

# THE SEARCH FOR AN ATTRACTIVE FORM OF FAITH

*Jos Moons*

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY precipitated within the Christian Church a search for a new, more modern style for its ancient faith—a search which continues, even now, in the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup> The process of secularisation in part created this demand for a new form of faith, a form that would be attractive and enticing. Various groups believe that they are offering such a faith, and that therefore the future is theirs. One particularly interesting phenomenon is how the traditionalism from which people felt liberated by theologians such as Yves Congar and Karl Rahner, and by Vatican II, is now regaining popularity among younger generations of Catholics. I would like to reflect on a range of such developments here, in order to carry on the search for the Christian faith of the future.

Such a project takes us to a place that resembles the road to Emmaus. Like the two disciples on the road, many committed believers today—lay, religious and clerical—are sad and disappointed. The faith they love often seems not to appeal to their contemporaries. This article, perhaps, can serve as a companion on their journey, speaking to them of their hopes for revival and renewal. But there will be no plain answers. Like the risen Lord, it may give inspiration and companionship by posing questions. Are the various attractive options for the future of Christianity really sound? Are they really Christian? These questions will also, I hope, turn out to help another group of people with whom we should be travelling: those who are searching for God but have not yet found Him.

<sup>1</sup> This article primarily concerns the Roman Catholic Church in Europe; but its argument is also relevant outside Europe and to other Churches.

### ***The Twentieth-Century Renewal: A Bitter-Sweet Aftertaste***

The search for a new form of faith began in the twentieth century—for example in the Liturgical Movement, inspired by Benedictine monks, and among the proponents of the *nouvelle théologie*. Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) for the purpose of *aggiornamento*: bringing the Church up to date. Now the doctrinal authority itself had become a companion on the road instead of a brake on progress. And after Vatican II the renewal continued: too fast for some, but too slowly for others.<sup>2</sup>

The scope of this renewal is apparent from the transformation of the liturgy. Services are no longer performed by the priest and witnessed by the congregation. Now the congregation takes part: there is no more praying of the rosary during mass, but inward and outward participation in the service.<sup>3</sup> The vernacular is used instead of Latin, making the liturgy more accessible. The Word is equal to the Sacrament, not subordinated to it.

Renewal can also be seen in theology. Instead of relying on the authority of St Thomas Aquinas (seen from a neo-scholastic point of view),<sup>4</sup> theologians now study the Church Fathers, and discuss human reason, mysticism and the arts. Two Jesuits, Henri de Lubac and Karl Rahner, exemplify this *nouvelle théologie*. Even within the official teaching of the Vatican Council, the text on divine revelation (*Dei verbum*) displays a newly open attitude to historico-critical biblical analyses. Moreover, its emphasis on God's self-revelation implies the

<sup>2</sup> Compare the critical tone of the recent editions of *Concilium* entitled *Unanswered Questions* (1999) and *Vatican II: Forgotten Future* (2005).

<sup>3</sup> In *Sacrosanctum concilium*, however, this was proclaimed as official doctrine: 'In order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their minds be attuned to their voices, and that they cooperate with heavenly grace lest they receive it in vain. Pastors of souls must, therefore, realise that, when the liturgy is celebrated, something more is required than the laws governing valid and lawful celebration. It is their duty also to ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged [*actuose ... participant*] in the rite and enriched by it.' (1.11) There are different interpretations of this passage. Some emphasize that inward participation has to be supported by outward participation, for example by joining in the Eucharistic Prayer. To others, participation is mainly inward and a moderate outward participation by acclamations is sufficient.

<sup>4</sup> See Herwi W. M. Rikhof, 'Thomas at Utrecht', in *Contemplating Aquinas: On the Varieties of Interpretation*, edited by Fergus Kerr (London: SCM, 2003), 103–136.



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notion of ‘salvation history’—and a farewell, once again, to defensive neo-scholastic theology in favour of *nouvelle théologie*.<sup>5</sup>

The new wine of the twentieth century and Vatican II at first tasted excellent and seemed to be doing us good. Our faith no longer remained secluded, apprehensively defending its axioms, but answered critical questions by looking at the sources of Christian truth and values (see, for example, *Sacrosanctum concilium* and *Dei verbum*). It was a faith that proved itself in its contact with the world, through ecumenism, for instance, and through charity.

