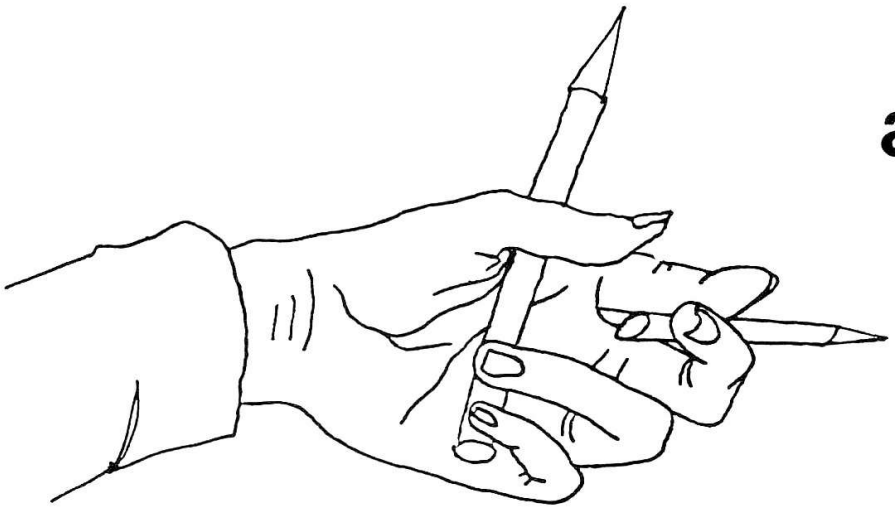
Belief and Unbelief Today



by Richard McBrien

THE PROBLEM

The reality of God enters into the very definition of what it means to be human. Human existence is qualified from the beginning by the God-given radical capacity ("supernatural existential", *potentia obedientialis*) to get beyond ourselves and to reach out toward that which transcends us, the Absolute, and toward that which raises us to a new level of existence, a sharing in the life of the Absolute (grace). The question of God, in other words, is implied in the question of human existence. And the opposite holds true as well. As soon as we address the problem of God, we are confronted with the problem of human existence.

But if the divine is so central to the existence of human persons, why do so many of us reject or ignore the reality of God? How is it that our radical capacity for grace is not universally actualized? In short, why are there unbelievers as well as believers?

The problem of unbelief is complicated by the fact that *unbelief is always relative.* Unbelief is a negative concept. It presupposes something positive which it negates. From the point of view of religious faith (whether Christian, Jewish, or Moslem, for example), unbelief is a denial of or at least an avoidance of God. But from another point of view, these religious traditions themselves may be forms of unbelief. To the ideological Marxist, religious faith may be a refusal to believe in the dialectical historical process or the classless society. To the positivist,religious faith may represent a stubborn refusal to believe in the conclusions of scientific experimentation.

The term unbelief is being used in this article to mean *the denial or at least disregard of the reality of God* (whether God is named "ultimate concern",the Transcendent, the Absolute, the "beyond in our midst", the ultimate dimension of secular experience, the other dimension, Being, or whatever else). There are, of course, different kinds and different *degrees* of unbelief. There are also different *sources.*

According to the Second Vatican Council, *atheism* (which we are equating here with unbelief) has many forms. The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* summarizes these: *classical atheism*, or the outright denial of God; *agnosticism*, or the refusal to decide whether to believe in God or not (a decision wherein one effectively decides *not* to believe in God); *positivism* (which rejects all reality which cannot be verified by scientific testing); an excessive *humanism* (which exaggerates the human capacity to control the universe through technology and which emphasizes freedom to the detriment of order); the rejection of *false notions* of God which the atheist assumes to be official doctrine; the transfer of ultimate concern from God (the Transcendent) to material things (the totally immanent); and the transfer of blame for social evil from individual, institutional, environmental forces to God as the One who thwarts the struggle for *liberation* by shifting our attention from this world to the next.

