



The Quest for God Beyond Belief

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Christians care about belief...on good authority, “for a person believes with his or her heart and so is justified, and confesses with his or her lips, and so is saved” (Rom 10:10). With that caring about belief come questions: Do I believe rightly? Do I believe enough? Do I believe? Why don’t I believe? Why can’t I believe?

I do not ask these questions in order to answer them. But they are in my mind as I seek to write not about the content or status but the place of belief. What is the place of belief? Its place is in the quest for God. That belief has to do with God the Christian will not doubt. The debacle of the sixties’ death of God theology made clear the extravagant futility of belief in Jesus without belief in God. Moreover, contending that belief’s having to do with God is of the nature of a quest—a pilgrimage—may also gain wide acceptance. Despite our dogmatic pretension, who will claim possession?

Belief, thus, has its place in the quest for God. Christian belief recognizes that quest. Out of its own store, for example, it speaks of the Creator and the creatures and says with Augustine: “Thou hast made us for Thyself and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee.”¹ Thus an entire issue of a Christian journal trying to relate “Word” and “world” can well be devoted to The Search for God. Christians believe it is human to search for, to quest for God and that Christian belief belongs to that quest. To say this is not at all to deny the work of God in calling and drawing us. Pascal put it well in this divine word to the human quester: “Thou wouldst not seek Me, if thou didst not possess Me.”² It is not to claim that humans do well in their search for God. Idolatry of self or other can happen, if we are looking for God. It is to say that Christian faith occurs on earth, not in heaven, and that belief, more specifically, is a human reality, part of that wider human reality we may call the quest for God.

I recognize that what I have just written should perhaps be argued much more

¹Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Edward B. Pusey (New York: Pocket Books, 1952) 1.1.1.

²Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1958) 554.

fully and rigorously. I do not seek to do that here,³ for my subject lies elsewhere. I write of the quest for God beyond belief. I do this as a Christian who cares about belief and who asks questions about belief. It may be that in exploring the quest for God beyond belief Christian belief will itself be illumined. Thus the “Word” of Christian belief may find its “world” in which it can be commended and nurtured.

I. “THEN, FACE TO FACE”: IS NOT THE END OF BELIEF’S QUEST BEYOND BELIEF?

Faith believes it knows something. Part of that knowledge is precisely that its knowing is imperfect. It was not Thomas, the poet of the beatific vision, but Paul, the witness to the blinding Damascus Road vision, who wrote that when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away (1 Cor 13:10). And it was C. S. Lewis, that doughty apologist for Christian belief, who wrote at the end of his “eschatological” novel, *Till We Have Faces*:

I ended my first book with the words *no answer*. I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away. What other answer would suffice? Only words, words; to be led out to battle against other words. Long did I hate you, long did I fear you.⁴

Why do I make this point? We are not *now* “then,” after all. Perhaps belief may understand itself better if it looks beyond itself to its end. Perhaps belief may know itself well in knowing that it is not the end. Belief commends what it knows, for it sees beyond itself “as in a glass darkly” to that in which it ends. And yet it knows that it is not itself the end, for it is caught up in the creative chaos of human interpretation. John Smith writes of this:

There must be a way beyond and between absolute immediacy and inference. Absolute immediacy can never deliver what it promises because some form of mediation—concepts, language, symbols—always intervenes and makes it impossible to pass from the experience to the reality of God; inference does not suffice because it always takes the form of necessity, which means not that God is experienced but that something else is experienced and that therefore God “must” be real. The deficiencies of the two approaches point the way to a third approach....The peculiar character of the reality of God is acknowledged together with the corresponding need for a medium of disclosure, and the medium is shown to be related in an intimate way to the reality it discloses.⁵

Does not the quest for God even *now* end beyond belief? Does not belief end beyond belief in the living of the Christian life? The orthodox dogmatists spoke of faith involving *notitia* (knowledge), *assensus* (assent) and *fiducia* (trust). To speak of assent is to speak of “an approving judgment of the intellect, by which we believe that those things which the Scriptures say concerning Christ

³I have discussed this more fully in writing the locus on the knowledge of God in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 1.193-264.

⁴C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 308.

⁵John E. Smith, *Experience and God* (London: Oxford University, 1968) 52-53.

and His merit and atonement for our sins...are certainly and indubitably true and by which we absolutely acquiesce in them.”⁶ Esteem for such belief is apparent in the commitment to the dogmatic enterprise. But the dogmatists knew that *fiducia* “is the principal part of faith.”⁷ The *fides qua creditur*, the passion of faith by which we believe, cannot be reduced to assent to the

fides quae creditur, the propositions of faith.

