

FAITH: BELIEF OR PRACTICE?

Faith, from Plato onward, has been considered a form of knowledge, usually a lower and more unstable form. Faith is “belief,” adhering to certain propositions that are taken to be true and valid but without having yet achieved full evidence when faith makes way for “sight” or proven knowledge. Philosophers of religion have often seen it as their primary task to show the coherence and validity of faith, to attempt to prove some of its most central claims, such as the existence of God or the possibility of an afterlife. Some of the most well-known analytical philosophers of religion, most prominently Richard Swinburne, have been primarily focused on this task, trying to prove God’s existence or at least show that it is more probable than not.¹ Continental philosophy of religion, a much more recent endeavor, has generally eschewed such attempts at proving God’s existence, often dismissing this as a futile task and instead has tried to examine religious experience in its various facets.² The two groups thus seem to approach the question of faith from quite different philosophical perspectives and to think of it in very different terms.³ Yet such a black-and-white juxtaposition is too easy. In fact, there have been attempts to rethink the relation between faith and knowledge on the analytical side and despite its quite different style there are also desires to “prove” aspects of belief or show the rational coherence of faith on the continental side. What I will try to show in this paper is that when it comes to philosophical analysis of matters of faith the more fundamental distinction is not between analytical and continental, but between regarding faith as a “knowledge game,” namely as “rational” (or semi-rational) belief, and treating faith as a practice, namely as a social phenomenon of actions and practices that give meaning to people’s lives. Representatives of both positions can be found on both sides of the continental-

¹ Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); *Is There a God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorf, eds., *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991); Alvin Plantinga and Michael Tooley, *Knowledge of God* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). This final title actually already moves to a position that argues that Christian belief might have its own kind of rationality and cannot be judged by traditional rationalist or scientific standards.

² For a summary of this in several continental thinkers, see chapter 10 in my *Postmodern Apologetics?* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 209-19. John D. Caputo makes this claim in a more popular mode by tracing the ways in which the relation between theology and philosophy changed over time in his *Philosophy and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006).

³ A particularly vivid example of the disconnect between the two traditions on this issue is on display in Lorenz B. Puntel’s *Being and God: A Systematic Approach in Confrontation with Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion*, trans. Alan White (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), which rejects these thinkers as completely irrational in highly rhetorical fashion and seems to miss the point of their work entirely.

analytical divide, even if the former is more dominant in analytical circles and the latter slightly more prevalent in continental ones.⁴ I will also suggest that the latter is a more productive and more inclusive way of thinking of religion, one that focuses on religion as a *human* phenomenon instead of attempting to prove claims about the divine. (Although I cannot show that in any detail here, the focus on faith as being fundamentally about knowledge rather than about practices is also a narrowly Christian approach that does not apply well to other religious traditions.)

First of all, it might be helpful to come to some clarification on what it means to speak of faith as primarily concerned with truth or knowledge. Paul Ricoeur, who is usually identified with the continental tradition although he made strenuous attempts to bridge the gap between the two, makes some helpful distinctions in his early analysis of religious language, although these distinctions are not limited to Ricoeur but are often used more widely. He distinguishes between a language of verification (of truth as correspondence) and a language of manifestation (of truth as “*aletheia*” or “*showing forth*,” presumably following Heidegger on this).⁵ Ricoeur suggests that religious language is not intended to verify or prove anything but instead to manifest a particular kind of truth. Religious texts, like poetic texts, function by opening a world in which we are invited to conceive ourselves anew and challenged to live a changed life. Religion and religious texts hence have their own truth functions and such “*truth*” must be measured according to its own criteria, which are internal to the kind of discourse it is. Imposing outside parameters of truth—especially from the sciences—is inappropriate. It is interesting, however, that Ricoeur remains firmly on the side of an analysis of religious (usually biblical) *texts* and feels much more ambivalent about analyzing sacred *practices* (in the vein of Eliade).⁶ Thus, although Ricoeur makes a first step toward thinking of faith not primarily in terms of correspondence or verification, he still remains wedded to the interpretation of texts.⁷

Yet, the distinction between different kind of truths and the suggestion that religious truth should be judged by its own criteria instead of having external

⁴ This is not meant as an exhaustive survey of positions or thinkers on this topic. I discuss some important representatives from various traditions (analytical, continental, pragmatist) in order to show that a conversation is possible here and to point to the ways in which I think it might be most productive, not to summarize all available positions or even to discuss any particular thinker’s work in full. [I should also say that my exposure to any traditions other than continental is extremely recent and thus necessarily fairly rudimentary. I thank J. Aaron Simmons for the opportunity to explore this possible conversation and my colleagues at Fordham University (especially Jada Strabbing, Judith Green, Stephen Grimm, Samir Haddad, John Davenport, and Bill Jaworski) for suggestions of what sources to engage and for sharing some of their own work with me.]

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, “Philosophy and Religious Language,” in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 35-47.

⁶ See especially his “Manifestation and Proclamation,” in *Ibid.*, 48-67. For detailed recent discussions of this essay see David Tracy’s contribution to *The Legacy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Ingolf U. Dalferth (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015).

⁷ Ricoeur actually explores interpretation of action (and its parallel to interpretation of texts) extensively in other realms, such as social, political, and historical ones. It is primarily in his work on biblical interpretation that he remains firmly wedded to texts (presumably linked to his Reformed heritage).

truth parameters imposed on it, is shared by several thinkers in both traditions and might be seen as a first move beyond conceiving rationality solely in strictly scientific or Enlightenment terms. For example, Anthony Steinbock argues forcefully that what he calls “the vertical dimension of experience” or mystical religious experience

has to be taken on its own terms and not subordinated to how objects are given to us in perception, or evaluated according to presuppositions of religious belief. A religious experience can only be confirmed or treated as deceptive within the context of religious experience itself... in its own “language,” as it were... Religious experiencing constitutes its own sphere of evidence; it has its own modes of givenness that are distinct from presentation but no less genuine. This sphere of existence has its “truth” that cannot be governed by or adjudicated from outside of this, its own, domain of experience.”⁸

He goes on to examine the “evidential character” of mystical experience based on the examples from the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions he has explicated earlier in the book. The work as a whole seeks to show that mystical experiences are “modes of *human experience* that have their own modes of evidence and raise their own problems of evidence,” which can be examined, described, and to some extent verified on their own terms.⁹

Some thinkers in the analytic tradition have also begun to argue that there might be a different rationality to faith and that it may well be internally coherent without necessarily obeying external epistemological or scientific standards. Linda Schumacher argues that we need to move to a “theological theory of knowledge” that takes seriously the peculiar “logic of faith.”¹⁰ She criticizes the “Reformed Epistemologists” (including Plantinga) for not going far enough in their critique of rationality or in showing that their reconceived “proofs” apply to a Christian Trinitarian God. Instead she proposes to get beyond the faith-reason conflict by showing reason to be always already grounded on faith and by arguing that Christian faith serves as a particularly useful source for such faith-based reason. Despite the shift she proposes, however, she remains focused on questions of rationality and wants to show that “faith is a vital component of human reasoning.” Faith is understood as a kind “unknowing” that gets things “wrong, or at least less right,” which is vital “in the process of coming to know.”¹¹ It is a primarily cognitive act, an inferior form of knowledge, albeit one she interprets as an essential first step to any form of rational knowledge, of the progress toward objective rational truth. It is not incidental that she thinks of Christian faith as most conducive for this kind of rationality.¹²

⁸ Anthony Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 115-16.