"Undeniably", the *Pastoral Constitution* declares, "those who willfully shut out God from their hearts and try to dodge religious questions are not following the dictates of their consciences. Hence they are not free of blame." But then the council proceeds to an extraordinary admission: "Yet believers themselves frequently bear some responsibility for this situation... . To the extent that they neglect their own training in the faith, or teach erroneous doctrine, or are deficient in their religious, moral, or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than reveal the authentic face of God and religion" (n. 19).

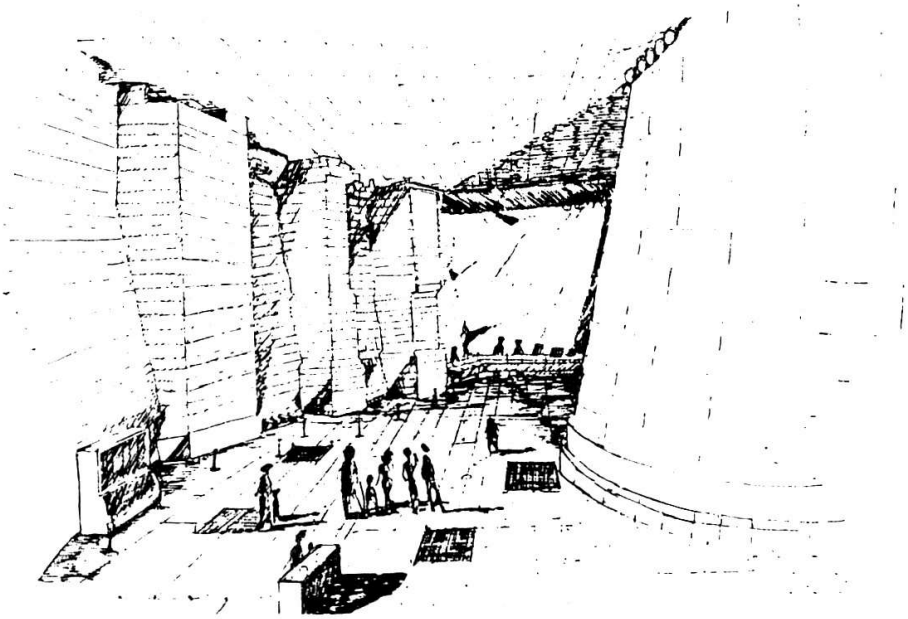
Some major *sociologists of religion* would agree with the main lines of the council's explanation, but their analyses are more broadly based. Thus, at a 1969 symposium in Rome, co-sponsored by the Vatican's Secretariat for Non-Believers, University of California sociologist Robert Bellah noted that the phenomenon of unbelief was limited to relatively small groups of intellectuals and cultural élites until the eighteenth century. With the expansion of these classes (especially through education and the concomitant rise in literacy) in the nineteenth century, a new spirit spread to a larger public: a fuller appreciation for the dignity of the individual and the importance of free inquiry, on the one hand, and a reaction against authority (or at least authoritarianism), on the other. This was accompanied by a shift in philosophical emphasis from the objective to the subjective orders. Belief became less an imposed system than a matter of personal decision.

So widespread was this change that many nineteenth-century rationalists and positivists predicted the demise of religion. But that never happened. Why not? Because the anti-religious forces made the same mistake that many religious people have committed: they confused religious belief with *cognitive* belief. Thus, with the collapse of cognitive belief, religious belief as such was sure to follow.

But this assumption about the collapse of religious belief was never verified by the facts. The large portion of religious people had never regarded cognitive, intellectualized belief as essential to their religious lives.

What they embraced instead was an *embodied* truth, transmitted not through definitions and logical demonstrations, but through narratives, images, and rituals. This insight is fully consistent with the *Pastoral Constitution's* insistence that "the witness of a living and mature faith... penetrating the believer's entire life... activating him toward justice and love..." is even more important in overcoming unbelief than is "a proper presentation of the Church's teaching" (n.21).

