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Postscript on Credibility

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Abstract

The article considers some of the factors relevant to the question of the credibility of Christian faith. It argues that atheism is a product of a certain kind of Western Christianity: when you exceed the boundaries of what can be said about God and create "religion", at the same time you create the conditions for disbelief in that religion. Nietzsche is a point of reference for various aspects of the question which centres on the status of "God" in relation to religious narratives that have lost power. How might Christians conduct themselves in the "Courtyard of the Gentiles" that Pope Benedict proposes?

Keywords

Unbelief, atheism, Nietzsche, "death of God", fictive religion

When Gershom Scholem, the great Jewish writer on mystical Kabbalah was introduced to the audience in the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York in 1973, his host said of him, "Nonsense is nonsense, but the history of nonsense is scholarship and Professor Scholem is the greatest scholar of nonsense." I begin with this story to make the point that as far as most of our contemporaries are concerned, what religious people have to say to them is nonsense and we theologians are the scholars of nonsense. We are in a pastoral context in which religious motivation and belief is now incomprehensible to large sections of the population.

Much moral and intellectual decontamination of Western Christianity and a high degree of de-familiarization will be needed before ears are again opened to us, and we should not expect this to happen soon. It would be too easy to say that we are not fit for this *missio ad gentes*, because the Church never has been up to its task. Yet I think it is true that we haven't thought enough and we haven't listened enough to know the way forward at this stage in the apostolate. Which is strange: back in the nineteen-thirties, Henri de Lubac told French Christians that the Church was not connecting with the deep desires of the human heart. With what consequence? By removing

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the sacred from the impulses at the heart of modernity, it was we (not atheists) who created the secular as a God-free zone. As de Lubac saw it:

> Men, taking us at our word . . . relegated this supernatural to some distant corner where it could only remain sterile. They exiled it to a separate province, which they willingly abandoned to us, leaving it to die little by little under our care.[1]

The poignancy of that phrase "little by little under our care" should frighten us, as should the prospect of there being no fruit for God because the supernatural becomes "sterile". We do know that traditional European Catholic cultures, in which the Church is a powerful voice both inside the psyche and in the public forum, have collapsed within one generation and where faith seemed to be a mile wide, it has been shown to be only an inch thick. And we should have more than a sneaking suspicion that the Church itself may have been partly responsible for this.

If it is true that, like babushka dolls, inside every Russian President is another Russian President, it may also be the case that inside every Christian culture is a secularism spawned by Christianity itself. Western Christianity carries its nemesis within itself and now may be the time, as Nietzsche thought, when the "will to truth" that Christianity unleashed is now coming back to bite us.[2] He thought that the Christian religion will be found deficient in the name of the truth that Christian teaching prioritises and describes the shift in ancient Greece from "tragic myth" to "scientific Socratism" (rational inquiry) in the light of the collapse of nineteenth-century German Christianity, from religious myth that dominated the imagination into a set of historical affirmations that dried up faith:

> For it is the fate of every myth to creep by degrees into the narrow limits of alleged historical reality, and to be treated by some later generation as a unique fact with historical claims . . . For this is the way in which religions are wont to die out: under the stern, intelligent eyes of an orthodox dogmatism, the mythical premises of a religion are systematized as a sum total of historical events; one begins apprehensively to defend the credibility of the myths, while at the same time one opposes any continuation of their natural vitality and growth;

[1] H. De Lubac, *Theology in History* (Ignatius Press, 1996), p. 232. Discussed in J. McDade, "Epilogue: *Ressourcement* in Retrospect" in *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology*, ed. by G. Flynn & P. D. Murray (OUP, 2012), pp. 508–22.

[2] "All great things bring about their own destruction through an act of self-overcoming (*Selbstaufhebung*) . . . After Christian truthfulness has drawn one inference after another, it must end by drawing *its most striking inference*, its inference *against* itself . . . ", F. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* III, 27 in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. & ed. by W. Kaufmann (Modern Library, 1968), p. 597.

