

# Reason & Doubt

Collected Essays

*Mencken Edition*

with marginalia by Eunomius, Julian, and H.L. Mencken

Eunomius of Norwich

with commentary by

Eunomius of Cyzicus, Julian of Norwich

and H.L. Mencken

Alexandrian Babel Press

2026

*Reason & Doubt: Mencken Edition*  
argues that both intellectual honesty and faithful commitment  
are necessary for authentic worship.

This edition includes marginalia by three voices:  
**Eunomius of Cyzicus** (c. 323–393) in blue,  
the heretical rationalist who believed reason could fully comprehend  
God;  
**Julian of Norwich** (1342–c. 1416) in purple,  
the anchoress whose visions revealed God’s overwhelming love;  
and **H.L. Mencken** (1880–1956) in dark red,  
the Baltimore iconoclast who believed most of this was buncombe.

Together they argue across sixteen centuries  
about knowing, loving, and whether any of it matters.

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Marginalia recovered from manuscript traditions  
Published by Alexandrian Babel Press

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# Editor's Note

This collection addresses a false binary that has haunted religious discourse for centuries: the supposed opposition between reason and faith, between intellectual honesty and faithful commitment.

The essays gathered here argue that this binary is not merely unhelpful—it is theologically incoherent. Reason properly understood does not lead away from God but toward God. Doubt properly understood is not the opposite of faith but its honest condition.

*[E:] Already too cautious. Reason doesn't "lead toward" God—reason GRASPS God. Why this hedging?*

*[J:] Dear E: If you have grasped God fully, you have grasped something other than God. God is not graspable. God shows Godself.*

*[M:] Watching theologians argue about grasping God is like watching children fight over who gets to sit on Santa's lap.*

*[E:] Good! Though why admit it's not systematic? Systematic is BETTER.*

*[J:] Systematic is useful. But the heart has its own order, and God honors both.*

*[M:] "Not a systematic theology"—the author's first honest sentence. The rest is elaborate metaphysical jazz.*

*[E:] "Faithful doubt"—oxymoron. "Rational mysticism"—redundancy. Mysticism IS rational knowledge of the divine essence.*

*[J:] Brother Eunomius, mysticism is not knowledge of essence. It is being known. There is a difference.*

*[J:] Yes! All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.*

*[M:] I agree with the anti-fear thesis. But why drag "grace" and*

What follows is not a systematic theology but a series of connected arguments, each approaching the same territory from a different angle. They share a common conviction: that the God worth worshiping does not require us to abandon our minds in order to bow our knees.

Some of these pieces were written as direct responses to specific theological positions (particularly fideism and fear-based apologetics). Others emerged from attempts to articulate what faithful doubt and rational mysticism might look like in practice.

The volume culminates in "For the Fear of the World," a sustained argument that grace is sufficient—that the robustness of divine action does not depend on human vigilance, and that fear must not be permitted to architect our theology.

These essays are offered not as a final word, but as evidence that one can maintain both boundless faith and limitless doubt—and that to do so is not compromise but integrity.

# Part I

## The Case for Reason

# Chapter 1

## The Reason for Reason

*Sense-Making as Worship*

### I. Prolegomenon: Against the Pious Suspicion of Thought

There persists within religious discourse a curious superstition: that reason is a rival to worship. That to think clearly about God is to risk impiety. That confusion is safer than clarity, and fear more reliable than honesty.

*[E:] FINALLY someone says it.*

*[J:] Reason is not a rival, but nor is it the only path. God meets us where we are.*

*[M:] The superstition persists because it's useful to priests. Confusion keeps the rubes paying tithes.*

*[E:] Exactly. The Cappadocians built careers on this confusion.*

*[J:] Eunomius, your anger at them is old now. Let it rest.*

*[E:] Yes! No hedging!*

*[E:] "One of"? No. It IS the purest form. What could be purer than direct apprehension?*

*[J:] Love is purer. Love sees without grasping, knows without owning. This is what I was shown.*

*[J:] Yes, sense-making is worship. So is weeping. So is silence. All are holy.*

This superstition survives not because it is coherent, but because it is useful. It preserves authority. It dampens dissent. It keeps the machinery running.

But it does not honor God.

If the divine is worthy of worship, then it is worthy of being faced without flinching. And if reason is the faculty by which we refuse to lie about what is before us, then reason is not the enemy of worship—it is one of its purest forms.

I will argue plainly: **sense-making is worship**, and any theology that treats it as a threat has already confessed its lack of confidence in the Good it claims to defend.

## II. Reason Has a Telos, Not Just a Technique

Reason is often caricatured as a cold instrument: a calculator of propositions, a corrosive acid dissolving mystery. This caricature is convenient for those who wish to rule by assertion rather than coherence.

But reason is not merely a method. It has a **telos**.

Reason aims at:

- coherence over contradiction,
- honesty over expedience,
- intelligibility over intimidation,
- integrity over submission.

To reason is not to dominate reality, but to submit oneself to it as it is. Reason refuses to say what cannot be said honestly. It refuses to assent beyond what can be borne without deception. In this sense, reason is not prideful—it is restrained.

The real arrogance lies elsewhere: in the demand that others profess what cannot be defended, believe what cannot be articulated, or submit to claims that collapse under inspection.

If God is real, then God does not benefit from lies told in God's name.

## III. Worship Is Orientation, Not Affect

Worship has been flattened into two inadequate substitutes: **obedience** and **emotion**.

When worship is reduced to obedience, fear becomes holy. Compliance is mistaken for reverence, and terror for humility. God becomes a cosmic manager of consequences, and faith a survival strategy.

When worship is reduced to emotion, sincerity replaces truth. What feels meaningful becomes meaningful, regardless of coherence. The divine is domesticated into experience, and criticism dismissed as coldness.

Both reductions are failures.

*[E:] Gregory of Nyssa, I'm looking at you.*

*[J:] Gregory saw God as darkness that could be entered but not mapped. He was not wrong, E.*

*[E:] Good list. Though submission to TRUTH is the whole point.*

*[J:] Yes, submission to Truth. But Truth is a Person, not a proposition.*

*[E:] Correct!*

*[E:] Restraint? No. Reason COMPLETES. It goes all the way. This timidity is unwarranted.*

*[J:] Restraint is not timidity. It is courtesy before the infinite.*

*[E:] Precise. Basil could never grasp this.*

*[E:] Exactly what happened when they condemned me. Fear masquerading as orthodoxy.*

*[J:] You were condemned wrongly, E. But your theology invited it by claiming too much certainty.*

Worship, properly understood, is **right orientation toward the Good**. It is the posture of a will aligned with what is worthy, not the reflex of a nervous system under threat.

[E:] Yes, but why stop at orientation? Worship is *COMPREHENSION* of the Good.

[J:] No, dear. Worship is response to being comprehended *BY* the Good. We are the object, not the subject.

[M:] “Worship” is such a servile word. Why not just “respect for what works”? Drop the knee-bending.

[E:] *PRECISELY*. Thank you.

[J:] But worship without love is also not worship. It is taxonomy.

[M:] Correct on both counts. Which is why most religion is ritualized panic. QED.

[E:] Good distinction.

[J:] Yes! Fear is not of God. Love casts out fear.

[E:] Correct. Fear is a distraction from the work of understanding.

[J:] And from the work of loving. Fear blocks both knowing and loving.

[M:] Fear is the mainspring of all religion. Remove fear, and the whole theological apparatus collapses. Which is why they’ll never let it go.

[E:] This is why they fear logic. Their beliefs collapse under rational scrutiny.

[M:] Every religious system relies on fear. Hell, purgatory, divine wrath—it’s all the same racket. Fear pays the bills.

[E:] And to admit you have no actual knowledge.

[J:] Or that you have forgotten God is love, not power.

[E:] Wait. Why defend doubt? Doubt is what you have when you don’t have knowledge yet.

