Catholic theology, Juan Alfaro comments, “Theologians, recognizing the complexity and intrinsic unity of the act of faith, distinguish in it the following basic dimensions: faith as knowledge of revealed truth (believing in God who reveals himself in Christ: ‘*fides quae creditur*’); faith as trusting obedience to God and as a personal encounter with him: ‘*fides qua creditur*’ (believing God, the formal structure of faith)” (“Faith,” in *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. Karl Rahner [New York: Seabury, 1975] 500–510, at 500); see also Rahner, “Faith between Rationality and Emotion,” in *Experience of the Spirit* 60–78, where he identifies *fides quae* with “faith as object” and *fides qua* with “faith as personal act” (73).

two distinct tracks or ways of believing, but are distinguishable aspects of a single, unified act of faith.⁶ Yet that act cannot be adequately represented by the positive content of faith itself as it may be expressed in the form of beliefs—as creedal, dogmatic, or more generally doctrinal statements.⁷ It is realized in the various ways and means, religious as well as everyday, by which faith is appropriated and lived. Believing is more than an intellectual assent to propositions (or “beliefs”) through a reasoning process; it is also, and complementary with this, a deeper entry into the reality of faith’s “content” in and through the transcendent depths of spiritual subjectivity. And these two dimensions enjoy a fundamental unity with each other that constitutes the single act of faith, and of believing as such.

Yet this fundamental unity between *fides quae* and *fides qua* can be lost when we focus on either a propositionalist approach to belief⁸ on the one hand, or on the other hand, a subordination of belief to a vague and undefined sense of faith or a spiritual

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6. See Alfaro, “Faith”; and Rahner, “What Is a Dogmatic Statement,” *Later Writings*, TI 5 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 42–66, at 48: “A dogmatic statement is a statement of faith . . . not only in as far as it is *fides quae creditur* but also in as far as it is *fides qua creditur*.” See also Rahner, “The Faith of the Christian Church and the Doctrine of the Church,” in *Ecclesiology, Questions in the Church, the Church in the World*, TI 14 (New York: Seabury, 1976) 24–46, at 39: “*Fides quae* and *fides qua* (the content of faith and the process of the act of faith) are identical in their origins because the fundamental reality which is believed in, the self-communication of God to the human person, namely the Holy Spirit, is also the principle of faith itself, its sustaining force, and its active movement.” There is an entire phenomenology of faith presumed here, one that situates the act of faith in transcendental freedom and understands faith to be the realization of that freedom. Cf. Rahner, “Faith between Rationality and Emotion,” in *Experience of the Spirit* 64–66. Geoffrey D. Dunn observes, “As many a modern fundamental theologian would point out, the separation of *fides quae* from *fides qua* is not always possible. What one believes and how one acts are intricately interwoven” (“Heresy and Schism according to Cyprian of Carthage,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 55 [2004] 551–74, at 551).
7. I am taking this notion of “beliefs” from Roger Haight, *Dynamics of Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1990) 32–48, at 33 (and *passim*), where he argues that faith is understood as an individual act with regard to revealed truth that has an inner dynamism toward communication. Because faith cannot rest as a private matter, it expresses itself in “beliefs.” Haight maintains a constant creative and interpretive tension between the act of faith and its self-expression in beliefs, but also a clear distinction between them. What faith and beliefs have in common is a focus on what is of “ultimate concern” (a phrase borrowed from Paul Tillich).
8. George Lindbeck raises this propositionalist approach as one possibility; see his *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-Liberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984). His own position, the cultural-linguistic approach, is not strictly speaking propositionalist, but takes into account the effects of cultural variations in the formulations of doctrine, which nevertheless have a formal priority over experience. In a broad sense, then, the *fides quae* comes before the *fides qua*, at least in the order of our understanding of the ongoing life of faith.

sensibility that makes too sharp a distinction between faith and belief.⁹ And both of these possibilities are reflected in contemporary theology, as I later note. The task for theology, then, is to develop an approach to believing that avoids this kind of bifurcation and that both broadens and deepens what believing means so that the nonbelieving world—which includes some believers themselves in their inability to express their faith with intellectual conviction—can be addressed. In short, we need what Rahner calls a theology that is at once both “missionary and mystagogic.”¹⁰ I am particularly concerned here with the way his understanding of mystagogy informs the relationship between the *fides quae* and the *fides qua*. Rahner writes,

The theology of the future will . . . be a missionary and mystagogic theology. . . . For in the future the Church will no longer be upheld by traditions that are unquestioningly accepted in secular society, or regarded as an integral element of that society . . . “Mystagogy” means that the *fides quae* of today can be expressed only in a very explicitly recognized unity with the *fides qua*. . . . [For] if it is true that everything that is expressed in objective concepts in theology has a reference to the interior self-communication of God in every person, then the *fides qua* both can and must constitute a theme in all departments of dogmatic theology.

Rahner proceeds to raise the kinds of questions that people in a secular world are asking of theology and, through theology, of faith itself:

“What does this mean for me (and society)?” “How does this really affect me?” “How precisely can I myself really believe this?” Once such questions as these are raised . . . theology of itself will become something quite different from what it formerly was. It will of itself become more mystagogic, more missionary, and this is something which in practice is in accordance with the contemporary and future situation.¹¹

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9. See Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 2013), who seems to establish a sharp distinction between faith as a kind of ephemeral experience of movement toward God, and belief as propositional, pertaining to a fixed world of objective givens: “Faith steals upon you like dew; some days you wake and it is there. And like dew, it gets burned off in the rising sun of anxieties, ambitions, distractions” (93). “Faith is nothing more—but how much this is—than a motion of the soul toward God. It is not belief. Belief has objects—Christ was resurrected, God created the earth—faith does not” (139). Wiman does not propose these terms as a systematic theologian, but as a poet.
10. “Possible Courses for the Theology of the Future,” *Theology, Anthropology, Christology*, TI 13, trans. David Bourke (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 32–60 at 41.
11. *Ibid.* 41. Elsewhere Rahner explains, “It is not only the ‘*fides quae*’ that must come to terms with God as mystery, but also the ‘*fides qua*’. The act of faith as such in itself, and not merely its conceptual objectifications, must in some sense come to terms with the mystery as such. For this too theology . . . should constitute a ‘mystagogia’ leading people to the experience of grace, and should not merely speak of grace as of a material subject which is present in a person’s life solely through the conceptions which one formulates of it” (“Reflections on Methodology in Theology,” in *Confrontations*, TI 11 [New York: Crossroad, 1983] 68–114, at 110–11). See also Rahner, “The Teaching Office of the Church in the Present-Day Crisis of Authority,” in *Confrontations* 2, TI 12 (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 3–30, at 23; and “Faith between Rationality and Emotion” 60–78, esp. 72–73.

