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"A beautifully written and illuminating presentation of the Catholic faith. This book is both a brilliant introduction to the Catholic faith and a sound initiation to the practice of theology."

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"Bishop Barron's *Light from Light* is to be warmly welcomed. This new book on the Nicene Creed brings the faith that this most central of all Christian creeds articulates into a fresh, lively, and poignant dialogue with classical and contemporary theologians, a conversation that unlocks the Nicene Creed and allows Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants as well as 'nones' to (re-)discover the unheard-of novelty, yet utter credibility, of this ancient condensation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This engagingly written book will be a rewarding reading for anyone open to (re-)discover and (re-)claim the Nicene Creed."

—**Reinhard Hütter**, Ordinarius Professor of Fundamental and Dogmatic Theology, The Catholic University of America

"In a time of crisis, it is essential to get back to basics, which is just what Bishop Barron does in this remarkable book. Instead of attempting to attract people to the faith by 'dumbing it down,' Bishop Barron presents it here in all of its glorious intelligibility, which is just what our age needs. He does so, however, with his usual knack for making difficult matters simple and luminous. I expect that this book will open many eyes."

—**D.C. Schindler**, Professor of Metaphysics and Anthropology, The John Paul II Institute

"It is very rare to find a synthesis of the Catholic faith that is *truly learned* and also *truly accessible*, but Bishop Barron's splendid book on the Creed presents that rare accomplishment. It will be equally at home in college courses and in parish discussion groups. Plus, the evangelical zeal, powerful though not overpowering, that animates the book from the first page to the last ensures that it will be as appealing to the heart as it is to the mind. Highly recommended!"

—**John C. Cavadini**, Director of the McGrath Institute for Church Life, University of Notre Dame

LIGHT *from* LIGHT

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A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON THE NICENE CREED

ROBERT BARRON

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THE NICENE-CONSTANTINOPOLITAN CREED

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

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PREFACE

For the past twenty years, I have been involved in the work of evangelizing the culture. In the course of this effort, I have indeed encountered an openness of spirit on the part of many, but also, I must admit, on the part of many more, an enormous antipathy toward religious belief in general, and Christianity in particular. Largely, the objections that the critics present are standard ones, on offer at least from the time of the Enlightenment: God is a wish-fulfilling fantasy, Jesus is a mythic figure, God's goodness is irreconcilable with the suffering of the innocent, the Church is hopelessly corrupt and its moral teaching unreasonable, etc.

But these have taken on a new intensity, due to a number of factors. First, the culture of self-invention, with its roots in the speculations of Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Michel Foucault, has now become the default position of armies of young people in the West. By this phrase, I mean the view that goodness and truth are not objective values, but only the result of the private decisions of individuals. Hence, again especially among the young, a radical relativism tends to hold sway, and this means that the Church's claim to speak the truth about anything is construed, automatically, as oppressive and exclusive.

A second factor is the influence of the so-called new atheists, who had a vogue in the first decade of the twenty-first century.[1] Though their influence has significantly waned, they have had a rather major impact on the minds of a generation of young people in the West. I know this from direct experience, for the arguments, language, and prejudices of Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and their colleagues are unmistakably present in the rhetoric of the audience that I often engage. What these figures have

1. See, for example, Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hachette, 2007); Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006); and Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004).

communicated, besides their particular perspectives, is a general sense that religious belief is irrational, a holdover from a primitive age. So time and again, my interlocutors, echoing Harris, Dawkins, and Hitchens, characterize the faith as "bronze-age mythology" or the musings of prescientific people who did not understand the basics of biology or chemistry.

A third factor—and I am afraid it falls under the category of "we've met the enemy and it is us"—is the dumbing down of the faith that has occurred for over fifty years, at least in the Catholic Church.[2] How prevalent this tendency is in other Christian denominations I will not venture to comment. But certainly within the Catholic context, we have presented a highly emotional and experiential version of religion—and this has left us largely helpless before the opponents of the faith. Tragically, our own de-emphasis on the intellectual substance of our faith coincided with a tendency within the academy to denigrate religion. Some of the saddest statistical studies that I have read are those that detail the number of young Catholics who enter the university as believers and exit as nonbelievers. But given the dovetailing of a dumbed-down Catholicism with a religiously skeptical professoriate, this phenomenon is hardly surprising.

The saddest consequence—at least for faith leaders—of this cultural and intellectual situation is the rise of the religiously unaffiliated. In the early 1970s, only about 3% of Americans identified themselves as unreligious, but that number has risen, astonishingly, to 26% today. And among those under thirty, the figure rises to almost 40%, which bodes ill indeed for the future of religious practice in our country.[3] In many other countries in the West, the numbers are even more disheartening.

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2. See Robert Barron, "The Trouble with Beige Catholicism," in *Bridging the Great Divide: Musings of a Post-Liberal, Post-Conservative Evangelical Catholic* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 11–21; Robert Barron and John Allen Jr., *To Light a Fire on the Earth: Proclaiming the Gospel in a Secular Age* (New York: Image Books, 2017), 89–95; and Robert Barron and Brandon Vogt, "#034: Don't Be a 'Beige' Catholic," *Word on Fire Show* podcast, August 2, 2016, https://www.wordonfireshow.com/episode34/.

3. Pew Research Center, "In US, Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," Washington, DC, October 17, 2019, https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/; Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), "America's Changing Religious Identity," Washington, DC, September 6, 2017, https://www.prri.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/.