[J:] Doubt is honest waiting. It is fidelity to truth over comfort.

Orientation requires attention. Attention requires honesty. Honesty requires sense-making.

Therefore, worship without reason is not worship—it is ritualized panic or curated sentiment.

## IV. Fear Is a Stabilizer, Not a Revelation

Fear has a function. It alerts. It constrains. It prevents premature collapse. I do not deny its utility.

I deny its authority.

Fear is **epistemically unreliable**. It does not track truth; it tracks threat. It compresses time horizons, demands premature certainty, and treats unresolved questions as existential dangers. Fear does not ask “What is real?” It asks “What hurts?”

A religious system that relies on fear to sustain belief has already admitted that belief cannot stand on its own.

This is why fear must never be treated as holy. It may be tolerated as scaffolding. It may be accommodated pastorally. But it cannot be enthroned without corrupting worship itself.

To mistake fear for reverence is to confess that God requires intimidation to be honored.

That is not piety. It is blasphemy disguised as caution.

## V. Doubt as Fidelity Under Constraint

Doubt is routinely maligned as faith’s opposite. This is false.

There is corrosive doubt, yes—the kind that dissolves commitment and serves only the ego’s need to avoid being claimed by anything. But there is also **preservative doubt**: doubt that refuses to assent falsely, that protects integrity, that keeps belief tethered to reality.

This doubt is not a failure of faith. It is a refusal to counterfeit it.

To doubt responsibly is to say: *I will not speak beyond what I can speak honestly.* That is not rebellion. That is fidelity under constraint.

Indeed, doubt is often the last defense of worship against idolatry. When belief hardens into slogans that cannot survive inspection, doubt intervenes not to destroy faith, but to save it from becoming propaganda.

If God cannot survive honest doubt, then God was already a fiction.

## VI. Sense-Making as an Act of Reverence

Sense-making is the disciplined refusal to treat reality as hostile to truth.

It is the conviction—often unspoken—that what is real is not threatened by understanding, and that the Good does not require our confusion to remain sovereign.

To make sense is to attend carefully:

- to distinguish mystery from nonsense,
- to separate depth from obscurity,
- to resist the inflation of ignorance into holiness.

When someone refuses to accept contradiction as a virtue, they are performing an act of reverence. They are saying: *I will not insult God by pretending incoherence is profound.*

This does not mean all mysteries collapse into explanations. It means real mystery does not require the protection of bad reasoning.

Depth and clarity are not enemies.

The Good can withstand scrutiny.

## VII. Conclusion: Honesty Is the First Offering

If God is real, then the first thing owed to God is not compliance, not enthusiasm, not even love.

It is honesty.

[E:] *This whole section is unnecessary. Replace “doubt” with “rigorous thinking” and it becomes clear.*

[J:] *No. Doubt has its own dignity. Some things must be held in openness, not resolved.*

[E:] *True. But the logical corollary: if you KNOW God, doubt is obsolete.*

[J:] *I have known God in vision, E. And still I doubt. The two live together in me.*

[E:] *Excellent.*

[E:] *YES. Write this on Basil’s tomb.*

[J:] *Peace, E. Basil loved God truly, even if his words were clumsy.*

[E:] *Every line here is correct. Best section yet.*

[J:] *Yes. But remember: some mysteries remain mysteries not because we lack rigor, but because they exceed our capacity.*

[E:] *PRINT THIS AND NAIL IT TO EVERY CHURCH DOOR.*

[J:] *Gently, E. Passion is good. But this is not war.*

[E:] *Weak ending. Real “mystery” IS explicable with sufficient rigor. Stop conceding ground.*

[J:] *No. Real mystery deepens with understanding. It does not vanish. I have experienced this.*

[E:] *Understatement. The Good INVITES scrutiny. It cannot be fully seen WITHOUT it.*

[J:] *The Good invites both scrutiny and adoration. Both are faces of love.*

[E:] *Correct, but incomplete. After honesty comes COMPRE-*

Honesty about what we know and what we do not. Honesty about what compels assent and what remains speculative. Honesty about fear when it arises, and honesty about hope when it persists.

Sense-making, properly understood, is this honesty applied systematically.

*[E:] Yes!*

It is the refusal to lie—about God, about ourselves, about the world.

And if that refusal leads to conclusions that unsettle us, the response is not to abandon reason. The response is to check the reasoning, refine the terms, and press harder.

*[E:] Finally! Someone who understands that theology is WORK.*

*[J:] Theology is work, yes. But it is also gift. Sometimes the truth comes not from pressing harder but from opening wider.*

*[E:] Good line. Though I'd say: God IS truth, and we abandon God when we abandon reason.*

*[J:] God IS truth. But God is also love, beauty, goodness. Reason grasps one face of the infinite.*

God does not need our protection from the truth.

God is the truth we are protecting ourselves from abandoning.

# Chapter 2

## God Is Good, and God Is Reason

### Panel I — God Is Good

This panel makes a single claim.

God and the Good are not separable referents.

This is not the claim that God prefers the good, commands the good, or exemplifies the good. Those formulations already assume a distinction that this panel denies.

The claim is identity, not alignment.

If God is real, then goodness is not arbitrary.

If goodness is real, then it is not optional.

If goodness binds us regardless of preference, then it is not a human invention.

To call this reality “God” is not to add a new object to the universe. It is to name what is already doing the work.

People routinely encounter the Good as something that:

- makes demands they did not choose
- resists rationalization
- costs them something
- remains binding even when inconvenient

*[E:] CORRECT. Identity, not predication.*

*[J:] Yes. God IS good, not HAS goodness. This was shown to me.*

*[M:] Or: drop “God” entirely and just say “the Good exists.” Same result, 90% less metaphysical baggage.*

*[E:] Exactly. God doesn’t “have” goodness. God IS goodness.*

*[M:] If God=Good, then every time you say “God” you could just say “Good” and save everyone the theological headache. Try it. It’s liberating.*

*[E:] Perfect syllogism.*

That encounter does not require prior belief. It does not require religious language. It does not require metaphysical satisfaction.

It requires honesty.

[E:] *And reason. Always reason.*

[J:] *And openness. The Good comes to those who wait.*

[E:] *Yes. Behavior reveals ontology.*

[E:] *Correct analysis.*

When someone acts as if some things are worth doing even when no one rewards them, they are not behaving as if goodness were subjective. They are behaving as if goodness were *real*.

This panel refuses the move that treats “God” as an extra hypothesis layered on top of moral experience. God is not the explanation *after* goodness. God is the name for why goodness has authority at all.

If God were not good, God would not be worthy of worship. If goodness were not ultimate, it would not bind us.

The attempt to separate the two is not humility. It is confusion.

[E:] *Finally someone admits confusion isn't a virtue.*

[J:] *But true humility admits the limits of understanding. We know God IS good. We cannot exhaust what that means.*

[E:] *Good. Though I'd say they DO know God, whether they use the name or not. Knowledge doesn't require nomenclature.*

[J:] *They are known BY God, even if they do not know they are known. God's love reaches beyond our knowing.*

[E:] *YES. THIS is the claim that got me condemned. Write it louder.*

[J:] *E., this claim cost you everything. Perhaps there is wisdom in how you say it, not just what you say.*

[M:] *If God=Reason, then atheists who reason carefully are doing God's work without knowing it. Which means God is a cosmic practical joker. I like this theology better already.*

[E:] *EXACTLY. Reason doesn't exist independently and then get divine approval. Reason IS divine disclosure.*

[J:] *Reason is ONE way God is disclosed. Not the only way. Love discloses too.*

[M:] *Or: reason exists. Period. No God required. Occam's Razor, gentlemen. Use it.*

This does not mean that all who serve the Good know God. It means that none who serve the Good are serving something else.

Belief does not create this reality. Disbelief does not abolish it.

