

THE FIRST ARTICLE

FATHER AND
CREATOR

Faith and Belief

“I/We believe in...”

Translation always implies interpretation. The meaning of words changes with the passage of time, and as a language evolves, new translations must be made. No word, no phrase in the creed has undergone a greater metamorphosis in translation than the opening word itself. *Credo*, the Latin word from which our English word “creed” derives, is itself a translation of the Greek *pisteuomen*, which, for Christians, had a distinctive meaning. The English translation, “I believe,” first used in the High Middle Ages, attempted to capture the biblical idea of faith—a notion something quite other than what “I believe” has come to signify in current speech. The term “believe” is so deeply embedded in the life and thought of the English-speaking world that such a major shift in its meaning could not but have far-reaching ramifications in religious attitudes and in the Christian understanding of “faith.”

Before we can even discuss the biblical notion of faith or what Christians mean when they, reciting the creed, say “We *believe*,” it is necessary to come to some understanding of terms or at least to recognize the ambiguity of the English phrase. To express the human response to God, New Testament Greek uses the word *pistis*; it implies belief, trust, obedience, and loyalty. Latin uses two terms, a noun and a verb (*fides* and *credere*), that correspond to the English “faith” and “to believe” to capture

the full meaning of *pistis*. Though closely related, faith and belief emphasize different facets of *pistis*. Faith, which involves the whole person, refers to the act by which one responds to God; belief refers primarily to the cognitive dimension of the act. Theologians speak of the first as *fides qua creditor*, and the latter as *fides quae creditor*.

Since the substance of the commentary in the pages that follow will focus on the contents of faith (*fides quae creditor*), the emphasis in this first chapter is on the act of faith (*fides qua creditor*). It begins with a word study; relying on the now classical research of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, it traces the etymology of the terms “belief,” “creed,” and “faith,” and relates them to one another. The middle section explains faith primarily in the Augustinian sense as believing in *someone* (God), and analyzes various aspects of faith in relationship to love, to prayer, and to being human. The final section of the chapter briefly explains the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard’s “leap of faith,” and the treatment of faith at the First and Second Vatican Councils. The theme that runs through the chapter is that faith represents a certain way of apprehending reality, a way of looking at the totality of one’s relationships, actions, and attitudes toward God and the world in which a person finds himself or herself. Not everyone who makes an act of faith is Christian, but, as Kierkegaard argued, the absence of faith is despair.

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF “BELIEF”

Literally and originally, “to believe” means “to hold dear.” This is the meaning that the German equivalent *belieben* still has in the sense of “prefer” or “give allegiance to.” Etymologically, “believe” is related to a broad range of familiar words, some archaic, like *lief* (dear, willing), some still in use, like “beloved” and “love.” The history of “believe” in its various forms—ranging from Old English *be loef* to the early modern English synonym “beloved,” through the seventeenth-century misspelling that gave us “believe” instead of “beleeve”—is a chronicle of its gradual change in meaning. One of the earliest examples of the word “belief” is found in a medieval homily that warns Christians not to set their hearts, as we might say today, on worldly goods. The actual phrase is “should not set their belief” on them.

In the fourteenth century, about the time of John Wycliffe (1330–1384), important changes began to take place that mark the transition from Middle English to Modern English. A new word, “faith,” was

coming into use as the English form of the Latin *fides*. Early evidence of the transition can be seen in the two versions of the English Bible attributed to Wycliffe, both based on the Latin Vulgate. In the first, *bilefe* translates *fides*, whereas in the second, “faith” appears in a number of places. By the seventeenth century the transition was virtually complete. The 1611 King James Authorized Version used the word “faith” 246 times, while using “belief” only once. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, which describes this evolution (s.v. *belief*), states,

...the word *faith* being, through O[ld] F[rench] *fei*, *faith*, the etymological representative of the L[atin] *fides*, it began in the 14th c[entury] to be used to translate the latter, and in course of time almost superseded ‘belief’ esp[ecially] in theological language, leaving ‘belief’ in great measure to the merely intellectual process or state.... Thus “belief in God” no longer means as much as “faith in God.”