⁹ Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism*, 241.

¹⁰ Lydia Schumacher, “The Logic of Faith: Prolegomena to a Theological Theory of Knowledge,” *New Blackfriars* (2011): 664-77.

¹¹ Schumacher, “The Logic of Faith,” 669.

¹² Schumacher wants to show why “Christian faith might be seen as exceptionally well suited to rendering reason sound” (“The Logic of Faith,” 672) and does so by relying on the doctrine of the incarnation as an illumination of knowledge, a rational disclosure of the nature of God. She concludes that “Christianity seems to offer the best rationale for the

A similar distinction is made by the (firmly continental) thinker Jean-Luc Marion. He repeatedly raises the traditional presumed conflict between “faith and reason” and tries to overcome it.¹³ While pointing out (like Kuhn and others) that science itself requires elements of belief or faith and is far from as stable as it is often assumed to be, he primarily seeks to show that faith has its own kind of rationality, an alternative type of knowledge, namely that of love or charity. He often employs Pascal’s distinction between the three orders of knowledge (of the body, the mind, and the heart) to distinguish between different kinds of knowledge. While philosophy, especially in its guise of metaphysics or onto-theology (or “natural theology”), aims at certainty, firm foundation, and verification, “revealed theology” aims at assurance and functions via manifestation. At times he draws on Kant to associate one with the understanding and the other with the will. And yet Marion consistently assigns a “logos” to faith, affirms its inherent rationality, and calls its adherents to justify and defend their faith in rational terms—albeit with a different kind of rationality.¹⁴ Unlike Schumacher, Marion thinks of this knowledge as infinitely superior to purely rational knowledge and repeatedly affirms that metaphysical or philosophical knowledge has no access to the knowledge of the heart or will (identified with “revealed theology” or the phenomenology of givenness).

Yet despite his strong and repeated rejection of proofs for God’s existence at all levels (whether in his work on Descartes, his phenomenology, or his explicitly theological writings), Marion does seem concerned to “verify” God’s reality. Although phenomenology can only examine the “possibility” of divine revelation, the notion of the saturated phenomenon that comes to us in overwhelming and bedazzling ways, which cannot be predicted or controlled, seems precisely directed at providing coherence and a certain kind of evidence for the reality and effective force of phenomena of revelation (among others such as aesthetic or cultural experiences). Thus, although Marion certainly moves us away from the futile task of proving God’s existence, he still seems intent on verifying the reality of revelatory phenomena coming directly from the divine, instead of examining the practices of religious believers. His treatments of the Eucharist are particularly striking in this regard. Although Eucharistic experience is primarily a communal religious practice, Marion interprets it as

ability to be rational” (673) via certain “habits of reasoning” that induce humility, but ultimately enable the believer to “know the unknowable God” (674). God’s transcendence is no obstacle: “The fact that He is currently inaccessible, however, is precisely the reason why the objective of knowing Him is the ultimate cognitive objective; why faith in Him is the paradigmatic instance of the faith that enters into all acts of reasoning; why those acts can and must be regarded as the venue in which God is indirectly known and made known in the present life” (675). [I thank my student Bill Woody for making me aware of this article.]

¹³ See several essays in his *Le croire pour le voir* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2010), a translation is forthcoming with Fordham University Press. The essay “Faith and Reason” (the first chapter in *Le croire pour le voir*), originally given as a Lenten address at Notre Dame de Paris, was already included in the English translation *The Visible and the Revealed* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008). Several of the essays in that volume also address the question of the relation between faith and reason, philosophy and theology, or the task of the “Christian philosopher” and he repeatedly points to Pascal’s notion of the three orders in these articles.

¹⁴ See especially the address on “Faith and Reason,” in *The Visible and the Revealed*, 145-54.

primarily (if not exclusively) a site of God's self-revelation where God speaks directly and imposes the correct interpretation on the one who experiences the divine. Thus, the concern is to show or say something about God, not primarily to analyze the practices of religious believers.

William Alston, an important analytical thinker who has written extensively on philosophy of religion, proposes to draw epistemic conclusions from an analysis of religious experience instead of relying entirely on sense perception or abstract rationality.¹⁵ He suggests that an "experiential awareness of God" (what he calls the "perception" of God) can function as valid grounds for religious belief. He calls this a "doxastic practice" approach that grounds justification for believing in God in the mystical practices of a community. Most of his analysis concerns the ways in which such beliefs can be internally justified by the perception or awareness (i.e. experience) on which they are grounded. He analyzes the "phenomenal qualia" of mystical perception and compares them with the sort of evidence provided by more common sensory perception.¹⁶ Based on accounts of mystical experience of the divine, we can conclude that God is perceived in some fashion (albeit not in "essence") and that the attribution of such experience as coming from or being given by God is not irrational:

If mystical experience is a mode of experience that is perceptual, so far as its phenomenological character is concerned, and if it is in principle possible that the other requirements should be satisfied for mystical experience to be the experiential side of a genuine perception of God, then the question of whether mystical experience does count as genuine perception of God is just a question of whether it is what it seems to its subject to be. And this question arises for mystical perception in just the same way as for sense perception, making possible a uniform treatment of the epistemology of the two modes of experience.¹⁷

He concludes from this that it is indeed possible that such experiences "constitute a genuine perception of God" and goes on to show how they "provide justification for certain kinds of beliefs about God."¹⁸ Some perceptual beliefs, he contends, can be based on and be justified solely by experience without needing a full justification of all background beliefs in every case (though in some cases they do). This applies again for general perceptual justification and for that of mystical perception.

Alston suggests that proofs for God's existence and other aspects of natural theology are equivalent to proofs for "external reliability" in the case of sensory perception, which can often be shown to be internally circular. By analogy, these more abstract external accounts of validity often do not tell us much about God and mystical perception accordingly can function in the internally reliable sense of many kinds of sensory perception. The problems are the same for both kinds of perception. He concludes from this:

¹⁵ William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

¹⁶ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 54.

¹⁷ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 66.

¹⁸ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 67.

Given that we will inevitably run into epistemic circularity at some point(s) in any attempt to provide direct arguments for the reliability of one or another doxastic practice, we should draw the conclusion that there is no appeal beyond the practices we find firmly established, psychologically and socially.¹⁹

Because this circularity applies in all realms of life, Alston suggests, “it is eminently *reasonable* for us to form beliefs in the way we standardly do.”²⁰ Mystical doxastic practices are coherent in this sense that they do not contain massive internal contradiction and provide instead rational support or guidance for application and justification of beliefs: Christian mystical practice

is a functioning, socially established, perceptual doxastic practice with distinctive experiential inputs, distinctive input-output functions, a distinctive conceptual scheme, and a rich, internally justified overrider system. As such, it possesses a *prima facie* title to being rationally engaged in, and its outputs are thereby *prima facie* justified, provided we have no sufficient reason to regard it as unreliable or otherwise disqualified for rational acceptance.²¹

While Alston also acknowledges differences between mystical experience and sense experience and confronts the troubling issue of religious diversity, which would seem to imply that various religious perceptions are incompatible and might be contradictory, he ultimately concludes that religious experience is for the most part no less unreliable than sense perception and that it is verified by its “fruit” in “masters” of the spiritual life.