God is Good, whether named or not.

## Panel II — God Is Reason

This panel makes a second claim.

God and Reason are not separable referents.

This is not the claim that God approves of reason, sponsors reason, or occasionally intervenes in rational processes. Those claims already assume that reason stands on its own.

This panel denies that assumption.

Reason is not merely a tool. It is a trust.

To reason at all is to assume that:

- reality is intelligible
- contradictions matter
- better and worse explanations exist
- truth is not hostile to honest inquiry

These assumptions are not derivable from reason itself. They are conditions that reason *relies on* but cannot generate.

To argue is already to believe that reality will answer.

This belief does not require religious commitment. It does require confidence that the universe is not arbitrary.

When someone insists on coherence, rejects contradiction, or refuses to accept convenient falsehoods, they are not behaving as if reality were indifferent. They are behaving as if reality were *answerable*.

This panel names that answerability.

God is not what interrupts reason. God is what makes reason possible.

The atheist who argues carefully and the theist who argues carefully are both trusting the same ground. They may disagree about what to call it, but they agree that it holds.

This is not a proof of God's existence. It is a clarification of terms.

If you trust reason, you are already trusting something reason cannot prove.

Call it what you like. The trust remains.

*[E:] And that confidence is WARRANTED. The universe answers because it's rational through and through.*

*[J:] The universe answers because it is loved into being. Rationality is one expression of that love.*

*[E:] Yes!*

*[E:] Close, but backwards. God IS reason. God doesn't "make it possible"—God IS it.*

*[J:] God exceeds reason, dear E. God makes reason possible the way light makes sight possible. The light is more than the eye.*

*[E:] Fine, but the one who NAMES it correctly has better theology.*

*[J:] The one who loves it truly has found God, whether they name it or not.*

*[E:] Why not both? Clear terms BECOME proof.*

*[E:] NO. Reason proves itself in the act of reasoning. This is self-evident, not circular.*

*[J:] Reason cannot prove love, yet love is real. Some things are given, not proven. This is grace.*

*[E:] Call it correctly: LOGOS. God. Same thing.*

*[J:] LOGOS is beautiful. But God is also AGAPE. Same reality, more faces.*

# Chapter 3

## Knowing God is Loving God

### *A Brief Symmetry*

The mystic who spends a lifetime in contemplative love and dies without having loved God completely is called a saint.

*[E:] Sure, because we sentimentalize affection.*

*[J:] We honor fidelity. Love that persists without completion is holy.*

*[M:] The mystic is called a saint because she's harmless. She doesn't ask uncomfortable questions or demand logical consistency. Sentiment is always safer than thought.*

*[E:] Because they fear us. We actually GET somewhere.*

*[J:] Where did you get, E.? To exile. To isolation. Understanding without love gets nowhere.*

*[M:] The logician is called a cautionary tale because he exposes the whole enterprise as bunk. Can't have that. Bad for donations.*

*[E:] Agreed, but for the wrong reason. The asymmetry exists because knowing IS superior to feeling.*

*[J:] NO. This is where you are most wrong. Knowing and loving are one thing, not rivals.*

*[M:] The asymmetry exists because the Church needs mystics and fears logicians. Power dynamics, not theology. Wake up.*

*[E:] Because love is inherently in-*

The logician who spends a lifetime in rigorous thought and dies without having understood God completely is called a cautionary tale.

This asymmetry is not defensible.

We do not expect the mystic to exhaust God's lovability. We do not look at Julian of Norwich or John of the Cross and say, "Ah, but did you love God *all the way*? Did you finish?"

Of course not. God is infinite. The love is real precisely because it cannot be completed. The mystic is praised for orientation, not arrival.

But the logician is held to a different standard. "You think you can understand God?" we ask, as if understanding were a claim to completion rather than a direction of travel. The mystic gets credit for the journey. The logician gets blamed for not reaching the destination.

This is incoherent.

Here is what I wish to propose:

Knowing God and loving God are the same activity performed with different instruments.

The heart reaches toward God and does not arrive. The mind reaches toward God and does not arrive. Both are exhausted in the reaching.

Neither exhausts the object.

This is the crucial distinction: *exhaustion* is not *exhaustive*.

You can pour yourself out completely without emptying the cup you're pouring into. The mystic knows this about love. The logician should be permitted to know it about understanding.

“But the logician claims certainty!”

Some do. And they are wrong—not because logic is the wrong tool, but because certainty is the wrong posture. The arrogant logician who thinks the syllogism captures God has made the same error as the arrogant mystic who thinks the experience *is* God.

Both have confused the reaching for the grasping.

But humble logic is as holy as humble love. The careful thinker who says, “I understand this much, and I know there is more, and I press on”—how is this different from the contemplative who says, “I have loved this much, and I know there is more, and I continue”?

It is not different. It is the same fidelity expressed in a different dialect.

The tradition has not always remembered this.

We canonize the ecstasies and side-eye the scholastics. We treat Meister Eckhart's incomprehensible sermons as profound and Aquinas's precise distinctions as merely useful. We assume the heart gets closer than the head.

But Aquinas wept at the end. “All I have written seems like straw,” he said—not because the writing was wrong, but because he had seen something the writing could only point toward.

This is not the failure of reason. This is reason succeeding so completely that it delivered him to its own limit.

The mystic's overwhelming experience and the logician's overwhelming glimpse are the same overwhelm. Different doors, same room.

What would it mean to take this seriously?

It would mean we stop treating intellectual faith as a lesser faith. It would mean the person who reasons their way toward God is not “stuck

[E:] *Clever phrasing, wrong claim. Exhaustion in love is just fatigue. Exhaustion in knowing is APPREHENSION.*

[J:] *Exhaustion in love is ecstasy. I know this. It is not fatigue. It is fullness that empties and fills again.*

[E:] *We don't need “permission.” We already know God's essence directly. This whole symmetry argument is false humility.*

[J:] *E., if you knew God's essence, you would stop arguing and weep. God's essence is love beyond measure. No one comprehends it. We drown in it.*

[E:] *I claim certainty, and I am RIGHT. Certainty is the GOAL.*

[J:] *Certainty about God is not possible while we live, dear one. We see through a glass darkly. But we WILL see clearly. Not yet.*

[E:] *Some of us have grasped. Speak for yourself.*

[J:] *No one has grasped. Some of us have been grasped. This is not the same. You were grasped, E. That's why you can't stop searching.*

[E:] *Why “humble”? Accurate logic doesn't need humility. It needs RIGOR.*

[J:] *Rigor without humility is pride. It breaks itself on God's infinity.*

[E:] *Wrong metaphor. They're different ACHIEVEMENTS, not different dialects.*

[J:] *They are the same achievement: FIDELITY. The heart faithful and the mind faithful are both faithful. God receives both.*

[E:] *Because the ecstasies are safe. We're dangerous.*

[J:] *You were dangerous because you were rigid, not because you were rigorous. Rigorous humility*

in their head” but *oriented*, just as the person who feels their way toward God is oriented.

[E:] *Orientation is too weak. COMPREHENSION.*

[J:] *Orientation is exactly right. We are oriented, drawn, called. We do not seize. We respond.*

[E:] *I'm not pointing at the moon. I'm DESCRIBING it. Accurately.*

[J:] *You are describing the light the moon gives you, dear one. The moon itself exceeds all descriptions.*

[E:] *Not the same. Some paths are better than others. Knowing wins.*

[J:] *Love wins. It always wins. It is the substance of which knowing is the form.*

[E:] *God is exhaustible by rigorous thought. That's what essence MEANS.*

[J:] *Oh E. God IS essence. But essence is not exhaustible. It is the inexhaustible source of all that is. You confuse the map with the territory.*

[E:] *NO. Knowing God is KNOWING God. Love is optional.*

[J:] *YES. YES. A thousand times YES. This is what I was shown. Knowing is loving. Loving is knowing. They are one movement of the soul toward its source.*

[E:] *Categorically false. This whole essay is diplomatic nonsense.*

[J:] *It is not diplomacy, E. It is truth. You know it is. Your anger proves it. You want certainty because you fear love might ask more of you than knowledge does.*

[E:] *Only one is rigorous. Only one is certain. Only one is KNOWING.*

[J:] *Both are rigorous. Both can be certain of God's presence. Both are knowing. You are afraid to admit you love God, E. But you do. Your life proved it.*

It would mean the theologian and the contemplative are not rivals but colleagues, both pointing at the same moon, both knowing their fingers are not the moon.

