plural types of family systems. The Church remains the main depository in our culture for the values of community life; for the ethic of mutuality and mutual service. In its Scriptures, the Church enshrines the early Christian vision of the Church as a new kind of community, a new kind of humanity, overcoming the old division of patriarchal society of male over female, master over slave, racial group against racial group. But this vision of the Church as a new community, a new family, has either been interpreted as a celibate community over against the family, or else distorted into sacralizing the traditional patriarchal family. The challenge to create a new understanding of family as committed communities of mutual service, taking a variety of forms, can also offer the Church a new opportunity to reinterpret this ancient Christian vision of the redeemed society as a new community of equals.

Religious Belief and the Shadow of Uncertainty

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In his *Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, John Wesley spoke of faith as follows:

...as you cannot reason concerning colours if you have no natural sight—because all the ideas received by your senses are of a different kind... so you cannot reason concerning spiritual things if you have no spiritual sight, because all your ideas received by your outward senses are of a different kind; yea, far more different from those received by faith or internal sensation than the idea of colour from that of sound.¹

In Wesley's mind faith is a 'spiritual sense' which enables the believer to perceive a reality beyond the scope of the non-believer restricted to the 'natural' senses. Faith, Wesley emphasises, is not a 212 human choice but a gift of God. Those lacking this gift may no more understand what it means to have faith, than those lacking the gift of sight may understand what it means to see. (Note, incidentally, that in this article I am using 'faith in' God and 'belief in' God as interchangeable terms, and talk of 'believers' and 'unbelievers' as if there was no such thing as 'half-belief'.)

The model of perception, when used in this way to explain the nature of religious belief, tends to make of believers a privileged group who may have only a limited dialogue with the 'blind'. Indeed, it is difficult to see what sort of discussion would be possible between believer and unbeliever as to why one should believe. The suspicion is that such a view of faith is supremely comfortable for the believer, who may rest condescendingly upon the laurels of his own good fortune at receiving a gift denied to others.

A model which would allow for much more discussion, and which would be much less comfortable for the believer, would be that of interpretation. Believer and unbeliever would differ in their understanding of a reality to which both, in principle, have access. The believer would not have been given the means of discerning a world which the unbeliever is unable to see, but would have chosen to interpret the world, which he shares with the unbeliever, in a different way. Such a view of belief makes it more open to doubt and rejection, although at the same time it makes it more open to defence and explanation. There are advantages as well as disadvantages in being able to talk to those who disagree with you.

It does not demonstrate Wesley to have been wrong in conceiving of faith as a 'spiritual sense', to say that such a view makes faith 'comfortable' for the believer and removes the inevitable self-criticism of a dialogue with the unbeliever in which each is free to explore the other's ground. Indeed, it could be argued that such comfort is what the assurance of faith is all about, and that believers are indeed a 'privileged group' in precisely the sense described. Nevertheless, here I shall be exploring a model of faith much closer to that of interpretation.

I am, of course, conscious of naivety in saying that belief and unbelief are like two different interpretations of 'the same thing', seeing that the form of interpretation one applies to reality determines in part the reality which one is interpreting. The believer does not, for instance, interpret the 'same world' as the unbeliever to be the creation of God. His view of the world as God's creation colours what he sees, so that in the end he and the unbeliever are not looking at the same thing. Despite the fact, however, that interpretation colours perception, there can always be a discussion between different interpretations, a discussion which involves the believer and the unbeliever not only in trying to understand but in trying to perceive reality in different ways. The model of interpretation applied to faith makes of it, as I shall try to show, a commitment that exposes the believer to the challenge of unbelief. The descriptions of faith which we shall consider—'venture', 'wager', 'risk'—all suggest some form of uncertainty and instability which represents not the weakness but the strength of faith. Our aim is to examine precisely what in this light faith is.

One further preliminary point. Faith is a practical matter, and, if it is to be conceived after the model of interpretation, then that interpretation, too, has to be conceived in practical terms. Marx's comment that 'the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it'² is a familiar one, but the Christian argues that the two are inseparable—faith without works is dead. Although the practical import of faith will not be primarily under consideration here, it will follow from the description of faith which we try to give as a form of commitment.