This truth about faith reflects and reveals truth about the human person and about God. I could risk contradiction here by writing pages about the otherness, the hiddenness of God. I will settle for paragraphs about the hiddenness of the human. Faith has to do with the whole human person in relation to God. My believing is only part of my being before and with God. For our purposes in this article we can perhaps simply cite the broad consensus among students of the human to the effect that our conscious beliefs do not exhaust or even well summarize our human knowing in the world. Carl Jung's name will perhaps come most quickly to mind at this point. Rightly so, for Jung not only argued that "'God' has a place in that part of our psyche which is pre-existent to consciousness and that He therefore cannot be considered an invention of consciousness,"⁸ but also specifically warned against the "aberration" of dominating everything by the intellect:

This serves the secret purpose of placing both doctor and patient at a safe distance from the archetypal effect and thus from real experience, and of substituting for psychic reality an apparently secure, artificial but merely two-dimensional conceptual world in which the reality of life is well covered up by so-called clear concepts. Experience is stripped of its substance, and instead mere names are substituted, which are henceforth put in the place of reality. No one has any obligation to a concept; that is what is so agreeable about conceptuality—it promises protection from experience. The spirit does not dwell in concepts, but in deeds and facts.⁹

One may differ, of course, with Jung. Some who build different structures on this foundation make the "beyond belief" point even more emphatically. Viktor Frankl, for example, wants to stress that "unconscious religiousness stems from the personal center of the individual man rather than an impersonal pool of images shared by mankind."¹⁰ Of his "logotherapy" Frankl writes:

...it leans on the phenomenological analysis of the pre-reflective ontological self-understanding. It borrows from what the patient knows by virtue of the wisdom of his heart, at the bottom of his heart, in the depth of his unconscious. This knowledge is brought to the surface of consciousness.¹¹

⁶Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (3rd ed.; Philadelphia: Lutheran Pub. Society, 1899) 410.

⁷Ibid., 415.

⁸C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (New York: Vintage, 1965) 347-48.

⁹Ibid., 144.

¹⁰Viktor Frankl, *The Unconscious God* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975) 65.

¹¹Ibid., 131.

On the other hand, Alexander Lowen cautions against bringing everything to consciousness, warning against a "whiteout." He has his own neologism, "bioenergetics," which he describes in a paragraph really requiring organ accompaniment:

By expanding consciousness in a downward direction, it brings the individual closer to the unconscious. Our aim is not to make the unconscious conscious, but to make it more familiar and less frightening. When we descend to that border area where body consciousness touches the unconscious, we become aware that the unconscious is our strength, while consciousness is our glory. We sense the unity of life and realize that life is the meaning of life.¹²

For the Christian person life is not the meaning of life. The Christian trusts God in all of life (“whatever you do, in word or deed...,” Col 3:17). But Lowen has the scope of meaning right. Hence Friedrich Schleiermacher could be convincing in his refutation of Kantian and Hegelian tendencies to reduce “religion” to willing or knowing.¹³ We will agree with him that the most authentically pious person is not, for example, the person who displays the most impressive conceptual structure of beliefs. Indeed, the clean straight lines of the carpentry of belief rise up from the ground of something else, something known in the deep places where God and the human are together. Paul Ricoeur has helped us read the blueprints for belief’s construction in his magisterial work *The Symbolism of Evil*. He distinguishes three levels: “first that of the primordial symbols of sin, then that of the Adamic myth, and finally the speculative cipher of original sin” and adds:

Hence, it is false that the ‘Adamic’ myth is the keystone of the Judeo-Christian edifice; it is only a flying buttress, articulated upon the ogival crossing of the Jewish penitential spirit. With even more reason, original sin, being a rationalization of the second degree, is only a false column.¹⁴

Ricoeur is not attacking belief; he knows that “the symbol gives rise to thought.” But he knows that thought and belief do not live off of themselves. Thus belief, bright and bold, rises from a broader life, a deeper quest. It does not begin in itself, even humanly speaking, and it does not end in itself. Even those of us who decline to be identified as mystics may recognize that our formulations do not exhaust our faith. We may prefer to speak of our life “before” God, rather than “in” God. But we can understand from our own experience a mystical testimony to prayer and love:

Language falters....Language is necessarily complex. It is always moving from expressed meaning to unexpressed, from denotation to connotation....We must go beyond words, confiding ourselves to God, letting God help us lift our hearts to him in silence and sometimes even without im-

¹²Alexander Lowen, *Bioenergetics* (New York: Penguin, 1975) 321.

