Introduction

What is true, then, is an experience of faith, and this is as true for agnostics and atheists as it is for theists. Those who cannot believe still require religious truth and a framework of ritual in which they can believe.

—SIMON CRITCHLEY[1]

Theology, it seems, is often most influential where it is least obvious.

—MARK C. TAYLOR[2]

And, perhaps, the true communion with Christ, the true *imitatio Christi*, is to participate in Christ's doubt and disbelief.

— SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK[3]

We live in an age of doubt, and we have been living like this for quite some time. This work investigates doubt, and the relationship it has to faith. One of the great moments in the history of doubt was Matthew Arnold's 1867 poem "Dover Beach" and its evocative description of the "melancholy, long withdrawing roar" of a "Sea of Faith" in full retreat. At the end of the twentieth century the theologian Don Cupitt drew upon Arnold's poem to frame his own exploration of the history of

1. Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless*, 3.
2. Taylor, *Moment of Complexity*, 180.
3. Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 102.

the flight of faith.[4] The genius of Cupitt and Arnold was to crystalize how old certainties have long been ebbing away. However, while the sea of faith has been pulling back for generations, the work of exploring the littoral expanse uncovered in its wake is still in relative infancy. Relatively few theologians have studied the absence of faith, just as few non-theologians have felt the urge to think much about a faith perceived as absent. When reflection on the status of faith in non-theological circles does occur it is frequently assumed that the withdrawal of faith is an epochal event that has its natural conclusion in secularization.

Nonetheless, the triumph of the secular is no longer self-evident or uncontested. Religious faith is in decline, barely on life support in many places, yet it refuses to die. While citizens in the West do not take faith as seriously as they did in the relatively recent past, faith is far from entirely absent. Contemporary theology is always situated within this oscillation between the absence and presence of faith. This manifests on the one hand in theologians plumbing the depths of secular atheist thought. On the other hand, significant thinkers who make no claim to faith are returning to examine the nature of faith. As the atheist philosopher Simon Critchley notes, faith is no longer just for the faithful: it is also a key part of the identity of those he names the "faithless."[5] Others such as Giorgio Agamben have drawn attention to the dependence on the sacred of secularization itself, revealing the hidden theological genealogy of much that is secular within modern Western society.

This work starts from the assumption that both the religious and the non-religious (as well as the undeclared) have much to learn from those like Agamben, Critchley, and Cupitt who venture out to chart the liminal, uncertain, and ever-changing terrain exposed by the withdrawal of the sea of faith. There is also another purpose to this work. It has never been particularly fashionable for theologians not to believe. The theologian is actually in something of a double bind. Unless central tenets of belief are questioned the theologian can never really come to grips with, far less understand, the deep-seated questions of those who do not have religious beliefs. However, questioning belief too intensely can also lead to trouble. At the risk of getting into trouble this work starts from the premise that if faith is to have intellectual, emotional, or spiritual vitality it will need to come to a more serious understanding of doubt. What follows is

4. Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith.*
5. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless.*

therefore an attempt at responding to Richard Kearney's suggestion that faith engage wholeheartedly with atheism in order to properly appreciate the divine.[6]

One of the predicaments facing exponents of doubt is the age-old question of whether the path of doubt leads inevitably into plain denial. Remembering the character of philosophical skepticism can be informative at this point. Philosophical skepticism is less the outright rejection of one specific truth than the realization that there may be more than one way of looking at things. It seems hard to argue that such a kind of skepticism might be of considerable help to theology. However, it is also part of the argument of this book that even outright atheism may be a powerful resource for strengthening theology and faith.

In noting that theology is at its most influential "where it is least obvious," Mark C. Taylor invites us to recognize the theological underpinning of disciplines not known for their theology. The original context for this remark was an exploration of the similarity between Charles Darwin's model for evolution and Adam Smith's theory of the invisible hand of the market. Both offer models of complex systems that construct meaning by understanding the interplay between multiple parts and a wider whole. To put it another way, both are secularized versions of the idea of God's guiding providence. Taylor understands that trying to effect a clear demarcation of the theological from the secular can be a losing battle and ultimately incoherent. Evolution and economics may (for some at least) epitomize faithless rationality, but more and more thinkers are discovering quite serious theological genealogies and underpinnings. If theology remains enduringly influential where least obvious, then what could be less obvious, and therefore potentially more influential, than secular questions of doubt, denial, and disbelief?