However, the aftertaste of this wine turns out to be sour. It is true that all the developments mentioned above are *aggiornamento*, and that they have helped to prevent the Catholic faith from ending up as a museum piece, but, nevertheless, a new springtime so far remains distant. On the contrary, the churchgoing population is ageing and faith, as expressed and experienced in church, seems to be evaporating. To turn to the ‘domestic church’ would be wishful thinking. Few Catholic families say prayers at home; often their children do not know the sign of the cross unless one of their grandparents has taught them.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See also, in particular, the Church as a community rather than a hierarchy; mission as shared responsibility (*Lumen gentium* and *Apostolicam actuositatem*); the contribution to the world (*Gaudium et spes*); and the appreciation of other faiths and religions (*Unitatis redintegratio*, *Nostra aetate*).

<sup>6</sup> Recent research on faith and the Churches in the Netherlands is alarming. The combined proportion of Catholics and Protestants in the population has been halved over the last forty years from

This situation gives rise to many questions. For example, from a historical and sociological point of view: how did we end up like this? Provided we pay close attention to the reasons for secularisation and to its prehistory we should avoid both left-wing and right-wing oversimplifications. From a practical point of view: how do we go forward with a surplus of churches and a lack of priests and volunteers? From a theological point of view: is God dead, and is the message of salvation outdated? From a strategic point of view: how do we turn the tide; and how do we become missionaries?<sup>7</sup>

Such questions exceed the scope of this article. They are, however, the context of my reflections here. For we do need a contemporary and attractive way of believing, and there are many different options available which all pretend to be the way forward. I would like to have a closer, critical look at four of these tendencies. What do they represent? Which of them is the future?

#### ***Four Options for an Attractive Faith***

It is clearly a simplification of reality to present the versions of faith described here as discrete options, since they are often mixed together in the way people experience their faith. But in order both to appreciate and to criticize current developments it seems appropriate, and even necessary, to separate them. An objection to this approach might be that many believers simply consider themselves to be 'conventionally religious'. They are unaware of the fact that their faith has distinct, and distinctive, characteristics. The role of theology, however, is to make

sixty to thirty per cent. Only a quarter of those who call themselves Catholics say they believe in God. See Gerard Dekker and others, *God in Nederland, 1966–1996* (Kampen: Ten Have, 2007). The figures are not improved by taking into account new forms of spirituality, which often have no Christian content. Compare James C. Kennedy, 'Recent Dutch History and the Limits of Secularisation', in *The Dutch and their Gods: Secularisation and Transformation of Religion in the Netherlands since 1950*, edited by Erik Sengers (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2005), 27–42; Wim van der Donk and Rob Plum, 'Begripsverkenning', in *Geloven in het publieke domein. Een dubbele transformatie*, edited by van der Donk and others (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2006), 27–54; and Alan Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> For these questions, see the literature indicated in the previous note and (less optimistically), Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularisation in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002). An interesting philosophical contribution comes from Gianni Vattimo, *Dopo la cristianità: per un cristianesimo non religioso* (Milan: Garzanti, 2002); translated as *After Christianity* by Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia UP, 2002). And see also Lieven Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context*, translated by Brian Doyle (Leuven: Peeters, 2003). Both Vattimo and Boeve are proposing a less dogmatic and more modest 'non-religious' or 'open' form of Christianity.

such unconscious assumptions and beliefs conscious, and to reflect on them in the whole context of the Christian faith.

*Salvation through the Mediation of the Church*

According to this option God is invisible and unknowable. Both philosophical arguments and considerations based on the Bible point towards this. But, thank God, there is salvation: God became visible in history through Jesus, and now the Church acts as a mediator so that God can be present. These are the fundamentals of the first option: that of the traditionalists.

The traditionalists' view of the world and of humanity can be rather negative. Human beings were made in God's image and approved by God, along with the rest of creation, as 'very good' (Genesis 1:31). And God took the trouble to make a garden and a spouse for Adam (Genesis 2). But the traditionalists emphasize rather the sin which has deprived human existence of its splendour and closeness to God (Genesis 3). Consequently the role of God's grace is particularly important. Jesus is depicted as saving us from the power of sin, using images which often go back to the Old Testament—expiatory offerings, scapegoats and blood. The atmosphere is rather that of Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).