The common starting-point of discussions of religious belief is to distinguish 'belief that' from 'belief in'.³ It is worth saying that in some contexts they mean very much the same thing: for instance, 'I believe in the Lochness monster' means much the same as 'I believe that the Lochness monster exists'.⁴ Believing in God, however, means more than believing that God exists; in addition to the 'cognitive component' of belief in God is another element which is explained in terms of 'trusting' in God, and it is to the conditions of trust that we must look in order to understand the nature of religious belief.

It only makes sense to say that you 'trust' someone to perform some service if you are not going to avail yourself of means of knowing for certain that this person will actually carry out the service for you. The man who says that he trusts his wife to be faithful while he is away, and then hires a private detective to confirm that she is, does not in fact trust his wife at all. It seems that in this case the condition of trust is associated with uncertainty, and that to seek to overcome the uncertainty is to betray the trust.

In reply to Anthony Flew, in their discussion of 'Theology and Falsification', Basil Mitchell advanced an interesting parable.⁵ In an occupied country during wartime, a member of the resistance meets a stranger who deeply impresses him, and who assures him that he is on the side of the resistance. The partisan feels that he can trust the stranger, although that trust is tested in future weeks by the appearance of the stranger in the uniform of the police handing over other partisans to the forces of occupation, as well as his activities in aiding the resistance. The evidence for the stranger's allegiance is ambiguous, and Mitchell makes clear that the partisan's trust in him is not unconditional. Nevertheless, it is of the nature of commitment to come to terms with what may count against one's own beliefs as well **214**

as what may count for them.

Mitchell's parable was specifically designed to reflect upon the problem of God's love in the face of evil, rather than God's existence. Nevertheless, its point about the evidence for God's goodness, that it is not compelling and that, indeed, there may be moments when it appears that the facts of human life cannot be reconciled with a good Creator at all, might also be applied to the evidence for God's existence. In both cases, one could make Mitchell's point against Flew, that the believer neither accepts that he would allow nothing to count against his belief in God, nor that, belief in God being essentially linked to trust in God, there are not realities or events (like the child's cancer to which Flew refers) which point the believer away from confidence in God, and invite a genuine doubt about His goodness and even His existence. Wherever the believer is challenged by the claim that he will allow nothing to count against his belief, he will want to argue that, on the contrary, belief in God by its very nature entails allowing that there are facts and events which count against it. Indeed, if there were nothing to count against it, then it would no longer be belief.

As a further illustration of the nature of belief, consider the wager in Pascal's *Pensées.*⁶ The comparison of belief to a bet is not intended to make belief a matter of cold calculation; far from it. 'According to reason you cannot bet either way',⁷ insists Pascal. The choice is dictated by at least one 'rational' consideration, however, namely that even if the chance of success in the wager is very slight, the bet should be accepted if the reward of the wager is so disproportionately high in relation to the amount staked.

In Pascal's argument, the possibility of God's existence might actually be very slight. However, since the rewards of believing are so high (in fact infinite) in proportion to the amount staked (a finite life), the bet is worth having even when, in all likelihood, it will be lost:

But here there *is* an infinity of infinitely happy life to win, one chance of winning against a finite number of chances of losing, and what you stake is finite. That removes all doubt as to choice; wherever the infinite is, and there is not an infinity of chances of loss against the chance of winning, there are no two ways about it, all must be given.⁸

Whatever the level of probability that God exists, in Pascal's view, one should believe in God, one should wager. One should always risk a finite certainty for an infinite uncertainty. A bird in the hand is never worth an infinite number of birds in the bush. Whatever the shortcomings of Pascal's parable, it illustrates, as does 215

Mitchell's, the fact that the nature of religious belief as a venture or risk entails a degree of intellectual agnosticism—indeed, almost intellectual indifference, in Pascal's case—where the attempt to establish the existence of God is concerned. Were such an existence to be established beyond doubt, then the element of trust implicit in belief 'in' God would be removed; and if we take Pascal's point it might even be said that so long as it has not been established beyond doubt that God does *not* exist, we should believe in him.