What has become crystal clear to me in my twenty years of work in the field of evangelization—and all of the factors mentioned above have contributed to it—is that the overwhelming majority of the critics of Christianity do not have a firm grasp of what thoughtful Christians actually believe. Fulton Sheen made a remark seventy years ago that is, if anything, truer today: "There are not over a hundred people in the United States who hate the Catholic Church. There are millions, however, who hate what they wrongly believe to be the Catholic Church—which is, of course, quite a different thing."[4]

And this is why I have written this book, a theological interpretation of the Nicene Creed. The twentieth-century Protestant theologian Karl Barth, a man deeply appreciative of the Christian theological tradition, once commented that every generation has to tell the story again, as though for the first time. He was by no means advocating liberalism or relativism, but he was acknowledging that the Good News should always sound both good and fresh. The canny evangelist has to know what is blocking the hearing of the Gospel in his own time and present the message accordingly. So I have composed this study of the Christian basics for those of my contemporaries who are ignorant of them and/or hostile to them.

I have chosen to focus on the Nicene Creed for a number of reasons. A peculiar quality of Christianity is that, among all the major religions of the world, it is most concerned with doctrinal clarity. Unlike a number of faiths that emphasize orthopraxis (right behavior) more than orthodoxy (right belief) and unlike others that cultivate a more open-ended and less defined theology, Christianity has, from the beginning, been massively interested in laying out its beliefs clearly, succinctly, and articulately. This instinct has found expression in creeds—which is to say, formal statements of doctrinal belief. Of the many such documents that emerged in the first centuries of the Church, the most theologically developed is the one that came forth from the deliberations of the Council of Nicaea in 325 and which was slightly

4. Fulton Sheen, preface to *Radio Replies*, vol. 1, by Charles Carty and Leslie Rumble (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 2012).

elaborated at the Council of Constantinople in 381. Called the "Nicene" or "Nicene-Constantinopolitan" Creed, it has provided the foundation for the theological systems of most of the great spiritual teachers of both Eastern and Western Christianity and is also used in a liturgical setting in many of the churches, again both East and West. It is fair to say that most Christians would subscribe to this ancient statement of our faith.

Now, if my reader is looking for a detailed study of the historical and cultural circumstances surrounding the Council of Nicaea or a careful analysis of the debates of the Nicene fathers, I suggest he or she stop reading right now. I will focus not so much on the historical but the theological. My purpose is to bring out the meaning of this beautiful and venerable Creed so as to engage especially the skeptical and/or searching audience of today. Though I have tried to avoid technical theological jargon as much as possible and though I do not descend, for the most part, into the fussy fine points of the issues I discuss, nevertheless, I have written this book at a fairly high intellectual level. A simplistic presentation of the faith, as I said, has been, demonstrably, a pastoral disaster. Dumbing down our religion most certainly has not brought more people to us—just the contrary. Catholicism is a smart religion, and I make no apologies for it.

In a number of studies undertaken in just the past five years or so, people who have left the practice of religion were asked why they disaffiliated. They offered a number of reasons, but one of the most prominent was simply that they no longer believed in the teachings of Christianity. This book, which tries to explicate those teachings in a compelling way, is written especially for those who have wandered away from the faith.

CHAPTER 1

I Believe

"I Believe in One God"

There is an eloquent ambiguity in the way in which the opening word of the Nicene Creed has come down to us. Our best evidence suggests that in the formula that goes back to the Nicene Fathers themselves, the word is *pisteuomen* (we believe), but as the Creed has been passed on, translated, and used in liturgical settings, *pisteuomen* often became *pisteuo* (I believe). The ancient Latin translation indeed begins with *Credo* (I believe). For the first several decades of my life, the Church commenced the Creed at Mass with "we believe," but about ten years ago, it switched back to a rendering of the standard Latin version: "I believe." I say that the ambiguity is eloquent, for there is value in both forms.

On the one hand, "we believe" effectively emphasizes the communal and corporate dimension of the Church's faith: we are in this Christian project together and never individualistically. Moreover, it indicates how, in a sense, we believe not only *with* others but in some cases *for* others. Perhaps my conviction regarding an article of the Creed is wavering, but yours is strong, and mine is firm with respect to another article, and yours is weak. The "we believe" allows us to find mutual support in our faith.

However, the "we believe" also allows us to escape, at least to some degree, personal responsibility. Do *I* truly believe this? What is at stake in agreeing to this ancient statement is not a triviality or even a matter of purely epistemic interest. Rather, the issues raised by the Creed have to do with where a person stands most fundamentally. And therefore, in another sense, it is altogether appropriate that the one who recites the Creed commence by

saying unequivocally, "I believe." Again, I think it is something of a desideratum not to eliminate this tension.

The verb itself is of crucial importance: "believe." Especially mindful of the army of the unaffiliated, those who have either never been exposed to a serious presentation of the faith or have actively left religious practice behind, I want to stress, as strongly as I possibly can, that authentic faith or belief has not a thing to do with naïve credulity or accepting claims on the basis of no evidence. Faith, in a word, is never below reason, never infra-rational. The Church has absolutely no interest in encouraging superstition or intellectual irresponsibility. Rather, and this will become clearer when we examine the principal object of our belief, real faith is supra-rational, above what reason can grasp. If we must speak of a certain darkness in regard to the matters of faith, it is the darkness that comes from too much light, rather than from defect of light.