For the traditionalists—who consider this to be a particularly Catholic approach—salvation is achieved through the mediation of the Church, and especially through its hierarchy. Just as Jesus, being God in human flesh, was once the tangible mediator between God and the world, now *una sancta catholica Ecclesia* fulfils this role. It is through the sacraments that we experience God's dealings with us. And we can come to know God's thoughts through the words of the Church, in preaching, in the liturgy, and in the official proclamations of bishops and popes.

*Salvation through a Personal Relationship with God*

The basis of this second option is the conviction that God has a personal relationship with every human being, and that God's presence can be understood by all. There is no need for a mediator—one's own faith is sufficient, although the exact details of this faith vary. Often it is based on sin and salvation, like that of the traditionalists. However, now the way to salvation is not through the mediation of the Church but through personal experience, and through the profession of being a

sinner and of being saved. In some movements the emphasis is on profession, for example in Calvinistic Churches. In others, for example the Evangelical Churches, the emphasis is on the inner experience of being saved.

Salvation can also be understood within a framework of 'creation and salvation' rather than 'sin and salvation'. In this framework, salvation is not about repairing the break caused by sin. Salvation means a growing nearness to God's Spirit. From the beginning, according to this view, the Spirit has inspired the world and its leaders;<sup>8</sup> in Jesus, God's inspiration was completely realised, and ever since then the Spirit has been leading us towards the plenitude of God. It is in this sense that we are saved. Many progressive Churches feel more at home with this vision because the burden of the concept of sin is avoided.

An emphasis on our personal relationship with God is associated with Protestant attacks on sixteenth-century Catholicism, but it is not specifically Protestant, and not only Protestants are attracted to this kind of faith. It has ancient roots: biblical figures such as St Paul and early Christian figures such as St Augustine wrote ardently about their personal experiences of God and of the Spirit.

### *Charity*

Some people find the ideas of God becoming visible in Jesus, of sin and salvation, and of God's Spirit too weighty and difficult. They only lead to quarrels when people try to find out precisely how everything fits together. Are we not running the risk of our search for salvation, as individuals or as Churches, becoming an egocentric obsession? What about the charity to which Jesus invites us?

This third version of an attractive contemporary faith is very simple and rooted in the community: Jesus was a prophet who preached and who practised charity in a particular way, and the Church is a community of people who try to encourage and inspire each other towards this ideal. There is no baggage about salvation, the experience of the Church, or the metaphysics of God and Jesus. Many of Jesus' sayings found in the Bible can be used to support these ideas: 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of

<sup>8</sup> See Genesis 1:2 and, for example, Judges 3:10; 1 Samuel 16:13-14 (King Saul and David); Isaiah 11:2 and 42:1 (the future Messiah).

heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven' (Matthew 7:21; also in Luke); 'For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother' (Matthew 12:50; also in Mark and Luke); 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me' (Matthew 25:40).



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This simple, social-humanistic way of believing is widespread among the younger generation of Catholics. Parents who want their children to be baptized often say that they want them brought up in the Christian faith to give them its 'values and standards', or, slightly more profoundly, its 'virtues and values'. Prayer is not mentioned and not practised. In communion catechism and teenage groups faith maintains a low profile: Jesus is presented as a teacher of charity and the emphasis is placed on kindness to other people and on social justice.

#### *Experience, Personal Growth and Wisdom*

According to the fourth option, too, the Christian faith has become over-complicated. People have been made dependent on a system of intellectual constructs (sin, salvation, the God-man Jesus) and externally imposed ethical obligations. This is not what Jesus meant. Jesus was a wisdom teacher, something like what the Desert Fathers call an 'abbot', and people in the East call a 'guru'. That is what the Church should be about.

Jesus taught us that in order to get in touch with higher things, we should abandon temporal ones: institutions, obligations, thoughts. Faith is about liberation. Step by step we will follow a path towards experiencing the true depth of reality and its inspiration by the transcendent. Jesus showed us this road to spiritual growth and wisdom, and he is our example. Jesus was not the only such example, though: there are many other teachers, such as the Buddha.

This type of belief system is a hotchpotch. The ideas about a deeper understanding of reality, nature and mankind may well be Christian.

But alongside them are found touches of Gnosticism (in the pursuit of knowledge by liberation from material reality); pantheism (in holism, alternative medicine, the special energies of stones); Buddhism; transpersonal psychology, and so on. Many Christians who also draw inspiration from the alternative spiritual scene favour this option; recent research calls them ‘unattached spiritual people’.<sup>9</sup> God means a lot to them, as do wisdom and experience. But institutions do not, and are viewed with suspicion.