Another work which might usefully be considered is Butler's *Analogy.*⁹ Butler is sometimes attacked for producing a work which turned out to be a double-edged sword. Intended to show that the arguments for a 'natural theology' were as difficult of acceptance as those for a 'revealed theology', it intended to encourage acceptance of both, whilst in reality encouraging acceptance of neither.¹⁰ Such a verdict, however, ignores Butler's central concern with the question of what sort of evidence, both for a revealed and for a natural theology, one must possess in order to believe. Butler's insistence upon probability as the guide to life cuts across his exposure of the weaknesses implicit in both forms of theology. He provides, not merely an account of the difficulties in both, but a way of believing in spite of these difficulties. Of those who fail to see the truth of Christianity he writes:

They take for granted, that if Christianity were true, the light of it must have been more general, and the evidence of it more satisfactory, or rather overbearing ... if any of these persons are, upon the whole, in doubt concerning the truth of Christianity; their behaviour seems owing to their taking for granted, through strange inattention, that such doubting is, in a manner, the same thing as being certain against it."¹¹

It is quite true that Butler brings out the difficulties of a 'natural' religion, which he regards as analogous to those that beset a 'revealed' religion. At the same time, however, his work brings out the nature of belief in its consistency with such difficulties and, rather than offering up hostages to sceptical fortune, challenges his opponents with expectations of Christian apologetic inappropriate to the belief which it is intended to sustain.

A similar argument can be found in J.H. Newman's epistemological works, notably the University Sermons¹² and Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent.¹³ Newman argues that as a commitment in the light of evidence that cannot be treated as certain proof, religious belief is like rather than unlike other forms of belief. There is, however, something of a quantitative scale whereby the more important to us a particular belief may be, the more subtle and even **216**

ambiguous the evidence for it:

Next let it be considered, that the following law seems to hold in our attainment of knowledge, that according to its desirableness, whether in point of excellence, or range, or intricacy, so is the subtlety of the evidence on which it is received.¹⁴

Since, however, it is the beliefs of which we can be most certain that play the least significant part in our lives, Newman identifies the risk of faith with a willingness to venture into what he elsewhere calls a 'certainty of commitment' without the security of a 'certainty of understanding':

We are so constituted, that if we insist on being as sure as is conceivable, in every step of our course, we must be content to creep along the ground, and can never soar. If we are intended for great ends, we are called to great hazards; and, whereas we are given absolute certainty in nothing, we must in all things choose between doubt and inactivity, and the conviction that we are under the eye of One who, for whatever reason, exercises us with the less evidence when He might give us the greater.¹⁵

If we seek to protect ourselves from doubt in matters of belief, the result will be 'inactivity'. In other words, the person who seeks to protect himself from doubt in his beliefs is like the person who, in order to protect himself from the risk of illness, never ventures outside the home. Faith is 'a state in which we must assume something to prove anything, and we can gain nothing without a venture'.¹⁶ The 'venture', like the 'wager' of Pascal, accurately identifies belief as a commitment undergone without the assurance that reality certainly justifies it.

When the believer believes, he is living within, and reacting to, the same world as the unbeliever. His belief does not rest on privileged insight into a supernatural reality hidden from the unbeliever, and indeed the presumption that he does can give rise to a form of 'spiritual élitism' in which the believer welcomes a position in which he has no common ground with the unbeliever. Belief 'in' God is a venture, a practical commitment, undergone in acceptance of the fact that evidence for God's existence is not compelling, and cannot be made to yield what Newman calls 'proofs such as absolutely to make doubt impossible'.¹⁷

From what we have been arguing concerning the nature of religious belief, we would suggest that there is often both an 217 unwillingness on the part of unbelievers to concede the extent of the evidence for theism, and an unwillingness on the part of believers to concede the limitations of the evidence. Both positions feed off each other. The believer wants to see too much evidence for God, and hence the unbeliever sees none. The unbeliever supposes that the believer must have 'proofs' of the existence of God,¹⁸ and the believer supposes that he must possess, if not reasoned proof, then some self-authenticating 'proof from experience' which will do as well. Neither side will concede the real ambiguity in the evidence which must make the believer uncomfortable, in his faith and the unbeliever open to doubt in his unwillingness to believe. In such a situation, the argument of Bishop Blougram has to be re-stated:

Now wait, my friend: well, I do not believe— If you'll accept no faith that is not fixed, Absolute and exclusive, as you say.