Faith, according to Bellah and other sociologists, is deeply embedded in our existential situation and is part of the very structure of human experience-an insight which Bellah correctly attributes to Pascal (d. 1662) and Kierkegaard (d. 1855), and which we might also link with Rahner and Lonergan as well. Religion, therefore, is not "a matter of objective-cognitive assertion which might conflict with science, but a symbolic form within which one comes to terms with one's fate" (see *The Culture of Unbelief*, p.46). Faith, consequently, is an *inner* reality, and the belief which follows from faith is inner-directed. But that does not mean that faith and belief are purely private. Such faith and such belief relate us to others, to the total human community, and indeed to the whole universe-bringing us even to the point of sacrificing our lives for others.



faith and belief relate us to others,
to the total human community.

How widespread is the opposite, unbelief? Again, it depends on how you define it. In one sense at least, everyone is a believer; everyone believes in something important. And insofar as people express their belief, they are "religious". In the context of the United States, for example, such beliefs may issue forth in what Bellah has called "civil religion". It is the linking of one's search for personal authenticity with a sense of national identity and national purpose. The Peace Corps would be one major instance of it. It had something of the character of a secular monastic order, complete with a vow of poverty and a heroic devotion to the service of others.

But if you take belief to mean some *explicit* affirmation of the reality of God, then unbelief is considerably more prevalent, and certainly more in evidence than in previous centuries - again, because of advances in education generally, in literacy particularly, and because of the modern philosophical shift to the "subject".

And that is why the obverse side of the problem of God is the problem of the unbelieving person. Indeed, the problem of God—of belief and unbelief—becomes a problem only when it is concretely stated in such terms. According to the Bible and to the kind of philosophical theology represented by Transcendental Thomism, the presence of God is integral to the very structure of our historical existence. Therefore, the person who does not "fear God"(in the biblical sense of responding obediently to the presence and call of God) somehow does not exist, and that person's nature is somehow less than, or other than, human. On the other hand, the unbeliever *does* exist. He or she is there. And that is the problem.

We shall not solve that problem. There are some things that we can do no more than accept as part of our historical situation (a "given" of reality) and deal with as intelligently and as constructively as possible.

The problem of belief and unbelief, therefore, is not primarily the problem of communicating the correct information about God so that everyone will be able to know it, and in knowing it perceive at once its truth. Nor is

it simply a problem of laziness or bad will on the part of those to whom the information is directed. Rather, *the problem of belief and unbelief is*, once again, *the problem of human existence.* Is human existence finally and ultimately worthwhile? Is it meaningful? Is it purposeful? Is it intelligible? Is it directed to some end beyond itself? Or is it simply "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing"? And the problem of human existence is but the other side of the *problem of God.* For the question of the intelligibility, purposefulness, and worthwhileness of human existence is always answered, positively or negatively, in terms of God or some verbal surrogate for God.

SOME CONTEMPORARY VIEWS OF THE PROBLEM

Is human existence finally and ultimately worthwhile? Is it meaningful?

Swiss theologian Hans Küng, professor at the University of Tübingen in West Germany and author of many influential and controversial books on the Church, has perhaps made his deepest impression thus far with his massive volume *On Being a Christian.* He discusses the problem of belief and unbelief early on in the book, in the section on God.

His approach is consistent with the one adopted here. "In order to answer the question of God", he insists, "it must be assumed that man accepts in principle his own existence and reality as a whole..." (p.70). Our attitude to reality, if we are ever to reach God, has to be one of fundamental trust and confidence. Not that such trust automatically eliminates uncertainty of every kind. Reality is there as a fact, and yet it remains

always enigmatic, without any clearly visible support or purpose. The challenge is to find some kind of satisfactory answer, and in this quest the believer is in competition with the unbeliever. Which one can more convincingly interpret the basic human experiences?

Even someone who does not think that God exists could at least agree with the hypothesis that *if* God existed, a fundamental solution to the problem of human existence would be provided. God would be seen as the ultimate reason for all that is, as reality's ultimate support, ultimate goal, and ultimate core. Threats of death, meaninglessness, rejection, and nothingness would be overcome. But we cannot proceed from the *hypothesis* of God to the *reality* of God.