### ***The Wisdom of Negative Theology***

These four types of faith, then, present themselves as contemporary and attractive, and are set against each other. To which does the future belong? Perhaps, being modern believers, we would like to avoid this question and just choose the type of faith, and the Bible stories, which appeal to us most. Historically, after all, there has always been unity through diversity where theology and spirituality are concerned (for example, within the Catholic Church alone there are Augustinian, Benedictine, Franciscan, Dominican and Ignatian traditions).

A modern and practical approach would be what is called in Dutch the *poldermodel*: consultation and consensus. ‘Together we can sort it out, as long as we are all prepared to moderate our demands.’ The presuppositions of this approach can be very pragmatic: compromise is the only way to reach a solution. But, at a deeper level, it can help to remind us of different perspectives that we might otherwise be in danger of forgetting. Here, unity is achieved through deliberation.

These ideas about diversity and consensus are wise and true, but they are not sufficient. Negative theology, although it does not have the whole answer to salvation either, can provide some critical perspective on the types of faith that might be attractive, contemporary and sound.

#### *Negative Theology and the Experience of Faith*

Negative theology presupposes the greatness of God, which means that God is unknowable—not only from a philosophical or a cultural-

<sup>9</sup> This term comes from Gerrit Kronjee, in his articles ‘De religieuze transformatie en de sociale cohesie’ [‘Religious Transformation and Social Cohesion’] and ‘Leefstijlen en zingeving’ [‘Lifestyles and Giving Meaning to Life’], in *Geloven in het publieke domein*, edited by van der Donk and others, 67–88 and 171–208.

historical point of view, but also from that of the Christian faith. The Christian God is involved with the world through creation, through incarnation (Jesus), and through indwelling (the Holy Spirit), and remains God at the same time. Nevertheless, it is clear that God is radically different from the world. When we talk about God and say what God is, we always have to be aware that our words fall short. This is the fundamental insight of negative theology, and it serves as a constant warning in relation to our thoughts, our experiences, our statements about God, and our forms of belief.<sup>10</sup> Negative theology is, most of the time, a matter of how we talk about God. It says ‘God has not been made’, and by saying so it avoids what we do not know—namely what God exactly is.

**God is radically different from the world**

But negative theology also has something to say about the experience of God and the way we live this experience. The same problem arises with experiential faith as with reflective faith: human ways differ radically and permanently from the Divine reality that we are trying to express and to attain. In theology human words and the reality of God are not completely synchronous, and the same is true for the way in which we try to express our faith in God. Our human expressions are inadequate.

#### *The Significance of Negative Theology*

The question is: what does not being able to know God mean? Is it better to stop thinking and to leave the expression of faith to people’s own consciences or, in more modern terms, to their feelings? Or, more radically, is it better to abandon theology altogether; to abandon expressions of faith through Church and charity; and, like the followers of the fourth style of faith, to seek refuge in inner mysticism beyond the world and beyond knowledge? Is *The Cloud of Unknowing* our new Bible?<sup>11</sup> On closer examination this approach turns out to be quite ironic. If, as H. M. Kuitert argues, ‘all talk about Above comes from

<sup>10</sup> An excellent study of negative theology is Deidre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena* (Leuven: Peeters, 1995). *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*, edited by Ilsa Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate (Kampen: Kok, 2000), places negative theology in the contemporary cultural context.

<sup>11</sup> *The Cloud of Unknowing* is a medieval ‘guide’ for the mystical journey with a strong awareness of the rational restriction (God remains a ‘cloud of unknowing’) and a plea for an affective knowledge of God. It is now also popular among unattached spiritual groups, read with a dualistic, simplified or ‘Eastern’ interpretation.



below', and if we cannot say anything absolute about God, then this is the end not only of positive theological statements but of negative theology itself.<sup>12</sup> But negative theology, even as *negatio negationis*, does not in fact mean that nothing can be said about God. Statements about God are very important and necessary; it is the essence of the Christian faith that God does not want to remain a mystery, alone and far away, but has made Godself known to humanity. This is only possible through words and concepts that can make God comprehensible for people now.

The merciful possibility that we, as humans with our earthly lives, can meet the transcendent reality of God, however, entails a huge risk: we can mistake the earthly for the transcendent. We can believe that God does not exist, for example, because our prayers have not been answered satisfactorily, and there is no letter in our letterbox explaining why. Here the meaning of negative theology shows itself.