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> the feeling for myth perishes, and its place is taken by the claim of religion to historical foundations.[3]

Christian truth is expressed in various ways: philosophically, mythically, imaginatively, ritually, morally. I suggest that it is the collective failure of all of these dimensions that is responsible for the growing incredulity of our contemporaries. Nietzsche, however, may be right in thinking that when religion slides into an obsession with historicity, it is in its death throes.[4] If his diagnosis is right, we will be undermined by what we have fostered because modern atheism is what Western Christian theism carries in its womb. Will we be destroyed by what we have unleashed in Europe? Have we brought about the conditions of our own demise, as surely as pain and shame may be erasing Catholicism from the Irish psyche? When you create and run a theocracy, a bold venture like "Christendom" or "Catholic Ireland", do you at the same time create the conditions for the aggressive secularism that it will spawn? Ethna Regan's fine paper made me wonder if Archbishop John Charles McQuaid of Dublin should now be seen as the progenitor both of "Hiberno-Christendom" and of the incipient secularism of post-Catholic Ireland.

In these North Atlantic Isles, we seem to be comprehensible to others only when we stop speaking religiously and adopt the *lingua franca* of tolerance, equality and diversity. And the root of it all is the widespread internalisation of the message that religion is "intolerant" and "creates conflict" – a view held by two-thirds of the European population according to a recent survey. European social cohesion is to be purchased by either the marginalisation of religious belief or its elimination.[5] This judgement about the "intolerance" inherent in religion, José Casanova thinks, is a

> secular construct that has the function of positively differentiating modern secular Europeans from "the religious other," either from premodern religious Europeans or from contemporary non-European religious people, particularly from Muslims . . . Insofar as they identify religion with intolerance, they seem to imply that they have happily left their own intolerance behind by getting rid of religion.[6]

[3] F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 10 in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. & ed. by W. Kaufmann (Modern Library, 1968), p. 75.

[4] The letters between Karl Barth and Adolf von Harnack on historical inquiry and theological truth is a classic point of reference: M. Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology : an Analysis of the Barth-Harnack Correspondence of 1923* (CUP, 1972).

[5] It is interesting that this is a view primarily of "religion", characterised in the most general terms as though there is one single *genus*, religion, within which there are various instances; it is not actually a rejection of God and Jesus Christ in reflective terms.

[6] J. Casanova,"The Secular and Secularisms", *Social Research* 76 (2009), pp. 1049–66, quoting the 1998 International Social Survey.

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But, of course, they haven't; they simply retain the same intolerant instincts and redirect them towards religion itself. The prejudices contained in this "secular construct" make it difficult for a religious community to argue strongly for the wider *social* value of its religious life, that a strong Christian presence might actually be how "the social good" is promoted. An uncritical acceptance of this secularist thesis ("religion causes social division") is probably more responsible for "unchurching" than are the quasi-scientific arguments against God offered by the "new atheism". As always, unexamined prejudices (we know a lot about them within Christianity, don't we?) and *idées reçues* govern most of the judgements that humans make.

But we are not alone: across the goldfish pond, the American media have suddenly discovered that one in five Americans is "religiously unaffiliated"; they call them the "Nones", the fastest growing sector of society in the supposedly deeply religious United States. America may soon be filled with Nones, non-participants in religion, not necessarily atheist but veil-less of course, simply people who do not seem to require a formal religious identity to find life meaningful. This may be news over there (surely not?) but it is a familiar pattern here in old Europe. But although we have been breeding Nones for some time, we are uncertain about how to address them theologically so we have no advice to give our American Christian cousins.

The American Nones and modern Europeans seem little different from Nietzsche's description of the two kinds of people he saw in nineteenth-century Germany: the *majority* who "no longer know what religions are good for and merely register their presence in the world with a kind of dumb amazement"; not enemies of religious custom, they "simply live too much apart and outside to feel any need for any pro and con in such matters". And, whispering in their ears, the *scholars* raised in "practical indifference toward religious matters", who are "inclined toward a superior, almost good-natured amusement in the face of religion, occasionally mixed with a dash of disdain for the 'uncleanliness' of the spirit which they assume whenever a church is still acknowledged".[7] The world is becoming like Nietzsche's Germany or Paul's Athens or Lash's Cambridge, or perhaps the world has always been like Nietzsche's Germany or Lash's Cambridge, in a steady state in which the "people of the land" (Hebrew: *am ha'aretz*) always keep their distance from what religious elites want them to do. Sometimes they are sensible in so doing: religion has its fair proportion of chumps.

[7] F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 58 in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. & ed. by W. Kaufmann (Modern Library, 1968), pp. 259–60.