So what is needed is a theology that unifies the *fides quae* with the *fides qua* in a deeper understanding of believing (the mystagogic task), thereby enabling Christian theology to function within and address a people of the church and of the world who are steeped in a secular milieu (the missionary task). In what follows I address the questions, What are the presuppositions for such a mystagogic theology? And what would be the shape of one essential “missionary” dimension of it—namely, discipleship?

I explore these questions in four stages. First, I consider the problem of the tension between *fides quae* and *fides qua* as one that is rooted in faith itself: the problem of the “elusiveness” of God. God’s elusiveness gives rise to the possibility of a loss of belief, or at least of a not-knowing who God is in relation to us, and thus to a possible theological diminishment of the importance of the *fides quae* as theology focuses on the construction of faith types that seem distanced from the classical loci. Second, I consider the *fides quae/fides qua* tension within the context of religion, in particular with regard to the notion of the “secular” in relation to the religious or the sacred, and to the dissociation of faith from reason in the intellectual history of the West. The problem for belief is posed not by the dangers of the secular world, but rather by the inability of religion to see itself in relation to it or, in the case of Christianity, as the source of the secular. One result is a defensive overemphasis by some on a propositionalist understanding of the *fides quae* and a concomitant diminishment of the importance of a personal appropriation of faith. Third, I turn briefly to the “practice theory” of historian of religions Catherine Bell, who moves the conversation from belief as an intellectual and existential decision to believing as an activity of religious life, where faith comes to expression and belief assumes realizable forms. In theological terms, we find a basis (in Bell’s nontheological program) for a reunification of *fides quae* and the *fides qua*. Finally, and in connection with this, I briefly examine one of the modes by which this unity is realized in practice: discipleship. The tension between *fides quae* and *fides qua* is not entirely erased here, but their unity is stressed. This, in turn, leads to the possibility of a Christian (missionary) engagement with a nonbelieving world that is shared with believers themselves.

Inspired by Rahner, I use the word “mystagogy” in its root sense of guiding an initiate into the world of faith, into its depths as they are realized interpersonally in God. While the word has a deep historical, liturgical, and baptismal pedigree, it can also be used more broadly, as Rahner did, to suggest the following of a way into the mystery of God. When we speak of a “mystagogy of believing,” we open up the notion of belief beyond intellectual assent to doctrine and toward a broader sense of the existential practice of faith in the world, the “missionary” dimension of believing.

The Problem of Believing and the Elusiveness of God

The elusiveness of God within the experience of faith was captured by Rahner in his challenging meditation on the word “God” and what might occur were that word ever forgotten.¹² It is helpful to recall that he was writing this in the wake of World War II,

12. *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978) 44–51.

when he witnessed first-hand how forgetting God by replacing God with a system of idolatry led to agonizingly tragic consequences in Germany and throughout Nazi-occupied Europe. It might sound strange to ask what would happen if a mere word were forgotten; many words have in fact dropped out of the common lexicon—Rahner offers “phlogiston” as an example. But the word “God” itself is not at issue; the issue is that there is such a word at all, regardless of the actual language that captures it. That there is such a word suggests something about the ontological makeup of the human being who has fashioned this word and is searching for its referent.¹³ The lack of a graspable referent is wrapped up in the origin and meaning of the word itself. The word arose in the course of human experience, an experience of transcendence that is bound up with and comes to expression in language. This fundamental experience is the search for and moving toward the totality of all that is. And this experience is bound up with language, which yields a dictionary word that tries to capture the origin and goal of this transcendence: God, Gott, Deus, Dieu, Dios, Dio, and so forth—different words expressive of the one word, which, if forgotten, means forgetting its ungraspable referent. For the word “God” refers to no object. The demonstration of the “existence” of “God” does not thereby establish an object that exists alongside other objects and can be objectively known like other objects. The referent of the word “God” is ineffable, the infinite term of a transcendent movement. That is why even the denial of the existence of God keeps the word itself alive, and thus is the tacit acknowledgement of the underlying human movement in transcendence toward what cannot be contained or grasped.

In this spirit Rahner asks what would happen if the word were to be forgotten. That is, what would happen if we were to imagine a species called *homo sapiens* that had lost the experience of transcendence:

They would forget all about themselves in their preoccupation with all the individual details of their worlds and their existence. *Ex supposito* they would never face the totality of the world and of themselves helplessly, silently, and anxiously. They would not notice any more that they were only individual existents, and not being as such. . . . They would be mired in the world and in themselves, and no longer go through that mysterious process which they *are*. . . . Human beings would have forgotten the totality and its ground, and at the same time, if we can put it this way, would have forgotten that they had forgotten. What would it be like?

13. For the purposes of my discussion here I am limiting myself to the Christian conception of monotheism, as enshrined in the doctrine of the Trinity, although this doctrine does depend in part on the sources of revelation also to be found in the Hebrew Scriptures. A set of perplexing questions arises when we see the conflation of Yahweh with the Christian Trinity and with the Muslim Allah. On the dangers of theological syncretism Mark Johnston writes, “A syncretistic confusion dominates modern theology because of a kind of wishful thinking, a form of thinking in which a technical theological claim (the numerical identity of the gods of the monotheisms) is the illegitimate offspring of decent and widely held desires. . . . One reason why . . . reflex syncretism is so comforting, is that taking a cold, hard look at what we do worship would leave us with the anxious questions: Do we really believe in God? Is our god really God?” (*Saving God: Religion after Idolatry* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2009] 3).