Such work remains, however, a purely epistemic project for Alston. He is interested in religious practices not for their own sake but for what they reveal about the internal reliability of religious claims: “I feel that when we wonder about the credentials of mystical perception we are interested in whether it is a source of knowledge, or true beliefs, about God, not just whether it enables us to form justified beliefs in some non-truth-conducive sense of ‘justified’.”²² In *Perceiving God*, he focuses primarily on establishing that we have “justified beliefs about God” and does not claim that this gives us actual “knowledge” of God. He examines this in more detail in an essay on “Knowledge of God,” where he extends his arguments regarding rationality to the possibility of knowledge about the divine.²³ Here also he suggests that there is hope for such knowledge if

¹⁹ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 149. He defines “doxastic practice” as “a system or constellation of dispositions or habits, or to use a currently fashionable term, ‘mechanisms’, each of which yields a belief as output that is related in a certain way to an ‘input’” (153). Therefore, “for any established doxastic practice it is rational to suppose that it is reliable, and hence rational to suppose that its doxastic outputs are *prima facie* justified” (183).

²⁰ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 150.

²¹ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 225.

²² Alston, *Perceiving God*, 182.

²³ Alston, “Knowledge of God,” in: *Faith, Reason, and Skepticism*, ed. Marcus Hester (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 6-49. Alston is actually quite critical here of what he calls “internalist justification theory” (e.g. Chisholm) that justifies beliefs through an internal deductive process. His own version relies instead on an examination of the

it is admitted that most of our knowledge is essentially circular and cannot be independently verified in some foundationalist sense, instead relying on the sphere of knowledge in which its claims and beliefs are operative. Although he remains careful with claims about concrete knowledge we could have about God, the investigation of mystic experience is taken to be fundamentally directed at showing that such belief is epistemologically justified.²⁴ In this he is strikingly similar to Marion, even as their starting points and styles are utterly different.²⁵ Both posit a connection between belief and experience and ultimately both seek to draw conclusions about the divine by analyzing human religious experience.²⁶

perception or awareness of God claimed by the believer and an analysis of their reliability. It thus relies not only on the justification of principles. See "Knowledge of God," 14-25. He concludes: "Generally speaking, to determine the reliability of a particular belief-forming mechanism we have to rely on what we know (or reasonably believe) about the reality with which this mechanism deals and our cognitive relations thereto. For empirical belief-forming mechanisms, this means carrying out empirical investigations, including the sophisticated version thereof known as science. And for religious belief-forming mechanisms, this means carrying out investigations into the nature and doings of God, and that means doing theology" (43). In his more recent book *Beyond Justification* he moves beyond epistemic evaluation of belief in terms of justification and suggests that it may not be "the key epistemic virtue of beliefs." Alston, *Beyond Justification: Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 176. He argues that traditional epistemology has focused too exclusively on the adequacy of grounds for belief and on the reliability of their formation. Instead we should admit a variety of epistemic criteria ("pluralistic epistemic desiderata perspective"). He illustrates his claims in regard to the analysis of perception provided in the earlier book on pp. 180-87 and summarizes the value of this perspective on pp. 243-46.

²⁴ "Perhaps it is a mistake to look for a foundation of one's faith that stands infallible, indubitable, and incorrigible, in no need of support from any other source. Perhaps no system of belief can be grounded in that way. Perhaps a more reasonable aspiration for the human condition is to have multiple sources of support such that although each can be questioned and none renders any of one's beliefs absolutely certain, they lend support to each other as well as to the beliefs they are invoked to support; so that in the way the whole assemblage fits together we have sufficient reason to take the beliefs to be true" (*Perceiving God*, 306).

²⁵ There is also an interesting parallel between how they use possibility and actuality in regard to faith. Both appear concerned to articulate the possibility of religious belief as coherent instead of making claims about its actuality – which they both leave to theology. Both also seem to acknowledge, in their own way, that certain beliefs enable one to "see" (Marion) or that they are "epistemically circular" (Alston).

²⁶ Both also seem to focus on extreme or unusual religious experience. Stephen Grimm points out that Alston "divorces the idea of encountering or perceiving God from the idea of being united with God" and that this notion of union must be interpreted in terms of degrees – with the great mystics at a higher stage and more ordinary Christian experience at a lower stage, but on the same continuum of experience of God. He concludes "that ordinary Christians can directly experience God, and that this experience deserves to be called 'mystical' because it contains an element of personal communion or involvement with God, one which can grow over time... not only can ordinary Christians experience God in this way, but many do – thus making Christianity more than a dead letter, a mere philosophy, for many believers." Stephen Grimm, "The Logic of Mysticism," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (forthcoming). [I am most grateful to Stephen Grimm for sharing a draft of the paper with me prior to its publication and for reading parts of this article and giving me helpful feedback on it.] I have made similar arguments in regards to Marion's excessive picture of experiences of revelation as always "saturated" to an intense degree. See my *Degrees of Givenness: On Saturation in Jean-Luc Marion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), especially chapters 6 and 7.

The analytical philosopher of religion Robert Audi moves somewhat further in his examination of the rationality of religious commitment.²⁷ He argues that “if faith, or even one major kind of faith, is a species of belief, then the rationality of religious faith must be decided largely on the basis of an account of rational belief.”²⁸ Audi suggests that several aspects of religious commitment are non-cognitive. Religious faith can be shown to have its own rationality that is not reducible to religious belief (though he disagrees with Alston over whether it can be “justified”). Audi distinguishes between attitudinal and propositional faith. Propositional faith (faith “that”) need not entail specific corresponding beliefs although it is still essentially concerned with propositions, while attitudinal faith is rather faith “in” and hence not about beliefs. He still thinks of faith as “the central cognitive attitude in religion” and claims rationality for it, but recognizes that “religious commitment of a full-blooded kind is never just cognitive, but also behavioral and attitudinal.”²⁹ Audi suggests that it might be possible to receive knowledge about God from direct experience instead of from “evidence propositions.” He admits several objections against experientialist knowledge about God and proposes to focus instead on “nondoxastic faith,” which may not necessarily be directed at propositional truths but still manifest firm commitment and even strong religious conviction.³⁰ Someone may have “wholehearted devotion to God” and firm trust in God without holding propositionally valid or verifiable belief-claims.³¹ Audi ultimately concludes that “the rationality of religious commitment is holistic” and includes

one’s moral and interpersonal conduct, as well as one’s attitude toward the universe and toward human existence within it. The rationality of this commitment, particularly for those in whom nondoxastic faith is fundamental, does not reduce to that of religious belief. The same holds for the justification of religious commitment, which is neither equivalent to nor entailed by its rationality. The justification of faith, for instance, does not reduce to that of the religious beliefs. Nor is the rationality of one’s cognitive religious position by any means the only element in the rationality of one’s overall religious commitment. Conduct, attitudes, and emotions are also part of the pattern to be appraised.³²

Audi thus seems to fluctuate between wanting to draw epistemic conclusions about the divine from religious faith and broadening the rationality of faith to conduct and attitudes instead of primarily cognitive elements.