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Speak if you will about "believing without belonging", the favourite sociological category at the moment that always lifts the drooping pastoral spirit, whereby there is a residual and privatised belief but no formal practice of Christianity, but it may be more truthful to face up to the fact that most people neither believe nor belong. In Nietzsche's words, "they simply live too much apart and outside" any formal religious context, and it has been going on, or *not* going on, for a long time.[8] But there is an acute question about whether in our present ecclesial condition we have anything to say that would be *original* to us, i.e., not already known by our contemporaries from other sources, intellectually *intelligible* to them and actually *helpful* as a way of resolving the human and cultural issues we face. We presume that we can provide these things; I come to doubt that we can and I am not sure if I am making a correct, or a psychologically impaired, judgement. But give me the benefit of the doubt.

In the opinion of a great modern theologian, when faced with "mass atheism" Christian theology has been stripped of its power to speak at all and the culture has lost the presuppositions which make faith possible.[9] So without the words, and without the pre-rational conditions that might direct a person towards religious belief, where do you start?[10] I think we do not know, and I would be very surprised if the Synod of Bishops this year addressing the question of the 'new evangelisation' came up with anything original or actually helpful. To their great credit, the English bishops, faced with responding to the preparatory documents of the 2012 Synod on the "new evangelisation", invited some non-believers to comment on the document and

[8] G. Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Blackwell, 1994); D. Voas & A. Crockett, "Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging", *Sociology* 39 (2005), pp. 11–28. On the Scandinavian model of "belonging without believing", see. G. Davie, "From Obligation to Consumption" *Political Theology* 6 (2005), pp. 281–301. But things are moving fast: H-G. Zieberth & U Riegel, "Europe: A Post-secular Society?", *International Journal of Practical Theology* 13 (2009), pp. 293–308; G Bosetti & K.Eder, "Post-secularism: A Return to the Public Sphere", www.eurozine.com

[9] "Modern atheism has put theology in a difficult position. Of particular importance here is mass atheism, a phenomenon unparalleled in past history; it regards the practical, if not theoretical denial of God or at least indifference to belief in God as being by far the most plausible attitude to take. As a result, theology has been stripped of its power to speak to people and communicate with them. There are now no generally accepted images, symbols, concepts and categories with which it can make itself understood. This crisis arises from the loss of the presuppositions which faith needs if it is to be possible as faith." (W. Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, (Crossroad, 1984), p. 41.

[10] In many ways, a fusion of Platonism and Stoicism provided the assumptions of European life until fairly recently, forming a pre-evangelisation consonant with what the gospel offered. We no longer have such a portal. Attempts to suggest that postmodernism offers a similar preparatory *mise-en scène* are unconvincing.

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help the Bishops' Working Party compose a response for the Rome Synod. I doubt if the Rome Synod had the pastoral and intellectual imagination of the English Bishops and invited atheists to address it on their view of Christianity. But until we start doing this kind of thing, we will get nowhere.[11]

It is a poor theologian who does not recognise unbelief as part of his or her own spiritual reality. Thérèse of Lisieux shows us that a holy mind can also be empathetic towards those who, in the name of truth, cannot affirm God. Without this experiential probing of the self, without the sense of being pressed internally by unbelief, without taking seriously that God is not an object of knowledge and intellectual mastery but an ever-receding horizon of meaning, I doubt that our theological reflection on this matter will be much good. How do we negotiate these intellectual and spiritual boundaries? Passports are no good: there is no Checkpoint Charlie by which we make the transition from one regime to the other because in a reflective believer Modern Sense and Christian Sensibility commingle, without ever fusing. We dip in and out of sub-cultures without sinking the roots of the self in any one of them.

My fear is that Christian faith will no longer act as the deep grammar of personal identity, even for Christians, in the way it has in the past. I point to only one factor among the many that could be adduced: Christianity is already mutating and dissipating (not disappearing) in post-industrial capitalism. We might imagine that we are having, in some measure, an effect on the culture; what is really going on is that the culture is changing us. Already, religious authority has a diminished power over believers and the prescriptions of religious practice have only a weakened hold over individual and social identity. This will not change. The shift towards privatised religion in the West means that our sense of the transcendent God, standing over against us and requiring obedience and a way of life, becomes weakened. (Islam does it all much better because it has not yet been deconstructed, but it will come to feel the pressure too.) If we present a God whose main role is "to meet my needs", then it is hardly surprising that often Christian faith becomes a distant memory, like New Testament Greek after a theology degree. God is "thought" in relation to selfhood not revelation (hence the popularity of "spirituality"), and a relationship with God becomes just one feature among many within the self. (Most people text more than they pray and do so with great enthusiasm and religiously.) Nietzsche's rejection of God is, partly, that such a God is not worth

[11] Carlo Martini's dialogue with Umberto Eco on the topic of "hope" is a model of modern engagement with non-believers: C. Martini & U. Eco, *Belief or NonBelief?: A Confrontation* (Continuum, 2000).