We can only say: human beings would have ceased being human beings. They would have regressed to the level of clever animals.¹⁴

The word itself, then, is a reminder of who we are as beings who have the experience of transcendence. “Loss of the word, the death of the word ‘God,’ including even the eradication of its past, would be the signal, no longer heard by anyone, that [the human race itself] had died.”¹⁵

The alternative to such a complete eradication of the word would be its survival, even if that survival is surrounded by arguments over its ultimate referent, as it is today in various contemporary expressions of atheism. But the arguments themselves presume a world of language that makes possible any contestations about God as such.¹⁶ We surrender ourselves to the a priori world of language in which we live and by which we come to self-consciousness and construct worlds of communication. The word “God” persists in the world of language because it points to the totality within which language emerges, the ontological ground without which there would be no words. And “for this very reason the word ‘God’ is not just any word, but is the word in which language, that is, the self-expression of the self-presence of the world and human existence together, grasps itself in its ground.”¹⁷

The implicit question Rahner raises, then, is how we are to understand the “loss of ‘God’” as a marker of the human condition, or as a historically conditioned moment that harbors still the possibility for the recovery of belief, perhaps in some new way. It might seem to some that what Rahner imagined as something of a thought experiment has indeed come to pass, and that we are now bereft of the word’s referent itself. I myself do not see us as so bereft; we may be moving there, so that one day, through a concrescence of losses, we will have arrived without knowing it. But, for now, there is still to be found an existential yearning for what is indicated by the absence of what has been forgotten. The transcendent aspirations of the human spirit have not been completely deadened; we are not yet merely clever animals, the ultimate outcome of Rahner’s scenario—or at least we hope not. We experience ourselves as beings who yearn, and in this yearning transcend ourselves, despite our doubts. Even those claims that there is ultimately nothing encompassing the cosmos, or sustaining it, or imbuing it—all these claims require some act of self-transcendence in order to establish such a position. Even the claims of the starkest atheism are the result of stepping outside oneself in order to make such a totalizing claim in the first place.

As noted earlier, some people would claim to have a faith in the sense of aspiring in transcendence toward what they cannot name. I do not have in mind here atheists; rather, people who were or are in some sense, implicitly or explicitly, religious, but for

14. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* 48 (translation modified for inclusive language).

15. *Ibid.* 49.

16. For the notion of a “world of language” see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989) esp. 438–46.

17. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* 50.

whom it has become difficult to believe in a *terminus ad quem* of their yearning. The *terminus ad quem* of faith has become increasingly elusive for such people, to the point that it has become difficult, if not impossible, to name precisely and in an intellectually convincing way where their faith is directed.¹⁸ Why is this the case? The word “God” has in fact received a referent, and that referent is often enough a god small enough to be grasped, manipulated, and eviscerated of mystery—a mere object. People living in such a religious universe have not, in Rahner’s sense, forgotten the word “God,” but because the referent of the word is often shrunken to an idol, the word cannot adequately express for these people the formal object of their faith, the mystery in which they live and move and have their being (see Acts 17:28). And so, there is a turn away from a confidence in doctrine about God (the *fides quae*) and toward a new apophaticism, a theological approach that stresses what we cannot say of God, an absence that can only be lived out in an aspiring faith, in believing as a kind of not-knowing or at times as a felt absence of God.¹⁹ There is, of course, a great tradition of apophatic theology in both East and West, but those foundational theologies did not dispense with the *fides quae*; they do, however, stress the limits of what can be said. The new apophaticism, by contrast, places the *fides quae* in brackets and, in some

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18. Some have become existential wanderers; for others, the planet itself, if not the cosmos, has become something of a substitute for what cannot be grasped, for what is endowed with its own mysterious depths. The lineage of this kind of thinking is very long, but has received its more recent articulations: Sally McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993); Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University, 2009); and a number of neo-Teilhardian scholars, notably Ilia Delio—see her *The Emergent Christ: Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011); *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution and the Power of Love* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013); and *From Teilhard to Omega: Cocreating an Unfinished Universe* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014). For more on Teilhard’s influence on contemporary thinking in this regard, see Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); and a masterful treatment by David Grumett, *Teilhard de Chardin: Theology, Humanity and Cosmos* (Dudley, MA: Peeters, November 2005).
19. See, e.g., the theological explorations in postdeconstructionist thinkers such as Jean-Luc Marion (notably *God without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991], and Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* [New York: Columbia University, 2010]). These two thinkers suspend a traditional metaphysics of being and draw on apophatic traditions in both theology and mysticism. The darkness of the felt absence of God, with roots going deep into the tradition and receiving classic expression in Dionysius the Areopagite, St. John of the Cross, and St. Theresa of Avila, is expressed by Blessed Teresa of Calcutta: “They say people in hell suffer eternal pain because of the loss of God—they would go through all that suffering if they had just a little hope of possessing God.—In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss—of God not wanting me—of God not being God—of God not really existing. . . . In my heart there is no faith . . . I don’t believe” (in *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*, ed. Brian Kolodiejchuk [New York: Doubleday, 2007] 192–93).

cases, effectively subverts it.²⁰ A mystagogic and missionary theology today would be able to embrace the apophatic dimension while holding the positive expressions of faith in a creative tension-in-unity.

Religion as Context for the Problem

Religion, understood here as organized religious institutions and formalized expressions of faith, has come under intense scrutiny in recent years. The “New Atheists” of the past decade—Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and others—are only the more obvious and influential voices. Apart from formal expressions of atheism, the alienation of intellectuals from religion and the general crisis over the very concept of the transcendent has also been widely noted.²¹ But how, if at all, is Christian faith related to this sense of the loss of God?