This change was true only for the noun. Unlike Greek and *biblical Hebrew, however, English never developed a verb form associated with “faith.” Translators, therefore, used “believe” as the verb form, which continued to have the meaning it had in the medieval period: to hold dear, to cherish. Until very recent times “I believe” clearly implied (as it still does for some) to entrust oneself, to give one’s heart, to be loyal, to make a commitment. The idea of commitment, it should be noted, is also at the root memory of the original Latin. Etymologically, *credo*, it seems, is a compound of two other Latin words, *cor*, *cordis*, “heart” (as in the English derivatives “cordial,” “concord,” and “accord”) and an archaic verb *do*, “put, place, set” (of which a trace is seen in such English words as “tradition” and “condominium”). The primary meaning of *credo* in classical Latin was “to entrust,” “to commit,” “to trust something to someone,” for example, money (as suggested by the cognate “credit”).

PERSONAL AND CORPORATE FAITH

There seems little doubt that in the early days of the Latin church, a per-

*The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that the “I believe” of the Apostles’ Creed professes the faith of the individual believer; the “We believe” of the Nicene Creed confesses the faith of bishops in council “or more generally by the liturgical assembly of believers” (n. 167). Subsequently, the Congregation of Divine Worship directed that the first person singular is to be used even in the liturgical assembly so that the confession of faith is understood “as coming from the person of the whole Church united by means of Faith.” (*Liturgiam authenticam*, 65)

son about to be baptized, in saying *credo*, meant “I herein give my heart to God the Father...to Jesus Christ his only son...to the Holy Spirit.” At the crucial moment in the liturgical rite, the minister, speaking for the Christian community, asks, “*Credis?*” “Do you believe?” The baptizand declares *Credo*—“I give my heart,” “I commit myself,” and in doing so makes a solemn act of self-dedication. Everywhere in the ancient church—in Rome, according to the *Apostolic Tradition* of St. Hippolytus, in Jerusalem, according to St. Cyril, in St. Ambrose’s Milan, and in St. Augustine’s Africa—the tone of the baptismal rite, whether in Greek or Latin, marks a change in one’s allegiance from Satan to God, from darkness to light, from sin to purity, from worldly attachments to attachment to the kingdom of God. Baptism is not merely a “head trip,” a question of moving from disbelief to belief, as the terms are currently understood, but a conversion, a change of heart.

The Christian’s act of faith, moreover, is not an aria sung solo. It is made in communion with the confession of faith sung by the whole church. The “I believe” of baptism becomes the “we believe” of the eucharistic community. The church keeps alive the memory of Christ and hands on from generation to generation the confession of faith that comes to us from the apostles. The Christian community is the “we” of faith. In proclaiming the gospel the church invites men and women to share faith in Christ, “first *through* her, then *in* her and *with* her.”¹

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In reciting the creed, Christians declare, individually and corporately, their faith before both God and the world. Thus the purpose of their confession is twofold: before God it is doxology, an act of praise and thanksgiving whereby we applaud all that God has done in creation. Before their fellow human beings, Christians declare publicly that God continues to act in the world in Christ and in the Holy Spirit. The creed echoes the faith of the New Testament church. By it the individual Christian follows in the centuries-old tradition of the baptized who began confessing their faith by *protesting* in the original sense of the word—that is, “witnessing for”—“Jesus is Lord!”

NEW TESTAMENT UNDERSTANDING OF FAITH

The specifically Christian meaning of faith as found in the New Testament adapts a Greek vocabulary to express the Old Testament notion of faith. The verb “believe” and the noun “faith” in our English Bibles translate the Greek words *pisteuein* and *pistis*, which in classical

Greek connote assurance and conviction. In the New Testament, *pistis* is made to incorporate the meaning of several Hebrew words that suggest the trust and confidence one puts in a person or a person's word because that person is judged trustworthy and dependable. Old Testament faith meant that the Israelites committed themselves to Yahweh and accepted with full confidence that the word spoken by God would be fulfilled.

In the gospels, faith connotes the trust and confidence that arise from accepting the person of Jesus and his claims. The faith that moves mountains clearly implies belief in the power Jesus exhibited in his own person. In the Johannine gospel the object of faith is made more explicit: it is faith that Jesus is the holy one of God (6:69), that he came from God (16:30), that he is the Messiah (11:27). Faith in Jesus means faith in his words (Jn 2:22; 5:47; 8:45). To become a Christian is to put faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 5:14; 9:42; 11:17), and to believe that one is saved by the power of his grace (Acts 15:11).

