

# Atheism as a “faith”

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*An address concerning one aspect of atheism in relation to secularism in the United States*

Very Rev. Dr. Thomas A. Baima  
Faith, Reason and Atheism Conference  
Saint Joseph Pontifical Seminary Carmelgiri, Aluva, Kerala, India  
November 14, 2020

Let me begin by thanking the Reverend Dr. Clement Valluvassery for the kind invitation to participate in this webinar marking the quasiquicentennial celebration of the publication *The Living Word, a Journal of Philosophy and Theology*. I am pleased to learn of the work of St Joseph Pontifical Seminary, Carmelgiri, Alwaye, Kerala, India. As a seminary professor and contributing editor of the journal *Chicago Studies*, I am glad to see that the dimension of intellectual formation both in and beyond Saint Joseph Pontifical Seminary is treated with such seriousness.

Pastoral ministry today requires that priests be up to the task intellectually. In many places, and this is certainly true in the United States of America, the majority of the population has a good secular education, often to the tertiary level. A good number of people have significant education in their profession. But sadly, our religious education tends to stop after age 14 for most people. As a result, through no fault of their own, when faced with issues such as are being considered at this conference: our people face them with a religious formation that does not measure up to the secular education they have received.

The first thing I want to suggest in my remarks today is that we have to prepare ourselves, as theologians, priests, and ministers, to accompany our people as they journey through lives which will confront them with challenges we ourselves did not have to face. Too many in the Church simply do not take atheism or other ideological movements seriously. And not taking atheism seriously does not lead to a good end.

It seems only proper since we are going to talk about Atheism that we begin with a prayer.

Grant O Lord, that none may love you less this day because of me; that never a word or act of mine may turn a soul from you; and, ever daring, yet one more grace would I implore, that many souls this day, because of me, may love you more. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

## My context

So, what might I offer you today on this question? To begin with a little biographical context, I did not attend either high school or college seminary. I only entered at the graduate level. My philosophical formation was not at a Catholic school but a secular university. While there were many believers among the student body, to the best of my knowledge, none of the faculty in the philosophy department at that time believed in the God of Abraham. In self-defense, as a devout Catholic working in such a department, I privately studied the neo-Thomists such as Jacques Maritain, Etienne Gilson and later Mortimer Adler. And to understand the context I bring to this

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<sup>1</sup> *Manual of Prayers*, ed. James D. Watkins (Rome: Pontifical North American College, 1995), 70.

presentation, you should know that I studied under Professor John Beversluis, a well-recognized expert on Socrates, who spent most of his scholarly life doing battle with C. S. Lewis on the question of atheism and belief.<sup>2</sup>

What I mean to say is that in my experience, atheists are people whom I know, respect, and have engaged in substantive dialogue. These questions are not a puzzle to be solved, or something abstract. These are questions carried by real people for whom they are life and death issues. I have also found that belief is very much involved in the whole matter of atheism at the level of the individual. That's part of what I want to explore with you in this address.

For our purposes now, in the dark of night (or whatever time of day it is where you are), I want to move away from the kind of mutual monologue between people wishing to prove that God does not exist, and instead engage a small group of philosophers who are asking the next question: If God does not exist, how do we live in this life: morally, politically, and spiritually (meaning here the inner life). In my next section, I will describe the contours of American secularism, which is the only variety I am competent to speak about, and then, in the section following, summarize the thought of one philosopher who is attempting to answer the next question.

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<sup>2</sup> See John Beversluis *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1985). A second expanded edition by Prometheus Books in 2007 includes responses to critics. Professor Beversluis is a former Christian who studied at Calvin College under W. Harry Jellema. Professor Jellema was a major influence on such Christian philosophers as Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstoff. Additionally, Beversluis studied at Westminster Theological Seminary. As a result, his knowledge of Reformed theology is formidable. Finally, in his post-Christian period, he did doctoral studies in philosophy at Indiana University. He became a professor at Butler University where he taught for thirty years. Upon retirement from Butler, he joined the philosophy faculty of Fresno State University.