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believing in, in the first place, and therefore does not really merit formal denial:

> What isolates *us* [atheists] is not that we don't *find* any God, either in history, or in nature, or behind nature – but that we feel what was revered as God to be not 'divine' but a hideous holy grimace, a sheep-like, absurd and pitiful inanity, a principle of slander against man and the world.[12]

Who gave him such a God? And might he be right to decline it? An interesting thought experiment to pursue, I think. Like Nietzsche and Matthew Arnold, we may be "wandering between two worlds, one dead,/The other powerless to be born".[13] I doubt that any of us has met a completely modern person who embodies the Enlightenment ideal of the self-empowerment of an entirely rational individual. But neither do we know anyone, no matter how unlettered, untouched by the currents that have been swirling round us for the past four centuries, if not longer. We all have the souls of peasants: Tolstoy was right about this, as Levin comes to know at the end of *Anna Karenina* when he realises that his problem is not that he had been living badly but that he had been *thinking* badly. The life-giving messages he had internalised from simple believers had been cast aside in a reckless drive for fashionable European scepticism. Levin's "heid", as they say in Glasgow, was "full of beilt sna" ('boiled snow'), but if the "heid" was useless, his observance of the virtues was still strong and he returns later in life to their radiance. At the same time as we have peasant souls, we all have restlessly uncertain minds like Hume's – David rather than Basil – and we all have to make an *itinerarium mentis ad Deum* that can only happen by actually knowing less and less – a difficult purification for most of us. Whoever regards the Christian religion as a consolation hasn't even got to the starting line of this *ascesis*.

Surely these points offer a starting point for conversations in the "Courtyard of the Gentiles" that Pope Benedict proposes that we build, a space for dialogue "with those to whom religion is something foreign, to whom God is unknown and who nevertheless do not want to be left merely Godless, but rather to draw near to him, albeit as the Unknown".[14] If there is an intellectual point of contact between the believer and the unbeliever it may lie in a shared silence about God and a rigorous apophaticism in the face of *esse*. We really don't take seriously the ineffability of God and such is our taste for the "history of nonsense" and mythological thinking about the divinity that we

[12] F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks* (CUP, 2003), p. 224.
[13] Matthew Arnold, "Stanzas from La Grande Chartreuse".
[14] Pope Benedict XVI (21 December, 2009).

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still produce swathes of Trinitarian theology charting the relations of divine hypostases about which/whom we know absolutely nothing.

Have we forgotten that the truth of God cannot be thought but can only be lived, and the Word that comes to us from God is not verbal or conceptual in character but is the lived reality of Jesus Christ, the servant of the circumcision who is the primary witness to the "truth of God" (Rom 15.8)? Too often, Catholics treat God as though God were an unadorned Baroque church awaiting the attention of painters skilled in *trompe l'oeil* and tourist guides (theologians) who can provide endless chatter to the interested visitor. In this ministry of creating a Courtyard of the Gentiles, less is more, and the more we say, the more we get God wrong and mislead others; Newman's "principle of reserve" has much to commend it in the dialogue with unbelief.[15] The crispness of Simone Weil's enigmatic comment is a challenge to the theological excess that I think has come back to bite us because we have claimed to know too much and this is not to be trusted:

> Of two men who have no experience of God, he who denies him is perhaps nearer to him than the other.
> The false God who is like the true one in everything, except that we do not touch him, prevents us from ever coming to the true one . . .
> We have to believe in a God who is like the true God in everything, except that he does not exist, since we have not reached the point where God exists.[16]

I interpret: a denial of God might be a more truth-bearing approach than the kind of confident affirmations we favour; the false God, who never touches us spiritually but exists only in the categories of our mind, prevents us from attending to the true God who cannot be an object in the mind because he is simple. And then the crunch: all this is true because there is something wrong with us and we are not yet at the point of spiritual maturity where God can be more than an object of thought. She says this because if we do not know how to attend consistently to what is real, to what is the case, to what is true, how can we be in a position to attend to the *esse* that God is? (Heaven, of course, will be when God *will* exist for us.) Weil is pointing the way to a difficult and demanding theism far closer to what may be needed for a serious engagement with God than what is found in most of our spiritual gushings.