Besides, it is also possible to formulate the *opposite* hypothesis: If God does *not* exist. One must concede that it is indeed possible to deny the reality of God. Atheism (or unbelief in its most explicit form) cannot be refuted on the face of it. There is more than enough *uncertainty* about reality to justify, or at least explain, why someone might decide to deny the reality of God. On the other hand, atheism is also incapable of positively excluding the alternative. If it is possible to deny God, it is also possible to affirm God. Just as atheism rests on a *decision* about the ultimate meaning (or meaninglessness) of reality, so, too, does belief. Just as there is enough *uncertainty* about reality to explain, and perhaps even justify, unbelief, so, too, there is enough *clarity* in reality to explain, and perhaps even justify, belief.

And so the terms of the problems become clear. *If* God is, God is the answer to our most fundamental questions about reality and about human existence. *That* God is cannot be proved or demonstrated or otherwise established beyond all reasonable doubt. It can ultimately be accepted only in a confidence founded on reality itself. Since the"evidence" is so uncertain, it cannot be imposed upon us conclusively. There remains room for human freedom. We are free to decide: to affirm the fundamental worthwhileness of reality and of human existence, or to deny it. Each path is fraught with risks. The decision not to decide (agnosticism) is itself a decision against the intelligibility and purposefulness of reality. It is a vote of no confidence,and *confidence* is what belief and unbelief are really all about.

MICHAEL NOVAK

The American philosopher Michael Novak, a disciple of Bernard Lonergan, has written several popular books on an extraordinarily diverse range of subjects (fiction, sports, Vatican II, politics, as well as philosophy and theology). None is more pertinent to our discussion here than his *Belief and Unbelief: A Philosophy of Self-Knowledge.*

Although Novak would not disagree with Küng's analysis of the problem, Novak proceeds from a more explicitly philosophical starting point than Küng does. That starting point is Lonergan's approach to human understanding and the structures of consciousness. Religion is based on the drive to understand. Even when all the goods of health, education, security, and wealth are in our possession, we still hunger to know who we are. And we infer from this hunger. "Belief in God based on fidelity to understanding is based upon fidelity to oneself. In discovering one's own identity, one discovers God" (p.182).

How, then, does belief differ from unbelief? The believer is attentive to the data of his or her own consciousness, and the unbeliever is not, or at least interprets the data differently. Since no one has ever seen God (John 1:18),one stands always before a silent and invisible God. One "sees", and another does not "see". Being irreligious is like being tone-deaf or color-blind. At least that is how the believer looks at it. But perhaps the believer perceives what is not there. The believer, therefore, can never be certain that his or her belief is accurate and true. "He is held in darkness by a hidden God" (p.23).

Being irreligious is like being tone-deaf or color-blind.

On the other hand, it is in believing that reality assumes intelligibility. If one believes in God, one understands why one is inclined to pay respect to other persons and why one is inclined to be faithful to understanding, to friendship, and to creativity. In the end, however, "The serious nonbeliever and the serious believer ... share a hidden unity of spirit. When both do all they can to be faithful to their understanding and to love, and to the immediate task of diminishing the amount of suffering in the world, the intention of their lives is similar, even though their conceptions of what they are doing are different" (p. 191).

GREGORY BAUM

Following not Lonergan but the French philosopher and theologian Maurice Blondel (d.1949), Gregory Baum pursues a similar line of analysis. Belief is not a matter of accepting as true certain elements of some unlikely story about God, but a matter of interpreting human experience in a particular way. Blondel named his approach "the method of immanence". The Christian message reveals the hidden (supernatural) dynamism present in human life everywhere. The message is not foreign to life; it explains what has been going on in life and where it is leading us.