## Atheism as part of American Religious Pluralism

Among the first lessons I learned from Professor Beversluis was that language is important and a good philosopher begins by defining terms. The terms we need to pay attention to are God, theism, atheism, deism, faith, doubt, belief, and knowledge. I will add to those, religion and spirituality. I will attempt to offer a useful definition when I first use each term in this address. Let me turn now to atheism as part of American pluralism.

For our purposes, I will be basing my survey of American secularism on the statistical sociology of Joseph O. Baker and Buster G. Smith.<sup>3</sup> Let us begin with a definition. What do we mean by secularism? Francis Cardinal George, the late archbishop of Chicago, himself a philosopher of some substance, defined secularism as “living as if there is no God.” Note please that this definition allows for a variety of secularisms.<sup>4</sup> All sociologists of religion would be quick to point out that secularisms developed less out of the theological question of the existence of God, and more in opposition to normative organized religion.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph O. Baker is assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at East Tennessee State University. Buster G. Smith is assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at Catawba College.

<sup>4</sup> See *Varieties of Secularism in A Secular Age*, eds. Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). The essay by Robert N. Bellah, “Conforming Modernity: Maruyama Masao, Jurgen Habermas, and Charles Taylor is a good survey of the different approaches. At root, secularism or atheism as we encounter them today are modern creatures. Modernity, then, is the necessary intellectual context for our study.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph O. Baker and Buster G. Smith, *American Secularism: Cultural Contours of Nonreligious Belief Systems* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 85.

Baker and Smith describe what they call “nonreligious belief systems.” Their portrait is wide-ranging, covering nonreligion’s relationship to religion, both carefully defined, patterns of private spiritual expression, life satisfaction and subjective well-being.<sup>6</sup> “Nonreligious belief systems” cover a range of notions along what we might call the “doctrine of God” spectrum, from atheism to agnosticism, to free thinking movements to the spiritual but not religious phenomenon. These descriptions are based on sociological surveys which capture actual belief and practice descriptions. One finding will illustrate the sophistication of this approach: “four out of five atheists report that they never pray.” This means, of course, that one out of five atheists *do* pray. How does this finding shape our understanding of atheism? At the very least, it shows a practical atheism, a secularism “living as if there is no God,” in addition to those who have taken a firm position on the god-question.

The research findings allow Baker and Smith to segment American society into five categories:

1. Atheist
2. Agnostic
3. Nonaffiliated believer
4. Culturally religious
5. Active religious<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 91.

In summary these authors noted that “there is both overlap . . . and substantial differences between the secular types concerning private spiritual beliefs and practices. A primary difference between the atheist, agnostic, nonaffiliated believers and culturally-religious is the totality of their disengagement with religion, public and private.<sup>8</sup>

If we posit the category of “nonreligious belief systems” with the important qualification about the range from atheism to the nonaffiliated believer, we see a range of secularisms the exploration of which will allow us to examine atheism with greater nuance and clarity than is usually found in apologetic approaches.

## **Atheism as a “faith”**

As an introduction to a consideration of atheism as a faith, allow me to define these two words. In Catholic fundamental theology “faith” has at least three meanings. First, the term refers to the theological virtue of faith. As a theological virtue, it is infused as a grace from God. A second use of the term “faith” refers to the human response by which his or her life is ordered to the demand of faith. Theologically, we also understand this response to be empowered by grace. The third meaning of the word “faith” is when we place the definite article in front of it: “The Faith.” This use of faith refers to the content of the revelation once delivered to the people of God through the history of the people of Israel and in the person of Jesus Christ. It is transmitted by scripture and tradition and summarized in the Creed. Let me telegraph where I am

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 104.

going by saying that when I claim that we can discuss atheism as a faith, I am using faith in the second meaning: a human response which orders our lives to the demand of faith.