[15] R. C. Selby, *The Principle of Reserve in the Writings of John Henry Newman* (OUP, 1975).

[16] Simone Weil, discussed superbly by R. Williams, "Simone Weil and the Necessary Non-existence of God" in *Wrestling with Angels* (Eerdmans, 2007), 203ff.

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The guiding question for believers like us is *whether* religious beliefs are true, *which* beliefs are true and *how* they are handled. But these are not the questions for many of our contemporaries who simply assume that "truth" is not to be found in religious statements at all. Consequently, it is very difficult for our question to displace the assumption that they have internalised. How, and from what sources, this internalisation happens is something I think none of us grasps; shifts in the atmosphere of the self are unpredictable and rapid these days, and an appeal to the *Zeitgeist* is not an explanation but a symptom of confusion. Instead of attempting to refute or "out-narrate" the new atheists on the block, it might be more helpful to explore the sense of self that is coming to pervade the many sub-cultures of European life and to begin to work out how to connect to these intuitions.

If people identify themselves as "religious", this can be publicly justified only as a matter of individual temperament or preference; as Elder puts it, "if religious beliefs are groundless, if they cannot be justified by appeals either to reason or to evidence, then the explanation for *why* people hold them can only be found in the subjective constitution of the believer."[17] I suspect this is true, but are we really sure we know what being "religious" is? Who determines the meaning of this word? I suspect that control of it has passed out of our hands, into the hands of others often with little sense of what religious living is. (It is helpful to let Terry Eagleton off the leash every few months or so to put the frighteners on infallible atheists.) If they articulate it at all, our contemporaries treat religion as a deceptive ploy, a noble lie, a consoling delusion, a projection of human neurosis. Daniel Dennett, for example, is not alone in viewing religion as a servile concern to gain the approval of a superhuman agency.[18] In its tame form, religion is generally treated as the private mythology that consoles the lonely psyche; in more strict forms, as the focus for neurosis and self-division; in its extreme form, it is close to the irrational, the paranormal and the psychologically unstable. (When taught in RE classes even in Catholic schools, "religious experience" is often identified with hearing voices and having visions rather than a consoling and joyful sense of being known and loved by God.).

We are constantly being "read" and interpreted by others, and a considerable misprision is under way that does us and them no good at all. The "history of nonsense" now includes non-religious accounts

[17] C. R. Elder, "The Freudian Critique of Religion: Remarks on Its Meaning and Conditions", *Journal of Religion* 75 (1995), pp. 347–370; 360.

[18] D. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (Penguin, 2006), p. 9.

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that out-narrate the self-understanding of any religious tradition. Indeed they predominate as the legacy of Freud, Nietzsche and Jung (a Gnostic deceiver popular in retreat houses) filters through the culture. Time to turn back to the early part of the twentieth-century: then, Karl Barth was very strong in his assertion that Christianity was *not* a religion; if it were, then it would be no more than a product of self-alienation, and could not pass through the "stream of fire" (*Feuerbach*) of atheist critique. Some teasing out of Christian distinctiveness is surely in order, and some reclamation of the way we interpret ourselves is needed too.

Yet even if we present ourselves better to others, things can still go wrong. In an afterword to his translation of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, the Scottish poet Don Paterson as a newly minted atheist presents a beautiful and intelligent case against theism that ought to be on the agenda of every theological curriculum. But what kind of nonsense from us, I wonder, has fed into his assertion that "only belief and religion have certainties" that betray "wondering enquiry as *the* central sane human activity"?[19] The only certainty I would claim to have is that *hope*-filled *love* is the only way in which *faith* has substance. The interaction of the virtues, not the dynamic of the mind, is the royal road to the divine. In similar vein, I would suggest that the "portals" of hope and love might open up more fruitful fields of dialogue in the Courtyard of the Gentiles than questions of explicit faith. Why should we prioritise the issue of explicit faith? James, the brother of the Lord, knew that it was full of holes:

> Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder!' (James 2.18–9)

That we are led to give priority to ideas in this religious complex is a legacy of an Enlightenment approach to religion, which, in encyclopaedic mode, sets out to compare religions through a taxonomy of the different ideas they use.[20] Ideas matter, of course, as a way of thinking through what might be implied in "the Way" (Acts 9.1; 19.23), but they are not the generative core of Christian identity, although intellectuals like to sharpen their swords on this particular stone. The instinct of faith is surely closer to that of trust than to the

[19] Don Paterson, *Orpheus: A Version of Rilke's Die Sonette an Orpheus* (Faber & Faber, 2006), p. 67.