The role of negative theology is to warn us. The God who reveals Godself remains a mystery. This is not a nasty trick or a game of 'hide and seek' on God's part; God simply cannot be otherwise. Humanity, which has been mercifully granted access to God, remains earthly; and God, who out of mercy makes Godself known, remains transcendent.<sup>13</sup> So revelation does not only mean that God makes Godself known, but that God also remains permanently concealed. Negative theology, therefore, is a plea to be careful about knowing God. This caution also

<sup>12</sup> Harminus Martinus Kuitert, *Zonder geloof vaart niemand wel* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1974), 28.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Sokolowski calls this 'the Christian distinction'. See Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame P, 1982).

has a social dimension. To speak rightly of God as much as possible a continual ‘conversion’ is necessary, in the very basic sense of *metanoia*, changing of mind. This conversion comes from listening to others, so that shortcomings in our ideas can be rectified by them.<sup>14</sup>

Negative theology is not only the road to mystery and to the other. It is also the road to experience. Statements of knowledge about God are based on original experience, on trying to convey experience in words, to preserve it, to express it and to pass it on. Both philosophy and (negative) theology proclaim that we will never fully succeed in this. The purpose of such statements is ‘only’ that they can guide listeners, who can compare their own experience with ours and grow by it. Talking about God in a theological way therefore must be mystagogic: its words and concepts always have to refer to that experience.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Negative Theology and a Sound Experience of Faith*

People are rightly attached to words, deeds, rituals, and structures; and especially to traditional religious forms that have proved their value. Forms help us to shape our journey with God. The issue addressed by this article, therefore, is an important one: the search for an attractive

<sup>14</sup> A very interesting example is the ‘Provisional Report’ of three different Vatican dicasteries, entitled *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the ‘New Age’* (2003). These articles are prepared to acknowledge deficits in the authors’ own form of faith, instead of taking a defensive approach in the Tridentine manner. See the Foreword: ‘This study invites readers to take account of the way that New Age religiosity addresses the spiritual hunger of contemporary men and women. It should be recognised that the attraction that New Age religiosity has for some Christians may be due in part to the lack of serious attention in their own communities for themes which are actually part of the Catholic synthesis such as the importance of man’s spiritual dimension and its integration with the whole of life, the search for life’s meaning, the link between human beings and the rest of creation, the desire for personal and social transformation, and the rejection of a rationalistic and materialistic view of humanity.’

<sup>15</sup> In Rahner’s own words: ‘Theology ... should constitute a “mystagogia” leading men to the experience of grace, and should not merely speak of grace as of a material subject which is present in man’s life solely through the conceptions which he formulates of it. Theology as science must certainly not be confused with *kerygma*, with *parenesis*, with the immediate utterance of the Spirit. But at the same time it must not forget either, as it all too often does, that it derives from the utterance of the Spirit and has to serve it. For unless this utterance of the Spirit and the theology deriving from it are related to the ultimate experience of the Spirit in the life of man they lose their distinctive subject-matter altogether.’ (Rahner, ‘Überlegungen zur Methode der Theologie’, in *Schriften zur Theologie*, volume 9 [Einsiedeln: Benzinger, 1970], 79–126, at 123, translated as ‘Reflections on Methodology in Theology’, *Theological Investigations*, volume 11 [London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974], 68–114, here 111.) This point seems still urgent to me, and this is further elaborated in my article, ‘The Difficulty of Prayer: An Investigation into the Spiritual Theology of Rahner’, *Bijdragen: International Journal in Philosophy and Theology*, 68 (2007), 162–184.

form of faith. However, if negative theology not only applies to the details of statements about faith but also to forms by which we express it, what does this mean for a sound experience of faith?