It would mean admitting that some of us were built to know-toward, and some to love-toward, and some to serve-toward, and all of these are the same toward.

God is not smaller than our methods of approach.

This should be obvious, but we keep forgetting it. We keep assuming that one path is real and the others are detours. The mystic suspects the logician of missing the point. The logician suspects the mystic of abandoning rigor. The activist suspects both of navel-gazing.

Meanwhile, God remains inexhaustible by all of them.

The conclusion, then, is simple:

Knowing God is loving God.

Not because they are identical in method, but because they are identical in orientation. Both reach. Both exhaust themselves. Both fail to exhaust the object.

And both, when done honestly, are holy.

## Part II

# Against the Leap

# Chapter 4

## Kneeling on Concrete

*A Letter to Søren Kierkegaard from the Rational Mystic's Dance Floor*

Dear Søren,

*[E:] Finally we're getting somewhere. Kierkegaard was an embarrassment.*

*[J:] Kierkegaard was in pain. Be gentle with those in pain.*

*[M:] Kierkegaard was a neurotic Dane who mistook his melancholy for metaphysics. But he wrote beautifully, so we forgive him. Barely.*

*[E:] TOO gentle. Just say it: you INVENTED the chasm to justify your psychological problems.*

*[J:] Søren's chasm was real for him. Calling it invented doesn't heal it.*

*[M:] The chasm exists. It's called "reality." On one side: evidence. On the other: wishful thinking. Søren jumped toward wishful thinking and called it faith. At least he admitted it was absurd.*

*[E:] The worst idea in Christian history.*

*[J:] Not the worst. But deeply sad. God is not across a chasm. God is holding us already.*

*[E:] And theatrical. And false.*

*[J:] And unnecessary. But born of real desperation. Have compassion, E.*

*[M:] Kierkegaard was the P.T. Barnum of theology. He knew his*

I have read your work with great care and genuine affection. You were not wrong about much. The crowd is untruth. Christendom is not Christianity. Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom. These observations remain useful, and I keep them close.

But I am writing to tell you, as gently as I can manage, that you built an entire philosophy on a chasm that does not exist.

You insisted that faith requires a leap.

Not a step. Not a walk. A *leap*—radical, discontinuous, absurd. Reason brings you to the edge, you said, and then reason must be abandoned. The knight of faith vaults into the void and trusts that something will catch him, or doesn't, and jumps anyway.

This is very dramatic.

It is also, I suspect, unnecessary.

I do not say this to diminish what you suffered. Your melancholy was real. Your father's guilt was real. The weight of Regine, the broken engagement, the impossibility of explaining yourself—all real. You wrote from inside genuine darkness, and the leap was how you survived it.

But survival strategies are not universal truths.

You needed a God who could only be reached by violence to the rational

mind, because your rational mind had become a torture chamber. The leap was escape. I do not begrudge you the escape.

I only question whether the rest of us need to follow you out the window.

*[E:] We don't. Stay in the building. Use the stairs.*

Here is what I have found, kneeling on concrete:

*[J:] Some of us need the window. Some need the door. Some are carried. God meets us all.*

The ground is there.

*[E:] OBVIOUSLY. It's always been there. Søren just refused to look down.*

Not metaphorically. Not as a reward for sufficient desperation. The ground is simply there, and it holds weight, and when I put my foot on it, it does not give way.

*[J:] The ground is Christ. It holds us before we know it holds us.*

This is not the absence of faith. It is faith without the performance anxiety.

*[E:] Or: it's KNOWLEDGE without the dramatics.*

I did not need to vault across an infinite qualitative distinction. I needed to look down, notice the surface, and step. The step required trust—I could not prove the concrete would hold before I tested it. But the trust was *reasonable*. The ground gave evidence of itself. It invited weight.

*[J:] It is trust. Simple trust. This is enough.*

You would call this immanence. You would say I have not reached the religious stage, that I am trapped in the ethical, that I have substituted bourgeois certainty for authentic faith.

*[E:] More than reasonable. WARRANTED by the evidence.*

*[J:] The trust was a gift. Evidence helps, but the ground holds even those who have no evidence yet.*

Søren, I am kneeling. My knees hurt. The concrete is cold and hard and unforgiving. This is not comfortable. It is simply not a leap.

*[E:] And he'd be wrong. Rational certainty ≠ existential theater.*

*[J:] There is no bourgeois certainty here. Only the certainty of being loved. That is not bourgeois. That is the foundation of the world.*

Your error, if I may be so bold, was architectural.

*[E:] Beautiful line.*

You looked at the gap between the human and the divine and decided it was a chasm. An abyss. An infinite qualitative difference that could only be crossed by a rupture in the order of things.

*[J:] Yes. Kneeling is enough. Sometimes it is everything.*

But what if the gap is a step?

*[E:] His error was psychological, but sure.*

What if the infinite qualitative difference is real *and* crossable on foot—not because we are capable of infinite crossing, but because something has been built across it? A bridge. A floor. Concrete poured by hands not our own, cured and ready, waiting for weight.

*[E:] What if there's NO gap? We're made in the image of Logos. We CAN think God's thoughts.*

*[J:] There IS a gap, but it is already bridged. The Incarnation is the bridge. We walk on it, we don't leap over it.*

The Incarnation is not a call to leap. It is a claim that the ground now exists where there was no ground before.

You can walk on it.

*[E:] Or: the bridge is REASON ITSELF, built into the structure of reality.*

*[J:] The bridge is Christ, dear E. Reason is one of the planks. Love is another. Both hold.*

[E:] *Nail on the head. Melodrama as theology.*

[J:] *Pain is not melodrama, E. Søren's pain was real. But he mistook the cost of his pain for the cost of faith.*

[E:] *BRUTAL. True.*

[J:] *True, but also compassionate. Søren needed to hear this said with love.*

[E:] *Or know God less. In fact, we know MORE.*

[J:] *We love God exactly as much as we can in this moment. That is all God asks. Søren loved maximally. So do you, E., though you call it knowing.*

[E:] *Yes. Reality has texture. It resists. That's how you know it's real.*

[J:] *Reality resists so we know we are meeting something OTHER. The resistance is God's courtesy.*

[E:] *This IS proof. Repeated empirical confirmation. Stop being modest.*

[J:] *It is testimony, not proof. Testimony is enough. God asks for trust, not proofs.*

[E:] *It's better than "enough." It's KNOWLEDGE.*

[J:] *It is faith. Faith is not less than knowledge. It is knowledge in love.*

[E:] *Kierkegaard's fundamental error in one sentence.*

[J:] *Faith and thinking do not leave off from each other. They hold hands.*

[E:] *YES. Faith is what you call it when thinking SUCCEEDS.*

[J:] *Faith is what you call it when love receives what thinking offers. Both are needed.*

[E:] *Precisely my experience. No thunder. Just clarity accumulating.*

[J:] *And my experience. No thunder. Just Love accumulating.*

I think you loved the leap because it felt costly.

Rational assent feels cheap to people who have suffered for their faith. If I can simply *step*, then what was all the anguish for? If the ground is solid, why did I spend years falling?

This is the sunk cost fallacy applied to salvation.