Since this matter is so basic and since a misunderstanding of faith is such a consistent block for so many, I should like to approach this issue with some care and from a number of angles. I will first employ the aid of St. John Henry Newman, a man who wrestled mightily all his life with the question of the relationship between faith and reason. Newman wanted to preserve the epistemological legitimacy of Christian faith in the teeth of the rationalist critique coming out of the Enlightenment. At a time when some serious Christian thinkers—Friedrich Schleiermacher comes most readily to mind—were proposing a nonrational approach to Christianity, a retreat into an elevated sentimentality, Newman insisted on the intellectual integrity of faith. He made his argument over and against one of the titans of the English Enlightenment and one of his own philosophical heroes, John Locke. Locke argued, commonsensically enough, that the quality of one's assent to a proposition ought to be in strict correlation to the quality of the inferential support that one could muster for said proposition. Thus, if your argument for a claim is practically airtight, your assent should be strong; if your argument is moderately good, your assent should be moderate; if your argument is weak, your assent should be tentative at best; etc.[1]

1. John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London: Longmans & Green, 1903), 157–187.

Newman stood completely athwart this position, taking it to be a kind of angelism. Perhaps in some perfected and abstract realm we would think this way, but here below, this is hardly ever the case. Very occasionally, for example in regard to self-evident states of affairs or mathematical indubitables, the correlation between assent and inference is absolute. But frequently, even typically, we give unconditioned assent to propositions for which there is no unconditioned inferential support. Newman's famous example is the unrestrained and unhesitating assent we give to the claim that Great Britain is an island. Our agreement with this proposition is grounded not in airtight syllogisms or self-evident sense perception, but rather in a whole congeries of hunches, intuitions, testimonies, historical records, etc. In short, with regard to this proposition and the overwhelming majority of assents we make, the operative word would be, strictly speaking, *believe* rather than know. What Newman is trying to show is that the rationalistic dichotomy between supposed knowledge and belief is largely a chimera. In point of fact, we assent to religious claims in the same way that we assent to practically any other kind of claim: through a combination of arguments, gut feeling, the testimony of others, intuition, and personal experience, a range of evidences both rational and nonrational. The object of religious assent is different than the object of nonreligious assent, but the manner of thinking in both cases is fundamentally the same. Thus, Newman can conclude that faith is just a word we use to describe "the reasoning of a religious mind."[2] Newman's approach here is, to use a phrase from classical rhetoric, a *tu quoque* (you as well) argument. He tells his enlightened interlocutors to drop their pretentious claim to sheer rationality, indeed to remove the plank in their own eye before attempting to remove the speck in the eye of the religious believer.

Another way to illumine this matter of belief is to look at it from the other side—which is to say, in regard to the radical difference between relating epistemically to God and relating epistemically to anything else.

2. John Henry Newman, "The Nature of Faith in Relation to Reason," in *Oxford University Sermons* (London: Longmans & Green, 1909), 203.

We will explain all of this in greater detail anon, but suffice it to say for the moment that God is not anything in the world—that is to say, not any kind of being among others. Both because God is infinitely actual and because he subsists as the Creator of the world, he, by definition, cannot be known in any ordinary acceptation of that term. The knowing faculty is ordered, by its nature, to things that appear and to those truths that can be deduced from things that appear. Even mathematical objects and sheer abstractions show up for the viewing of the mind, which is suggested by Plato's term *eidos* (form). But God cannot be seen, and he cannot be known through even the highest abstraction. Therefore, knowing, certitude, perception—all of which convey the sense of control—are necessarily inappropriate when talking about God. As Paul Tillich said, echoing the entire Christian tradition, God is not provisionally unknown, but unknown and unknowable through his very nature. Augustine implied the same when he said "*Si comprehendis, non est Deus*" (If you understand, that is not God).[3] And even Thomas Aquinas, who presents a very rationally informed theology, can say, "*Quidquid potest intelligi vel cogitari minus est ipso Deo*" (Whatever can be known or understood is less than God himself).[4]

To say with respect to such a reality that we have a commanding or controlling knowledge would be, if I might put it this way, epistemically impious. Belief in this context is not a concession, a settling for second best; rather, in this life at least, it is all we can or should hope for. Like the bear in Faulkner's famous story of a young man's initiation into the ways of the hunt, God is seen only in the dappling and only after the hunter has abandoned his compass and gun, the instruments of navigation and control. As we shall see shortly, the eager mind can, to a degree, track down the truth about God, but at the end of the day, God has to disclose himself—and the response to such a disclosure is, necessarily, *belief* rather than knowledge. If I might propose a somewhat homely analogy, the play between reason and faith in regard to

3. Augustine, *Sermones de scripturis* 117.3.5 (PL 38:663).

4. Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio in symbolum apostolorum* 1, in *Opuscula theologica*, vol. 2, ed. Raymundus M. Spiazzi (Turin: Marietti, 1954). For a recent English translation of this work, see *The Sermon-Conferences of St. Thomas Aquinas on the Apostles' Creed*, trans. and ed. Nicholas Ayo (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005).

God is something like the play between reason and faith in regard to coming to know another human being. To be sure, investigation, examination, research, and observation all play a role in this process, but finally, if one wishes to know the heart of another person, he has to wait until that other *reveals* himself, and then he has to decide whether he *believes* what he has been told. An aggressive reason that seeks always to grasp on its own terms will never come to know deeper dimensions of reality, including and especially the personal. Such depths can be plumbed only through something like a faith that accepts and receives.