Now, what about a definition of atheism? In order to give us a definition which will allow us to deal with the sociological data on non-belief, which is broader than the simple question of whether or not there is a deity, I would propose a definition used by Mortimer Adler to describe himself before he became a Christian. He described this state as “not believing in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” What is being denied, then, is more than simply a deity. What is being denied is the historical Faith as I proposed it in the third definition. Through this definition we will be able to both see how the range of non-belief fits into society and understand how atheism as a semantic system can move beyond the God question.

I just called atheism a “semantic system.” I got that expression from Francis Cardinal George who, speaking to a meeting of Jews and Christians, said:

American Culture is an actor in our mutual relationship; it is a semantic system, which interacts with the semantic systems of our respective faiths as they dialogue with one another. . . . I would argue that it is a religious competitor with Judaism and Catholicism, sometimes helpful and sometimes malign.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> George, Op. cit.

It is in this sense that I'm going to talk about atheism as a faith. By this I mean a semantic system "allowing nonbelievers an avenue to public morality, meaning and righteousness that could be divorced from theism and focused solely on humanity."<sup>10</sup>

I will attempt this discussion by looking at one philosopher who is concerned with the next question for atheism, which is the development of such a semantic system. We certainly cannot universalize his claims, but I would argue that he offers one instance of a view of atheism behaving as a faith.<sup>11</sup> The philosopher I will use is Simon Critchley, who authored *Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* and has been provoking this discussion of atheism as a faith ever since.<sup>12</sup>

As I present Professor Critchley's thought, I don't want you to be confused about what he thinks and what I think. In this section, you will be hearing his thought. While I respect the serious inquire in which he is engaged, I disagree with him on almost every point. I will share what I think about some of these matters in the final section of the paper.

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<sup>10</sup> Baker and Smith, op. cit. Some of my thinking on this point is indebted to Professor Ingolf U. Dalferth's work on philosophy and theology and the interrelationship between the two. The insight I am employing in this essay relates to the development of critical philosophical theology after Kant which sharply distinguishes between revelation and reason. Mortimer Adler makes the same point distinguishing dogmatic theology (reasoning from revelation) and philosophical theology (reasoning without appeal to revelation). Professor Dalferth says that critical philosophical theology deals with "religious faith proper . . . that is based on the 'interior moral laws which can be derived from the [practical] reason of every human being."

<sup>11</sup> Simon Critchley is the Hans Jonas Professor of Philosophy at the New School for Social Research, a graduate school in New York City, describes its mission as a commitment to progressive values, academic freedom, rigorous scholarship, and critical theory in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, as envisioned by its founders: Charles Beard, John Dewey, James Harvey Robinson, and Thorstein Veblen, who were teaching at Columbia University during the First World War. Professor Critchley's teaching and research focuses on continental philosophy, philosophy and literature, psychoanalysis, ethics, and political theory. His starting point is similar to the question confronting theologians in the Death of God movement, who nevertheless wanted to keep doing theology.

<sup>12</sup> See Simon Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (New York: Verso Press, 2014).

Professor Critchley is an English philosopher, currently a professor at the New School for Social Research in New York City. He studied at the University of Essex, then the University of Nice, where he wrote an M.Phil. on overcoming metaphysics before he returned to Essex to do his doctorate on ethics and deconstruction.<sup>13</sup> Politically and philosophically, he would associate himself with radical thought.<sup>14</sup> The principle authors he has studied in depth are names you know: Marx, Freud, Derrida, Levinas, and Nietzsche. He is best known for his claim that philosophy begins with disappointment. At this point, I'll let Professor Critchley speak in his own voice about atheism and Christianity:

I have little sympathy for the evangelical atheism of Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens that sees God and religion as some sort of historical error that has happily been corrected and refuted by scientific progress. On the contrary, the religious tradition with which I am most familiar –broadly Judeo-Christianity – offers a powerful way of articulating questions of ultimate meaning and value of human life in ways irreducible to naturalism.<sup>15</sup>

To be clear, atheism is not simply about the existence of God, as theists understand the deity. Surely, that's what preoccupies Dawkins or Hitchens, but in a certain sense, they are taking their starting point from Christianity's struggle with the Enlightenment. At the root is a question of authority. If there is no God, then there cannot be revelation,

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<sup>13</sup> See Carl Cederstrom, "Biography of Simon Critchley" interview on "How to Stop Living and Start Worrying" Critchley's personal website.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin Dieter Ullrich, "Simon Critchley, John D. Caputo and radical political theology?" in *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, Vol. 79, nos. 1-2, (2018).