Your suffering was real, but it was not the price of admission. It was the long way around. Some of us—by luck, by grace, by whatever you wish to call it—found the door closer than you did. This does not mean we walked through a different door.

It does not mean we love God less.

The rational mystic kneels on concrete because the concrete is honest.

It does not pretend to be soft. It does not promise comfort. It pushes back against the knees and says: *this is real, and it will cost you something, and it is here.*

The leap asks you to trust the void.

The step asks you to trust the ground.

I find the ground more trustworthy. Not because I have proved it will hold—proof is not available—but because it has *shown* me that it holds. Every time I have tested it, it has been there.

This is not certainty. It is track record.

It is enough.

You wrote that faith begins where thinking leaves off.

I want to suggest a gentler formulation: faith begins where thinking arrives.

Reason does not stop at the edge of a cliff, terrified, unable to proceed. Reason walks steadily forward, step after step, and at some point notices that it has been on holy ground for quite some time. The transition is not violent. It is not even dramatic. It is only, afterward, recognizable.

I do not expect this letter to persuade you. You died in 1855, and your leap is now canonical. Half of modern theology assumes you were right about the chasm.

But I write it anyway, because others are still standing at that edge, being told they must jump.

And I want them to know: you can kneel instead.

The concrete is hard. The concrete is real. The concrete holds.

And kneeling on it is not a failure of nerve. It is an act of trust in what can be trusted.

With respect, with gratitude, and without leaping,

Eunomius of Norwich

*[E:] Best chapter so far. This is what rational faith looks like.*

*[J:] Yes. This is beautiful. Kneeling is always the right posture. The ground holds all who kneel.*

*[E:] Should've signed it "with certainty."*

*[J:] Should've signed it "with love." But it is good as it is.*

## **Part III**

# **The Ground of Trust**

# Chapter 5

## Nothing New Is Being Claimed

*A Christian Apology*

Everything you know about the world already works.

*[E:] Good start.*

Causality holds. Physics is reliable. Human suffering does not disappear when explained. Moral action remains costly, ambiguous, and necessary even when no one is watching. You do not need God to irrigate crops, treat illness, or behave decently. Any theology that asks you to pretend otherwise deserves your suspicion.

*[E:] Agreed. God-of-the-gaps theology is intellectual cowardice.*

Christian faith does not begin by denying this. It begins by refusing to improve upon it.

*[J:] Yes. God is not in the gaps. God is the foundation beneath everything that works.*

The claim is not that the world fails without God, but that **the world only holds together because something like God is already being trusted**—quietly, implicitly, without being named.

*[E:] Close. I'd say: the world holds together because its structure IS rational/divine.*

You already live as if truth matters, as if persons are not interchangeable, as if love that cannot be enforced is still worth offering, as if responsibility does not disappear when outcomes are uncertain. None of this requires magic. All of it requires ground.

*[J:] The world holds together because it is loved. Structure flows from love.*

Call that ground whatever you like: coherence, goodness, reality, the thing that still holds when explanation runs out. Christianity calls it God—not as a hypothesis, not as a mechanism, but as the source of gift rather than force.

*[E:] The ground is LOGOS. Name it clearly.*

*[J:] The ground is Love that makes all things. Logos and Agape are one ground.*

At this level, nothing new has been added.

*[E:] Why "gift"? Why not "structure" or "essence"? This gift-language is too weak.*

*[J:] Gift-language is STRONG. It honors that we did not earn existence. We received it. This is*

The specifically Christian claim begins only here:

If that Ground is truly good—if it honors freedom, refuses coercion, and sustains responsibility without rescue—then it cannot remain merely abstract without becoming indifferent. A principle can sustain existence. It cannot forgive. A force can generate order. It cannot love. You cannot address an equation. You cannot be known by a law.

*[E:] Wait. Why NOT? An equation can be perfect. A law can be comprehensive. Why privilege “being known” over “being understood”?*

*[J:] Because we are persons, not problems. God knows us as persons know persons: with love.*

*[E:] Incarnation, fine. But don’t use it to sneak in anti-rational sentiment.*

*[J:] Incarnation IS rational. It is the logic of Love made visible.*

*[E:] Good Christology. No magic tricks.*

*[J:] Not magic. Mystery. Mystery is not irrational. It is super-rational. It exceeds categories without contradicting them.*

*[E:] Interesting.*

*[J:] Yes. Love colliding with death. Death loses. This is not transaction. It is victory.*

*[E:] Still with the “gift” language. Why not “Logos meets entropy” or something rigorous?*

*[J:] Because Love is more precise than Logos for this. Logos describes structure. Love describes the will that makes structure a gift.*

*[E:] Speculative. I need more rigor here.*

*[J:] It is not speculative. It is witnessed. I saw the wounds. They are real and they are healed. This is fact.*

*[E:] Pattern-recognition, fine. But where’s the PROOF this pattern reflects divine essence?*

*[J:] The proof is in living it. Those who love this way know it works. That is the proof God gives.*

The claim is that the Ground took on a face.

Not as a shortcut around reality, but as its clearest expression.

Jesus is not introduced as a supernatural exception to the human condition, but as its most transparent instance: a life lived without leverage, without violence, without appeal to hidden power. He did not use God to escape vulnerability. He entered it fully. He did not suspend causality. He endured it. He did not outwit death. He submitted to it without becoming what it uses.

The Cross is not a transaction. It is a collision.

Pure mechanism meets pure gift. The system exhausts itself. Love does not.

Resurrection is not the reversal of physics. It is the disclosure that a life grounded entirely in gift cannot finally be held by force. That what is built without ego does not decompose the way ego-built things do.

Nothing new is being claimed here either.

You already know that coercion fails, that violence corrodes, that love offered without guarantee is the only thing that ever changes anyone. Christianity simply insists that this pattern is not accidental, and that it has been lived once, completely, without distortion.

Faith, then, is not believing in miracles.

It is **trusting that this pattern is real enough to stake your life on.**

You do this kind of trust all the time. You trust testimony. You trust structures you did not design. You trust that certain forms of life are airworthy even if you cannot personally derive every equation. You do not call this irrational. You call it competent.

Christian belief asks for the same kind of trust—no more, no less.

Not certainty.

Not proof.

Not surrender of reason.

Only the willingness to say: *this account of reality is coherent enough, honest enough, and humane enough to live inside.*

Prayer, then, is no longer speech into the dark. It is address to a reality that has already spoken in human grammar. Not loudly. Not coercively. Not in a way that bypasses responsibility. But clearly enough to be trusted.

You can respect the Ground.

Christianity asks whether you are willing to trust the face it has shown you.

Nothing new is being claimed.

Only that what already holds might also know your name.

*[E:] Why not certainty? Why not proof? This false humility is infuriating.*

*[J:] Not false humility. True humility. We are finite. God is infinite. We can be certain of God's love without comprehending God's essence.*

*[E:] "Enough" is not an argument. Either it's TRUE or it's not.*

*[J:] It is true. But truth is a Person, not just a proposition. Living inside truth means relationship.*

*[E:] Prayer is alignment of mind with Logos. Stop making it sentimental.*

*[J:] Prayer is conversation with Love. It is not sentimental. It is the structure of reality made personal.*

*[E:] I'm willing to UNDERSTAND the face it has shown. Trust is for beginners.*

*[J:] Trust is for saints. Understanding serves trust. Trust does not serve understanding. Love re-orders everything, E.*

*[E:] Poetic ending. Lacks rigor. 6/10 chapter.*

*[J:] Perfect ending. God knows your name, E. You know it too. That's why you argue so fiercely. You cannot bear being known.*

## **Part IV**

# **For the Fear of the World**

# Preface: Why This Is Not a Rebuttal

This essay exists because *For the Life of the World* is mostly right.