It is worth noting that in Thomas Aquinas' religious epistemology, faith is a rare case of the will commanding the intellect. Typically, in Aquinas' account, it is just the opposite: will is a function of the intellect, responding to what the intellect presents to it. But when it comes to faith, the will, in a way, comes first, for it commands the intellect to assent, and it does so out of love.[5] Because the will loves God, it directs the mind to accept what God has revealed about himself, even though the mind cannot clearly see or understand it. Again, lest this sound anomalous, much the same dynamic obtains in an interpersonal relationship. Is she telling me the truth about what is in her heart? I cannot possibly know directly, but my will, which loves her and has come to trust her, commands my intellect to assent.

At this point, we might consider the dilemma proposed by Paul Tillich. One can easily enough say that God can neither deceive nor be deceived and therefore the word of God is reliable. But this begs the question whether the Bible is in fact the word of God. Many theologians, especially in the Protestant tradition, speak of the self-validating power of the Scripture. The texts are, in the Bible's own lovely self-description, "God-breathed"; God's wisdom blows through these pages, and hence we have come through experience to appreciate the one whom we have found there. We have come to trust him and hence to believe what he has said.

These last examples reveal that there is inevitably a subtle play between intellect and will, between analysis and acceptance, whenever we are dealing

5. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2-2.2.

with authentic faith. In the great story of the beginnings of humanity, we find Adam and Eve walking in easy fellowship with God, listening to his command, "obeying" him, trusting him. When they grasp at the fruit of the tree of knowledge, they are arrogating to themselves the determination of right and wrong, turning themselves into gods. The rescue operation that the Lord inaugurates with Abram is primarily a matter of teaching a people how to listen to him again. Abraham's "faith" is tantamount to his willingness to attend to a voice that transcends his own. The rationalist, naturally, will object that there is no warrant for such a surrender, and we will take up this matter in the next section. But for now, let us be content with understanding that faith is a trusting surrender that there is a reasonability on the far side of reason. It is, therefore, an openness to adventure.

Having examined the term "believe" in some detail, we must attend to the little word "in," which actually carries a good deal of spiritual significance: "*Credo in unum Deum*" (I believe in one God). In Latin, *in* with the accusative case has the sense of motion toward, while *in* with the ablative case, *in urbe* (in the city) for example, has the sense of location. Our believing does not place us firmly and certainly in the space of God; rather, it moves us toward him, into him. St. Bonaventure's searching and seminal text *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (*The Soul's Journey into God*) has a similar connotation: it is an account of how we make our way into or toward the mystery of God.[6] This clues us into a very important dimension of creedal language. We ought never to think that acceptance of the truth of the propositions contained in the Creed is tantamount to Christian experience in its totality. On the contrary, creedal formulas are guides, guardrails, indicators on the side of the road that is leading us into God. They point us in the right direction and prevent us from going completely off the path. So, for example, if you do not believe in the Trinitarian God or in the Incarnation of the Logos or in the activity of the Holy Spirit, you are certainly in dangerous territory, and you will not tell the Christian story correctly. But the "content" of these

6. Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God*, in *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God, The Tree of Life, and The Life of St. Francis*, trans. Ewert Cousins (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1978), 51–116.

great mysteries is not fully given in the formulas themselves; we approach that completeness only through repeated narrating of the tale and through the concrete living of the Christian life. Thomas Aquinas could say in this context that faith terminates not in the *enuntiabile* (proposition) but in the *rem* (thing).[7]

"One God"

So, what is this "thing" that is the principal object of the act of faith? Perhaps the most basic observation we could make is that it (he) is not really a thing at all. Whatever we mean by the word "God," we do not intend one finite reality among many, not the "supreme being" in any conventional sense of that term. We intend that which brought (and brings) the whole of finite reality into being, that which transcends even as it remains intimately close to all that can possibly be seen or measured. I have found that many skeptical questions concerning God are generated by this fundamental misunderstanding of the meaning of the word. Or to state it more positively, many dilemmas and conundrums are cleared up the moment a person comes to grasp what serious Christians mean by "God." But even if we accept the correct definition of the word, is there any rational warrant for believing in the existence of this peculiar reality?

For much of human history, the existence of God was more or less taken for granted. Indeed, as many cultural analysts have observed, our contemporary Western culture is perhaps the first ever seriously to entertain the possibility of subsisting apart from belief in God. In this context, Charles Taylor can speak of the "buffered self"—which is to say, the ego cut off from any real connection to what transcends its immediate experience.[8] Prior to, say, 1500, Taylor contends, practically no one thought that a satisfying life

7. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2-2.1.2 ad 2, in *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia*, Leonine ed. [hereafter Leon.] (Rome, 1882–), 8:11. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Faith (2a2æ. 1–7): Latin Text, English Translation, Introduction Notes, Appendices and Glossary by T.C. O'Brien*, vol. 31 of *St. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologiæ* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 12–13.

8. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), 37–42.

could be had in abstraction from God; but now, happiness apart from God, happiness derived entirely from this-worldly goods, is seen as a very lively option. Thus, we have to make a case for the transcendent; we have to find a way to break through the buffered self.