<sup>15</sup> Simon Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Philosophy* (New York: Verso, 2012), 19.

which means there cannot be any religious authority as traditionally claimed. But they pretty much stop there.

Other forms of atheism take a wider view. They move on from the God question, into trying to understand how to create a semantic system which does not depend on a revealing God. Perhaps that is another definition of atheism which might be useful in our inquiry. Said another way, these thinkers are trying to do *theology* after the negation of God.<sup>16</sup>

Odd as it sounds to Catholic and Orthodox ears, radical theology seeks to continue the *theological* task after affirming the negation of God. It is in this sense that Professor Critchley can sub-title his book, “experiments in political *theology*.”

As we, as Christian theologians, consider atheism in this conference, I want to challenge us to not consider a caricature of atheism. Atheism has many “denominations” if you would. As there are a variety of secularisms, there are a variety of atheisms. Dawkins and Hitchens are one kind, Critchley another, and there are still others besides.<sup>17</sup> There are those for whom atheism is a serious undertaking. We must do them the courtesy, as we should with all humanity, of taking serious concerns seriously.

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<sup>16</sup> See Calvin Dieter Ullrich, “Simon Critchley, John D. Caputo and radical political theology?” in *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, Vol. 79, nos. 1-2, (2018).

<sup>17</sup> A survey of sorts can be found in Milo Sweedler, “The Poison and the Cure – Experiments in Political Theology: Critchley’s *The Faith of the Faithless*,” in *Theory and Event* Vol. 15, No. 3, (2012)

The concern which Professor Critchley takes seriously is a basis for ethics and political life. The book is wide-ranging, so I will narrow my considerations to how he handles belief in a non-theistic semantic system. I'm going to move pretty fast here, so bear with me.

Critchley's previous work is located in continental philosophy. Particularly in Rousseau and Heidegger. It is through his work on Rousseau that he considers how a non-theistic belief system needs both a way to explain what Christians call original sin and a ritual system which mediates sacralization of political association. His argument, like his view of philosophy itself, begins with disappointment. He confesses an implicit romanticism in his philosophical approach, which he also found to be disappointing.<sup>18</sup> The promise of the secular has disappointed. He laments how secularism has not lived up to its promise (and indeed he recognizes that it cannot). He is at pains when he sees that in the post-modern period politics (which for him is action in the world), [politics] has moved towards violence and uses religion to provide justification. He sees religious justified violence as the main ethical problem.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, he cannot find a way forward in the several secular approaches of the Enlightenment nor in the various Theistic alternatives offered by the various forms of fundamentalist religion, because both tend devalue the individual.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Carl Cederstrom, "Biography of Simon Critchley" interview on "How to Stop Living and Start Worrying" Personal website. <https://www.simoncritchley.org/about>

<sup>19</sup> See Milo Sweedler, "The Poison and the Cure – Experiments in Political Theology: Critchley's The Faith of the Faithless," in *Theory and Event* Vol. 15, No. 3, (2012).

<sup>20</sup> See Simon Critchley, "Faith of the Faithless" a conversation with Cornell West at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (February 7, 2012) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3oB2eQmVFLY>

As a continental philosopher, the answer for ethics lies in the human person as subject capable of transcendence, individually and in society. He offers two parables in the book. One is of Oscar Wilde who writes:

When I think of religion at all, I feel as if I would like to found an order for those who cannot believe: the Confraternity of the Faithless, one might call it, where on the altar, on which no taper burned, a priest, in whose heart peace had no dwelling, might celebrate with unblessed bread and a chalice empty of wine. Everything to be true must become a religion. And agnosticism should have its ritual no less than faith.<sup>21</sup>

In explaining himself, Critchley will refer to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's question about having spirituality without religion. For Critchley, it's the opposite he is seeking, religion [a rule of life] without theism, which nevertheless provided the means to bind together individuals in association for action in the world.