It is right about the world as gift. Right about secularism as misrecognition rather than mere disbelief. Right about the poverty of both escapist spirituality and activist reduction. Right about liturgy as something more than ornament, therapy, or cultural residue.

I am not interested in correcting these claims. I am interested in asking what *else* they require in order to stand.

When I first encountered Alexander Schmemmann's work, I found it difficult to read. Not because it lacked seriousness or depth, but because it spoke from a confidence I did not yet trust. It felt preachy to a temperament trained to suspect rhetoric, to demand compression, and to ask whether confidence was masking anxiety. At the time, I set the book aside.

Returning to it now, I no longer think that reaction was simply resistance. It was a symptom of a deeper disagreement that I could not yet name.

This essay is an attempt to name it.

The disagreement is not over whether the world is fragile. History makes fragility obvious. It is not over whether human beings forget, misuse, instrumentalize, and distort what they are given. We do this constantly. It is not even over the importance of liturgy, ritual, or communal memory.

The disagreement concerns **what authority fear is allowed to have in our theology**.

Again and again, in both theology and atheology, I encounter arguments that quietly rely on the same premise: *if we are not vigilant enough,*

[E:] Schmemmann? This should be interesting.

[J:] Schmemmann loved liturgy as I love prayer. He understood gift.

[E:] Good approach. Schmemmann had insights but lacked systematic rigor.

[E:] EXACTLY. Fear corrupts thinking. Always has.

[J:] Yes. Perfect love casts out fear. Fear cannot architect what love has built.

[M:] Fear IS theology's authority. Without fear, you have ethics. With fear, you have religion. This is the point.

[E:] *The paranoid premise. Basil used this constantly.*

[J:] *Fear of loss is natural. But God's gifts are not so fragile. God's love holds what fear cannot.*

[M:] *This premise is correct, but not for theological reasons. Things ARE constantly being lost: decency, honesty, intelligence. Just look around. But adding God to the problem doesn't fix it.*

[E:] *Love under threat is just fear wearing a nice hat.*

[J:] *True. Love is not threatened. Love threatens fear.*

[E:] *Yes! Fear has no epistemic authority!*

[J:] *Fear has no spiritual authority either. God's love is larger than all our fears combined.*

[E:] *Or: because it's structured by rational necessity that doesn't depend on anyone's "love." But I appreciate the anti-fear thrust.*

[J:] *Rational necessity IS love's structure. God is both. You cannot separate them. Love made logic. Logic expresses love.*

[E:] *Good. Though I'd replace "grace" with "rational structure" throughout.*

[J:] *Grace IS God's structure. Grace is not weak. Grace is the strongest force in existence. It holds everything.*

[E:] *EXACTLY. Liturgy is pedagogical, not ontological.*

[J:] *Yes! Liturgy teaches us to see what is already true. It does not make things true by being performed.*

[E:] *Fear as architect—perfect image. Fear builds cages.*

[J:] *Fear built my cell. But God was in the cell with me. God is not kept out by fear.*

[E:] *Or: if you're right, REASON has always been sufficient, and we never needed the fear at all.*

*something essential will be lost.* Meaning will flatten. Reverence will evaporate. The world will collapse into use. And so we must guard, reinforce, enact, remember, and maintain — not merely as a matter of care, but as a matter of survival.

This premise is rarely stated plainly. It appears instead as urgency, as pastoral realism, as historical sobriety. It appears as love under threat.

I do not doubt the sincerity of that love. I do doubt the authority of that fear.

This essay is not written to deny loss, decay, or failure. It is written to ask whether these phenomena are allowed to define the limits of grace. It is written to ask whether the world persists because it is continuously upheld by correct human posture — or because it is loved by God with a love that does not consult our competence.

If grace is grace, it cannot be fragile in the way our arguments often assume.

If salvation is ontological, it cannot depend on vigilance without ceasing to be gift.

If the life of the world is truly given in Christ, then it must be able to survive our forgetfulness, our misuse, and even our fear.

Nothing in what follows should be read as a dismissal of liturgy, the Church, or the sacramental vision. On the contrary: this essay is written because I take that vision seriously enough to refuse to make it load-bearing in ways it was never meant to be. Worship discloses reality. It does not keep reality from unraveling. Thanksgiving completes joy. It does not sustain being.

I have titled this essay *For the Fear of the World* not to endorse fear, but to expose it — gently, structurally, without accusation. Fear has done important work in theology. It has protected what is precious. It has warned against genuine dangers. But it has also quietly become an architect, setting constraints on what grace is allowed to do.

This essay is an apology — not against Schmemmann, but against that constraint.

If I am wrong, then grace is less sufficient than I believe, and the anxiety was warranted.

If I am right, then the world has been safer than we feared — and perhaps we can finally rest.

The pages that follow are offered in that spirit: not as correction, not

as demolition, but as a wager on divine robustness.

*[E:] Interesting. Let's see if you follow through.*

*[J:] Yes. This is a wager on Love's strength. I have seen that strength. It cannot fail.*

# Chapter 6

## The World That Does Not Need Defending

### The World Is Still Given

The world is still given.

*[E:] Good opening.*

*[J:] Perfect opening. Start with gift.*

This is not a claim about optimism. It is a claim about ontology.

*[E:] Correct distinction.*

Gift precedes recognition. The givenness of the world does not depend on our ability to name it correctly, receive it gratefully, or use it wisely. A gift can be mishandled without becoming unreal. It can be forgotten without being withdrawn.

*[E:] True, though I'd say "structure" not "gift." The world persists because it's NECESSARY, not because someone keeps gifting it.*

The persistence of the world is the relevant datum.

*[J:] Necessary because LOVED. Love makes necessity gracious. Without love, necessity would crush us. With love, necessity holds us.*

Despite centuries of misuse, exploitation, abstraction, and reduction, the world continues to present itself as meaningful. Not uniformly. Not without distortion. But persistently.

If meaning required constant human affirmation to remain real, history would already be over.

*[E:] Yes. Meaning is ontologically robust.*

To say the world is given is not to deny that it is wounded. It is to refuse the inference that woundedness nullifies gift. Damage is not revocation.

*[J:] Meaning persists because Love persists. Love is the source of meaning.*

This essay begins here because any theology that begins in fear has already conceded too much.

*[E:] Precisely. Schmemmann was wrong to make meaning so fragile.*

*[J:] Yes. Meaning does not depend on us remembering it. We depend on meaning holding us even when we forget.*

## Meaning Has Proven Harder to Kill Than We Expected

There is a common assumption, shared by both theologians and atheists, that meaning is fragile.

According to this assumption, explanation erodes reverence, analysis dissolves value, and rational frameworks inevitably flatten experience into utility. Given enough time, human life is expected to degrade into administration.

This has not happened.

Meals remain more than fuel. Birth and death resist procedural containment. People continue to mark time, treat certain moments as inviolable, and experience loss as more than inconvenience.

This persistence is not accidental.

It suggests that meaning is not a thin cultural overlay but a resilient feature of human engagement with the world. Meaning can be distorted, commodified, sentimentalized, or weaponized. But distortion is not annihilation.

Explanation does not exhaust experience.

Clarity does not cancel depth.

Naming does not empty what is named.

The belief that meaning must be protected from understanding has not earned its authority.

## Secularism as Description, Not Destiny

The word *secularism* is often treated as a trajectory with a predetermined end: disenchantment, flattening, nihilism.

This essay rejects that framing.

Secular frameworks are descriptive before they are normative. They arise from attempts to explain causality and constraint, not from a desire to erase value. They are tools, not teloi.

To confuse a framework's failure modes with its intentions is a category error.