And now what are we? unbelievers both, Calm and complete, determinately fixed To-day, to-morrow and for ever, pray? You'll guarantee me that? Not so, I think! In no wise! all we've gained is, that belief, As unbelief before, shakes us by fits Confounds us like its predecessor...

All we have gained then by our unbelief Is a life of doubt diversified by faith, For one of faith diversified by doubt: We called the chess-board white, —we call it black.¹⁹

Bishop Blougram's Apology does not, of course, suggest that there is no difference between belief and unbelief. But it does suggest that belief and unbelief are each more tempted by the other, and more alive to the nature of the other, than either likes to admit. Both have some idea of how reality might come to be perceived as the other perceives it, and both perhaps at times experience in themselves as an exception what the other experiences as a rule—a life of faith diversified by doubt, or one of doubt diversified by faith. This seems to me to be a more accurate picture of the nature of religious belief in human experience, than that which suggests that for those who 'really' believe an unbridgeable gulf must be confessed to between themselves and 'unbelief'.

For this reason one might, perhaps, be suspicious of some movements in modern Christian thought which seem to be seeking to throw up an 'exclusion zone' around belief. Consider, for instance, 218 the argument that the basis of Christianity as an historical religion has to come to terms with the fact that since historical facts are by definition only probable (or possible), Christian faith must find a surer foundation upon which to rest than the provisional conclusions of historians as to events in the first century A.D. Lessing's 'ugly, broad ditch'²⁰, it is said, opens up between accidental truths of history and necessary truths of reason²¹. The beliefs of Christians cannot be dependent upon historical judgments because the beliefs, as 'truths of reason', must be necessary, their falsehood inconceivable, and, since a conclusion is only as strong as the premises upon which it rests, if the beliefs of a Christian were to rest upon the 'truths of history',which are merely 'accidental' (that is to say, truths which it is conceivable might not be the case), they would only themselves be as likely as those accidental truths.

It is not difficult to find in modern theological argument the claim that Lessing's formula effectively excludes historical research from the foundations of faith. The attempts to develop and revitalise the quest of the historical Jesus in the light of a more subtle twentieth century historical methodology are undermined by the insistence that the 'Jesus of history' is too elusive a being to provide a sure foundation for the 'Christ of faith'. A clear statement of this view comes from Martin Kähler in *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*:

...Christian faith and a history of Jesus repel each other like oil and water as soon as the magic spell of an enthusiastic and enrapturing description loses its power.²²

A similar determination not to 'tie our faith in the word of God to the results of historical research'²³ can be found in Rudolf Bultmann. In an essay entitled 'The Crisis in Belief' he wrote:

In the Christian message ... there is absolutely no question of man's being given an historical account of a section of the past, which he might put to the test, or critically confirm or reject.²⁴

It is remarkable that a century which has seen so much development both in terms of resources and of method in historical research, should have seen so much recurrent historical scepticism in its theology. One possible reason for this, however, is the sense that Christian belief must somehow be 'certain' in a way that the conclusions of the historian may never be. The Anglican theologian John Knox makes this point clear: Since even the best attested fact of the history of the past can possess no more than a very high degree of probability and since, by definition, Christian and indeed all religious faith must from the believer's point of view be absolutely certain and secure, can faith ever be said to depend upon a historical fact, no matter how well established? Faith must know its object in a way we cannot know a historical fact.²⁵

Knox's remarks need to be carefully scrutinised. What, for instance, does it mean to suggest that religious faith must 'from the believer's point of view' be 'absolutely certain and secure'? Does he mean to imply that it does not matter whether the belief held by the Christian is true or not, so long as he believes it with certainty? There is real confusion here, between certainty as a psychological condition of the believer (or 'certitude'), and certainty as a description of a proposition which may or may not be *believed* with certainty. It is perfectly possible to believe an historical proposition with certainty, just as it is perfectly possible to disbelieve a proposition which is 'certain' in the second sense. The question which needs to be asked is: In what sense must all religious faith be 'absolutely certain and secure'? Many have tried to build walls around their faith in the conviction that it must be, without perhaps asking themselves in what way it must be so. Indeed, one might ask whether the faith of Bishop Blougram, diversified by doubt in such a way that he can conceive of himself changing places with the unbeliever, is 'weaker' or 'stronger' than that which Knox seeks to elaborate.