After his conversion Paul wrote, "The life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me. I still live my human life, but it is a life of faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20). Faith joined with baptism renders a person righteous (Rom 1:17; 3:22, 26, 28, 30; 4:5; 9:30; Gal 2:16; 3:8, 24) and makes Christians children of God in Christ (Gal 3:26). In his Epistles to the Galatians and Romans, particularly in Chapter 4 of the latter, Paul points up the antithesis between faith and the Law; and in other passages where he opposes faith and works, he also implies the contrast between faith and the Law. Those who think they can be saved by the works of the Law without faith in the Lord Jesus are no better than unbelieving Gentiles.

St. Paul emphasizes that faith is a grace, an undeserved gift. After his discussion of the gifts of the Spirit (see below, Chapter 19), which the apostle implies are transitory or certainly not as central to Christian life, he speaks of the "three things that last: faith, hope, and love" (1 Cor 13:3). In the New Testament the concepts of faith and hope are closely linked, and to a certain extent, interchangeable.* Thus 1 Peter says, "Should anyone ask you the reason for your hope," the explanation to be given "gen-

*Faith, hope, and love are traditionally called the theological virtues, to distinguish them from the natural virtues—prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. The former are not virtues in the ordinary sense of moral philosophy, but rather the opening up of a new vision of reality. Faith, hope, and charity are infused, which is to say that they are interior graces whereby human potentialities are caught up and given a new dimension by God acting on the person.

tly and respectfully” is an interpretation of the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus at God’s right hand (3:15, 18–22). The Epistle to the Hebrews, after a passing reference to baptism—“our bodies washed in pure water”—says that the Christian’s profession of faith “gives us hope, for he who made the promise deserves our trust” (10:22, 23). The confidence that drives Christians to persevere in their calling despite suffering, insults, and persecution is like that of Abraham, who “never questioned or doubted God’s promise.” Christian hope rests on the fidelity and power of God, “who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead” (Rom 4:20, 24). In these passages hope is not to be confused with sheer optimism of the kind that looks to human ingenuity, technology, and economic development to build a bright new world. Christian hope, the expectation of the unseen (Rom 8:24; Heb 3:6; 11:1), is sustained by faith in God’s promises. New Testament faith, grounded as it is in the revelation of God’s presence and activity in Jesus Christ, who is the alpha and omega of all creation, looks to the future as well as to the past.

BELIEVING AND BELIEVING IN

But what does the assertion “I believe in” mean to Christians today? Do we mean the creed to be an act of self-dedication, a loyalty oath that signals a commitment that has transformed our life? Or are we more tentative? When we say “I believe,” do we mean that we are less than confident—that we are really not certain? Wilfred Cantwell Smith, to whom I am indebted for much of the foregoing history of terms, says that the metamorphosis of the meaning of “I believe” is dramatically characterized by the following contrast:

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There was a time when “I believe” as a ceremonial declaration of faith meant, and was heard as meaning: “Given the reality of God, as a fact of the universe, I hereby proclaim that I align my life accordingly, pledging love and loyalty.” A statement about a person’s believing has now come to mean, rather, something of this sort: “Given the uncertainty of God, as a fact of modern life, so-and-so reports that the idea of God is part of the furniture of the mind.”²

The change in meaning that took place over a period of time has in the end proven drastic. Whereas to believe originally meant to hold dear and clearly implied a strong personal commitment based on trust, it now connotes an element of uncertainty, and even when addressed to a

person—"I believe you"—it signals a minimum of trust and does not imply commitment. More often than not, "believe" in the modern sense implies doubt. To illustrate the point, Smith cites the *Random House Dictionary*. The first entry under the word "belief" defines it as "an opinion or conviction" and offers by way of example *the belief that the world is flat!* Thus the user of this popular dictionary comes away from it associating belief with a notion that is antiquated and false.³