Thinking of truth in more pragmatic terms has a significant precedent in various strains of American pragmatism, especially in William James’ *Varieties of*

²⁷ Robert Audi, “Rationality and Religious Commitment,” in *Faith, Reason, and Skepticism*, 50-97.

²⁸ Audi, “Rationality and Religious Commitment,” 50.

²⁹ Audi, “Rationality and Religious Commitment,” 66.

³⁰ He also draws a useful distinction between reconciliation of faith and reason for a religious person and providing evidence that would convince a skeptic (Audi, “Rationality and Religious Commitment,” 77).

³¹ Audi, “Rationality and Religious Commitment,” 80.

³² Audi, “Rationality and Religious Commitment,” 88-89.

Religious Experience.³³ In this important work, originally presented as the Scottish Gifford lectures on natural religion, he analyzes religion in terms of its practices. There is no attempt to “prove” any of these experiences as valid in the sense of corresponding to the actuality of a particular God. Rather, various practices from a large variety of religious backgrounds are set side-by-side and patterns emerge that can help us draw conclusions about how religious practices function and what they “do” for their adherents.³⁴ His approach is firmly Protestant in its emphasis on individual experience and complete disregard of communal practices, which he not only deliberately sets aside in his study but rejects as “second-hand” and inauthentic.³⁵ Unlike the thinkers mentioned above, he does not attempt to provide an alternative kind of rationality for faith but instead focuses on religious feeling (“feeling is the deeper source of religion”³⁶) and eschews any investigation that might attempt to ascertain the correctness of particular experiences or their possible correspondence to an identifiable divine source. These experiences “carry an enormous sense of inner authority and illumination with them when they come” but they are not verified by life and remain disconnected from it.³⁷ They are true in the sense that they “work” and are evaluated by their “fruit,” which he measures primarily in moral terms, namely whether it makes the religious person more kind, generous, concerned

³³ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin, 1990).

³⁴ James insists that there is a variety of religious experiences that constitute different types (*Varieties*, 104), which he ultimately identifies as once-born (a kind of positive world-affirmation that he calls “healthy”) and twice-born (a more negative awareness of one’s sin and need for redemption that requires conversion and that he calls “sick”). The distinction does not seem to imply a judgment (i.e. that “healthy” spiritualities are somehow “better” than “sick” ones) but both refer to “pivotal human experiences” (130); “the two are equally essential facts of existence” (131). In fact, he reiterates: “Please observe, however, that I am not yet pretending finally to *judge* any of these attitudes. I am only describing their variety” (135). In both cases the goal seems to be a kind of unification of the self. James also recognizes that some people seem constitutionally incapable of religious sentiment: “Some persons, for instance, never are, and possibly never under any circumstances could be, converted. Religious ideas cannot become the centre of their spiritual energy. ... To the end of their days they refuse to believe, their personal energy never gets to its religious centre, and the latter remain inactive in perpetuity” (190-91).

³⁵ “His religion has been made for him by others, communicated to by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit. It would profit us little to study this second-hand religious life. We must make search rather for the original experiences which were the pattern-setters to all this mass of suggested feeling and imitated conduct. These experiences we can only find in individuals for whom religion exists not as a dull habit, but as an acute fever rather” (James, *Varieties*, 15). Unfortunately this conviction leads him to focus almost exclusively on intensely excessive and radical experiences – a problem also encountered in contemporary phenomenological analyses of religious experience. He goes on to make a distinction between “institutional” and “personal” religion. Institutional religion is only “an external art” concerned with “ritual acts” that “with its priests and sacraments and other go-betweens sinks to an altogether secondary place” and lives “at second-hand upon tradition” (33-34). He proposes to ignore this side of religion entirely. In that regard it seems somewhat ironic that he defines the distinctiveness of religious experience in terms of its “solemnity” in light of his exclusion of ceremony and ritual from examination (42). He also seems fascinated by Teresa of Avila, yet finds her goals “paltry” and “poor” speaking of her as “superficial” and “a typical shrew” (316). See also his outline of spiritual progress in Christianity, which finds its height in the most individualist version (196).

³⁶ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 387.

³⁷ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 23.

with the poor, etc. and whether it is theologically coherent.³⁸ The religious life should be judged “by its results exclusively.”³⁹ These results include “the highest flights of charity, devotion, trust, patience, bravery.”⁴⁰ The features of saintliness are a focus beyond the self (usually in a higher power), self-surrender to this higher sense, a sense of freedom from selfhood, and “loving and harmonious affections that are affirmative instead of negative.”⁴¹ The practical consequences of holiness include asceticism, strength of soul, purity, and charity,⁴² but also “equanimity, resignation, fortitude, and patience.”⁴³

James judges (insofar as he judges at all and does not merely describe) the validity of an experience by accomplishing these character traits and actions. In fact, James is fairly negative about what rationality can accomplish.⁴⁴ He refuses to “distinguish natural from supernatural effects” or decide which are actually sent from God.⁴⁵ To identify the deity or consider its existence is an exclusively theological endeavor and philosophy should instead focus on the fruits of religious experiences.⁴⁶ The task of philosophy is to “extract from the privacies of

³⁸ “Immediate luminousness, in short, philosophical reasonableness, and moral helpfulness are the only available criteria [for measuring the value of an experience]. Saint Teresa might have had the nervous system of the placidest cow, and it would not now save her theology, if the trial of the theology by these other tests should show it to be contemptible. And conversely if her theology can stand these other tests, it will make no difference how hysterical or nervously off her balance Saint Teresa may have been when she was with us here below” (James, *Varieties*, 25; emphases his).

³⁹ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 28.

⁴⁰ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 239.

⁴¹ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 249-50.

⁴² James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 251.

⁴³ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 261. He also briefly examines the traditional vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity, though he seems to find them slightly baffling and somewhat “unnatural” (284-298). He spends the most time on poverty and barely mentions chastity.

⁴⁴ “Rationalism insists that all our beliefs ought ultimately to find for themselves articulate grounds” (James, *Varieties*, 72). After listing these he points out: “Nevertheless, if we look at man’s whole mental life as it exists, on the life of men that lies in them apart from their learning and science, and that they inwardly and privately follow, we have to confess that the part of it of which rationalism can give an account is relatively superficial. It is the part that has the *prestige* undoubtedly, for it has the loquacity, it can challenge you for proofs, and chop logic, and put you down with words. But it will fail to convince or convert you all the same, if your dumb intuitions are opposed to its conclusions. If you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level which rationalism inhabits. Your whole subconscious life, your impulses, your faiths, your needs, your divinations, have prepared the premises, of which your consciousness now feels the weight of the result; and something in you absolutely knows that that result must be truer than any logic-chopping rationalist talk, however clever, that may contradict it ... That vast literature of proofs of God’s existence drawn from the order of nature, which a century ago seemed so overwhelmingly convincing, to-day does little more than gather dust in libraries, for the simple reason that our generation has ceased to believe in the kind of God it argued for” (73). Conversely “if a person feels the presence of a living God after the fashion shown by my quotations, your critical arguments, be they never so superior, will vainly set themselves to change his faith” (74).