[20] The second mistake is to treat "religion" as a univocal rather than an analogous term and to treat religions as individual examples of the genus "religion", as though religion were one thing. 'The word [religion] takes its modern meaning at the intersection of the encounter between Christianity and what came to be called "other religions," and between Christianity and the antitraditional and naturalistic impulses of modernity.' (T.T. Roberts, *Contesting Spirit: Nietzsche, Affirmation, Religion* (Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 6.

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capacity to handle ideas, as any child of a believing mother knows. Jonathan Swift is said to have remarked, "You do not reason a man out of something he was not reasoned into". Nor do you reason someone *into* Christianity, and it may well be a mistake to engage unbelievers on those terms. The lack of credibility of Christian faith today is not at the intellectual level but at what Pascal refers to as the "heart", the default settings underlying our thinking and feeling, whose veins spread through the whole conscious body. In Nietzsche's words, "What decides against Christianity now is our taste, not our reasons."[21]

It is not simply that the idea of God has gone from our cultural landscape. What matters more is the loss of a form of life of which that idea and its religious consequences was the guarantee, the disappearance of the inherited, pre-reflective forms of agreement centred on God about how we are to live. A basic mode of orientation at the pre-reflective, almost instinctual level, has been taken from us – we all have the soul of peasants, after all – and the problem modern Europe faces is *what makes possible "leading a life*" in the absence of God. I think this is the case, but, to my frustration, I do not detect widespread anguish over the question. "One of the chief characteristics of the nihilism crisis is that very few people experience the modern situation as any sort of crisis."[22]

In the classic text that announces our present condition – Nietzsche's parable of the "madman" who announces that "God is dead and we have killed him" – it is precisely the "atheists in the market place" who sneer at the news, although he is telling them what, in their way of life, they already affirm and know.[23] Like the black sheep of the Rahner family, Nietzsche was alert to lived but unacknowledged unbelief: the atheists in the market place are the "anonymous atheists" who cannot understand the explicit truth about their transcendental condition. That God is dead is implicitly affirmed in their way of life, but the mind, rarely a locus of truthful self-knowledge, is unwilling to catch up. Nietzsche compares this event to the wiping away of the horizon, the unchaining of the earth from the sun, a brutal assault on the order of the cosmos, like a new Fall that afflicts all of us, the cause of piercing remorse: "How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers! . . . Who will wipe this blood from us? With what water could we cleanse ourselves?"[24] But where does this self-condemning voice come from?

[21] F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 132, ed. B. Williams (CUP, 2001), p. 123.

[22] R. B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* (Blackwell, 1991), p. 90.

[23] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, pp. 125, 119–20. That they do not recognise what they have done is an ironic echo of Peter's words to the Jews of Jerusalem, "You killed the author of life . . . but you acted in ignorance" (Acts 3. 15–7).

[24] S. Mulhall, *Philosophical Myths of the Fall* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

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Where inside us? How could we be responsible for the death of God? In Robert Pippin's interpretation, this murder is

> a great shock, a trauma, a collective and very sudden, unprepared for realisation that a very great deal of the accounts provided by the "ancient parents" with their God, their natural hierarchy, their metaphysics, their after-life, their story of cosmic justice and so on, were fairy tales, delusions, fantasies. All this then prompted a new drama, now of Oedipal proportions, requiring some new relation to such ancestors, even with such rejection.[25]