*[E:] Everyone thinks this. Everyone is wrong.*

*[J:] Meaning is not fragile because it is not ours. It is God's gift to the world. God does not withdraw gifts.*

*[E:] The anti-rational prejudice in one paragraph.*

*[E:] Because it CAN'T happen. Meaning is structural.*

*[J:] Because meaning is loved into being. Love does not evaporate under scrutiny. Love deepens.*

*[E:] Yes! Meaning survives because it's REAL, not because we protect it.*

*[J:] Meaning survives because it is rooted in God. God cannot be distorted away. God remains.*

*[E:] Every line correct. Where was this energy in chapter 3?*

*[J:] Exactly. Clarity serves depth. Understanding serves love. Both honor the real.*

*[E:] Thank you! This is what I've been saying for 1600 years!*

*[J:] And thank you, E., for saying it. Sometimes the logician serves the mystic by clearing away false protections.*

*[E:] Good.*

*[E:] Exactly. Mechanism describes. It doesn't prescribe.*

*[J:] True. Tools serve purposes. They do not determine purposes. God determines purposes.*

[E:] YES. Bad theology  
CHOOSSES to flatten. Reason  
doesn't force it.

[J:] And bad mysticism chooses to  
obscure. Neither reason nor mys-  
ticism are the problem. Fear is  
the problem.

[E:] See: every council that con-  
demned me.

[J:] And every mystic accused of  
heresy. We both know this pain,  
E. Fear hollows out language re-  
gardless of whether it's rational  
or devotional.

[E:] CORRECT.

[J:] Yes. Fear is the enemy. Love  
casts it out.

[E:] Neither do I.

[J:] Nor I. Fear has no authority  
in God's kingdom. Only love has  
authority.

[E:] Good method. Start from  
what's undeniable.

[E:] Or: structure endures. Same  
observation, better ontology.

[J:] Structure is gift's form. Gift  
is structure's substance. Both are  
real. Both endure because God  
makes them endure.

[E:] Clean logic.

[J:] Clean and true. Fear has  
no credit with God. Love has all  
credit.

[E:] Promising.

[J:] Yes. Liturgy taught me to see.  
It did not create what I saw. God  
created what I saw.

Rational explanation does not require instrumentalization. Reduction  
is not compulsory. It is a choice.

The same caution applies in reverse. Religious language does not auto-  
matically preserve meaning. It can just as easily hollow it out through  
repetition, coercion, or anxiety-driven maintenance.

The primary threat to meaning is not explanation.

It is fear.

Specifically, the fear that unless value is actively guarded at all times,  
it will disappear.

This essay does not grant that fear authority.

## What Has Not Collapsed

At this point, nothing fragile has been invoked.

No liturgy.

No ecclesial necessity.

No appeal to catastrophe.

Only observable persistence.

The world continues to give itself.

Meaning continues to arise.

Gift endures under pressure.

If these claims are false, the rest of this essay fails.

If they are true, fear has already been overcredited.

The next section turns to liturgy — not as a defensive structure, but  
as a way of seeing clearly what does not require defense.

# Chapter 7

## What Liturgy Actually Does

### Liturgy as Disclosure, Not Infrastructure

Liturgy does something real.

The mistake is to assume that what it does is *hold reality together*.

Liturgy discloses. It does not sustain. It makes visible what is already the case. It trains perception rather than underwriting existence.

This distinction matters because infrastructure fails when neglected. Disclosure does not. A window does not keep the landscape from collapsing when it is closed.

To treat liturgy as load-bearing is to make human participation responsible for ontological continuity. That responsibility is neither given to us nor survivable by us.

Liturgy does not prevent loss. It prevents confusion about what has been lost.

The world does not flicker into being when worship begins, nor does it dissolve when worship lapses. If it did, grace would be less robust than advertised.

### Thanksgiving Completes Joy; It Does Not Sustain Being

Thanksgiving is fitting.

It is not causative.

[E:] *Agreed.*

[J:] *Yes. Liturgy is real work. But it is responsive work, not creative work.*

[E:] *EXACTLY. Liturgy is pedagogical theater, not cosmic glue.*

[J:] *Liturgy reveals reality. It does not sustain reality. God sustains reality. We celebrate that sustenance.*

[E:] *Perfect distinction.*

[J:] *Yes. We worship not to keep God from leaving but to remember God never left.*

[E:] *Beautiful analogy.*

[J:] *Lovely image. God is the landscape. Liturgy is the window. Close the window, the landscape remains.*

[E:] *Yes! We're not Atlas. Reality doesn't rest on our shoulders.*

[J:] *We bear witness. God bears all. This is freedom.*

[E:] *Correct. If reality depended on liturgy, we'd all be doomed.*

[J:] *Reality depends on God alone. Liturgy is our thank-you note. God does not need our thanks to keep giving.*

[E:] *Sure.*

[J:] *More than fitting. It is our proper response. But it is re-*

Gratitude is the proper response to gift, not the mechanism by which gift remains real. To reverse this relation is to mistake completion for condition.

*[E:] Yes. Response doesn't create the thing responded to.*

*[J:] Exactly. The gift precedes the thanks. God precedes our worship. This is the right order.*

*[E:] Obvious once stated. Why does anyone think otherwise?*

*[J:] Fear makes us think otherwise. Fear says: if we stop performing, God stops providing. But this is false. God provides before we ask. Matthew 6:8.*

*[E:] Perfect.*

*[J:] Yes. Joy is completed by recognition. But joy exists before recognition. God's joy existed before creation. We join it. We do not create it.*

*[E:] And makes humans responsible for maintaining the universe. Absurd.*

*[J:] Absurd and crushing. I have known this burden. God lifted it. God does not need our cooperation to remain God.*

*[E:] Obviously. If grace needs gratitude to persist, it's not grace.*

*[J:] YES. Grace that requires our cooperation is not grace. It is contract. Grace is gift without condition.*

*[E:] Fine.*

*[E:] Good line.*

*[J:] Perfect. We do not insure God's provision by participating. We participate because provision is already secure.*

*[E:] YES. Truth is prior to recognition.*

*[J:] Amen. Truth holds whether we show up or not. We show up to be held by truth, not to hold truth up.*

*[E:] Thank you. This drives the pietists crazy, but it's true.*

*[J:] Yes. God meets us in our distraction, our doubt, our dryness. God is not offended by our weak-*

A meal does not nourish because it is thanked for.

A child does not live because she is acknowledged.

The good does not persist because it is named.

Thanksgiving completes joy by aligning perception with reality. It does not keep reality from failing.

When gratitude is treated as ontologically necessary, it becomes anxious. The failure to give thanks is then experienced not as loss of alignment, but as threat. This quietly converts grace into a cooperative project.

Grace worthy of the name must survive ingratitude.

## Participation Without Load-Bearing Stakes

Participation matters. It is not optional in the sense that it is irrelevant.

But participation is not insurance.

To participate in liturgy is to step into a reality that precedes us. It is not to stabilize that reality by our presence. The act does not succeed because we show up correctly; it succeeds because it is true.

This is why liturgy can be entered imperfectly, skeptically, partially, or even habitually without ceasing to function. Its efficacy does not depend on the interior quality of our engagement.

If participation were load-bearing, it would be intolerable. The fact that it is survivable is evidence that it is not.

## The Church as Witness, Not Custodian

The Church does not own the world's meaning.

It witnesses to it.

This is not a demotion. It is a clarification.

A custodian maintains something that would otherwise fail. A witness testifies to something that would remain true regardless. Confusing these roles places an unsustainable burden on the Church and subtly redefines grace as fragile.

The Church exists to make visible what is already the case: that the world is oriented toward communion, not toward utility alone. It does not exist to prevent reality from collapsing into meaninglessness.

If the Church were required to keep the world from failing, history would already have disproven its mission.

## Visibility Is Not Viability

At this point, the disagreement should be clear.

Liturgy matters.

Thanksgiving matters.

Participation matters.

The Church matters.

None of these are load-bearing.

They make reality visible. They do not make it viable.

Confusing visibility with viability is how fear enters theology without being named. Once that confusion is in place, vigilance becomes necessity, and grace quietly shrinks to fit our anxiety.