I would argue that the critique begun by Nietzsche comes full circle in contemporary discussions of Christianity and secularism, but also that the secular is embedded in the heart of Christian faith itself. Failure to keep this latter claim in mind can lead to a facile rejection of the world and to a merely exegetical theology. The problem of Christian faith itself as a stumbling block to faith in God was named by Nietzsche over 100 years ago: the Western world has suffered a loss of a sense of God, at least the God who had crowned society in earlier times, when Christendom was the order of the day. God has become for many people in contemporary culture literally incredible, not because of the transcendent nature of the divine, nor even because of the mythology that sometimes surrounds the divine mystery, but because God has been reduced to the ordinariness of a bourgeois object of comfort in the face of the scientific impossibility of demonstrating God’s existence. Nietzsche’s famous scene of the madman in the marketplace still has a ring of truth.²² This is not the manifesto of the village atheist; it is the jeremiad of a

20. This certainly seems to be the case of such thinkers as John Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, who are heavily influenced by their reading of Derrida, and both of whom are interested in limning a way of speaking of a “return” of religion and of god outside traditional metaphysics. See in particular the utterly fascinating and at times bewildering book by Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. Luca D’Isanto and David Webb (Stanford, CA: Stanford University 1999).

21. Louis Dupré observes, “In the present situation the very reality of the transcendent is at stake, more than its specific conceptualization. The very possibility of a relation to the transcendent in the modern world has come under fire” (“Spiritual Life in a Secular Age,” in *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998] 131–43, at 142). This is, of course, a frequent topic as well in the writings of Charles Taylor, briefly discussed below.

22. The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. “Whither is God?” he cried; “I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers . . . Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? . . . Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? . . . God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann [New York: Vintage,

prophet—an areligious cultural prophet: Whatever it was that once held Western culture together in a modern consensus, with a rational ordering from bottom to top and a strong sense of transcendent sanction—had disappeared because it was no longer required in a world become banal by bourgeois values. God, who had once stood at the pinnacle of this picture, was “murdered” by the autonomous bourgeois self, later to be understood by Freud as the human being pitted against the brute forces of nature and fate, where God has become the refuge from nature and from our darker natures. By the 19th century, the development of a capitalist economy, the replacement of medieval order by nation states, and the rise of a scientific worldview independent of a natural philosophy, much less a natural theology, had led to the forgetting of God and the intentional denial of God in atheistic humanism, for the God of bourgeois religion was no friend of this newly autonomous *homo*, and had in fact become the problem.²³ Buckley takes this argument one step further and holds that in the 19th century, God becomes the enemy of human nature, satanic in the sense of representing the antihuman:

What the dialectical movement of the nineteenth century had come to assert over the earlier theism was actually a Satanic understanding of God, the enemy of the human. God was understood—deconstructed, if you will—as Satan. Christianity was revealed as a destructively parasitic and decadent hostility to human life. To understand the passion, the urgency, even the hatred of the anti-theism that emerged from within that century, it is imperative to understand that—without ever naming it as such—atheistic humanism thought itself in a struggle to eliminate the satanic in human history, the alienation and destruction of the human.²⁴

And so, as Nietzsche had proclaimed with some cynicism the triumph of a bourgeois form of religion resulting in the death of God, God soon came to be seen as incredible—neither necessary *nor desired* for guaranteeing a rational understanding of the world or of the human being. The very notion of God was threatening to the human person, to human freedom and rationality. God had not only been loosed from the human grasp, but had also been denied—systematically “disappeared.” The events of the 20th century in Europe could be interpreted in light of this historical development, where, in effect, the word “God” had been erased, replaced with the idols of ideology. What remained was a subliminal emptiness, a trace of what had once been a presence.²⁵

1974] 181). Buckley insightfully exegetes this passage: “Two things were poignantly obvious to Nietzsche: that the incredibility of god within the bourgeois world constitutes his death, and that this was the elimination of a god radically unimportant to those who clustered there. The god who had disappeared from conviction was finally irrelevant” (*At the Origins of Modern Atheism* 28–30, at 30).

23. For an excellent summary of the progress of atheism in modernity, see James Turner, *Without God, without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1985).
24. Buckley, *Denying and Disclosing God* 98.
25. On the concept of the “trace,” see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Translator’s Preface” to Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1974) xiii–xx.

The larger framework of the problem I describe here can be understood if we look at two main cultural shifts in the West: (1) the development out of the Christian West of a secular society and its implications for believing, and (2) the gradual dissociation of faith from reason that resulted in a gulf between the claim of having faith and believing in God. I can treat these huge topics only briefly here. My purpose is to suggest that the relationship between the sacred and the secular is more complex than commonly imagined, and that understanding this creates an opening toward understanding believing as practice and toward engaging those who do not believe.

Charles Taylor has famously provoked some rethinking of the meaning of the secular and of secularity's impact on religious belief. He takes a new look at the standard "secularity thesis" that has been a staple of intellectual history of the West since the 17th century.

From the seventeenth century on, a new possibility gradually arose: a conception of social life in which the "secular" was all there was. Since "secular" originally referred to profane or ordinary time, in contradistinction to higher times, what was necessary was to come to understand profane time without any reference to higher times.²⁶

The secularity thesis sees the emergence of science in the 17th and 18th centuries in particular as not only an epistemic but also an ontological event. During these centuries the entire cultural, religious, and metaphysical framing of the real underwent a radical revision, so that belief in God eventually became an intellectual option.

How did this happen? The move toward the secular, Taylor argues, is partly owing to the loss of an "enchanted" world that once governed both daily human life and the faith that imbued it. By this he means a world that was once populated by spirits, both good and bad, and their attendant magic. This was the world of premodern times. But a process of disenchantment, certainly fueled in part by the rise of modern science and political changes from premodern social arrangements, to the rise of the modern state, brought about a view of the world that no longer depended on such an imaginative construct. Along with disenchantment, then, there arose a world in which it was no longer necessary to believe in the unseen (the *invisibilium*). God receded to the margins of reality and became first a force and then an idea. This was an epistemic shift, to be sure, but also one of moral and spiritual sensibility and significance. "The process of disenchantment, which involved a change in us, can be seen as the loss of a

Spivak writes, "Derrida's trace is the mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present, of the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience. For somewhat different yet similar contingencies, both Heidegger and Derrida teach us to use language in terms of a trace-structure, effacing it even as it presents its legibility" (xvii). Harkening back to Heidegger, what is true of language is also true of being, which assumes a trace structure, so that what is always already present is the absence of being. So, too, I would argue, with the being of God.