"Faith" and "belief," as defined in our modern dictionaries, are not synonymous. Faith is more than believing. It rests on the kind of certitude that is implied in the phrase "believing in." Faith establishes a personal relationship. One may "believe" something in lieu of firsthand evidence, accepting the truth of a statement on the word of someone regarded as trustworthy; but strictly speaking one has faith—believes—only in a person. This is the classic distinction of St. Augustine: *credere Deo* (to believe on God's authority), *credere Deum [esse]* (to believe that God exists), and *credere in Deum* (to believe in God). Only this last, which presupposes and incorporates the first two, illustrates true faith. Medieval theologians repeated St. Augustine's threefold distinction, with St. Thomas saying that all three are aspects of the single act of faith.⁴ Like the Latin CREDO IN which it translates, "I believe in" signals an avowal, a firm commitment to the Triune God. Faustus of Riez (d. 490/500), in a passage that continues to be quoted, said it is not enough to believe that God exists (one also believes that the devil exists), but one must believe *in* God.

To believe in God is to seek Him in faith, to hope piously in Him, and to pass into Him by a movement of choice. When I say that I believe in Him, I confess Him, offer Him worship, adore Him, give myself over to Him wholly and transfer to Him all my affection.⁵

The creed as a profession of faith uses the verbal form "I believe in" in the sense it had into the seventeenth century. The preposition "in" needs to be duly stressed, for it points up the difference between saying "I believe you" and "I have faith in you."

It was this same Faustus of Riez who, commenting on the phrase "I believe in the holy catholic Church," wrote rather dramatically,

...we must believe *in* the Trinity alone; so, remove that syllable from before the name of the Church....Whoever believes in the Church believes in man...Away with that blasphemous conviction.⁶

Faustus' warning about not believing in the church echoes in the Catechism of the Council of Trent, and, most recently, in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.⁷ The latter also makes the point that we do not "believe in" formulas, but in the reality they express. It is through creedal formulas, however, that we can speak of the mystery of the Triune God.

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THE ACT OF FAITH

Strictly speaking, the creed is not an *act of faith*, but it does presuppose an act of faith that is highly personal and antecedent to any verbal formulation. Before saying out loud, "I believe in God," I must say in my heart, "My Lord and my God, I believe in *You*" in order to say it sincerely.⁸ For Christians, "the act of faith" is one's personal response to God who calls, a commitment to divine being revealed in Jesus Christ.

The Old and New Testaments witness to one fundamental fact. It is God who calls human beings, addresses each by name, and manifests love and care for them. According to the Scriptures, God encounters us in much the way we encounter other persons, but the Creator and creatures are not equals. God is not "person" in the way humans are. On the other hand (as we shall see in the next chapter), the Bible makes it clear that neither is God an "impersonal" being, either in the sense of one who is distant and disinterested, or in the sense of a mere cosmic force.

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God is mystery, beyond human capacity and categories. Individuals can ultimately *know* God only in faith and can understand the divine self-revelation only in response to God's prior call. The Christian doctrine of grace is based on the fact that God takes the initiative. Even when individuals seem to discover God, perhaps after a long and tortuous search, they are successful because God has first found them. It seems that when humans pretend to have found God on their own, without the Scriptures, without the church, they misrepresent the divine essence. At best, God becomes a creature of human ingenuity, a mental construct or hypothesis demanded by some theorem that explains the universe; at worst, a caricature no better than the idols of whom the psalmist said,

They have mouths but speak not;
they have eyes but see not;
They have ears but hear not;
they have noses but smell not;

They have hands but feel not;
 they have feet but walk not;
 they utter no sound from their throat.
 Their makers shall be like them,
 everyone that trusts in them. (Ps 115:4–8)

The believer responds to God as a person, speaks to and of God with personal pronouns—“Thou” rather than “it.” As inadequate as the category is, we have no better adjective than “personal” to capture the testimony of Scripture.

153-165 The act of faith thus establishes a bond between persons. Faith tells us that we are accepted; it is the ground of love. The act of faith implies mutual trust that goes beyond objective reasons. Like love, it is not something we can force. Like love, faith is not something we deserve because of our achievements or because of our moral integrity, our generosity, or our education. Simply put, faith responds to faith. This is the line of reasoning behind the Credo in Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Schwartz’s musical work, *Mass*:

I believe in God,
 But does God believe in me?