The Catholic Church has long maintained that the existence of God can be known through the light of natural reason. There is indeed biblical warrant for this: "The heavens are telling the glory of God" (Ps. 19:1), and "his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (Rom. 1:20). And some of our greatest theologians and philosophers have formulated arguments for the existence of God, most famously St. Anselm and St. Thomas Aquinas. Furthermore, the First Vatican Council (1969–1870) clearly teaches that God's existence can be known with certitude through the exercise of our rational faculties.[9] The best of our tradition has known—as I tried to indicate in the preceding section—that this knowledge has nothing to do with controlling God or with reducing him to an easily understood object of the mind. Thomas Aquinas speaks, for instance, not of "proofs" for God, but rather of *viae* or "paths" to God,[10] and of *manuductiones*, "leadings by the hand,"[11] by which a mind is brought toward a consideration of God's existence. No one of our great masters ever taught that these "demonstrations" provide anything like an exhaustive or adequate account of God. But they do, nevertheless, point us in the right direction—and that is no small thing.

The principal challenge to religious belief is coming, today, from a materialist and secularist ideology that often claims the warrant of the physical sciences.[12] This is the view that reality is simply coterminous with the realm of changeable matter. So, clearly on these grounds, belief in God is ruled out

9. First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius* 2, in Denzinger et al., *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), nos. 3000–3007.

10. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.2.3 (Leon. 4:31–32).

11. Thomas Aquinas, 1.1.5 ad 2 (Leon. 4:16).

12. See Robert Barron, *Arguing Religion: A Bishop Speaks at Facebook and Google* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire, 2018), 17–26; Robert Barron and John L. Allen Jr., *To Light a Fire on the Earth* (New York: Image Books, 2017), 103–105; and Robert Barron, *Renewing Our Hope: Essays for the New Evangelization* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 12–18.

of court as fantastic. As a first response, we might observe that this sort of ideological materialism is self-refuting, for the claim that reality is reducible to the material cannot be justified on purely materialist grounds. One cannot determine through the scientific method that the scientific method is the only way to access reality. Nonetheless, many people, especially the young, are beguiled by the undoubted success of the physical sciences into accepting a "scientistic" epistemology and worldview. Therefore, in approaching the question of God today, it might be wise to seek points of overlap and connection between a religious and scientific *Weltanschauung*.

I would certainly not recommend, in this context, the embrace of so-called "intelligent design" speculation, whereby God is construed as an intervening cause required to account for certain forms of irreducible complexity in some living things. Not only is the biology behind such speculation questionable, but the notion of God undergirding it is deeply inadequate, in the measure that it posits God as a cause among many, fussily intervening in natural processes. Nor would I enthusiastically recommend taking up arguments from the supposed fine-tuning of the universe in the direction of the emergence first of life and then of consciousness. I say this not because I think there is no merit whatsoever to these arguments; but I fear, once again, that the God that they present is somewhat misleading. The Creator of the entire universe is not one cause, however intelligent and powerful, who intervenes occasionally or in one particular manner in the functioning of the world. Both the intelligent design and fine-tuning arguments, in a word, betray too much of their provenance in the deism of the Enlightenment.

However, there is a path that emerges from the world of science and that I would indeed recommend. This is the argument that commences from the mystical fact of the universe's radical intelligibility. Every science is predicated finally on the supposition that the world that the scientist goes out to meet through her senses and her curious, critical intelligence is marked by form, pattern, and understandability. Whether we are talking about the practitioners of psychology, biology, chemistry, astrophysics, or geology, every scientist must assume objective intelligibility. The medieval philosophers

expressed this idea with typical pith: *ens est scibile* (being is knowable). They also held that there exists so deep a correlation between the searching mind and the intelligible object that, when they meet, each, as it were, actualizes the other. Each finds its purpose in the other, something like the two halves of the mythic figures from Plato's story of human origins in the *Symposium*.[13]

Of course, the philosophers of the classical period knew this truth as well. Pythagoras opined that everything is number, by which he meant marked by order, harmony, and measurable proportion. Plato took this truth to be so basic that he required its acceptance by any prospective student in his Academy. And contemporary scientists implicitly affirm it at every turn, as they use the most sophisticated mathematics to describe dynamics of reality at all levels. They speak indeed of the "laws" or at least the statistical probabilities that govern the biological and astronomical orders, but they also assume that even the most basic levels of being, invisible to the naked eye and accessible only through indirect indications, are governed by something like mathematical principles. In the words of Cambridge particle physicist and Anglican priest John Polkinghorne, "It is an actual technique of discovery in fundamental physics to seek theories which are expressed in terms of what mathematicians can recognize and agree to be beautiful equations."[14]

But why should this be the case? Though we take this principle (again, unprovable through the method that thoroughly presupposes it) utterly for granted, the more we stare at it, the stranger it seems. Why should the world, in every nook and cranny and as a totality, be marked by intelligibility? Why should the scientific enterprise be undertaken with such confidence? Furthermore, why should its findings inform such remarkably successful practical projects? I have continually been amazed at the number of atheist and agnostic commentators who are content simply to accept this astonishing state of affairs as dumbly given, just the way things are. But Paul Davies challenged his scientific peers with a simple but penetrating question: Where do the

13. Plato, *Symposium*, 189D–194E, trans. Alexander Nehama and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1989), 25–31.