⁴⁵ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 299.

⁴⁶ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 300-303. He is willing to say, however, that “the existence of mystical states absolutely overthrows the pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate dictators of what we may believe” (385).

religious experience some general facts” and to interpret them “after the fact.”⁴⁷ Proofs for God’s existence or philosophical reasoning about God’s attributes are futile⁴⁸ and any metaphysical speculation about God should be abandoned.⁴⁹ Instead, it can provide useful evaluation of experiences according to general criteria, refine definitions, interpret symbolism, and evaluate actual modes of living.⁵⁰ James concludes, citing Leuba: “Does God really exist? How does he exist? What is he? There are so many irrelevant questions. Not God, but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life, is, in the last analysis, the end of religion. The love of life, at any and every level of development, is the religious impulse.”⁵¹ Philosophy examines this impulse and its effects in the lives of religious people instead of speculating about the character of its source.⁵²

This “pragmatic” approach has recently been picked up by Philip Kitcher who, albeit being an avowed atheist or secular humanist, has analyzed religious experience in much more positive terms than the rather militant scientific philosophers Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins. Kitcher condemns these “voices of reason” as “hectoring,” “without charity,” and “always without hope.” Instead, he admits that “religion is, and has been, central to the lives of most people who have ever lived,” suggesting that the core of religion lies in its ability to sustain hope and exhort its adherents to forms of altruism.⁵³ While he thinks that faith propositions cannot be maintained rationally, religious communities do valuable work in society. He thus moves us even further away from thinking of religion solely in terms of knowledge (whether rational or irrational) and toward examining how it actually functions in people’s lives and the larger culture (though it is worth pointing out that his analysis of “practices” does not refer to ritual or liturgy but to ethical and social activism). In an essay responding to “militant modern atheism” he argues that these militant atheists operate with a “belief model” of religion, which he contrasts to a fuller version of religious life:

Besides beliefs there are emotions, aspirations, desires, and actions: devout Christians love God and their neighbors, aspire to accord with the divine commandments, wish that the Holy

⁴⁷ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 389.

⁴⁸ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 392-98.

⁴⁹ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 408.

⁵⁰ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 409.

⁵¹ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 453.

⁵² Interesting parallels could again be drawn to Marion’s project James repeatedly identifies religious or mystical experiences as “gifts” (James, *Varieties*, 50, 141). Like Marion he focuses exclusively on excessive and superlative experiences: “No other emotion than religious emotion can bring a man to this peculiar pass [of intense asceticism]. And it is for that reason that when we ask our question about the value of religion for human life, I think we ought to look for the answer among these violenter examples rather than among those of a more moderate hue” (52). “In mystical literature such self-contradictory phrases as ‘dazzling obscurity,’ ‘whispering silence,’ ‘teeming desert,’ are continually met with. They prove that not conceptual speech, but music rather, is the element through which we are best spoken to by mystical truth” (379). And James has the same disdain for metaphysics: “So much for the metaphysical attributes of God! From the point of view of practical religion, the metaphysical monster which they offer to our worship is an absolutely worthless invention of the scholarly mind” (401).

⁵³ Philip Kitcher, *Living with Darwin: Evolution, Design, and the Future of Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 155, 159.

Spirit would descend on them and on others, work for the relief of suffering and the spread of the Gospel. Those who *merely* believe, if there are any such people, are not full participants in the religious life.⁵⁴

While religious actions can be interpreted as grounded on belief, the reverse can also be argued, namely that beliefs grow out of actions and practices or out of commitments to certain goals and values. Kitcher goes on to distinguish between four types of orientation: secular (value orientation without belief), mythically self-conscious (religiously practicing but without making transcendent belief claims), doctrinally entangled (values are connected to doctrinal beliefs), and a mixed version between the latter two groups, which he calls doctrinally indefinite. While Kitcher acknowledges that a rejection of such more value-oriented or practice-oriented versions of religion is too facile, he does firmly refuse any grounding of such values in doctrinal belief. No convincing evidence for such belief can be given and the attempt to provide such evidence (or “prove” God’s existence) is misguided. Faith should be firmly located in the practice sphere instead of seen only as “belief without sufficient evidence.”⁵⁵ Kitcher maintains that Dennett and Dawkins are mistaken when they interpret faith only in terms of belief in doctrinal statements and thus as a purely “cognitive deficiency” in regard to the existence of a transcendent deity. Instead, religion serves important social and individual needs and secular humanism can only function as a convincing alternative if it provides the sort of intellectual satisfaction, rich community life, social commitment, and fulfilling meaning that religion has traditionally supplied. This is not yet the case:

Within the actual social environments in which contemporary people grow up, doctrinal entanglement can be expected to persist, not because the arguments directed against the doctrines are incomplete or because the people who hang on to belief in transcendent entities are too stubborn or too stupid, but because enlightened secularism has not yet succeeded in finding surrogates for institutions and ideas that religious traditions have honed over centuries or millennia.⁵⁶

While it would certainly be more desirable, according to Kitcher, if such rich secular alternatives existed, religious adhesion can be tolerated and to some extent appreciated as necessary in the meantime.

In the aforementioned book on evolution and intelligent design, written for a more popular audience, he makes a distinction between “supernaturalist” faith

⁵⁴ Kitcher, *Preludes to Pragmatism: Toward a Reconstruction of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 291.

⁵⁵ Kitcher, *Preludes to Pragmatism*, 297.

⁵⁶ Kitcher, *Preludes to Pragmatism*, 301. In the essay “Challenges for Secularism” he similarly outlines how religious commitments emerge from upbringing and social conditioning and have no further truth value: “None of the processes of socialization, none of the chains of transmission of sacred lore across the generations, has any special justificatory force. Because of the widespread inconsistency in religious doctrine, it is clear that not all of these traditions can yield true beliefs about the supernatural. Given that they are all on a par, we should trust none of them” (*Preludes to Pragmatism*, 259; emphasis his).

and what he calls “spiritual religion” (which seems to correspond to a least common denominator of spiritual kernel in all religions) and insists that the “enlightenment project” renders most faith propositions invalid. Any version of supernaturalism must be abandoned in a thoroughly intellectual position. Here he works out somewhat more fully why religious believers might be reluctant to rescind faith and admits the valuable work that religious faith commitments and especially embeddedness in religious communities does. Thus, unlike James, he focuses on the role of communities instead of the purely personal benefits or expressions of religion. Religion encourages social cohesion and enables “a society to deal successfully with its neighbors.”⁵⁷ He concludes that “religious doctrines do not have to be true to be successful.”⁵⁸ Success of religious stories is not about their “literal truth” but rather about “the emotions they provoke and the actions they inspire.”⁵⁹ Churches often provide the only place (for Americans) where “hearts can be opened, serious issues can be discussed, common ground with others can be explored, places in which there is real community, places in which people come to matter to one another—and thus come to matter to themselves.”⁶⁰ While it is clear that he would personally prefer secular intellectual alternatives to these religious communities (because more “true”), he admits that for many people religious communities are the only places where this sort of fulfilling life can be found.⁶¹ For Kitcher religion has no epistemic dimensions or truth value at all (because it is fundamentally untrue, not a correct picture of the world), but has value only in the consolation it provides to religious believers and the actions to which it moves them.⁶²

⁵⁷ Kitcher, *Living with Darwin*, 143.