In his book *Faith and Doctrine,* Baum carries Blondel's apologetical approach one step further. He identifies the elements of ordinary human experience which contribute to a believing as opposed to an unbelieving response. He calls them "depth experiences", i.e., ordinary human experiences that are memorable, that are the source of many decisions, and that tend to unify human life. Those depth experiences may be specifically religious, or they may be secular. In the final accounting, however, they are all religious in that they ultimately put us in touch with God.

The specifically *religious* experiences are the experience of the holy and the experience of contingency. The so-called *secular* depth experiences are the experience of friendship, encounter, conscience, truth, human solidarity, and compassionate protest.

The religious literature of the world abounds in testimonies to the experience of the *holy*. It is what William James (d. 1910) described in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) as a "sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call 'something there', more deep and more general than any of the special and particular 'senses' by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed". Rudolf Otto (d. 1937), another major analyst of religious experience, insisted in fact that the sense of the sacred or of the transcendent is a purely *a priori* category. It is not something derived from sense experience, he argued in his classic work, *The Idea of the Holy* (1917). The experience of the sacred is rooted instead in "an original and underivable capacity of the mind implanted in the 'pure reason' independently of all perception". (The similarity to Rahner's notion of the "supernatural existential" is difficult to miss.)

The experience of *contingency* is our feeling of radical dependency, our sense of limitation, even of insignificance, and our concomitant sense of insecurity. At the same time we are profoundly aware that we belong to another who is vast, strong, caring, eternally reliable, that we are part of a larger unity which has meaning and in the context of which we find the strength to face life. It is an experience alluded to many times by Jesus himself (the parables of the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, for example) and systematically developed in the works of the great nineteenth-century Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (d. 1834).

The experience of *friendship* gives us a new kind of self-possession. We become reconciled with ourselves as we are accepted by another. And since we become more ourselves, we have more energy available for the mission of life. Closely related to the experience of friendship is the experience of *encounter* (as in a teacher-student relationship) that profoundly changes and shapes our lives. The Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber (d. 1965) is one of the principal systematizers of encounter experiences.

Conscience, too, is a depth experience. It is the experience of moral responsibility. We realize the call

to transcend ourselves and our own self-interest and to act on behalf of others. In so doing we sense that we are acting in accordance with what is deepest in us and thus opening ourselves to reality and to life as it is and as it is meant to be. A thinker who has assigned to conscience a central place in Christian theology is Cardinal John Henry Newman (d. 1890).

Truth is another depth experience. At certain moments in our lives, whether in conversation, research, or reading, our resistance to truth is overcome and we experience a conversion of the mind to a higher level of consciousness. We suddenly see the picture. And because we see, we are able to plan and redirect our lives differently, make decisions in a new way, and enter more deeply into personal unity. St. Augustine stands out among those who have understood life as a series of conversions to truth. Bernard Lonergan's notion of conversion is also pertinent here.

The experience of *human solidarity* makes us aware of the unity of the human family and its common destination to growth and reconciliation. The experience transcends our ideologies and even shatters them. We realize our interdependence. We share in the joys and sufferings of people everywhere. We recognize the deathly, inhuman character of prejudice, hatred, and discrimination. Baum names Pope John XXIII as one in whom this experience bore astounding fruits. One could add the work of Methodist theologian James Fowler, who, building on the psychological theories of Harvard professor Lawrence Kohlberg, speaks of the sixth stage of faith-development as "universalizing faith".

Connected with the sense of human solidarity is yet another depth experience, that of *compassionate protest.* It is the experience of those who become deeply disturbed by the misery in life, who are burdened by the presence of injustice, exploitation, and war. They identify with those who have no hope in this world. Such persons speak out as prophets, as accusers, as critics, even at the risk of their reputations, their physical safety, and their lives. Martin Luther King, Jr.(d. 1968), personifies this experience. And so, too, perhaps do some of the *theologians of liberation* in Latin America.