It is "Oedipal" in the sense that by moving away from belief in God we set ourselves in conflict with our ancestors whose religious voices we have internalised since birth. Freud (a great myth-maker behind his posture of "scientist") suggested that humans carry the repressed memory of the trauma at the beginning of human history when the primal father is killed by his sons. Our killing of God evokes the killing of the archetypal father whom we revere, whom we fear and in whose presence we are always guilty. Now if we are no longer who our "ancient parents" told us we were – remember Adam Philips's words, "If there is no God, who can now tell us who we are?" – then something bleak is sweeping through human identity. A cord is cut and we now read the past without trust, as the narratives of our ancient parents are revealed to be delusory accounts from which nothing can be drawn because what it tells us about ourselves can no longer be credited by us.[26] We place ourselves differently in relation to time and history as we do in relation to space and location because the physical world can also become Godless. Seamus Heaney has seen this radical change take place in Ireland during his lifetime, in unexpected ways as houses themselves evolve:

> . . . [it was] the transition from a condition where your space, the space of the world, had a determined meaning and a sacred possibility, to a condition where space was a neuter [sic] geometrical disposition without any emotional or inherited meaning. I watched it happen in Irish homes when I first saw a house built where there was no chimney, and then you'd go into rooms without a grate – so no hearth, which in Latin means no *focus*. So the hearth going away means the house is unfocused . . . the unfocussing of space and desacralizing of it.[27]

[25] R. Pippin, "Nietzsche and the Melancholy of Modernity, *Social Research* 66 (1999), pp. 495–520, 499.

[26] But see the dignified narrative of "lithogenesis" that Hugh MacDiarmid presents in "On a Raised Beach" with its parodic inversion of "moving the stone" in atheistically accepting death, in *Selected Poems* (Penguin, 1974), p. 178ff.

[27] Quoted in D. Tobin, *Passage to the Center: Imagination and the Sacred in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (University Press of Kentucky, 1999), p. 5.

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His imagination sees the hearth as the sacrament of the divine presence and the removal of grates from Irish houses signals the elimination of the sacred from Catholic Ireland.[28] The desacralized home without a hearth is an instance within a cosmos without God, and you have an echo of Pascal's account of "the silence of infinite space", the now terrifyingly empty heavens that no longer proclaim God (Ps 19). God has gone from Catholic Ireland where the space of the house is no longer charged with sacred meaning. God's disappearance from the cultural horizon is more of a change in aesthetic imagination than of rational argument. This may be always so because God is always more than an object of thought. Of course, the obverse of this view is that God's original presence in Irish life was also an aesthetic perception, a "seeing" of the world suffused with divine love. Was it ever more than an aesthetic trope? Of course it was: as Christians, we will say that the actuality of God became there, as elsewhere in Europe, a "felt presence" in the lives of countless men and women. But would Heaney, in many ways a still deeply Christian post-Christian writer, be able to acknowledge a divine actuality behind the aesthetic perception? Not if we are to trust the despondency of his poems "In Illo Tempore" and "The Disappearing Island" ("All I believe that happened there was vision"). Heaney, like Larkin, hates the chill wind of atheism but can do nothing about it.[29]

Every road-sweeper surfing the *Zeitgeist* now exercises a hermeneutic of suspicion about religious narratives that "enable us to act in the world as if we were in touch with a benevolent reality, as it we were capable of comprehending its cosmic purpose, as if there were a divinity whose decrees we fulfil and who gives meaning to our individual lives – as if God were alive".[30] The key phrase in this sentence, of course, is the repeated "as if" that points to the fictive quality of what is presented as truthful. For many non-believers, this phrase is nearly always just below the surface of their response, inhibiting the assent that they could give to Christian claims. We believers are just beginning to get the point, and when we do, do we not suspect

[28] Others too present a memory of what God once was to us. Two quotations to ponder: the first is from Julian Barnes: "I don't believe in God, but I miss him". The second is Beckett's, "He doesn't exist, the bastard!" The traces of the divine are glimpsed by Barnes elegiacally, by Beckett angrily and aggressively: two sides of the unbelieving coin bearing the imprint of loss and pain.

[29] S. Heaney, *New Selected Poems* 1966–1987 (Faber and Faber, 1990), pp. 206 & 240. Philip Larkin's "Church Going" is strangely more positive about the continuity of religious feeling across the generations than Heaney who draws a fixed line between the two ages he straddles. Heaney's grasp is more acute perhaps because he knew better than Larkin how Christian vision made mystics out of ordinary Irish Catholics like him.

[30] J. B. Stern, "Nietzsche and the Idea of Metaphor" in *Nietzsche: Imagery and Thought*, ed. by M. Pasley (Methuen, 1978), pp. 64–82; 68.