⁵⁸ Kitcher, *Living with Darwin*, 143.

⁵⁹ Kitcher, *Living with Darwin*, 144.

⁶⁰ Kitcher, *Living with Darwin*, 159-60.

⁶¹ He provides a very interesting analysis of why this is truer in America than in Europe and why therefore America is the only Western nation in which religion still plays such a large role. He concludes: “We should look more carefully at the causes of the pain, the harsh competitiveness of American life, the lack of buffers against serious ills, the atomization of society, the vapidness of much secular culture, and above all, the absence of real community” (Kitcher, *Preludes to Pragmatism*, 166). He reiterates similar claims in “Challenges for Secularism” (265-68). His analysis of the rich intellectual and cultural life in Western Europe seems slightly exaggerated. One might suggest more cynically that much of the entrenched secularism in these countries comes from slow drifting away from religious institutions that seemed no longer fulfilling and has now become habitual rather than necessarily from rich secular alternatives.

⁶² He makes that point even more forcefully in the opening section of “Challenges for Secularism,” *Preludes to Pragmatism*, 256-64, although he also points to the dangers of giving up on any epistemic dimension for faith (263). Responding especially to *Preludes to Pragmatism*, Judith Green criticizes Kitcher for still remaining too closely wedded to arguments about faith in terms of (lacking) rationality and proposes that he should instead take religious practices far more seriously than he does. She argues that religious worldviews function in conjunction with religious experiences and rely on them. She particularly objects (rightly so) to Kitcher’s simplistic description of religious myth as a kind of utterly unfounded magical view of the world. James’ analysis of religion, on which Kitcher draws (especially in the essay “A Pragmatist’s Progress: The Varieties of James’s Strategies for Defending Religion” in *Preludes to Pragmatism*), she suggests, is more concerned with analyzing the ways in which religious believers practice their faith rather than confirming the truth claims of propositional statements of belief they make, what she calls “whole-person believing.” (Green’s analysis of James’ insights on the role of belief in truth-producing inquiry at first bears some significant resemblance to Schumacher’s desire to rethink the basis of scientific rationality in terms of faith, but she

Secularism hence has to evolve to sustain the sort of personal fulfillment and social bonds religion has so far provided. It must feature “a firm commitment to increased socioeconomic justice, both within nation-states and across the entire human species, a commitment that is not simply a declaration of abstract rights but embodied in the sharing of the world’s resources and opportunities in accordance with egalitarian ideals” as well as a richer community life that increases solidarity, sympathy, and social exploration of significant goals.⁶³ It must learn from religious faith how to build fruitful and fulfilling social communities in which people and life have value and meaning and provide alternate accounts for ethical values and purpose-making in a finite, thoroughly human mode.⁶⁴ Such a rich secular life can provide a genuine alternative to faith, not only because it is truer but also because it fulfills the functions religious communities fulfilled in the past.⁶⁵

In a very different style another secularist/atheist philosopher also pushes faith most firmly out of the knowledge game. Jean-Luc Nancy argues strongly for faith as a form of trust instead of belief as a form of knowledge.⁶⁶ He interprets

arrives at quite different conclusions that are far more sensitive to the role of religious practices.) She concludes by drawing on Dewey’s religious humanism in a call for considering the importance of religious communities to engage in inter-faith conversation and collaboration (between faiths but also with secular humanists such as Kitcher). This includes asking Kitcher to “give those shared beliefs some truth-credit for their functionality in actually achieving what he takes to be the larger purpose of the religious belief-formation and ritual-expression process” (88). Judith Green, “Jamesian Reasonable Belief and Deweyan Religious Communities: Reconstructing Philosophy Pragmatically with Philip Kitcher,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 50.1 (2014): 69-89. See also her introduction to the entire issue focused on pragmatist responses to Kitcher’s work “Introduction: A Collaborative Critical Conversation on Philip Kitcher’s *Preludes to Pragmatism*” (1-8) and Kitcher’s replies to the essays included in the issue (98-114). [I hereby gratefully acknowledge not only Judith’s pointing me to these references but also for allowing me to read a draft of her contribution and the introduction before they went to print. It also seems to me that the reflections she provides in the introduction about the “style” and “tone” of philosophical debate and the need for courtesy are useful and important for understanding – and hopefully amending – the ways in which philosophers from different traditions often fail to engage each other productively.]

⁶³ Kitcher, *Preludes to Pragmatism*, 267, 268.

⁶⁴ In “Challenges for Secularism” he considers several of the “consolations” that religion is supposed to offer (social cohesion, ethical values, meaning and purpose for life, fear of death/hope for immortality) and shows both how the religious justification cannot be sustained and how a secularist alternative can be envisioned. Kitcher, *Preludes to Pragmatism*. 269-80.

⁶⁵ “Thoroughly secular people can interpret the purpose of their lives, not through some ‘vertical’ links to a dimly understood transcendent reality, but through ‘horizontal’ connections to a natural world that is vaster than their own individual existence. Through your implicit recognition of yourself as part of a world, including most importantly other human lives, on which your actions make an impact, the epiphany can be a rich source of broader connections without any presuppositions about the supernatural. The religious claim of especial depth or richness in these experiences is thus exposed as the residue of misguided presuppositions that ought to be forsworn” (Kitcher, *Preludes to Pragmatism*, 284).

⁶⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); *Adoration: The Deconstruction of Christianity II*, trans. John McKeane (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013). See also his philosophical lecture on heaven to French children in *God, Justice, Love, Beauty*, trans. Sara Clift (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 1-

Christianity as the opening of an utter alterity or unconditional alienation. It goes beyond rationality or thinking. By identifying faith with belief, atheism is a form of theism and simply a negation of its logos. Instead, he suggests “faith is not a weak, hypothetical, or subjective knowledge. It is neither unverifiable nor received through submission, nor even through reason. It is not a belief in the ordinary sense of the term.”⁶⁷ This is not irrational, rather faith is “a sign of the fidelity of reason to that which *in and of itself* exceeds reason’s phantasm of justifying itself as much as the world and man.”⁶⁸ Nancy puts this quite strongly by interpreting belief and faith as completely opposed to each other. Faith “is faithfulness to an absence and a certainty of this faithfulness in the absence of all assurance” (36). In a different essay (in honor of Derrida), he analyzes the epistle of James, especially its emphasis on “work” and suggests again that faith is about *praxis* and even *poesis*, about doing and acting.⁶⁹ He also draws on the popular discussions of the gift to speak of faith as a response to gift—albeit in a sense quite different from Marion. The gift of faith is not adequacy of knowledge but faith in the other. Nancy is obviously not interested in the concrete religious practices of particular communities and, in fact, is quite critical of “religion” (as opposed to “faith”). He suggests that “from the point of view of the Christian community, to interpret the act of faith as a subjective and existential adherence is, consequently, completely erroneous” and argues that instead it is “faithfulness to nothing, faithfulness to no one, *faithfulness to faithfulness* itself... thus faithful to no other thing than to the very gesture of faithfulness.”⁷⁰ While his analysis of faith as “doing” and “faithfulness,” together with his focus on the incarnation as a genuine encounter with the body and the flesh, is an important step in the right direction, a faithfulness to nothing or no one does not seem tenable. Faithfulness and trust are *in* someone, commitment is *to* someone, not to pure emptiness or contentless nothing.