Depth experiences such as these bring us in touch with reality at its deepest level, and in so doing they bring us in touch with ourselves. Or to put the matter differently, as we reflect on the content and meaning of our human experiences, we begin to see that there is more to life than meets the eye, that there is an intelligibility (to use the Lonerganian term) which grounds, explains, and directs all that is. *To believe means to affirm the intelligibility of reality.* Or, in Baum's terms, *to believe means to recognize the significance of our depth experiences.* They put us in touch with the God who is immanent to human life. They explain our lives and give them direction.

PETER BERGER

A sociologist of religion in the Lutheran tradition, Peter Berger has developed an apologetic similar to Baum's. He, too, argues for an anthropological starting point in his *A Rumor of Angels.* What is there, if anything, in ordinary human experience which gives rise to belief in transcendental reality? What Baum called "depth experiences" Berger calls "signals of transcendence". He defines them as "phenomena that are to be found within the domain of our 'natural' reality but that appear to point beyond that reality" (pp. 65-66). As such, they express essential aspects of our being. They are not the same as Jung's archetypes, because they are not unconscious and do not have to be excavated from the depths of the mind. They belong to ordinary, everyday experience.

Berger identifies five: our propensity for order, our engagement in play, our unquenchable spirit of hope, our sense of outrage at what is thoroughly evil, and our sense of humor.

Our propensity for *order,* Berger argues on the side of philosopher of history Eric Voegelin, is grounded in a faith or trust that ultimately all reality is "in order". This transcendent order is of such a character that we can trust ourselves and our destiny to it. Human love – parent for child, man for woman – defies death. Death cannot annihilate the reality and fruits of love. There is an order which banishes chaos and which will bring everything to a unity at the end. And belief in God vindicates that order.

Play also mediates transcendence. When one is playing, one is on a different time,no longer measured by the standard units of the larger society but by the peculiar ones of the game itself. In the "serious" world it may be Tuesday, 11.00 A.M., March 5, 1981. But in the universe of play it may be the second inning, the fourth round, the fifth match, or two minutes before the half. The time structure of the playful universe takes on its own specific quality, a kind of eternity.Religion—belief in God—is the final vindication of childhood and of joy, and of all the playful gestures that replicate these.

Even the Marxist philosopher Ernest Bloch (d. 1978) has argued that our being cannot be understood adequately except in connection with our unquenchable propensity to *hope* for the future.We realize ourselves in projects, as we seek to overcome the difficulties and the limitations of the here and now.The artist, in failing health, strives to finish her creative work. A man risks his life to save another. Herein, we have a kind of depreciation or even denial of the reality of death. And it is precisely in the face of the death of others, and especially of those we love, that our rejection of death asserts itself most loudly. It is here, above all, that everything we are calls out for a hope that will refute the empirical fact. So deeply rooted is this attitude that one might conclude it is part of the very essence of human existence. Belief in God vindicates the gestures in which hope and courage are embodied.

Our being cannot be understood adequately except in connection with our unquenchable propensity to hope for the future.

The argument from *damnation* or *outrage* is the other side of the argument from hope. Some evils (e.g., the Nazi war crimes) are so obscene that we are convinced they cry to heaven for vengeance. And we are equally convinced they *will* be condemned and punished. Belief in God validates our deeply rooted conviction in a retribution that is more than human.

Finally, there is the argument from *humor*. By laughing, we transcend the present, the given, what is. We see discrepancies. The neighborhood bully is in deathly fear of spiders. A fastidious writer makes an egregious mistake in grammar. So we see that our imprisonment in the conditions of the present is not final. Things are not always what they seem. They can be other. Belief in God vindicates our laughter.

OFFICIAL TEACHINGS OF THE CHURCH

The preceding apologetical approaches do not seem to be inconsistent with the official teachings of the First Vatican Council and are certainly not inconsistent with those of the Second Vatican Council. The former council declared that "God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certainty from the things that were created through the natural light of human reason, for 'ever since the creation of the world His invisible nature has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made' (Romans 1:20)..." (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith*, chapter 2).