¹³The classic statement is the second “speech” in F. D. Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (Harper Torchbook; New York: Harper, 1958) 26-118.

¹⁴Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon, 1967) 237, 239.

ages. All of this is particularly clear to us when we reach the upper terraces of prayer...we are well beyond words, yet not outside either thought or feeling....Like

the mystics who turn to the images of the Song of Songs, we frequently find that narrative of wooing and sexual union satisfactory....And yet even its exalted measures may be too much, too complicated, too multifaceted and overladen with too many movements away from the central fact: love.¹⁵

II. "IN GOD WE LIVE, MOVE AND HAVE OUR BEING": DOES NOT THE QUEST FOR GOD OCCUR APART FROM BELIEF?

If a full description of belief is not *sufficient* to express the Christian's quest for God, is belief even a *necessary* part of the search for God? There are slippery words here: "quest" or "search," "belief" and possibly even "Christian." Distinctions are desirable. It is important to distinguish between one who knows more than he or she can name (but who *can* name the object of the quest) and one for whom the quest seems chiefly a subjective reality. Or, again, a nonbeliever, without being moved to worship and prayer, may possibly identify something which is not the self and which fulfills some of the roles God does for the Christian. The differences are important. Still, the Christian may recognize in the experience and interpretation of the unbeliever what that person does not discern: precisely, the quest for God.

Of what are we speaking? Nearly two decades ago in a popular piece titled *A Rumor of Angels* Peter Berger wrote of "signals of transcendence":

I mean phenomena that are to be found within the domain of our "natural" reality but that appear to point beyond that reality....I mean certain reiterated acts and experiences that appear to express essential aspects of man's being, of the human animal as such...they belong to ordinary everyday awareness.¹⁶

He went on to identify the propensity for order, play, hope, condemnation, and humor. What shall we make of this? Is the parent who tells the child waking in the night that "everything is going to be all right" really making the cosmic statement "Have trust in being!"? Does the prisoner in the concentration camp who can manage a laugh imply thereby the imprisonment of the human spirit and that the spirit's imprisonment will be overcome? It is hard to know, but I suggest that the Christian's own belief can find connections in at least three major strands of human reality unattached to specific religious belief.

Consider, for example, the metaphysical—the quest to identify principles "which are indispensably relevant to the analysis of everything that happens."¹⁷ Here the human spirit may be doing more than one thing. The disrepute of the metaphysician is well earned, if the quest is for an escape from

¹⁵Ann and Barry Ulanov, *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) 124-25.

¹⁶Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (New York: Doubleday, 1970) 53.

¹⁷A. N. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Macmillan, 1926; reprinted, Cleveland: World, 1960) 82.

the concrete, the particular, the existential. We would not give up the real, no matter how messy it may be, for the tidy unreality of abstraction. But what if reality is in some sense one, what if

there is a structure sustaining the irreducible reality of particulars? And what if Christians speak of God not only as real, but as universally present? What, for that matter, if they speak of “the beloved Son” as the one in whom all things hold together (Col 1)? Then, I submit, the Christian will not be able to exclude metaphysical inquiry from the quest for God. The metaphysician may not identify only God or all of God, but the quest has the right feel about it in its combination of the universal and the real. The Christian will be interested in how convincingly the metaphysician performs his or her descriptive work and in appropriating that work will draw on the discernment which faith’s vision provides.

To quest for God is to quest for one who is One. The word to the believer is this: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one” (Deut 6). Because God is one, God can be served with all the heart, soul and might of the believer. Kierkegaard knew this when he wrote that purity of heart is to will one thing. Is the human quest for such unity to be found apart from belief? Perhaps the transcendence people seek in art has its place here. It is clear that people do seek something of religious import in the realm of the beautiful. Consider this grim prescription by Walter Pater:

We are all under the sentence of death but with a sort of indefinite reprieve...we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest—at least among “the children of this world”—in art and song. For our one chance lies in expanding the interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time....Of this wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art’s sake, has most; for art comes to professing frankly to give nothing but highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake.¹⁸

And what is found in this quest? Thomas Aquinas tells us that “Three things are required for beauty. First integrity....Then proportion or harmony. And finally clarity.”¹⁹ At the heart of this is order or harmony, as Plato knew:

The artist disposes all things in order, and compels the one part to harmonize and accord with the other part, until he has constructed a regular and systematic whole.²⁰

Is not the “fit” right here for a God? Would it not verily be a divine judgment in which each thing found its proper place? To that degree the art museum, the concert hall, may be built on holy ground. One need not say that everything is found here. The believer may ask whether the quest here has to do with the

¹⁸Walter Pater, “Conclusion,” *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry in Selected Writings of Walter Pater*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: New American Library, 1974) 60-61.