26. Charles Taylor, "Western Secularity," in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan Van Antwerpen (New York: Oxford, 2011) 31–53, at 32.

certain sensibility, which is really an impoverishment.”²⁷ And with the revolutions of the 18th century, Western modernity became “very inhospitable to the transcendent.”²⁸ Religious belief (and religious imagination) was thereby gradually relegated to the sphere of pious opinion. We were left with the sphere of immanence and an attendant loss of God.

Jürgen Habermas sees the nature of the secular differently, tracing it to the rupture in the relationship between faith and reason. In postmetaphysical scientism, the synthesis between faith and reason that had obtained in the premodern world, “the tradition extending from Augustine to Thomas fell apart.”²⁹ The result was a discarding of the former notion of sacred knowledge (the wisdom accrued from Scripture, tradition, theology, and philosophy) in favor of a revealed knowledge that did not rest on such a rational foundation. Religion entered the realm of the irrational, and the secular world assumed the mantle of reason. But now, he claims, things have changed: We are living in what he calls a “postsecular” era, one that coincides with the resurgence of religion, and not only in the West. This is a time of recalibration of the categories of sacred and secular and of how they relate to each other. While the secular stands on its own, and has certain rational epistemic requirements that the religious interlocutor must respect, the secularist must nonetheless acknowledge the bona fide contribution to overall knowledge and understanding of the human condition that religion can help offer. It makes a difference whether we speak with one another or merely about one another. If we want to avoid the latter, two presuppositions must be fulfilled: the religious side must accept the authority of “natural” reason as the fallible results of the institutionalized sciences and the basic principles of universalistic egalitarianism in law and morality. Conversely, secular reason may not set itself up as the judge concerning truths of faith, even though in the end it can accept as reasonable only what it can translate into its own, in principle universally accessible, discourses.³⁰ A secularist dismissal of

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27. Ibid. 39. For a theological rendering of disenchantment, but seen in a more positive light as one of the effects of Christian revelation, see Ghislain Lafont, *Imagining the Catholic Church: Structured Communion in the Spirit* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2000). In speaking of Christian antiquity, Lafont sees a “partial disenchantment” not only in religious matters but also in philosophy and politics. “‘Disenchantment’ to the extent that Christian revelation freed the reality of the divine and of the human and cosmic from the realm of fable and myth; ‘partial’ because the return to the real does not bring about the disappearance of transcendence, spirituality, and mystery but places them in a new light” (21). Below, see Talal Asad’s treatment of the secular, which locates its emergence in the Christian displacement of God from a sacred locus. One could go further and say that the incarnation opens up the possibility of a secular realm in its own right, one that is assumed by the Divine.
28. Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?,” in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University, 2011) 167–87, at 177.
29. Jürgen Habermas, “An Awareness of What Is Missing,” in *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Malden, MA: Polity, 2011) 15–23, at 16.
30. Ibid.

religion and its intellectual warrants cannot be sustained in the contemporary world situation. Conversely, a dismissal of secular modes of rational discourse and the dominion of the secular in everyday life cannot be dismissed by religion. The problem of believing is part of a broader epistemological shift that transcends the sacred–secular binary.

Moving beyond Habermas, Talal Asad deconstructs the categories of the sacred (or religious) and the secular altogether. His framing is neither epistemic nor ontological, but anthropological. The secular is a “concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life.”³¹ The secular is not a singular or stable notion: “The secular, I argue, is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it . . . nor a simple break from it.”³² Nor is the religious a fixed category. The history of the “sacred” and of the “secular” does not follow a grand narrative resulting in the inexorable triumph of the secular, where the secular serves as a “mask” for religion. In the West, at least, these two notions depend on each other, and each produces its own myths: the liberal secularist myth and the redemptive myth of Christianity. The myths themselves jostle with one another for primary space, with the “siting” of the Christian God in a “supernatural” world marking the opening for modernity. But for Asad, these myths are powerful in their own right in shaping worldviews.

The question of whether people did or did not *believe* in these ancient narratives . . . does not quite engage with the terrain that mythic discourse inhabited in this culture. For the sacred did not function as a single totalizing myth structure in premodern discourses. Instead there were disparate places, objects, and times, each with its qualities, and each requiring conduct and words appropriate to it.³³

If anything, the situation Asad describes is closer to our own situation than the version offered by the standard secularity thesis, and foreshadows a notion of believing understood as practices across a wide spectrum of expressions. It also creates space for engagement between believers and nonbelievers.

Still, there remains the fact of the gradual dissociation of faith from reason that would create a tension between faith and belief, a topic treated by Pope Benedict XVI in his controversial Regensburg Address of September 12, 2006, “Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections.”³⁴ The main point of this address was the “rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry.” What Benedict wished to convey is that there resides in revelation itself, indeed in the revelation of God to Moses as well as in the Christian revelation of God in Jesus Christ,

31. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2003) 25.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.* 30.

34. Available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html. For a helpful discussion of this speech, see Michael Reder and Josef Schmidt, “Habermas and Religion,” in *An Awareness of What Is Missing* 8–9; and Johnston, *Saving God* 70–76.

a role for *logos* (reason) at the heart the revelation. Contrary to those who would argue that the rationality of the story arrives subsequently to the revelation itself as part of a Hellenizing process, Benedict argues that *logos* is so inherently bound up with the divine revelation that to fail to act with reason (*logos*) is to act contrary to God's nature—a view congruent with natural law theory. The uncoupling of God and *logos* is not only a trait of certain strands of Islam, as the pope suggested (provoking some controversy), but also of those forms of religion starting with nominalism, realized in radical Protestantism, and arguably enshrined by Kant in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, as well as in major aberrations in the history of Christianity in the West where reason has given way to ideology or to irrationality and violence.³⁵ This process, which the pope saw as a result of the wedge driven between faith and reason, results in a religion of “feeling,” where faith and belief have become matters of opinion untethered from reason.