While Nancy primarily rethinks the notion of faith in a more practical and “active” vein, he does not make the move to examine religious practices, which are not his concern. In contrast, Giorgio Agamben focuses exclusively on religious practices and makes no attempt to connect them to faith. He provides a genealogical account of notions of “*leitourgia*” (the liturgical “work of the people”

32, and his many analyses of religious paintings in *The Ground of the Image* and *Noli me tangere: On the Raising of the Body*.

⁶⁷ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 25.

⁶⁸ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 28; emphasis his.

⁶⁹ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 52. And he reiterates: “In this sense, faith cannot be an adherence to some contents of belief. If belief must be understood as a weak form or an analogy of knowledge, then faith is not of the order of belief. It comes neither from a knowledge nor from a wisdom, not even by analogy. And it is also not in this sense that we should understand Paul’s opposition of Christian “madness” to the “wisdom” of the world: this “madness” is neither a super-wisdom nor something symmetrical to wisdom or to knowledge. What James, for his part, would have us understand is that faith is its own work. It *is* in works, it *makes* them, and the works *make* it” (52; emphasizes his). In a later essay he insists on Christianity specifically that “the Christian category of faith is above all *the category of an act*... Faith consists in relating to God and to the name of God, to the extent that God and his love are not present, shown—to the extent that they are not present in the modality of monstration. But it is not in the domain of belief, because faith is not an adherence without proof. The greatest spiritual and theological analyses of the Christian faith show that faith is rather, if we insist on expressing it in terms of adherence, *the adhesion to itself of an aim without other*” (152; emphasizes his).

⁷⁰ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 154; emphasis his.

including processions and exclamations), of “*opus dei*” (divine labor, especially the priestly office), of monastic poverty, and various other aspects of patristic and medieval Christian practices.⁷¹ He has no interest whatsoever in examining whether these are “true” or provide knowledge about the divine, but instead mines them for their social and political potential. He shows how liturgy functioned as a form of life, which was carried to its height by monastic rules that sought to make this life effective.⁷² The monastic rule is not about slavishly observing particular laws but about the form of life it inspires and about shaping all of one’s life to fit this form. The two are in reciprocal relation: “The rule is made life to the same extent that life is made rule.”⁷³ The monastic rules function as liturgical text and turn life into liturgy, while also making liturgy a form of life. Agamben reiterates these insights repeatedly: “The form is not a norm imposed on life, but a living that in following the life of Christ gives itself and makes itself a form”;⁷⁴ “to the liturgization of life, there corresponds here a total vivification of liturgy.”⁷⁵ The tensions in this ideal are exhibited by discussions concerning the validity of the priestly office and the effectiveness of the sacraments. Liturgy, he claims in a text on the divine office,

is, in truth, not very mysterious at all, to the point that one can say that, on the contrary, it coincides with perhaps the most radical attempt to think a praxis that would be absolutely and wholly effective. The mystery of the liturgy is, in this sense, the mystery of effectiveness, and only if one understands this arcane secret is it possible to understand the enormous influence that this praxis, which is only apparently separate, has exercised on the way in which modernity has thought both its ontology and its ethics, its politics and its economy.⁷⁶

Agamben analyzes the enactment of liturgy, the public service it provides, and the offices that come to result from it. Throughout he focuses on the reality and effectiveness of rites and practices in order to analyze their social role and political potential. He stresses the “public character” of liturgy instead of “personal piety” or “private prayers.”⁷⁷ Ontological questions are not central, rather operativity and effectivity are. Although Agamben draws on and criticizes the analyses of several liturgical theologians, his concern is not to provide a theological analysis of liturgy, but to galvanize its focus on operativity and effectiveness in order to show how we arrived at particular conceptions of ethical duty, political office, and law in modernity. He concludes that the “problem of the coming philosophy is that of thinking an ontology beyond operativity and

⁷¹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

⁷² “The cenobitic project is literally defined by the *koinos bios*, by the common form of life from which it draws its name, and without which it cannot be understood at all” (Agamben, *Highest Poverty*, 11).

⁷³ Agamben, *The Highest Poverty*, 69.

⁷⁴ Agamben, *The Highest Poverty*, 105.

⁷⁵ Agamben, *The Highest Poverty*, 117.

⁷⁶ Agamben, *Opus Dei*, xii.

⁷⁷ Agamben, *Opus Dei*, 27.

command and an ethics and a politics entirely liberated from the concepts of duty and will.”⁷⁸ The monastic life concerns “a transformation of the very canon of human practice, which has been so determinate for the ethics and politics of Western society.”⁷⁹ The “paradigm of human action” at work in monasticism “has progressively extended its efficacy beyond monasticism and Church liturgy in the strict sense, penetrating into the profane sphere and enduringly influencing both the ethics and the politics of the West.”⁸⁰ Similarly, an analysis of Paul’s concept of time and “sojourning” can enable us to recognize our easy acquiescence to the dominant political realities and to challenge its totalitarian “hypertrophy of law” and its political illegitimacy.⁸¹

This is carried even further by Simon Critchley in *Faith of the Faithless* where he argues that someone without faith is better able to live out a “faithful” life.⁸² Faith is not “metaphysical belief in God” but understood “as a declarative act, as an enactment of the self, as a performative that proclaims itself into existence in a situation of crisis where what is called for is a decisive political intervention.”⁸³ The enactment of faith

is as true for the non-Christian as for the Christian—indeed, it is arguably truer for non-Christians, because their faith is not supported by any creedal dogma, the institution of the church, or metaphysical beliefs in matters like the immortality of the soul and the afterlife. Paradoxically... the faith of the faithless reveals the true nature of faith: the rigorous activity of the subject that proclaims itself into being at each instant without guarantees or security, and which seeks to abide with the infinite demand of love. Faith is the enactment of the self in relation to an infinite demand that both exceeds my power and yet requires all my power.⁸⁴

Critchley seeks to retrieve a Pauline notion of faith that he interprets as anti-establishment and anti-established-church: “If Paul’s essence consists in anything, then it is surely activism. This spells trouble for any and every church that sees itself as founded, funded, and well-defended... the return to Paul is the demand for reformation. It is the demand for a new figure of activism” and for critique of liberal democracy.⁸⁵ Faith, then, “is an announcement that enacts, a

⁷⁸ Agamben, *Opus Dei*, 129.

⁷⁹ Agamben, *The Highest Poverty*, 59.

⁸⁰ Agamben, *The Highest Poverty*, 62.