This is not, of course, by its very nature altogether obvious. Christianity does not have a good track record when it comes to doubt. Skepticism, doubt, and even disarmingly simple questions have all been viewed negatively at one time or another—which is somewhat strange given the history of Christian theology. Christianity has always had an uncanny knack for adapting to different cultures, adopting their various principles and neuroses. It is also hard to think of a single significant theologian who did not explicitly develop theology as the exploration of lines of questioning. During the Middle Ages such lines of inquiry,

6. Kearney, *Anatheism*.

questions (*quaestiones*), were the very lifeblood of theology. However, throughout history theology has been concerned with translating and shuttling between the divine and the secular, adapting to new categories of thought and continually learning from changing contexts. It is a truism, but nonetheless helpful to remember, that there has never been a point of universal harmony within theology. Instead, through succeeding centuries Christianity has continued to morph and adapt against a backdrop of new questions and fresh concerns.

A thought-provoking illustration of this process of change and adaptation is seen in the critique Søren Kierkegaard leveled against the church of his day. Not content with the unchallenging theology coming from the pulpit, Kierkegaard accused the clergy of being cannibals. Kierkegaard could see how nineteenth-century clerics had turned the radical message of Jesus into a set of comfortable social conventions off of which they could make a good living.[7] While Kierkegaard's language may have been intemperate, he realized that Christianity had fused into Christendom, and, along with it, the contemporary concern for ethics and morality over faith. Yet while Kierkegaard and others since have railed against Christianity accommodating itself too much to the world, today the situation is more often reversed. Rarely is Christianity accused of being too comfortable or congruent with the insights of our contemporary situation. More often Christianity is perceived as carrying a torch for views that are distinctly old-fashioned at best, and unhealthily world-denying at worst. To media and the academy alike, Christianity is often identified with criticisms of evolution and denials of scientific methodology. Add to this the perception that sexism, homophobia, and patriarchy are justified in the Bible and you have a recipe for viewing Christianity as a social and intellectual pariah. It is therefore little wonder that many thoughtful people find religion something incomprehensible and alien. Humanists reject beliefs that pit human against human as fundamentally incompatible with highest human aspirations. Atheists correctly note that there is neither overwhelmingly good evidence nor compelling logical arguments for there even being a God. The existence of evil, the hypocrisy of institutional religion, and the moral failings of ordinary believers all add to the case against faith.

In light of all this, it is only natural to wonder whether the divide between critically thinking doubters and religious adherents can ever

7. Kierkegaard's title to chapter 5 is revealing: "The priests are cannibals, and that in the most odious way." *Attack Upon "Christendom,"* 268.

be bridged. Two hundred years ago the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher wrestled with similar issues. In the educated opinion of his day, religion was perceived as crude and unsophisticated. In response Schleiermacher penned one of the great apologetic tracts of Christian thought, *Speeches to Cultured Despisers.* Schleiermacher was writing at the height of the Enlightenment, when philosophy and science seemed to be unconquerable. While many religious people feared the new Enlightenment insights, Schleiermacher was convinced that Christianity had nothing to lose from wholehearted engagement with new thinking. He believed that at its heart religion was the "sense and taste for the infinite."[8] To truly understand the infinite Schleiermacher was committed to the notion that educated skeptics might have something to contribute, and something to discover.

There are relatively few of Schleiermacher's mindset in our own age. Pressure to disengage from debate comes from both church and academy. Many churches find appeals to emotions more successful than robust intellectual debate. Meanwhile higher education has increasingly retreated behind a smokescreen of sociology that sees theology and faith as quaint and old-fashioned practices of a dim and distant man-eating tribe. Worse still are the occasional public forays into debate of scientific skeptics and militant believers. In the mud-slinging that accompanies these mercifully rare exchanges, it is hard to discern much on either side to commend healthy debate or mutual understanding. Churches themselves bear a large burden of responsibility for the paucity and shallowness of contemporary debates. Christianity is far from perfect; and there are more than enough good reasons for people not to believe based on the actions and words of professing Christians. This work is not an attempt to argue anyone out of their profound reasons for disbelief. Many of the things educated skeptics do not believe are things that millions of other religious people simply do not believe. A literal seven-day creation, a four-thousand-year-old planet, the subjugation of women to men, the prohibition of shellfish, and rules against clothing of more than one fabric are all to be found in the Bible. However, doggedly believing such things to be timeless truths is profoundly inimical to Christianity and theologically incoherent.

Christianity's worst enemies are not intelligent questioners, but those who produce the most noise in proclaiming their trust in Christ.

8. Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 23.

This work hopes to present the case for an alternative response to Christianity. This alternative empathizes with those embarrassed at religion while making the case for a form of religious belief that is not entirely intellectually moribund. As such this work is neither a traditional apology for Christianity nor a rebuttal of atheist objections. Instead it is a friendly critique written from the perspective of someone who believes that Christianity's most impressive resources are sometimes better understood by outsiders to the church than insiders.