¹⁹Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, ed. T. C. O’Brien (London: Blackfriars, 1976) 1.39.8.

²⁰*Gorgias* 503E-4A. Quoted from *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett (2 vols.; New York: Random House, 1937) 1.565.

order of redemption or the order of creation. But at least a kindred intensification of human spirit

seems to be here discernible.

A third such human sphere which seems to reach beyond the human is the ethical. The believer who has heard the word that God is One is to heed that word by obeying with all the heart, soul, and might available. Will not that believer hear an echo in the ethicist's talk about universalizability? Indeed, the believer may find a welcoming opening when the ground of the good or the right is left unclarified. I refer not only to formal philosophical discussion that you cannot...or you can...or you must...derive "ought" from "is." I think as well of how persons working in counseling or in social science classes in the schools struggle to speak of "health" or "values" without making more than a descriptive statement. Moral claims do seem to call out for a ground; here we seem to glimpse not only parallelism, but also dependence.

In writing this I do not mean to suggest that moral insight or even moral action is specifically dependent upon conscious religious belief. That argument would be difficult to sustain empirically. Moreover, it would seem to invite an authoritarian and heteronomous reading of the ethical ground which would exclude the chance to check and disqualify a call to Jonestown. Dependence on God does not amount to dependence on belief. Indeed, if there is a God whose creative will for all humankind is one, we might indeed expect human beings, simply as human, to be able to hear that call. God's will for all is precisely "for" them. It does not deflect the creatures from earth and society, but reaches them concretely there. But it reaches them creatively and as such involves a call to freedom which does order the chaos of the "is." The "ought" is the mask of that ordering.

In all of this there is direction without completion. The metaphysician's vision is far reaching, but it is not clearly one. The artist's vision may be one, but it is not clear how much the viewer or hearer's particularity matters. The ethicist hears a call sounding for each self but cannot account for that call. What now is does not clearly justify what is not yet. Now and not yet...that seems to be the rhythm of faith, and that is the rhythm of a quest. The quest is not itself belief, but it does seem to seek, apart from belief, what belief hears calling.

III. "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?" MAY THE QUEST FOR GOD OCCUR AGAINST BELIEF?

If the quest for God does not depend on belief, could it even turn against belief? Can one who believes consider that possibility?

If the believer understands belief always to have a human side, that believer can recognize the possibility of corruption and distortion in the very act of belief. Against such sickness the cry of the atheist might well be seen to be questing for health. Herbert Richardson has discussed this in connection with the "matrix of Meaning," the "intellectus," which is dependent upon a culture's concept of God. In transitional periods between dominant matrices atheism will flourish. It may be prophetic, anticipating a new epoch. Or it may take the form of boredom, when a traditional "intellectus" is dying from within.

Or atheism may be a juvenile protest, parasitically dependent upon the affirmations it resists.²¹

If Richardson is right, it is clear that a believer could not well dismiss an atheistic tendency without looking carefully at the context in which it arises and lives. But other believers have suggested an even broader and bolder role for atheism. Robert Scharlemann has done that in

developing Paul Tillich's understanding of the symbol of the cross, "that Jesus 'sacrifices himself as Jesus to himself as the Christ' and therein is the mediator of God." Here is Scharlemann's application of this principle:

Prereflective religion accepts the appearing of God as God; reflection rejects the appearance. From the standpoint of the reflexive experience of the cross, the reality intended, but not yet distinguished, by religion is a reality that makes its appearance in the movement between religion and reflection. The untruth of all existent gods, which is exposed by reflection, is the essence of the God who is God. Truth for religion consisted in the relation in which consciousness neither could nor wished to withdraw itself from the impression of the appearing God; for reflection the untruth of religion consists in the ascertainment that no object can be godly. From the standpoint of the reflexive experience of the truth of truth in the symbol of the cross, what religion receives and what reflection dispels (by its critical questioning) are two phases of the God who is the depth of truth.²²