Newman makes the useful distinction between what he calls a 'certainty of understanding' and a 'certainty of commitment'. What Knox, perhaps, fails to see is that the faith of a Christian admits of the latter certainty rather than the former. Faith, to return to our earlier description, as a wager or as a venture, involves not a certain 'belief that' but a certain 'belief in'. In Mitchell's parable of the partisan and the stranger, the belief in the stranger is an unwavering trust whose strength is reflected in its capacity to survive periods of doubt deriving from the ambiguous behaviour of the man. Of course, the practical commitment of a 'belief in' God is not entirely separable from an intellectual 'belief that' certain propositions about God are the case. It is possible indeed to argue that a purely intellectual revision of these 'beliefs that' might destroy a belief 'in' God, just as the confidence of the partisan in the stranger might in the end be shattered if the evidence against the latter's trustworthiness became overwhelming. But this dependence of belief in God upon certain propositions being true does not require those propositions to be certain. The firmness of faith is not to be measured by the degree of certainty with which the 220

propositions about God which are a necessary condition of that faith may be held. The mistake of Knox is to suppose that the strength of faith is proportionate to the strength of a proposition, so that a proposition about the past, by definition only capable of being weakly held, must necessarily prove the foundation of a weakly-held faith. In reality, the opposite has also been argued, namely that the weaker the propositions about God to which the believer is committed, the stronger his belief in holding them!²⁶ What we have argued is that whilst there is an inevitable 'cognitive component' of belief, the strength of the belief cannot be correlated exactly with the strength of this component. Those who, like the devils in St. James' epistle 'believe and tremble',²⁷might be supposed to possess the fullest belief 'that' God exists with none of the commitment of which that belief 'that' must form a part if it is to be belief 'in' God. On the other hand those who, like Bishop Blougram, find it possible to share and even sympathise with the intellectual misgivings of the unbeliever, nonetheless do not waver in their understanding. For belief in God, as they argue, is a very practical matter, which is not given up lightly, particularly if it brings out the best in the believer:

Belief or unbelief Bears upon life, determines its whole course, Begins at its beginning.²⁸

The merely 'accidental' (less than certain) nature of historical judgements does not, then, disqualify them from contributing to the faith of the believer, because the strength of that faith is not directly proportional to the strength of the propositions which form an integral part of it. One is simply not talking about the same sort of strength. Furthermore, to argue that historical judgments are too unstable to be linked to faith risks cutting loose the so-called Christ of faith from any of the constraints upon His nature exercised by the admittedly limited results of historical research into Christian origins. The Christ of faith is then too liable to become the Christ of the theologian's imagination, or of the inventiveness of the church. It is precisely Bultmann's concern not to 'tie our faith in God to the results of historical research' which opens up the danger of subjectivism, and of a faith which, precisely because it is not 'tied' to historical insights into the past, becomes 'tied' instead to social and cultural influences in the present. In this sense faith rather loses than gains its freedom by being loosed from its dependence upon history, and in the last resort it is more likely to be the 'Christ of faith' which, separated from its historical roots, reflects the face of the believer from the bottom of Tyrrell's well.

Our claim is that the search for certainty of belief may lead the 221

theologian to undervalue the sources of belief, and that this may critically affect his or her capacity to challenge the present with a faith whose roots go *beyond* the present. It is a well-recognised paradox that a faith which tries to isolate itself proves most dependent upon outside pressure. A faith which cannot measure the present against the past on the grounds that the past remains ambiguous and uncertain becomes the victim of the present, whose own ambiguities it is all the less likely to appreciate. Something of this danger is perhaps to be seen in Bultmann himself, who appeared ready to take existentialism as a timeless phenomenology rather than a prevailing and limited philosophical system, and to graft the gospel upon it.