This is a compelling argument. But I would argue further that secularization of the sort the pope describes is possible only within a nominally Christian mind that has forgotten that the transcendent has entered into the natural world and established it as the place of divine revelation. There is a sense in which the *saeculum* is established so that this revelation can take place: the locus of revelation is in fact the *saeculum*. The Word (*Logos*) creates the conditions of its very possibility of appearance within the created order. When Christian faith forgets this, and separates itself in opposition to the very world that it otherwise hallows, it can degenerate into ideology. The secular world becomes the enemy, rather than the theater of lived religion that Christianity has otherwise hallowed. Believing becomes reduced to rational assent to culturally unintelligible propositions. The desired unity between *fides quae* and *fides qua* is lost in an attempt to reinvigorate the robust stature of the objective content of faith, standing over and against the prevailing winds of secular framings of reality. In theology, we can find this in various apologetic programs that reduce the task of theology to a circumscribed determination and interpretation of doctrine as proposed by the magisterium.³⁶ This is far from the goal of a mystagogic and missionary theology I seek here—one that would bring the *fides quae* and the *fides qua* together into a unified act of believing.

Toward a Recovery of the Original Unity

Any grappling with the contemporary tension between *fides quae* and *fides qua* needs to understand how faith can be expressed and form given to it, in what I am calling a mystagogy of believing. This mystagogy involves not only intellectual assent to truth but also the religious practice of living within the world according to the gospel,

35. For more insight into Josef Ratzinger's thinking on this topic, see Joseph Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas, *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, foreword by Florian Schuller, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2006).

36. See, e.g., Paul Griffiths's address to the Catholic Theological Society of America, “Theological Disagreement: What It Is and How to Do It” (June 6, 2014), *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 69 (2014) 23–36.

realizing faith within the realm of ethics. The missionary task for theology is to propose what this might mean in light of Christian faith and what form believing takes in Christian practice.

In ecclesial practices of the first century the *fides quae* and the *fides qua* were simultaneously expressed in the baptismal ritual, wherein an assent to faith was made with all one's being, including not only will but also intellect. This assent was given symbolic expression in the baptismal dialogue, the simple and scripturally based formulae of faith known as the *regulae fidei*, and in the early creeds that sprang from these formulae.³⁷ Assent to the beliefs of faith—a rational assent and not simply a matter of aspiration—was realized in an act of believing through participation in the liturgical mysteries, which was where faith received its mystagogical enactment, and through incorporation into the body of the church, where this faith was shared and enacted in communal forms.³⁸ In this liturgical enactment, the *fides quae* and the *fides qua* were seen to constitute a unity with only a formal distinction, because the act of faith is realized in the mystagogy of believing, symbolically realized by the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, which established and formed the Christian community as the living body of Christ in the world.

In something of an illustration of this principle, Michael McCarthy discusses what he calls “modalities of belief” in early Christian debates, focusing on Augustine's arguments with the Pelagians.³⁹ In the theoretical grounding of his essay, McCarthy joins historians and cultural anthropologists in questioning the notion of believing as limited to carefully circumscribed sets of doctrines with clear boundaries establishing insiders and outsiders, and argues instead for a notion of belief that is tied to communal practice and relationships.

Like their Greco-Roman counterparts Christians too manifest modalities of belief whose textures we rarely examine. Individuals and groups frequently inhabit a strange kind of space where they appear committed to the idea of a universal and coherent system of doctrines while resisting or even obfuscating its careful delineation. The anathemas of church councils imply that belief is a form of interior assent to some core doctrines that make up the universal “faith of the church,” but the actual relationship between an individual's act of will and the surrounding culture is exceedingly complex.⁴⁰

37. See Antonius Brekelmans, M.S.F., “Origin and Function of Creeds in the Early Church,” trans. Theo Westow, *Concilium* 51 (1970) 33–42, esp. 39–42. See also Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (New York: Seabury, 1979) 50–64.

38. In this regard, the work of Louis-Marie Chauvet is particularly apposite. Chauvet argues that it is not that individuals received faith and then banded together into the church, but rather that “the church is primary. The gospel is communitarian by its very nature” (*The Sacraments: The Word of God and the Mercy of the Body* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2001] 31–34, at 31).

39. Michael C. McCarthy, S.J., “Modalities of Belief in Ancient Christian Debate,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17 (2009) 605–34.

40. *Ibid.* 608.

This is territory that, McCarthy avers, has been little noticed, and it has indeed been a minority voice in theological treatments of doctrine and heresy, as it has been in patristic studies.⁴¹ But it has not been lost to those immersed in the study of liturgical history and theology, nor to those engaged in ritual theory. The late Catherine Bell, a scholar in the history of religions whom McCarthy cites, is a major case in point, and her work in ritual theory and its relation to practice established a wider framework for consideration of the relationship between belief and the practice of faith.⁴² In several unpublished works, Bell examined the meaning of belief in early Christianity as well as in other religious systems.⁴³ It is clear that for the early Christians, belief was a matter of choice, usually following conversion to Christian faith, which included its beliefs and rejection of alternative beliefs: “I believe in this, not that; I am a Christian, not a Roman, not a Jew, ideally, not a master nor slave, male nor female. Being Christian was meant as the all-encompassing signifier.”⁴⁴ It was this choice that led to a ritualized initiation into a community of like-minded persons and oral proclamation of a common faith in the form of the creeds.

Still, Bell questions the “choice and conversion of the individual” model on which this notion of belief rests. It leads to a Christian (and Western) particularism about what is meant by belief. Turning to Buddhism as a contrasting data field, Bell would take what she calls a “practice approach” to the matter, asking “about believing, not belief or beliefs; we would ask how believing is constructed, with what imagery that distinguishes it in Dogon or Buddhist culture from other forms of thinking, philosophizing, etc.”⁴⁵ This approach, she says, is more complicated than simply specifying particular beliefs (or doctrines), for it suggests a number of forms that believing might take, “a spectrum of distinguished forms and positions.”⁴⁶ It expands believing from the private realm of an assent of intellect and will to a focus on religious practice—“the implicit expectations, the assumptions at stake, the crown jewels in the pocket of a particular view of reality.” Practically, this would involve a methodology that would take into account the historical forms of religious commitment, including the texts, rituals, and ethical precepts that inform such a commitment. Theologically speaking, this would involve an examination of how faith is lived and what are its ethical implications. What this leads to, Bell says, is “that choice, commitment, rejection is not at

41. One major early exception is the work of Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), which situates the controversy within the patterns of popular religion and understandings of salvation.