The claims of the four styles of faith discussed here offer the temptation of a clear and easy answer to the big questions of life. They are consequently very enticing. However, wise believers and theologians should not give in to this temptation. The ultimate goal of our search is not the form of faith, but God. Forms have their limitations; we should not be inventing forms, but searching for God.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, it is important to be open to the value and the truth of other forms of faith than our own. The traditional way of believing, for example, often lacks the warmth that comes from the personal experience of faith or from the practice of charity. The same holds true for ‘unattached spirituality’, which is focused on individual growth. But an emphasis on personal belief can obscure the fact that experiences can also be stimulated by traditional communal forms and translated into them. ‘Unattached spirituality’, with its dualism, likewise lacks this understanding. And the social-humanistic option for simple charity lacks—from a Christian viewpoint—its source in the experience of God’s mercy, and is in danger of becoming superficial or merely moralistic.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, paying attention to experience is important. It is the best protection against a danger that affects all types of faith: mistaking the form of faith—whether traditional, personal, ethical or alternative—for the source and goal of faith, God. The goal of faith is, for example, not in ‘doing’ charity, but in experiencing and living through charity. It is not in prayer or the celebration of the sacraments, or papal statements, but in experiencing our relationship with God through these things. In

<sup>16</sup> According to Rahner this comes close to the Christian idea of sin, because it makes a temporary, worldly value into an absolute one, in God’s place. Compare *Grundkurs des Glaubens: Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums* (Freiburg: Herder, 1984), 395.

<sup>17</sup> The depth that the Christian dimension brings to charity is succinctly expressed in Benedict XVI’s 2005 encyclical letter *Deus caritas est*, §1: ‘Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. Saint John’s Gospel describes that event in these words: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should ... have eternal life” (3:16). ... Since God has first loved us (cf. 1 John 4:10), love is now no longer a mere “command”; it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us.’

the end, it is about experiencing God Godself. The experience of that which precedes words, forms, and rituals is also their final goal.<sup>18</sup>

Negative theology, therefore, does not provide one clear and easy answer to the provocation of this article by declaring only one form of faith to be holy. It refers the different forms to one another, and to their final goal—God.

### ***An Attractive Faith***

This article has aimed to be a travelling companion on the way to Emmaus. Believers today often regret that their faith fails to appeal to their contemporaries, and this article aims to respond to their needs and hopes. How far may we hope for salvation from the forms of faith discussed here? The insights of negative theology warn us against expecting or claiming too much, and against too fervent a rivalry with other forms of faith. On this basis of negative theology, I have called for an attitude of modesty and caution, for sensitivity to the truths that others may hold, and for the spiritual deepening of our statements about faith, of our actions and of our religious forms.

With this attitude, we may become travelling companions ourselves, especially to those who are not Christians yet. We should start by inviting them to deepen their experience and to become more sensitive to all the dimensions of existence, of words and of deeds. Then we can call these deeper dimensions ‘God’, and preach the gospel. In doing so we should also instil a sense of caution against becoming fixated on form rather than focusing on God.

This approach can be deepened in various ways, in particular by relating it to psychology and spirituality. Our forms and convictions provide security in the vast and intangible totality of reality, of God, of the other, and of myself. That is why they are necessary: they provide a framework to make the vast and intangible manageable. But the great temptation is to make this framework absolute, forgetting about the Absolute. This temptation is more attractive the more elusive the Absolute seems to be. But only the Truth shall set you free, whether

<sup>18</sup> Experience is a complicated word, and the desire to experience God is a complicated desire. For the dimensions of this experience and an evaluation, see Jos Moons ‘Op zoek naar geloofservaring. Theologische kanttekeningen’ [‘The Desire to Experience God: Theological Notes’], *Theologisch Debat*, 2(2007). For a discussion in depth, see Moons, ‘The Difficulty of Prayer’.

psychologically or spiritually. Historical, sociological, theological and strategic questions have been raised here, and need to be answered. Moreover, there are other ways of thinking about God's greatness: it is not just that God exceeds the words and forms that God nevertheless uses to communicate; it is also a part of God's greatness that, to quote Josef Ratzinger, 'there are just as many ways to God as there are people'.<sup>19</sup>

Have we found the attractive faith for which we search? Yes and no. We must keep on looking for an enticing form of Christianity, bearing in mind that the forms we may find are sound in so far as they are able to put themselves into perspective. This way, we will not end up finding a surrogate, but God.

**Jos Moons** was born in Gouda, in the Netherlands, in 1980. He studied theology at the Catholic Theological University in Utrecht, and at the Jesuit theological faculty of Paris. He was ordained priest in 2005, and is currently working in a federation of parishes near Amsterdam. He has previously written articles on Rahner, on prayer, and on contemporary longings for an experience of God.

<sup>19</sup> Josef Ratzinger, *God and the World: Believing and Living in Our Time*, translated by Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2002), 279.