In his own summary of *Faith of the Faithless*, Professor Critchley claims the book is really about love. What he means is what Soren Kierkegaard wrote about in *Works of Love* where "the rigor of faith" lies in its effort to "persist with the commandment to love, 'you shall love your neighbor.'"<sup>22</sup> Based on his reading of the Apostle Paul and Martin Heidegger, Critchley holds:

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<sup>21</sup> Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis and Other Writings* (London, Penguin, 1954), 153, quoted from Simon Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (New York: Verso, 2012), 3.

<sup>22</sup> Critchley, 18. See also, Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, eds., Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

Faith is a proclamation that enacts life. Such a proclamation 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.

Professor Critchley goes on to circle back to Oscar Wilde’s parable:

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.<sup>23</sup>

In *Faith of the Faithless*, Professor Critchley argues the “faith is not belief in metaphysical entity, but the lived subjective commitment to an infinite demand. He illustrates infinite demand with that section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said:

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. . . You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.<sup>24</sup>

It is precisely the ethical overload, to use his phrase, in these commands by Christ that we find an illustration of *infinite* demand. We are confronted with the force of the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. Additionally, see Duane Armitage, “Simon Critchley’s Faithless Faith: A Kierkegaardian-Heideggerian Critique,” in *Heythrop Journal* No. LVIII (2017), 626-635.

<sup>24</sup> Matthew 5:43-44, 48.

demand and the facts of the situation. Theists read this as a divine command. The non-theist reads it as a way to structure subjectivity (the ultimate source for them of ethics). For Critchley, this is the source of conscience.

Faith, the way Critchley is using the term, is an enactment of a calling (which comes from the infinite demand through conscience). What calls is beyond our power and creates a powerlessness in the self. "Faith" Critchley says, "is not exhausted by belief in a deity, it is a declarative act in relationship to the calling." He posits a supreme fiction, something we know to be fiction which we can believe because it structures subjectivity.<sup>25</sup>

There is much more to the book, which is basically about how to act politically. But this description, dense though it may be in places, reveals that atheism today is much more sophisticated than the logic crunching of Dawkins and Hitchens. In these forms, it behaves very much like a faith, albeit one very different from that of theism. As Professor Critchley himself says, if Dietrich Bonhoeffer was looking for spirituality without religion, the atheist today is looking for religion (a rule that orders life) without the spirituality of theism. While in my paper so far, I have demonstrated that there is a way that atheism can be spoken of as a faith, I have not touched on the most important

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<sup>25</sup> Simon Critchley, "Poetry as philosophy – on Wallace Stevens" in *European Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2005). Critchley gets the term "supreme fiction" from Wallace Stevens. The notion of supreme fiction develops from an atheistic transcendence originating in infinite demand, to a poetic transcendence in the supreme fiction. As Calvin Dieter Ullrich notes "This transcendence remains atheistic in content, to be sure, but strikes a somewhat different key in structure." See Calvin Dieter Ullrich, "Simon Critchley, John D. Caputo and radical political theology?" in *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, Vol. 79, nos. 1-2, (2018).

issue for a theological conference. What does all this offer us for the evangelizing mission?

## Faith, Reason, and Atheism

I started out by talking about the formation of priests in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I noted the need for priests to be up to the task intellectually. As I complete our consideration of this topic of Atheism as a faith, I want to return to the priest as the missionary disciple as this applies to his role as an instrument of evangelization. It is in this section that you will find my own approach to the topic.

Professor Alister McGrath has described how C. S. Lewis, who is certainly recognized as one of the great apologists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, used the imagination and the poetically true as an element of apologetic.<sup>26</sup>

Professor Louis Markos, who has written a lot about Lewis as an apologist, relates the following: “. . . Lewis’ conversion did not occur in a single leap from atheism to Christianity but in a series of two distinct leaps (or steps) of faith. Lewis spent two years as a theist – as a believer in the existence of God but not in the deity of Christ – before embracing Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>27</sup>

If you don’t know C. S. Lewis’ story, he was an academic at Oxford University. His area was English literature. He maintained close friendships with some other

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<sup>26</sup> Alister McGrath, *Lunch with C. S. Lewis* \_\_\_\_\_

<sup>27</sup> Louis Markos, *Apologetics for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 65.