...

I believe in one God,
 But then I believe in three.
 I’ll believe in twenty gods
 If they’ll believe in me.

...

Who created my life?
 Made it come to be?
 Who accepts this awful
 Responsibility?

Faith tells us that Another loves us for ourselves. We respond tentatively, cautiously. At first we do not know the Other’s name. We do not ask. We are secure for the moment in the knowledge that Someone trusts us, takes responsibility for us. Paradoxically, in finding the Other we discover ourselves. In faith and love we come to see our own worth. We may have doubts, but doubts do not destroy faith any more than intellectual difficulties destroy love. It is neglect and lack of trust that undermine faith and love. One displays but cannot verify faith any more

than a person can prove his or her love. Faith, like love, is expressed in myriad ways (“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways...”) but proves elusive when analyzed and subjected to the scrutiny of rational arguments.

FAITH AS RESPONSE

The act of faith is essentially a prayer addressed directly to God. It is the human response in the dialogue instituted by God, and it is from that initial “I believe in You” that every other prayer arises. Prayer acknowledges one’s dependence. Praying means opening oneself to another. “The Other” becomes intimate with us and touches us at the depth of our existence. One of the better insights of contemporary theologians is found in the parallels they draw between faith and prayer. They note that objections raised against the latter are similar to those raised against the former. One objection alleges that prayer (and, by implication, faith) stands apart from everyday experience. In normal situations, so the reasoning goes, we deal with problems ourselves; in crises and emergencies, when we cannot cope, we have recourse to prayer. If indeed this were the case, the implications are far-reaching; God then becomes a “God-of-the-gaps,” the *deus ex machina* who descends out of the blue to rescue us when all else fails. The clear insinuation is that God stands aloof from the everyday world. To have recourse to prayer is to rely on a higher power; in effect, as the argument goes, this means a “pray-er” does not take the world seriously. Human endeavors of all kinds—political activity, struggles for freedom, economic development, scientific research—may be regarded as important to a greater or less degree, but not as ultimately significant. Thus the further insinuation is that one uses faith as an excuse to avoid making a firm commitment to the human enterprise. 142-143

These misrepresentations of the nature of prayer reflect much of the contemporary misunderstanding of the nature of faith. An act of faith that does not take the world and the human condition seriously does not, in effect, accept God as the ground of all being. It implies that God is finite and an entity apart from the created universe. The locus of faith, like the proper place for prayer, is not a niche in a corner of one’s life, a space, however small or large, where “religious” activity and *perhaps* ethical decisions take place. Faith is more like the atmosphere, fresh air that permeates and enlivens every hour of individual and communal life,

waking and sleeping, work and leisure, production and consumption. Where faith is concerned, there are no gaps. The faith response to God's self-revelation implies a reverence for all that God has made, an acceptance of the inherent goodness of creation. Christian faith implies a readiness to assent to God as both the ground and goal of human existence.

THE HUMAN FACE OF FAITH

Faith is essential to human life. No one lives, at least for long, entirely without faith, because it is intricately bound up with the meaning of human existence. Even non-believers—people who do not have faith in the Christian sense—adopt a basic stance toward life. In making an act of faith a person exercises a fundamental choice that defines one's views about reality, about what is important and what is not, about what is moral and immoral. Faith is not an optional accessory, like a fireplace in a house or air-conditioning in an automobile. "A person," writes Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "is not a human being and then also a Jew, or also a Christian, or a Muslim. One is a human being by being one or the other of them."⁹ Smith explains his point by taking the Hindu as an example. The word "Hindu" simply means "Indian." The people of India who speak Hindi think of themselves as Hindus; the distinction between Indian and Hindu is, in origin, a foreign invention. Endemic to their culture is the desire of Indians to be human, to discern as best they can how to live properly. To be authentically human in a world where matter and spirit converge and vie with each other for preeminence is not an easy task. The enterprise of becoming human is something that must be worked at in the context of cosmic forces. It cannot simply be left to chance or circumstance or fate. Outsiders view the lifestyle that Indians have developed over the centuries in religious terms and thus consider "Hinduism" as one of the world's great religions. In India, however, to be Hindu represents nothing more than the effort to be human.