42. See Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University, 1992).

43. These include “Belief: A Classificatory Lacuna and Disciplinary ‘Problem’”; “Belief, Beliefs, Believing: Declensions of ‘The Problem’”; and an untitled talk given at the Institute of Buddhist Studies, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, on October 5, 2006 (Buddhist Institute talk). These are all housed in the Catherine Bell Collection, Santa Clara University Library Archives.

44. Bell, Buddhist Institute talk 22.

45. *Ibid.* 27

46. *Ibid.*

all what Christian believing is about; that is what it wants one to think it is doing, not what it is really doing. Probably believing is more likely to be a way in which contradictions are maintained, not truths affirmed.”⁴⁷ The issue, then, is not which “beliefs” comport with faith and how, but how faith is realized in patterns of believing, understood in a richly textured sense that includes “truths” of faith handed down through tradition and teaching, but not exhausted by that category.⁴⁸ Here we find some congruence with the thinking of Asad, who sees the “religious” or “sacred” as a fluid and shifting category where the essence of religious commitment is not found in beliefs as such, but in the mythological worlds within which people live their lives, both religious and secular.

What I wish to suggest here is that a “mystagogy” of believing—believing that would give form and expression to faith—would be constituted by spiritual, doctrinal, and institutional practices, all of which together constitute a coherent religious world that would not reduce God to a manageable idol. But these also constitute an actual community that is, both on the level of individuals and, as a corporate body, receptive to the “gift” of faith, that is, to the cultivation of the theological virtue of faith. Faith in a Christian sense does not point to a vague or undifferentiated God, but rather to a God who has self-communicated as Spirit and in the flesh to human persons. This is a God who is therefore eminently personal, and who, in the form of a human being, embodies not only a message about God, but God’s very self to the human race. In this approach, Christians believe first not in doctrinal or even liturgical expressions of faith, much less in institutions that have arisen from the message of salvation. Rather, the entire human person, in communion with others in the church, gives an integral assent—of intellect, will, transcendent spirit, embodied being—to the Person who offers himself as “the way” to the mystery of God (see Jn 14:6). For Christian faith concerns not only “God” as in the ineffable term of our transcendence, but “God” as the eminently personal who is met in history, the one who, by virtue of being and existing, establishes the personal as the transcendent mystery of which we human beings are finite analogues. We believe in this God as a result of our experience of this God and living our lives in congruence with that experience. So there is a fundamental unity between what is believed (the *fides quae*) and the mode of believing, the (*fides qua*).

47. Ibid. 28–29.

48. The Catholic reader will wish to take note of the notion of the “hierarchy of truths” first enunciated by Vatican II in *Unitatis redintegratio* no. 11: “When comparing doctrines with one another, they [theologians] should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists a ‘hierarchy’ of truths, since they vary in their relation to the fundamental Christian faith,” http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html. This notion of the hierarchy of truths has been much discussed since the council closed. The fundamental idea, however, antedates the council, in the venerable and highly useful notion of “theological notes,” whereby various types of teaching can be distinguished in terms of their proximity to divine revelation. On this topic see Harold E. Ernst, “The Theological Notes and the Interpretation of Doctrine,” *Theological Studies* 63 (December 2002) 813–25.

Discipleship and the Missionary Task of Theology

This faith, the unified *fides quae* and *fides qua*, is what is realized in a variety of modes of believing. Here I will specify the mode commonly called “discipleship.”⁴⁹ From an ecclesial standpoint, one of the principal modes of believing, alongside liturgy, prayer, doctrine, and institutional practices, is the *praxis* of the message, that is, living the gospel message—embodying the message not only by saying it but also by doing it.⁵⁰ Here is where believing for the Christian begins intentionally: living the baptismal call in the world, deciding to believe through a living embodiment of faith. The whole of the Christian vocation to a faith that embodies justice derives from this foundation.

Gerhard Lohfink has carefully developed this idea of discipleship from his reading of New Testament texts. For purposes of this discussion I highlight two very important points he makes. The first is that “discipleship” never appears in the Gospels as a noun. “That is: There is no such thing in the gospels as abstract discipleship. It is not an idea or a purely inward disposition; it exists only as a concrete, visible, tangible event.”⁵¹ It is, then, an activity (literally, a “walking behind” the teacher), and in the case of following Jesus, learning how to enact the message, to live it. Believing in Jesus is not adhering to his doctrine *per se*, but entering into his world (the church), and participating in his mission, not simply alone, but with others. Second, this participation in Jesus’ mission takes many forms; there are many calls within the baptismal mission.

Every individual has her or his own history, with an individual ability or inability to see, an individual freedom or lack of freedom. This individual history corresponds to the calling of each person. Only those who see are called. And no one is called to something that is completely outside his or her sphere of possibilities. Not everyone can be called to everything, but the various callings can work together to form the whole of the people of God.⁵²

Some literally followed Jesus on the road, adopting radical poverty with him, while others followed him by welcoming other followers into their homes and maintaining their regular lives. The point is that believing in Jesus is realized by participation in his mission, practicing the way of Jesus. This would involve interpretation, both personal and communal, as the early church developed, and we can see the ensuing development

49. This is a necessarily delimited selection. In a broader discussion I would break out the possible forms of enactment of believing into the relations of love and the aesthetic. All three—discipleship (ethics), love, and beauty—find their finality in a Person who is the “truth” of God revealed: God for us. All modes of believing are ultimately an act of worship of this God.

50. See Deuteronomy 30:11–14, NAB: “For this command which I enjoin on you today is not too mysterious or remote for you. . . . No, it is something very near to you already in your mouths, and in your hearts; you have only to carry it out.”

51. Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2013) 73.

52. *Ibid.* 99.

of doctrine as a sign of that process. But underlying it is the mystagogy of believing that begins in the baptism of Christians, giving them the ability to “see” Jesus. Following this baptismal vocation is the primary mode of Christian believing in God.