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that non-believers might be right in questioning the truth-claims embedded in such fictions? There is a widespread sense that the metaphysic that sustained the Christian narrative seems to have dissolved and what is left is a free-floating narrative with little forensic or moral warrant.

The literary critic R.P. Blackmur remarked that we live in the first age that is "fully self-conscious of its fictions" and so our characteristic literary narratives carry explicit authorial signs that they *are* fictions, not referential versions of the way the world is. Our narratives may be truth-bearing, but only indirectly and figuratively, and so we acknowledge a gap between world and text, and unless texts are able, in some measure, to cast light on our experience of "world", they slip quietly into the category of entertaining, but not truth-determining, works. At the extreme end of modernist style, a literary text can be filled with the voices of other literary texts in self-enclosed intertextuality: think of Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* in which every phrase is a text. (The only way to read the New Testament is to see it as internally constituted by the texts of the Old Testament.)

Analogously, "God", perhaps the supreme fiction, is generally deemed to have no extra-textual reality and exists only within fictive religious narratives. I suspect that it is this interpenetration of "God" and "religion" that lies at the root of the whole problem of credibility. God has no reality other than the role God plays within religious narratives and claims, and the primary issue, then lies in the nature of figurative religion. What seems incredible to many of our contemporaries is that they should be asked to trust their lives to a character in a fictive narrative unconnected with their sense of their own humanity. In this respect, God is now no different from the figures of the ancient Greek pantheon and it requires no great struggle to put him back on the shelf with that gang of imaginary rogues. Religion is viewed, not unreasonably, as a *fictive* cultural product. The question raised in a quatrain from Edward Fitzgerald's *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* focuses the issue nicely:

> And strange to tell, among that Earthen Lot,
> Some could articulate, while others not:
> And suddenly one more impatient cried –
> "Who *is* the Potter, pray, and who the Pot?"

Does God make us or do we make God? A puzzle in the poem as it is in real life, of course, but if you are a reflective believer, you may come to think this is a false opposition. To say that God makes us is to hold that our existence is the effect of originary, uncreated goodness and that the instinct to direct ourselves towards this goodness is our glory and fulfilment. And if transcendent goodness makes us, there

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is good reason to think that our turning to that goodness will not be in vain – hence the hope of "resurrection" is built into the bare elements of a doctrine of creation. Soteriology only specifies *how* this is effected in Christ, the key-stone in the arch that spans creation and heaven.

One can certainly, and one *should*, hold these things, at the same time as we recognise that human beings persistently construe this goodness in imaginative terms: there is a figurative "making" of the divine that is the source of "religion" constructed through myth, ritual and symbol. Once these narratives take flight, the heavens are filled with religious noise and the ineffable God comes to be endlessly talked about, narrated, imagined, simultaneously construed and misconstrued because nothing positive can be said about God that is not immediately to be subverted.[31] If we really believe that God is at the boundaries of human thought, why is there so much theology? That question may contain its own answer, but do not presume that it is a justification.

We should not lament our inability to get God right in ways that do not mislead. God might not be accessible to our minds except through the entanglements of figurative language because there is no neutral vantage point, no *point de répère* from which we could begin to get a perspective on the divine, no path outside the labyrinth, no aerial photography by which we which we could hover above and beyond the landscape of language and narrative, able finally to view God with accurate coordinates. (That many metaphors are needed here is the point.)

Recognise that we are the most theologically fertile of the three monotheisms, with the most highly developed metaphysical underpinning for our metaphors, constantly tempted to speak about God with more precision than we can actually have. Is unbelief partly a response to Christian claims to know too much, too clearly, too precisely about God? Is it significant that contemporary unbelief emerges and seems strongest still in a European culture that has provided the intellectual schemes that underpin Christian thought? What might this say to us? Perhaps when you exceed the boundaries of what can be said about God and create "religion", at the same time you create the conditions for disbelief in that religion. There are protective boundaries by which the divine mystery is preserved from conceptual intrusions and we theologians are not the elaborators of the divine mystery but its sentries. This is most pressing today because most formal rejections of God are rejections of the human, all too human (Christian, all too Christian?) versions of God that we have devised.

[31] The IVth Lateran Council (1215) laid down the principle that there is no similarity between God and creature without an even greater dissimilarity.

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More properly agnostic theology and more listening to unbelievers is needed, I think, if we are to help the Church engage effectively in this mission.

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