Likewise, Buddhists set themselves not "Buddhist" ideals, but human ones. The individual they call the Buddha—"the Enlightened One"—disclosed how human beings may best live. There are no Buddhist truths, no Buddhist ideals, no Buddhist values apart from the cosmic truth, human ideals, absolute values that are inherent in the universe. Enlightenment like that experienced by the Buddha should be everyone's goal, though in Buddhist eyes, only the Buddha himself attained it perfectly.

Each of the great religions of the world, in that it takes a fundamental stance toward reality and what it means to be human, represents a different faith. Thus it is for Christians, who proclaim that Jesus revealed not only who God is, but what it means to be human. And more. By reason of the incarnation, the very fact that God “came down from heaven” and became one of us opened the possibility for us to become one with God. Jesus the Christ, Savior and Lord, not only reveals in the sense of discloses, but also enables us to be what we are called to be. The Christian faith does not—should not—stand in contrast to authentic human existence. As for Buddhists, for Christians there are no Christian truths, values, ideals, but only Truth, Goodness, and Life exemplified by the One who said “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” All human beings are called to the same destiny. 561, 2419

To insist on the human quality of Christian faith does not mean that reason and the secular world are the sole criteria for a correct interpretation of the gospel, but it does mean that there is no salvation apart from the struggle to be human in the fullest sense. On the other hand, while faith, like prayer, cannot be defined apart from a societal context, the social aspects do not exhaust it meaning. Modern theologians emphasize that faith is multi-dimensional; it extends vertically to the heights and depths of existence as well as horizontally across the full range of human experience, individual and corporate.

FAITH IN DISPUTE

According to popular accounts of the sixteenth-century Reformation, the issue that divided the theologians, generally along Protestant-Catholic lines, was whether faith is basically trust in God’s mercy and forgiveness, or whether it is essentially a matter of content—what is believed. In retrospect, it seems as if the opposing camps were so intent on expounding their own point of view that they were not listening to each other. The disputants, in fact, held more in common than they realized. Most accepted Augustine’s threefold distinction—*credere Deo*, *credere Deum (esse)*, *credere in Deum*—and in the tradition of medieval theology regarded them as representing three different facets of the single act of faith. Luther’s quest for a merciful God led him to emphasize *credere in Deum*—trust and confidence on which faith is grounded. Catholics, uneasy about the Reform movement as a whole, wanted something more definite and less individualistic than what would come

to be called “a personal relationship.” None of the disputants, however, questioned the existence of God—*credere Deum (esse)*.

Although the sixteenth-century controversies helped to clarify the Christian understanding of faith, they had deleterious (and for a long while undetected) consequences. Once the Reformation became institutionalized, the Protestant-Catholic debate centered not on the act of faith, but on the contents of faith—“revealed truths.” Catholic theologians were wont to compile lists of truths that Christians were obliged to accept because they were grounded on revelation—doctrines, practical truths (e.g., the Ten Commandments), and the means of salvation (e.g., the Lord’s Prayer, the sacraments of baptism, penance, and Eucharist). More often than not, the doctrines were a paraphrase of the Apostles’ Creed (the argument ran that these truths were obligatory, as evidenced from the constant practice of the church in requiring that Christians profess them as a condition for baptism). Many points that Catholics considered “revealed” were disputed by Protestants. In the eyes of non-theologians, the end result was that theology took on the tone of polemics and apologetics. The discussion no longer centered on transcendent realities basic to the act of faith, but had shifted to particulars, the differences that separated the churches. Or to state it in the categories we have used in much of this chapter, theologians focused their attention on *what* must be believed on divine authority (*credere Deo revelante*), to the neglect of faith as personal commitment (*credere in Deum*).

The Age of Reason or, as it is also called, the Enlightenment, was in part a reaction against theological disputes, confessional rivalries, and wars of religion. It forced the churches to focus their attention once more on basics. Avowed rationalists in the movement exalted reason to the exclusion of revelation. They regarded faith as defective knowledge, little more than ill-founded opinion or, at best, a means of legitimating religious and ethical teaching until society advances or individuals mature to the point where reason and science liberate them. Many not only rejected revelation and faith in a personal God, but many questioned the very existence of God (*credere Deum esse*). Thus in nineteenth-century Europe, Christians were once again made to ask themselves what they meant when they said, WE BELIEVE IN....