Nor is the First Vatican Council's teaching a denial of the necessity of grace. The same council insists on the necessity of faith for salvation, and faith is always the work of grace (chapter 3 of the *Constitution*). Furthermore, we have already argued, with Rahner and others, that human reason does not exist in an historical vacuum. Our history is the history of salvation. Our reason, indeed our whole consciousness, has been radically modified by God's offer of grace. There is no such order of reality as a purely natural order. Likewise there is no such reason as a purely natural reason. Hypothetically, that could have been the case. But in fact it is not. Thus, when Vatican I argues that we can know God through the power of human reason alone, that teaching is not necessarily inconsistent with the view

that all of our knowledge of God is, in the first instance, made possible by God, by the offer of grace, by the "supernatural existential".

The Second Vatican Council acknowledges that there are many reasons for unbelief, at least one of which is the failure of the Church to live up to its own teaching. If we are to persuade the world of the reality of God, it will not be done simply through a more effective communication of doctrine. It will happen chiefly through our putting the Gospel into practice (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, n.21).

The council also seems to be pursuing the same theological course outlined above. The Church knows "that her message is in harmony with the most secret desires of the human heart... . Far from diminishing man, her message brings to his development light, life, and freedom... . 'Thou has made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee' (*Confessions* of St. Augustine)" (n.21). For that reason we must be prepared always to enter into dialogue with one another, believers and unbelievers alike, in order to learn from one another's human experiences and to assist one another in the interpretation of those experiences (nn.21 and 23).

What is to be said, finally, of the abiding presence of *unbelief* in the world? According to Vatican II (*the Pastoral Constitution*, nn. 19-22; the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, n.16;and the *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity*,n. 7), not every instance of positive atheism, i.e., explicit rejection of God, is to be regarded as the result and the expression of personal sin. Even the atheist can be justified and receive salvation if he or she acts in accordance with his or her conscience. Over against the earlier teaching of the textbooks, the council assumes that it is possible for a normal adult to hold an explicit atheism for a long period of time, even to life's end, without this implying moral blame on the part of the unbeliever.

The council also seems to rule out the notion that those who die without explicit faith in God but who live good lives are destined for some form of natural happiness

alone. The council, in the *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity*, implicity affirms our thesis that the natural order is already graced and that there can be no purely and distinctly natural end of human existence. Even the so-called nonbelievers can reach a saving faith without having accepted the explicit preaching of the Gospel.

CONCLUSION

Belief and unbelief are two sides of the same human coin. They represent different interpretations of the mystery of human existence.*The believer interprets reality and human existence as finally worthwhile, intelligible, and purposeful.* The unbeliever interprets reality and human existence as finally without intelligibility or purpose and, therefore, without ultimate worth. *Neither belief nor unbelief can be established or disproved by arguments alone.* The believer sees what the unbeliever does not see. Still, the believer's perception is not arbitrary. There are dimensions of human experience which cannot be explained fully apart from the God-hypothesis--call them "depth experiences", "signals of transcendence", or whatever else. This does not mean that the case for belief is clearly the stronger of the two, but only that *the case for belief is not without warrants.*

Michael Novak expresses the problem movingly in his *Belief and Unbelief*(p. 24)·

> The believer need not forgive God for the suffering of this world; like Job, he may accuse God to his face. But he does not cease to remain faithful to the conscience which cautions him not, finally, to be dismayed. Belief in God, he knows, could be an empty illusion, even a crime against his own humanity. He knows the stakes.If he is faithful to his conscience and thinks clearly concerning what he is about, he has no place in his heart for complacency or that sweet pseudoreligious 'peace' that sickens honest men. His belief is not unsteady-quite the contrary-though he knows that the thread supporting it, however firmly, is so slender that in the night it cannot by any means be seen.This commitment to conscience keeps him faithful, and his daily experience may make his commitment as

plausible as Sartre's experience made his, but there is no final way short of death of proving who is right. Each man has but a single life, during which his choice may go either way. That choice affects many things in his life, but one thing it does not affect: his reliance on his own conscience (formed, no doubt, in friendship with other men) as his sole concern and comfort.

No one has seen God.