Furthermore, discipleship—or participation in the mission of Jesus—involves an act of self-transcendence in giving oneself over to God by giving oneself over to the other and to the yearnings and unanswered questions raised by those who claim no faith, as well as by those who do. We see this in the Gospels themselves, as when Jesus meets the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1–42) who comes to see who Jesus is, even while remaining a Samaritan; or even inside Israel, as in his fraternal conversation with the inquisitive Nicodemus (Jn 3:1–21), where believing in the truth is said to coincide with living (doing deeds) in the light of God. These approaches to the nonbeliever or the seeker in the Gospels themselves model engagement with both nonbelievers and questioners in our own time, and model also the dynamism of believing understood as a mystagogy of practice.

The Emmaus narrative (Lk 24:13–35) illustrates such a spirit of engagement, where two disciples invite into their company a stranger who, they presume, does not know what has happened in Jerusalem. When their eyes are opened at the breaking of the bread, they change course and head back toward Jerusalem, on mission. Discipleship, then, can be understood as a mystagogy of believing that reaches beyond oneself toward strangers, draws them into dialogue, and moves along the road with them. But this mystagogy of believing is rooted in the community of the church that extends the mission of the gospel beyond the church. It is crucial to grasp that this mission to encounter the other is not to be read as an individualistic engagement, as if faith in Jesus implies a purely individualist response, a solo vocation to mission. The Emmaus story, like the story of the Good Samaritan and of Nicodemus, is intended for and presumes the experience of the church as a whole, which mediates God’s gracious self-communication to us. The *fides qua* of the church, and not only the content of the church’s faith, is what is at stake in these stories. As Louis-Marie Chauvet reminds us in his analysis of this passage, “You cannot arrive at the recognition of the risen Jesus unless you renounce seeking/touching/finding him by undeniable proofs. Faith begins precisely with such a *renunciation of the immediacy* of the see/know and with the assent to the mediation of the church.”⁵³ And so faith, as a mystagogy moving into mission, is an ecclesial reality. Yet more than discoursing about beliefs per se, or proselytizing, this mystagogy into mission is a moving along the road of life, breaking bread with the other and, as a church, transcending our limited selves, meeting the other where *cor ad cor loquitur*, “heart speaks to heart.” The encounter of the believer with the nonbeliever happens first in this most human of ways, which is the way of Jesus on the road.

Entering into this mystagogy of faith in mission occurs by dint of an act of ecclesial self-transcendence, by which the faithful move beyond the boundaries of religion

53. Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Sacraments: The Word and the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical: 2001) 25, emphasis original.

alone and into the wider space (the *saeculum*), which believers share with the rest of the world and in which the incarnation took place. It is by a similar act of self-transcendence that the unbelieving other encounters the believer—and encounters Christ—in that common wider space. The elusiveness of God to which I referred earlier is bridged in and through the human, as it was in Jesus himself. It is here, on this very human level—the level of the church disciple who is simply following the Lord—that the believer meets the unbeliever and speaks to her heart. For this is the way of the church in the world, and this way is the foundation for more programmatic enactments of believing in the transformative praxis of the gospel.

What forms might this mystagogy in mission take? In much of the thinking about interreligious dialogue today, theologians speak of the “dialogue of life” alongside the dialogues of doctrine and ethics.⁵⁴ If this is to be recommended for interreligious dialogue, then it might also be recommended for dialogue with nonbelievers. Such a dialogue of life can lead as well to dialogues about moral decision making, socio-economic and political ethics, and the more transcendent values encompassed by the ideals of beauty. This dialogue, in turn, will give to the Christian participant a keener sensibility of the *humanum* that the Son assumed and thus further deepen and open up the genius of Christian faith, so that the church can proclaim a gospel of joy and hope to all persons. But because the problem of nonbelief is not just a problem of the world “out there” but also exists within the precincts of the church itself, such habits of dialogue, which require great intellectual honesty and moral courage, must begin within the church itself.

Conclusion

So I return to the question with which I began: What kind of theology can resolve the tension of faith between what we claim (*fides quae*) and how we experience God (*fides qua*) so that we can meet an unbelieving world—the world in which we live and of which we are a part? I looked to Rahner for some key indicators, in particular his call for a theology at once both mystagogic and missionary, where believing draws together the content of faith and the living of it in an integral act. For Christian faith is a human response to a personal self gift, one that calls us to modes of believing that include, but are not exhausted by, beliefs; rather, beliefs begin and are rooted in a living and intentional discipleship, participation in the mission of Jesus. When understood in this way, believing constitutes a way of understanding God, the revelation in Jesus Christ, the life of the church and the human limitations of its teaching, and the One in whom Christians ultimately hope. Words, doctrines, beliefs as such—and the world of interpretation that surrounds them—follow in the wake of such faith, where believing itself is a lived mystagogy of faith in mission. Finally, a unity between what is believed in faith (all that God has disclosed, the *fides quae*) and the way of entering into the mystery of what has been given (the *fides qua*) will have been more closely approximated

54. See General Congregation 34, Decree 5, “Our Mission and Interreligious Dialogue,” in *Jesuit Life and Mission Today* 547–56, at 548.

in this mission to the world of nonbelievers—a world shared by believers themselves. A theology that engenders this unity is what we need to develop today, not only on the level of systematics, but also for practical theology and the development of strategies for ecclesial engagement with a largely nonbelieving world.

Author biography

Paul Crowley, S.J., received his PhD from the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA, and is now professor in the Religious Studies Department at Santa Clara University. Specializing in fundamental and systematic theology and philosophical hermeneutics, he has recently published “Encountering the Religious Other: Challenges to Rahner’s Transcendental Project,” *Theological Studies* (2010); “The Rediscovery of God and the Recovery of Systematic Theology: Questions for East Asian Contexts,” *LANDAS* (Spring 2013); and *Robert McAfee Brown: Spiritual and Prophetic Writings* (2013). He also edited *From Vatican II to Pope Francis: Charting a Catholic Future* (2014). In preparation is a monograph entitled *Divine Dislocation: On Believing in an Unmoored God*.