It is impossible in a few pages to summarize or even to name the many ways in which theologians, Protestant and Catholic, attempted to respond to the Enlightenment. We single out two approaches that, because of their lasting influence, are of more than historical interest.

The one is associated with the father of modern existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855); the other with the First Vatican Council (1869–1870). Taken together, they illustrate the paradox of Christian faith, which is at once decision and grace, human and divine action converging in the personal dimensions of life.

THE LEAP OF FAITH

Among Protestants, one of the most vehement critics of the Enlightenment was the melancholic Dane Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard described “the leap of faith” that embodied his views of choice and truth. Reacting in particular against what he considered the cosmic determinism and impersonal collectivism of the German idealist philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, Kierkegaard set out to vindicate the individual. His starting point was the insecurity—the anxiety and alienation—that people experience in their everyday lives. He had little patience with philosophers who raised theoretical doubts about the certainty of religious and ethical truths but stopped short of asking the kind of question that exposes even more radical doubt about the purpose and meaning of human existence. Existential doubt brings one face to face with despair. Intellectual doubt is partial; despair engulfs one’s whole being. It is possible to live with the former, not with the latter. The title of one of Kierkegaard’s most famous books, *Either/Or*, illustrates the fundamental option that confronts the individual: one is faced with the choice “either” to despair “or” to risk a leap into the unknown—a leap of faith.¹⁰

In opposition to Hegel’s tendency to generalize and deal with humans in the abstract, Kierkegaard focused on concrete existence, personal freedom, and the act rather than the contents of faith. In his existentialist view, individuals define themselves not in terms of what they understand, but in terms of the choices they make. An individual constitutes himself or herself as individual by choosing one mode of existence rather than another.

Kierkegaard was impatient with speculative philosophy and theology that made no difference in people’s lives. He emphasized that truth must be defined as much by the way it is apprehended as in terms of what is apprehended. One chooses truths (others might say “values”) by making a subjective commitment to a particular (in the sense of concrete) style of life. For Kierkegaard, truth is subjectivity. It comes also to be called “existential truth,” a lived truth rather than a mere verbal truth.

According to Kierkegaard, truth consists not in the correspondence of thought with things, “not in knowing the truth, but in being truth.” Although truth rests on the life choices one makes, there are no criteria to guide the decision or to say that it is correct or incorrect except that the choice be honestly made.

One’s quest for authentic existence leads to making a basic choice regarding ultimate reality. This fundamental option is essentially a leap of faith, a plunge into the unknown. Kierkegaard accepts the Old Testament patriarch Abraham as the archetype of the person of faith. Called by Yahweh, Abraham had the courage to depart the land of his kinfolk and the familiar surroundings of his father’s house to live the uncertain existence of a nomad and journey to an unknown land. In one of his more important works, *Fear and Trembling* (1843), Kierkegaard reflects on how God, who had promised Abraham that he would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sands on the seashore, instructs the patriarch to sacrifice his only son. Although Abraham could see no other way in which God’s promises were to be fulfilled except through Isaac, he proceeded dutifully up Mount Moriah. Further, in demanding the life of Isaac, God asks for human sacrifice, something that from an ethical standpoint is absolutely forbidden. Abraham must make a leap of faith, accept the absurd, do something that in human terms makes no sense. According to the Dane’s analysis, faith is grounded in an existential attitude of being, open to all possibilities of human existence. In the existential moment—*now*—one accepts the past and makes a commitment to fulfilling one’s potentialities. The opposite, “unbelief,” means being closed, shut-in against the limitless possibilities that human existence offers. (One of Kierkegaard’s complaints against Hegel was that “his work is full of syntheses, while life is full of choices.”¹¹)

The Kierkegaardian leap of faith is often misrepresented as merely “the will to believe” and sheer subjectivism. In fact, the Danish thinker recognized Christianity’s claim to be objectively true, independent of anyone’s subjective commitment. He raged against the established church precisely because it so institutionalized and systematized the gospel that Christian faith no longer made a difference in one’s life.