What resounds here is a recognition of the ontological otherness of God. God is not a being like other beings; it is faith itself that requires one to reject belief in such a God. It was in such a way that Tillich appealed to a return of "the Lutheran courage...the courage to take the anxiety of meaninglessness upon oneself."²³

May the atheist be understood by the believer to be crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Can one consider that in face of the fact that it is the atheist who is forsaking God? It matters which God(s) we are talking about. Prophetic atheism may cry out against belief in God which causes or supports human suffering. Dorothee Soelle finds such a cry in Job:

Why does the Almighty allow evil?...Once the question is radically raised, no answer can be given within the context of an understanding of God that combines justice and omnipotence. Job is stronger than God. Job's thinking has led to atheism for moral reasons.²⁴

Such moral atheism cannot find a moral God in the vestments of due religion. Scharlemann and Tillich, on the other hand, seem to be making an ontological point, one which Paul Ricoeur calls specifically "nonethical":

To think nonethically, we must start at a point where the autonomy of our will is rooted in a dependence and an obedience which are not infected by

²¹Herbert W. Richardson, *Toward an American Theology* (New York: Harper, 1967).

²²Robert P. Scharlemann, *The Being of God: Theology and the Experience of Truth* (New York: Seabury, 1981) 177, 181.

²³Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University, 1952) 189-90.

²⁴Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 116.

accusation, prohibition, and condemnation. Listening is just such a pre-ethical situation. It is a mode of being which is not yet a mode of doing, and for this reason it escapes the alternatives of submission and revolt. Heraclitus used to say “Do not hear my words but the Logos.”...The God whom we seek is not the source of moral obligation, the author of commandments, the one who could put the seal of the Absolute on the ethical experience of man. On the contrary, this inquiry convinces me that the kerygma must not be caught in the snare of obligation and duty.²⁵

Perhaps in these two, the moral protest and the ontological yearning of atheism, we find a quest for a God whose otherness is not remoteness, whose transcendence is in relationship. That might be a God who loved humankind with a love like none other. Why, it might be the God in whom Christians believe, a God who will not forsake humankind, whatever may come. It could be that contemporary Christian theology faces the challenge of formulating such a doctrine of God, beyond the affirmations of liberalism and the denials of neo-orthodoxy. Any given atheist may not represent this quest at all, of course. God may not forsake humankind, but it is possible to reject God defiantly. One thus needs to attend to particularity in the study of atheism. Or the atheist may not know that for which/whom he or she quests. But the believer still may hear a divine call in this human challenge.

IV. I BELIEVE

So what, if the quest for God ends beyond belief? So what, if it occurs apart from and even against belief? So what, for the believer? So this: belief need not bear the entire weight of the relation to God. That will help when the believer considers the very young and the very old, the retarded, the senile. It will help when the believer considers himself or herself. Perhaps Gerard Manley Hopkins had something of this in mind when he wrote:

My own heart let me more have pity on; let
Me live to sad self hereafter kind,
Charitable; not live this tormented mind
With this tormented mind tormenting yet....

Soul, self; come poor Jackself, I do advise
You, jaded, let be; call off thoughts awhile....²⁶

Knowing its place, perhaps belief can fill its place both more naturally and more efficaciously.

Belief finds its place—*with others*—in the quest for God. We are not alone in this. Two things follow: there is something for the believer to say, and there is

²⁵Paul Ricoeur with Alasdair MacIntyre, *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York; Columbia University, 1969) 71, 75.

²⁶Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (4th ed; New York: Oxford University, 1967) 102-103.

something for the believer to hear. Belief will be affected by the critique of the other(s); it will bear its own burden of witness. It will live with this ambiguity. Not easily. Indeed, the believer may pray along these lines:

Lord, in our day there are those who seek thee:
There are those who seek thee not.

Yet the *place* of worship may not well distinguish them.
Habits there evade thee, being customary,
And there are those without who seek in absence
And mark their yearning by their protest.

Make us alert who pray that the walls
Of due religion do not insulate our prayers
From the outsider's world,
Nor the outsider from our cares.
Are these homes of prayer only museums of our history?
Symbols of our culture and poems of our architects?
Is the mark of doom on every holy place?

Sceptics also have gone into museums while faith abides,
Yet prayerlessness is a heavy thing
And darkens our time most sorely.
Lord we continue to pray: let it not be as mere
Survivors of the secular, but truly revivers of the sacred.
Amen.²⁷

²⁷Anonymous.