14. John Polkinghorne, "The Trinity and Scientific Reality," in *The Blackwell Companion to Science and Christianity*, ed. J.B. Stump and Alan G. Padgett (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012), 524.

laws of nature come from?[15] And Einstein himself once quipped, "The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible."[16]

In his indispensable *Introduction to Christianity*, Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) argued that the only finally satisfying explanation for objective intelligibility is something like a great intelligence that embedded these sophisticated patterns into the structure of the universe.[17] Ratzinger observes how our language reflects this intuition: we speak of *recognition* of truths—which is to say, re-cognition, thinking again what has already been thought. And here we can make appeal to the Bible. One of the most important and fundamental claims of the opening chapter of the book of Genesis is that God made the universe through great acts of speech: "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Gen. 1:3). "And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so" (Gen. 1:9). We must not, of course, take these as literal descriptions, but rather as symbolic gestures in the direction of the intelligence that informs the act of creation. In the prologue to St. John's Gospel, which consciously hearkens back to the commencement of Genesis, we hear "In the beginning was the Word. . . . He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1:1–3). If everything came into existence through a word, everything is, necessarily, stamped by an intelligible form and intelligent purpose. And this is why, according to Ratzinger and a number of other commentators, it is not surprising that the modern physical sciences emerged precisely out of a culture shaped by this biblical imagination. If one believes in creation, one will readily make two assumptions necessary for the development of the sciences—namely, that the world is not God (and hence can be analyzed and experimented upon) and that the world is intelligible

15. See Paul Davies, "The Nature of the Laws of Physics and Their Mysterious Bio-Friendliness," in *Science and Religion in Dialogue*, vol. 2, ed. Melville Y. Stewart (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 769–788.

16. Albert Einstein, "Physics and Reality," *Journal of the Franklin Institute* 221, no. 3 (March 1936): 351.

17. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2nd ed., trans. J.R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 151–158.

(and hence likely to yield results to those who examine it intelligently). What I find particularly illuminating about this observation is how it makes clear that religion is not only not the enemy of science but in fact the condition for its possibility.

A second rational approach to God, a second *manuductio*, commences with the radical contingency of the world. By this technical philosophical term, I simply mean the ontologically evanescent quality of everything in our immediate experience. The objects, animals, and people that surround us, the states of affairs that obtain, the weather, the stars and the planets—all of these exist but do not *have* to exist. One indication of this is the simple fact that all of them came into being and sooner or later will pass out of being. But an even simpler determination can be made by observing that all of these things and states of affairs *could be otherwise*. It is sunny now, but under different conditions, it would be cloudy; a car is racing past me on the road, but it could just as well be in the garage, or it is quite conceivable that it would not exist at all; I am currently typing these words on a keyboard, but I could just as well have chosen to be doing a thousand other things. What this simple thought experiment reveals is that all the matters under consideration do not contain within themselves the reason for their own existence, for if they did, they could not be otherwise than they are. And this is precisely why, by an altogether valid instinct, we look for their causes, for the conditions for their possibility, for the sufficient explanation of why they exist as they do. David Hume imagined that the idea of causality is illusory, since the causal relationship, as such, cannot be empirically observed.[18] Say what you will about Hume's analysis of the empirical verification of causality; he is certainly wrong to say that we have no rational warrant for accepting the metaphysical reality of causality, for such acceptance is a necessary correlate of contingency perceived as such.

And so such states of affairs are contingent—which is to say, they touch upon something else (*con-tingere*), they require an explanation extrinsic to

18. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 2nd ed., ed. Eric Steinberg (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993), 15ff.

themselves. But then we are naturally led to ask, in regard to those causes or sets of causes, whether *they themselves* are self-explanatory or contingent. To return to one of our earlier examples, my typing of these words on a keyboard is contingent upon my at least relatively good health, the temperature of the room (which is poised sufficiently between extreme heat and extreme cold so as to render my activity possible), the stability of the desk upon which the keyboard rests, etc. But the curious mind continues to inquire: Are those causes self-sufficient or contingent? Immediately we perceive that they are the latter, for my good health depends upon the functioning of a number of bodily systems, upon the oxygen that I am breathing, my genetics, etc.; the temperature of the room is determined through the heating system in the room where I am situated, upon the structure of the house in which that room is found, upon the current state of the weather, etc.; and the stability of the desk depends upon the stability of the floor on which it rests, which depends upon the stability of the earth, etc.

So far, so obvious. But the restless intellect still has not found a sufficient justification for the existence of the contingent state of affairs under consideration. Our analysis of causes that are themselves contingent simply postpones any definitive answer. Can this type of causal regress be infinite or indefinite? The response must be in the negative, since an infinite postponement of the matter never adequately explains how something that does not have to exist actually exists. Therefore, we must conclude to the existence of some reality that ultimately explains contingent being and is not itself contingent. Thomas Aquinas referred to this reality as the *uncaused cause* or the *necessary being*. And this, he affirmed, is what reasonable people are referring to when they use the word "God."[19]

In order more fully to understand this argument, it might be wise to respond to one of the principal objections to this type of demonstration. Some say that the possibility of an infinite regress of contingent causes cannot be excluded—in other words, that the chain of caused causes might simply go

19. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.2.3.

back indefinitely. Even Thomas Aquinas admitted that this objection would hold in regard to historical series of causes—that is to say, causes going back in time: I was caused by my father, he by his father, he by his, etc. In that sort of causal chain, the present causal activity of each member is not here and now dependent upon the causal influence of the immediately antecedent cause. Though my coming into being was dependent upon my father, I can act and influence other things even though he is no longer alive. And thus, one could not rule out an infinite regress in that context. It is instructive that typically when this sort of proof is attacked, the critic is assuming a causal series, to use the technical terms, subordinated *per accidens* (incidentally) and not *per se* (in itself).[20] What Thomas Aquinas denies is precisely that latter type of infinite causal series, in which each element is here and now dependent upon the influence of the cause immediately preceding it. In that kind of causal chain, the suppression of the first instance would indeed entail the suppression of all subsequent causality.

