

Introduction

This is a book about the nature of Christian faith. In our anxious age of violent certainties, it offers a holistic understanding of faith that I intend to be timely and liberating, orthodox, and critical. Today's widespread spiritual yearning for inclusion and deep re-connection with others and the world is shown to characterize Christian faith as it is presented here: as an abiding faith in Jesus Christ, of mystical flavor, worked out through the Eucharistic community.

I argue for a self-involving, spiritual-not-just-rational understanding of faith based on personal participation and transformation. Such faith is evident when certainty-craving *individuals* who are anxious and ultimately violence-prone toward the threatening "other"—all of which is shown to be typical of modern culture in the West—come to abide in Christ and his Eucharistic body. Hence we become relational *persons* freed to embrace the other.

Abiding faith is not to be confused with the tribal faith of more undifferentiated, pre-modern times. This book is not an exercise in nostalgic medievalism. But neither is it satisfied with the individualized faith typical of today's secularized West. Beyond tribal faith and individualized faith, then, abiding faith is identified as the classic understanding of intentional Christian faith from the New Testament and the Fathers. It was displaced by tribal faith in the period of Christendom, which in turn began to give way from the later Middle Ages. Thereafter individualized faith emerged with the agenda of modernity. Abiding faith then went underground and was redescribed as mysticism. It is now re-emerging as a post-modern theological and ecclesial option.

This book differs from others addressing the nature of faith because it brings together a range of normally separate discussions, also tackling the problem from a distinctive standpoint. It draws the lived reality of faith into

conversation with philosophy of religion. It adopts sharp contemporary analysis of the violence inherent in modern culture as a background to understanding the distinctive nature of Christian faith. It sets out to explore faith against the backdrop of secularity, and modern Western experience more generally, without defensiveness. Its distinctive standpoint is Catholic-minded, ecclesial, and Eucharistic. Faith is presented in terms of liberating, inclusive, ecclesial praxis, beyond the anxious individualism and structural violence implicated in non-ecclesial, non-Eucharistic, non-inclusive definitions of faith.

The book is in two parts and six chapters. Part I explores how faith has fared in the crucible of modernity. Part II is a history, intellectual defense and reflection on the contemporary outworking of abiding faith, under a title taken from Australian Church historian Tom Frame and his book *Anglicans in Australia*, referring to the axes along which Australian Church life needs to be renewed. I have changed Bishop Frame's order, however, putting "belonging" before "believing," for reasons that will become obvious.

Chapter 1 is about the modern Western self and how it *feels*, in particular with regard to faith. A world of religious belonging has gone from the West, and faith has become a matter of individual choice and bricolage. This condition is explored under the headings of secularization, loss of community, the rise to cultural dominance of consumerism, and the annexation of faith by consumer culture. Various standard forms of post-modern faith are then considered: conservative Christianity, consumer spirituality, and atheism—the latter in two forms that I call *atheist chic* and *atheism-lite*.

Chapter 2 is about how our sense of God came to be reshaped by the culture of modernity. First, the roots of modernity are identified with a theological vision of power and control, from the rise of nominalism in the late Middle Ages, which inadvertently spawned the drive to autonomy characteristic of modern atheism. Modernity is then analyzed, drawing on Stephen Toulmin and his important book *Cosmopolis*. This title refers to a system of meaning offering certainty to a troubled Europe, from the early seventeenth century. Modernity's breakdown is charted against the post-modern mood of deregulation and volatilization of truth and power.

Chapter 3 explores the anxious roots and regularly violent consequences of human system building. "The system" of modernity is analyzed in terms of René Girard's theory of the false sacred. A range of deviant and foreign manifestations of "the other" become scapegoats, helping the modern West manage its anxiety and uncertainty. Here the discussion engages Michel Foucault on deviance and foreignness, looking also to post-colonial theory,

environmentalism, feminism, and Queer theory. This chapter is a precursor to the Girardian account of modernity that I hope to provide in my next book.

In chapter 4, what I am calling abiding faith is defined, and its fortunes throughout Christian history are traced. This is an understanding of faith beyond tribalism and individualism, also beyond modernity's agenda of control and certainty. Abiding in Christ is identified as the typical understanding of faith from St. Paul to the monastic theology of the Middle Ages, whereupon the rational certainties of Scholasticism drove this classical, participatory approach to faith underground as mysticism. There it has remained as a reminder and a corrective to controlling theological rationalism. Ellen T. Charry, Michel de Certeau, Grace Jantzen, Andrew Louth, Denys Turner, and Mark McIntosh are the theologians who have helped me to understand mysticism more as a theological style than as a type of experience. In seeking to reappropriate St. Paul's mysticism for today, I indicate a Girardian path beyond the debate that passed from Albert Schweitzer to Rudolf Bultmann to E. P. Sanders in twentieth-century New Testament studies.

Chapter 5 is an apologetic account of abiding faith. Modern rationalism and its skeptical assessment of faith is given a run for its money by the more participatory, self-authenticating version of abiding faith identified in chapter 4—a faith that is not objectively verifiable nor subject to complete rational closure, but which is certainly intellectually compatible with the holistic epistemology that has emerged in post-modern times. The key ideas here are “participatory knowing” and “paradigmatic imagination.” This chapter centers on a conversation with mid-to-late twentieth-century philosophies of religion and science, demonstrating that abiding faith need not entail a retreat from public meaningfulness. Among those I touch on are the later Ludwig Wittgenstein, W.V. Quine, and Thomas Kuhn in philosophy, also John Henry Newman, Nancey Murphy, George Lindbeck, and Garrett Green in theology. But the chapter hinges on a clear statement of the cumulative nature of abiding faith from the memoirs of Bishop David Jenkins, also a harrowing fictional story of conversion by contemporary Australian writer Tim Winton.

Chapter 6 offers an exposition of abiding faith and its implications for Christian life today under the headings of vision, self, and spirituality. I argue that faith does not necessarily entail a comprehensive system of belief, and I consider some Girardian implications of faith beyond the metaphysical agenda of modernity in conversation with the philosopher Gianni Vattimo. I discuss how faith is and is not passed on, engaging with Edith Wyschogrod

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and her theory of post-modern sanctity but opting for a Girardian account of how we become selves. Rather than *anxious individuals* defining themselves against “the other,” the Church emerges in this chapter as a pacific community of *ecclesial persons* whose being is understood as fully relational, dwelling peacefully in the Trinitarian life. This transformation frees us from certainty, anxiety, and violence so we can embrace the other. The important theologians I touch on in this chapter are D. M. MacKinnon, Rowan Williams, John Zizioulas, and especially James Alison.

This is a wide-ranging discussion and its appeal might well depend on the reader’s openness to René Girard and his account of human culture and religion. My hope, however, is that I might commend that account by showing something of its range and power. I also hope to commend faith’s reconnection with participation in the Christian form of life, beyond the compromised understanding of faith that both religious skeptics and anxious believers take to be the genuine article.

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