⁸¹ Agamben, *The Church and the Kingdom*, trans. Leland de la Durantaye (London: Seagull, 2012), 40. Although this address is formulated as a challenge to the churches, Agamben is not calling for a reinvigoration of religious liturgies but for political action. This is worked out in much more detail in *The Kingdom and the Glory*.

⁸² Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London/New York: Verso, 2012). In the following I cite primarily from the introduction because his thesis is formulated there most forcefully. The rest of the book obviously works these claims out much more fully and substantiates them via analyses and criticisms of Paul, Rousseau, Agamben, Žižek, and others.

⁸³ Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 13.

⁸⁴ Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 18.

⁸⁵ Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 157.

proclamation that brings the subject of faith into being.”⁸⁶ It has nothing to do with “abstract metaphysical belief” in a “transcendent beyond” but is instead “a lived subjective commitment” in response to an “infinite demand” that confronts me with my weakness and calls me beyond myself.⁸⁷ Faith is true inasmuch as it is loving commitment or “troth”/pledge.⁸⁸ Consequently, the world is seen through a new light, namely through the eyes of faith and the infinite calling.

Critchley suggests that this calls us to radical political action instead of the kind of quietism he sees Žižek advocating.⁸⁹ He concludes that what is “being called for is a rigorous and activist conception of faith that proclaims itself into being at each instant without guarantee or security, and which abides with the infinite demand of love. Faith is the enactment of the self in relation to a demand that exceeds my power, both in relation to my factual thrownness in the world and the projective movement of freedom achieved as responsibility.”⁹⁰ Such faith “is not only shared by those who are faithless from a creedal or denominational perspective, but can be experienced by them in an exemplary manner.”⁹¹ Here we have gone to the other extreme: Practices become completely separated from the life of religious communities and so lose all dimension of religious commitment entirely. He seeks to speak of “religion—as that force which can bind human beings together in association—without God.”⁹² Religion no longer has any importance, but practices are analyzed solely for their political potential. While Agamben at least provides a rich analysis of historical religious practices, even when their relevance for the present is put exclusively in political terms, in Critchley religious faith is explicitly dismissed as inferior to an individualized “faith of the faithless” that no longer maintains any ties to religious communities and apparently becomes entirely Gnostic. While this may or may not be useful for current political controversies, it surely is not particularly helpful for understanding religion or the faith of religious people.

In light of these extremes, how might we articulate the philosophical task of analyzing faith and religion more convincingly? I would suggest—in light of the insights gained from all the thinkers examined above—that the attempt to prove God’s existence or prove the “validity” of religious assertions in some scientific sense is not only futile but misdirected. Not only is such an exercise doomed to failure (what would it mean to “prove” what is most fundamentally beyond conception?), but it is also far removed from the actual life and interests of religious believers. And it is unclear what rational purpose it would serve: Would someone decide to go to church or synagogue regularly because of a conviction that the ontological argument holds? Instead, people participate in religious communities or affirm a particular kind of faith, because they are bonded in some way or other to these communities and the practices of faith are at least to some extent meaningful to them.

⁸⁶ Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 161.

⁸⁷ Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 162.

⁸⁸ Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 165.

⁸⁹ He summarizes his view: “politics is action that situates itself in the conflict between a commitment to nonviolence and the historical reality of violence into which one is inserted, and which requires an ever-compromised, ever-imperfect action that is guided by an infinite ethical demand” (Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 243).

⁹⁰ Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 251.

⁹¹ Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 252.

⁹² Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 20.

While I think Kitcher's rejection of all truth claims of religion too facile and the move to "spiritual religion" (which seems devoid of any substantive meaningful practices) fairly empty and unable to sustain the kind of social cohesion he suggests religion enables, the focus on practices and community as meaning-giving seems right to me. Often this kind of meaning is inarticulate and it is not always felt equally strongly. People drift away from faith, not usually because they are suddenly convinced that it is irrational or lacks proof, but because the bonds that held them to the community have become slack or been broken, because the practices no longer seem meaningful or fulfilling. And in many religious traditions, in fact, faith is primarily about practices and has very little to do with coherent creedal statements. Faith is expressed in lighting candles, saying Kaddish, keeping the fast during Ramadan, and eating certain kinds of foods at celebrations that serve to strengthen the bonds in families and communities, and so forth. Even martyrdom was often far more about a refusal to cease or begin certain practices (observing the Sabbath, eating forbidden foods, sacrificing to idols, crossing oneself with two or three fingers) than it was about a denial of a statement about the divine as correct or incorrect. This is not to say, with Critchley or Nancy, that practices can be entirely separated from faith or are more authentic when they do not rely on doctrines, traditions, or communities. Rather, faith is expressed in practices and emerges out of them, while it also shapes practices and communities in reciprocal and mutually corrective fashion.

What does this mean for the task of the philosopher of religion? It seems to me that it would be far more productive for philosophers to think more deeply about the ways in which faith is actually expressed rather than to speculate about validity or coherence of certain isolated doctrinal statements.⁹³ Carefully describing and examining religious practices and ascertaining their meaning helps us to understand faith and religious commitment much more deeply, enables us to see how religious faith and practice function, what makes religious communities "tick." It might also help to get a better sense of what makes certain members of religious faiths turn to violence and fundamentalism. Examining the way fundamentalist or extreme communities function, what bonds their members together, how their statements or proclamations of faith (including the condemnation of other groups or positions) function to shape their identities and compel adherence seems a much more productive engagement with them than the baffled rejection or embarrassed ignoring they usually receive from academics, including ones who identify as religious in some form. That kind of attitude does not lead to greater philosophical comprehension but prohibits it. Furthermore, focusing on religious practices has one other significant advantage over speculations about the divine, whether in the forms of proofs for God's

⁹³ This is not, of course, to abandon all attempts to seek for truth or an abdication of any kind of rationality for matters of faith. It is, instead, a plea for reorienting the primary philosophical way of engaging religious commitment to become less about the accuracy of faith statements and more about the way in which faith is actually practiced in real life. A good example of this is Steinbock's examination of mystical experience (mentioned at the beginning of this article) and Richard Kearney's hermeneutic investigations of religious narratives, especially in regard to hospitality and compassion. See especially his *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) and the volume he has edited with James Taylor, *Hosting the Stranger: Between Religions* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

existence, questions of theodicy, or other philosophical dilemmas about divine attributes. While we cannot ultimately observe the divine or test any of these hypotheses, we can observe religious believers and their practices. We can “test” them by observing them again and again, analyzing how their particular practices function in a larger vision of life, seeing how communities are constituted and what makes them fall apart. There is lots of “data” here, while we have very little “data” on the divine. This is not to say that philosophy would be reduced to anthropological observation. Instead it can build on the data provided by anthropology and sociology to gain insight about the meaning of such practices, in a way that anthropological or sociological research is often prohibited from doing by its strong (and justified) commitment to unbiased observation and withholding judgment. Philosophy of science and philosophy of history seek to understand the patterns and meaning of scientific practices and historical events, respectively. Philosophy of religion would be well served by shifting to a similar focus.⁹⁴

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⁹⁴ Obviously, the preliminary proposal I offer here about what philosophy of religion could entail in light of this discussion of various thinkers would need to be worked out much more fully.