If the first kind of proof we looked at gives us a great Intelligence that stands behind the intelligibility of the world, this one gives us something even more fundamental—namely, a great source of being and actualization that stands behind the passing and ephemeral world of our experience. One of the prefaces to the Eucharistic Prayer in the Catholic tradition expresses the implications of this notion as follows: "In you [God] we live and move and have our being."[21] And this last quotation reflects, to be sure, one of the most basic intuitions of the biblical authors—namely, that God is the Creator of all things. This idea, spoken in supreme poetry in both the book of Genesis and in the middle chapters of the prophet Isaiah, is perfectly correlated to the notion of God as the noncontingent ground of all contingent existence. If God is the sheer act of to-be itself, in and through which all finite things subsist, then God can only be described as Creator.

A third path is more mystical and intuitive, less rationalistic. Though the arguments for God's existence offered by Thomas Aquinas are perhaps

20. Thomas Aquinas, 1.46.2 ad 7 (Leon. 4.482).

21. "Preface VI of the Sundays in Ordinary Time," in *Roman Missal* (ICEL, 2010).

the best known, few realize that Thomas' insistence that we can and should *argue* for God on the basis of what the senses deliver to us was, at the time, somewhat egregious. For most of the theological tradition that preceded and indeed surrounded him, the affirmation of the self-evidence of God's existence was far more common. St. Augustine is typical here. The great North African bishop maintained that God is not so much a true thing that the mind discovers, nor a good ideal that the will seeks. Instead, God is the light of truth itself by which the search for any particular truth is undertaken, the light of goodness itself that illumines the quest for any particular good or state of righteousness. This is why Augustine refers to God as the *prius* of all thought and action, the great undergirding condition for the possibility of these two fundamental moves of the soul.[22] Bernard Lonergan, though in a vein more Thomistic than Augustinian, caught this when he spoke of the hunger that drives the questing mind. The mind, he says, is empty, but not in the manner of a box but rather in the manner of a stomach, meaning it knows what it seeks.[23] Aquinas himself refers to the light of the agent intellect, designating the always already present energy that animates the intellect in its work of seeking the truth. In a word, there is some primordial sense of the Truth in its unconditioned form that drives the quest for particular truths. Apposite here is the Hindu adage that the atheist is like the man riding into town on the back of an ox saying, "I'm seeking an ox." Anyone sincerely looking for the truth has already been found by God.

Paul Tillich, operating here within a very Augustinian framework, speaks of revelation as the "breakthrough of the unconditioned."[24] Our ordinary experience is exclusively of conditioned things, and indeed the previous argument is predicated upon this fact. But in and through the conditioned beings of the world—and through the way in which we know those things—one

22. See, for example, *De civitate Dei* 8.7; *De magistro* 11–12; *Soliloquia* 1.12–15; *De trinitate* 12.24–25.

23. Bernard Lonergan, "Metaphysics as Horizon," in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan: Volume 4 Collection*, 2nd ed., ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 200.

24. Paul Tillich, *Dogmatik* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1986), 41.

can sense what Tillich calls "being itself" or the "truth itself." One of the marks of the unconditioned is that it cannot be sequestered simply on one side or the other of the subject/object divide. It is both "in here" and "out there"; and it is neither "in here" nor "out there." It lies beyond the split between subjectivity and objectivity. And this is why those who describe the experience of receiving a breakthrough of the unconditioned will use language sometimes more subjective in tone and sometimes more objective. According to a number of contemporary theologians and philosophers of religion, the precipitating causes of this breakthrough are frequently "limit experiences," times when the finitude of the world and one's own finitude are *felt*. Thus, when we confront our own sin, our own physical weakness, our own mortality, our own practical incapacity, or when we feel the unresolvable tension between two competing ontological values, we come to a kind of edge beyond which we can sense a darkness both frightening and alluring. As Hegel put it, to know a limit as a limit is already to be beyond the limit.[25]

It is in light of this reflection on the nature of the unconditioned that we can properly understand one of the most famous and controversial of the arguments for God's existence—namely, the so-called ontological argument, first formulated by St. Anselm of Canterbury and commented upon, both positively and negatively, by some of the greatest figures in the philosophical and theological traditions. The demonstration itself is simple enough to lay out schematically. Step one: God is defined as that than which nothing greater can be thought; step two: it is greater to exist both inside and outside the mind than in the mind alone; conclusion: God exists. Now, detractors of this argument, from Thomas Aquinas to Immanuel Kant, have tended to see it as a kind of intellectual legerdemain, pulling the extra-mental out of the intra-mental. However, might we appreciate it as a sort of showing forth of the implications of an experience of the unconditioned? In the rarely read section of St. Anselm's *Proslogion*, which immediately precedes his articulation of the ontological argument, the saint tells us that he had been

25. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Humanity Books, 1969), 134.

assiduously searching for a clinching proof of God's existence, and that only when he let go of this quest did the argument come to him as a sort of gift. And it came, basically, in the form of a name, "that than which nothing greater can be thought."[26]