Oxford dons. One of the men in the group was J. R. R. Tolkien, the author of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Tolkien was a devout Catholic. He accompanies Lewis throughout their friendship as a fellow scholar and writer. Occasionally, they would talk of serious things, such as one evening when they were out walking through the gardens of Magdalene College where they both taught. Lewis had already worked his way through the god-question and had become a theist, but he had not made the next step of belief in the God of Abraham manifest in Jesus Christ. Reason had taken Lewis to theism, but it could not take him any farther. Both of them were scholars of English literature, so both were quite familiar with the various myths of different cultures. Now, most English speakers, because of the Enlightenment, hear the word “myth” and think of something that is not true. A myth, in the sense a scholar of literature might use the term, is a symbolic story which carries *poetic* truth. The argument Lewis held to was that many cultures come up with the same myth, a divine being who comes down to Earth to save us, and whose death and rebirth restores the cosmic balance. You find the same persistent patterns in their religious literature. To Lewis, this proved that while myths might have poetic truth, that was all.

J. R. R. Tolkien asked Lewis a different question. He asked why all those cultures had the same myth? C. S. Lewis was asking a question which Simon Critchley also posed in a public lecture, which is how was it that Christianity broke out of its Middle

Eastern confines and became the religion of the Roman Empire?<sup>28</sup> How was it that Rome, this highly developed culture which grew on the intellectual achievement of Greek philosophy would be over taken by this Semitic religion?

While Critchley's answer is power, as Marx understood it, Tolkien offered Lewis a different reason. Tolkien suggested, and here I'm quoting Markos, that "perhaps the reason Christ resembled so closely the myths of the pagans was that Christ was the myth that came true. Perhaps the stories recorded in the Gospel represented God's historical enactment of a divine plan and truth that the pagans yearned for in their myths. This would be the turning point for Lewis – the historicity of Christianity." Lewis would himself say, "The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the dying God without ceasing to be myth, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history . . . to a historical Person crucified under Pontius Pilate."<sup>29</sup> . . . [Christ] is the True Myth, able to satisfy our twin desire, and need, for earthly reality and heavenly mystery."<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

I illustrated the seriousness of this undertaking with the work of one philosopher, Simon Critchley, who is searching for a path to action in the world, indeed to love, which emerges from the human person as a subject capable of transcendence,

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<sup>28</sup> "Simon Critchley and Cornell West in Conversation" (February 17, 2012) Brooklyn Academy of Music, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3oB2eQmVFLY>

<sup>29</sup> C. S. Lewis, "The Myth Became Fact" anthologized in *God in the Dock*. Quoted from Markos, op. cit., 66-67.

<sup>30</sup> Markos, Op. cit., 67-68.

individuality and association, which could function as a “faith for the faithless.” While I do not agree with Critchley’s conclusions, nevertheless, I respect him and the seriousness of his project. The seriousness of his project is a challenge to us, as priests and ecclesial ministers, as to whether we are ready and willing to accompany nonbeliever is a genuine search. And it is to this final point that I will devote this conclusion.

Are we prepared to go out from the comfort of our dioceses, our parishes, our schools, even our theologies and spiritualities and meet the postmodern seeker in his or her mystery? If we can, if we are comfortable to be with them – to accompany them and take the time, years even, which they struggle with Mystery as it has manifested itself to them – then we may be there when whatever faith they have is transformed by the gift of the theological virtue of faith.

If we accompany the postmodern person through the seeker’s journey, we might be there at the moment, as J. R. R. Tolkien was for C. S. Lewis, when they stand at the dawning place of the mention of God.

My question, for the missionary disciple, is are you prepared to accompany everyone you meet, believer and nonbeliever on this quest?

Thank you.

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