There is wisdom in the Christian church just as there is wisdom in the critiques and questions of skeptics. If educated twenty-first-century people are to make sense of religion it will be necessary to suspend embarrassment for a moment at the same time as keeping a tight grip on critical faculties. Believers also need to be willing to entertain the question that what they take for Christianity may actually be nothing more than a particularly popular and persistent form of idolatry. Each of these propositions is challenging in different ways for the skeptic and the believer. However, until the thought that something is not quite right with traditional views of Christianity is entertained it will not be possible to discover its uncomfortable truth.

G. K. Chesterton wryly noted how the only good argument against Christianity is Christians. However, just as individual Christians are the first to admit that they are individual works in progress, so theology reminds us that Christianity is still emerging, still being discovered, still "to come." The role of educated skeptics in this is unique: they are not the ones Christianity needs to fear, so much as the ones whose perspective and participation is essential to the future of theology and religious practice.

This book is not an attempt to prove central doctrines of Christianity beyond all reasonable doubt. That does not seem to be a sensible claim to make. Instead, the question that animates this book is whether reasonable doubt can tell us more about Christianity. We will see how theology makes more sense, not less, when doubting is affirmed and critical questions are allowed into the heart of theology. We will also discover how some of the most brilliant and illuminating theology has been inspired by, and originates in, sources and thinkers who have no particular loyalty or commitment to Christian theology. The atheist John Gray has written that Western humanism is itself a child of Christian theology.[9] Atheist

9. Gray, *Straw Dogs*.

humanists and religious believers alike therefore share a common theological inheritance. It is therefore imperative to look more closely at the other in order to understand oneself. The remainder of this introduction gives an overview of how the book attempts to do this.

The first chapter explores the nature of the relationship between faith and doubt, and how the two are ineradicably connected. This leads into a discussion of fundamentalism, and an exploration of different forms of fundamentalist discourse. In chapter 2 science fiction is analyzed in an attempt to understand how rationality and religion have been imagined and creatively reimagined in the light of recent philosophical thought. The opposition of faith to reason that was dominant in modernity is not essential and it has been fruitfully reconfigured in both literature and film. This introduces the question of postmodernity, a topic that chapter 3 explores in greater depth through the thought of Jacques Derrida. New possibilities for making sense of religion arise from the decidedly non-theological experience of deconstructive thought. Derrida also reveals the importance of understanding impossibility as a philosophical concept that is not entirely foreign to the theological concept of paradox. Chapter 4 turns to more traditional theological questions with an examination of the dangers of anthropomorphism. Concentrating on the question of hell and the devil, this chapter explores some of the consequences of overly simplistic religious imagery. In chapter 5 more sophisticated responses to questions of evil are explored. The first part explores the question of the nature of evil, while the second part explores Eleanore Stump's case for discerning a reason for suffering and evil. The chapter concludes by noting how the atheist Slavoj Žižek essentially repeats the insight of both the book of Job and Donald MacKinnon in refusing to ascribe meaning to evil. Chapter 6 tackles the question of scriptural understanding, and asks whether there is a way of responding to the thorny problems raised by the Bible. This leads into a discussion of the relative purposes of theology and science, and how different narratives relate to one another. Chapter 7 focuses on atheism and is divided into two sections. The first part examines the links between emancipatory atheists and theologians who have anticipated certain atheist readings of Christianity arising from the death of Christ on the cross. The second part concentrates on the thought of Giorgio Agamben, and asks how his thought might prove beneficial for theology. Finally, chapter 8 returns to the question of how faith and reason might relate. Connections are drawn between the way Kierkegaard, Jacques Lacan, and Žižek theorize subjectivity. Unlike the certainty of the

Cartesian cogito, all three posit a broken, divided notion of subjectivity that requires an understanding of the importance of the other. Using the theme of breach as developed by China Miéville, the chapter argues for a reconfiguration of the relationship between faith and doubt.

In the New Testament Thomas the apostle is portrayed as doubting the resurrection of Jesus. It is significant that for the scriptural writers Thomas's experience is not excised. Instead, his doubts are held up as a legitimate response laden with meaning. Thomas is not deplored, rather he comes across as understandably human, asking for evidence before he commits himself. The question that runs through this work is whether Thomas might not simply be a saint but also a hero for our own times. Thomas's doubts did not derail the Christian narrative so much as draw attention on the marvel of the resurrection. By extension, what if critical skepticism is not a stumbling block but rather the only thing that can save Christianity from itself?