To sum up. The familiar distinction between 'believing in' and 'believing that' is a useful one in the analysis of religious belief. Clearly some 'beliefs that' will form an essential but insufficient 'cognitive component' of belief in God. This component will not be one that is beyond change or revision, and a purely intellectual deconversion from Christianity is not impossible. It will be a component that involves interpretation of evidence open to believer and unbeliever alike, for the believer exists in a shared world of meaning within which belief in God may be strengthened, provoked or weakened by intellectual argument and discovery. Yet the unstable cognitive component of belief in God is consistent, precisely in its instability, with the nature of belief in God as an enduring act of trust. A certainty of commitment is not compatible with a certainty of understanding, only with uncertainty of understanding, which is just what any rational discipline entails. The demanding and unclear path of intellectual inquiry is the appropriate handmaiden of faith; the theologian in his or her intellectual uncertainty ensures that faith does not retreat into an over-confident subjectivism, but rather remains a rational commitment.²⁹ Paradoxically, it is those with too rationalist an understanding of faith itself who seem to reject the contribution of intellectual inquiry to it. Precisely because faith is an enduring commitment it can live with a cognitive component which at times proves awkward; it is when faith is *identified* with that component that the cry of horror 'This can't be faith!' goes up. Ironically, the desire to separate reason from faith comes from interpreting faith after the manner of reason, as strong in proportion to the evidence for it. Whereas precisely because faith is not to be understood as growing in proportion to the strength of the evidence for the propositions which it holds, there may be a rational component of faith. To exclude reason from faith is merely to have rationalised faith; here, on the other hand, I have argued for a faith whose rational component forms a link between believer and unbeliever, and which retains such a component because its strength is not be correlated directly with the strength of that component (some have even suggested an inverse 222

correlation: the weaker the rational component, the stronger the faith). Faith sees through a glass darkly; such muddy vision worries only those rationalists who confuse faith with sight.

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- 3 Price, H.H. 'Faith and Unbelief' in Hick, John (ed.) Faith and the Philosophers (Macmillan 1966), p.9.
- 4 Price H.H. Belief, (Allen & Unwin, 1969), p.432.
- 5 Flew, A. & MacIntyre, A. (edd.) New essays in Philosophical Theology (SCM 1955), pp.103-6.
- 6 Pascal, Pensées, (J.M. Dent 1973), pp.93-6.
- 7 Ibid., p.94.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ed. W.E. Gladstone (Clarendon Press 1897).
- 10 The two-edged sword idea appeals, for instance, to J.C. Livingston in his Modern Christian Thought from the Enlightenment to Vatican II (Macmillan, 1971), p.51.
- 11 Butler, Analogy (Ed.W.E. Gladstone, Clarendon Press, 1897), p.306.
- 12 SPCK, 1970
- 13 Notre Dame, Indiana, 1979.
- 14 Newman, University Sermons, p.215 (Sermon X1, para. 23).
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid (para. 22).
- 17 Ibid (footnote).
- 18 Although there is a debate as to whether they were in fact intended as 'proofs' at all. See for instance Appendix 5, 'The Five Ways', of Aquinas' Summa Theologiae Vol. 2, 'Existence and Nature of God, (Blackfriars), pp.188-90, esp. para. 2.
- 19 From Robert Browning's Bishop Blougram's Apology, (A selection by W.E. Williams, Penguin 1974), pp. 225-6.
- 20 Chadwick, H., Lessing's Theological Writings (A & C Black 1956), p.55.
- 21 Ibid., p.53: 'accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason'.
- 22 Ed & translated Carl E. Braaten, Fortress Press, 1966, p.74.
- 23 From Bultmann's 'New Testament and Mythology', in Bartsch, H.-W., ed., Kerygma and Myth (SPCK 1972), p.41.
- 24 In Bultmann, Essays Philosophical and Theological, (SCM 1955), p.18.
- 25 Quoted in Peter Carnley's excellent essay 'The Poverty of Historical Scepticism' in Sykes, S.W. & Clayton, J.P. edd., Christ, Faith and History, (CUP 1972), p.166.
- For instance by Søren Kierkegaard. In Concluding Unscientific Postscript (tr. D.F. Swenson, Princeton 1968), p.209, Kierkegaard writes:
 ...to believe against the understanding is martyrdom; to begin to get the understanding a little in one's favor, is
 - temptation and retrogression
- 27 James, 2:19.
- 28 Browning, op. cit., p.227.
- 29 See W.W. Bartley III, The Retreat to Commitment, Chatto and Windus) 1964.