What is immediately clear is that this name corresponds to no being in the world, indeed to no possible being among beings. For to such a reality, something more could always be added: the conventional supreme being plus the world would be greater than the conventional supreme being alone. Nor could it simply correspond to an idea in St. Anselm's mind, for that idea plus any type of objectivity would be greater than that idea alone. Hence, what was given to Anselm through that name was an experience of unconditioned being. What the proof makes explicit is what is already implicit in the name, that the unconditioned is neither in the mind alone nor in the world alone, its perfection tantamount to a transcendence of those categories. Anselm was not moving, as his critics consistently maintain, from the intra-mental to the extra-mental; rather, he was witnessing to the existence of a reality that can be sequestered in neither of those categories. As I mentioned earlier, the view that God's existence is self-evident was the dominant one prior to Thomas Aquinas. Perhaps we might even see a link between this venerable tradition and the point of view, coming forth from John Calvin and enduring to the present day in Calvinist philosophical circles, that the knowledge of God's existence is "properly basic"—that is to say, known with the same kind of immediacy and indubitability as our knowledge of our own existence and that of the physical world.[27]

A fourth and final path is the moral. In his apologetic writings and in his more formal treatises on religious epistemology, John Henry Newman consistently took as his point of departure the experience of conscience. There are any number of psychological powers that enable us to evaluate dimensions of the world. For example, we have an aesthetic sensibility and

26. Anselm, *Proslogion* 2–5, in *Anselm: Monologion and Proslogion*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1996), 99–102.

27. See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?," *Noûs* 15, no. 1 (1981): 41–51.

an ability to read persons and their motives, but we also have the capacity to evaluate the goodness or evil of our moral acts. Yet, Newman argues, there is a qualitative difference between this last power and its analogues. For only in the case of moral evaluation do we feel ourselves in the presence of Someone whom we have either pleased or offended. If we make an erroneous aesthetic judgment, we might feel ignorant or foolish, but we do not, strictly speaking, feel ashamed. And this is precisely why we speak, only in the case of moral evaluation, of the "voice" of our conscience. *Someone*, we are convinced, is praising us or blaming us.

The German phenomenologist Max Scheler makes much the same point in his analysis of the act of repentance. "Repentance begins with an indictment! But before *whom* do we indict ourselves? Is it not then in the nature of an indictment that there should be a person who receives it and before whom the charge is laid? Repentance is furthermore an inward *confession* of our guilt. But to *whom* do we then confess. . . . Repentance ends with a clear consciousness of the removal . . . of guilt. But *who* has taken the guilt from us?"[28] What Scheler notices is that the feeling of real shame goes beyond a sense of responsibility toward another human being whom we have offended; it places us, painfully to be sure, in the presence of the source of moral obligation. And the feeling of being truly forgiven, similarly, passes beyond whatever psychological satisfaction we might derive from receiving the benediction of another human being whom we have hurt and introduces us into the presence of a grace coming from a transcendent place.

Scheler's phenomenological colleague Dietrich von Hildebrand drew a distinction between the "merely subjectively satisfying" and the "objectively valuable." The first is something that gives pleasure to the ego, that therefore takes its bearing entirely from the side of subjectivity. But this is to be sharply contrasted with a value that confronts the ego and demands a response, an acknowledgment. These values can appear in the aesthetic order—for example, Beethoven's Seventh Symphony or Van Gogh's *Starry Night* or Dante's

28. Max Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, trans. Bernard Noble (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2010), 61.

Commedia. In the presence of such values, it would be comically inadequate to say, "I just don't care for it." Their objective goodness is so overwhelming that the only proper response is surrender and appreciation. But these objective values also appear on the moral plane. Acts of kindness, forgiveness, self-sacrifice, self-forgetting love, etc. are not so much subjectively satisfying (they might be anything but); rather, they stand forth in their objective quality and demand what Hildebrand calls a "value response."[29] But these moral goods are seen as ultimately reflective of distinctively spiritual values, goods having to do with the *summum bonum*, the highest value, which is God. We might link this to an earlier path by drawing attention to the properly unconditioned nature of the moral demand. We are summoned, of course, to perform morally good acts, but underneath this demand is the pervasive and mysterious demand to be a good person, to do good and avoid evil, or to put it in more explicitly religious language, to follow the law of God. This is not a demand that can be legitimately put aside or compromised; rather, it presses upon us with unconditioned power. Paul Tillich speaks of what *uns unbedingt angeht*, of what ultimately concerns us in the moral sphere.[30]

Therefore, the intelligibility of the world, the contingency of ordinary states of affairs, immediate mystical experience, and the press of moral obligation all point in the direction of God. Is any one of these approaches airtight, beyond question, utterly convincing? Perhaps not. But we should keep Newman's epistemology in mind. Rarely, if ever, do we assent to a proposition on the basis of a single clinching argument. Typically, we do so under the influence of a congeries of arguments, intuitions, and experiences, all of which tend along the same trajectory, and this is eminently true of our assent to the proposition that God exists. I might make reference in this context to a final "argument": that from the *consensus gentium*—which is to say, the general agreement of people across time and space that God, or at the very least some ultimate ground of reality, exists. As I mentioned above, our contemporary Western culture is anomalous in the extreme in

29. See Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Christian Ethics* (New York: David McKay, 1953).
30. Tillich, *Dogmatik*, 41.

the measure that it is the first ever widely to entertain God's nonexistence as a lively option. The arguments that I have sketched might be seen as the rational explications of fundamental intuitions that ordinary people have had from time immemorial. They represent the bringing into explicit consciousness of powerful and consistent perceptions about ultimate reality that have perdured and continue to perdure in the human heart.