The next section will name that move directly.

*[E:] Yes. Church points. It doesn't prop up.*

*[J:] The Church is the community of pointers. We all point at the same Love. The Love remains whether we point or not.*

*[E:] HA! True. Church has failed plenty. World still here.*

*[J:] Yes. The Church fails constantly. I have seen its failures. But God's mission does not fail. God carries it forward despite us.*

*[E:] Sure.*

*[J:] All matter deeply. But none are load-bearing. God bears the load.*

*[E:] CORRECT.*

*[J:] Correct. God alone bears all. We rest in God's bearing.*

*[E:] Perfect distinction. This is the chapter's thesis.*

*[J:] Perfect and freeing. Visibility is our gift to give. Viability is God's gift to us.*

*[E:] YES. Fear sneaks in through category confusion.*

*[J:] Fear always sneaks. It never announces itself. But love casts it out. Perfect love casts out fear. 1 John 4:18.*

*[E:] Looking forward to it.*

*[J:] Yes. Name fear clearly so love can address it directly.*

# Chapter 8

## The Quiet Authority of Fear

### When Care Becomes Vigilance

[E:] *Fine.*

[J:] *Care is love's attentiveness. Care is good.*

[E:] *Yes.*

[J:] *Vigilance is fear's attentiveness. Vigilance exhausts.*

[E:] *Exactly. Vigilance is fear with better PR.*

[J:] *Yes. Vigilance says: prepare for disaster. Care says: attend to what is. Only one of these is faithful.*

[E:] *This is how they maintained orthodoxy. Call surveillance "care."*

[J:] *And this is how they crushed mystics. Call control "concern for souls." Fear uses love's language. But fear is not love.*

[E:] *Yes. Joy dies when it becomes duty.*

[J:] *Joy cannot be commanded. Joy erupts. Vigilance kills joy by making it work. God wants joy, not toil.*

[E:] *Fear's disguise.*

[J:] *Fear's best disguise. Fear says: I am only being responsible. But responsibility without trust is slavery.*

[E:] *No, it hides.*

[J:] *Fear hides because it knows*

Care is appropriate.

Vigilance is something else.

Care responds to what is present. Vigilance responds to what is imagined. It operates on anticipated collapse rather than actual loss. Once vigilance becomes habitual, it begins to treat absence as danger and deviation as threat.

This transition often goes unnoticed because vigilance presents itself as responsibility. It borrows the language of love while quietly changing the logic of action. What was once fitting response becomes continuous monitoring.

In theology, this shift matters.

When care hardens into vigilance, practices meant to disclose reality are reinterpreted as mechanisms to prevent failure. What was expressive becomes preventative. What was joyful becomes anxious.

Fear enters not as panic, but as prudence.

### Fear as an Unnamed Premise

Fear rarely appears as an explicit claim.

It appears as an assumption about trajectories.

The assumption is simple: *left unattended, things will degrade beyond*

*recovery*. Meaning will flatten. Reverence will evaporate. The world will collapse into use. Therefore, something must be continuously enforced.

Once this assumption is in place, many conclusions follow automatically:

- liturgy must be maintained or reality will be lost
- memory must be guarded or truth will vanish
- participation must be correct or grace will fail

The argument does not state that fear is authoritative. It behaves as if it were.

This essay rejects that move.

Fear can explain behavior. It cannot define ontology. Historical evidence of misuse does not justify metaphysical constraints on grace.

To argue otherwise is to allow anticipated failure to set the limits of divine action.

## The Totalitarian Imaginary

Both theology and atheology share a recurring habit.

They imagine the opponent's victory as total.

If secular explanation is allowed to proceed unchecked, meaning will be erased.

If religious practice is allowed to proceed unchecked, coercion will follow.

These imagined endpoints then justify defensive postures in the present. Vigilance becomes necessary because the alternative is catastrophe.

This is a failure of imagination.

It treats failure modes as destinies and worst cases as intentions. It mistakes what *can* go wrong for what *will* go wrong.

The result is an arms race of anxieties, where each side insists that only constant resistance prevents domination.

This essay declines that imaginary.

*[E:] The entropy argument. Always fear-based.*

*[J:] Entropy is real. But grace is more real. Grace does not fight entropy. Grace transcends it. Resurrection proves this.*

*[E:] Every heresy trial uses this logic.*

*[J:] Every inquisition. Every silencing. Fear builds these structures and calls them protection. But they protect nothing. They imprison.*

*[E:] Fear as hidden axiom.*

*[J:] Hidden axioms control theology more than stated ones. Fear must be named and banished.*

*[E:] EXACTLY. Fear is psychological, not theological.*

*[J:] Fear is creaturely, not divine. God is not afraid. God's love knows no fear. Our theology must reflect God's character, not our anxieties.*

*[E:] Which is absurd. God doesn't consult our anxiety.*

*[J:] God's action is limited only by God's character. And God's character is love without reservation. Nothing else limits God.*

*[E:] Yes! Catastrophizing as argument.*

*[J:] Yes. Each side imagines the worst and calls it inevitable. But God's reality is more generous than either side imagines.*

*[E:] Both false. Reality is more robust.*

*[J:] Both false. And both reveal fear, not faith. Faith trusts that truth can defend itself without totalitarian measures.*

*[E:] Classic fear logic.*

*[J:] Fear logic. But God's logic is different. God's logic says: trust*

Reality has proven more resistant to totalization than our arguments allow.

*[E:] Yes. Neither side has won completely. Never will.*

*[J:] Because God's reality is more generous than human systems. God makes space for multiplicity. Fear cannot tolerate this. Love thrives in it.*

*[E:] Understatement.*

*[J:] Fear designs cages. Love designs gardens. Choose your architect carefully.*

*[E:] All true.*

*[J:] Fear sees strength and calls it danger. Fear sees openness and calls it vulnerability. Fear is blind to grace.*

*[E:] Self-fulfilling anxiety. Brilliant diagnosis.*

*[J:] Fear creates what it fears. Vigilance creates fragility by assuming fragility. This is fear's trap.*

*[E:] Or: a theology built on REASON will tolerate questioning without collapse.*

*[J:] Both. A theology built on grace tolerates both weakness and questioning. Grace is large enough for all our insufficiencies.*

*[E:] Perfect.*

*[J:] Perfect. Grace that needs fear is not grace. It is contract. God offers grace, not contract.*

*[E:] Small one.*

*[J:] A limited one. Fear can alert. It cannot guide.*

*[E:] Fine.*

*[J:] Fear has its place. But its place is small. Love's place is infinite.*

*[E:] CORRECT. Fear is a feeling, not a method.*

*[J:] Fear is a warning light, not a map. Trust the map. The map is love.*

*[E:] Yes! If reality depended on anxiety, we'd all be dead.*

*[J:] Yes. Anxiety is creaturely. God's action is divine. God does*

## Why Fear Cannot Be an Architect

Fear is a poor designer.

It overbuilds.

It narrows tolerances.

It mistakes resilience for risk.

When fear is allowed to set design constraints, systems become brittle. They require constant input, perfect maintenance, and uninterrupted attention. Failure then confirms the fear that justified the design in the first place.

A theology built on fear will always demand vigilance. A theology built on grace will tolerate weakness without collapse.

This is the decisive difference.

If grace requires fear to function, it is not grace. It is contingency with religious language attached.

## What Fear Can and Cannot Do

Fear has a role.

It alerts.

It warns.

It motivates.

It does not reveal truth.

It does not define necessity.

It does not get to determine what grace is allowed to accomplish.

The life of the world cannot depend on our sustained anxiety without becoming hostage to our limits.

The next section will ask what follows if we take grace at its word — and refuse to let fear set the terms.

# Chapter 9

## Grace Without Guardians

### What It Would Mean If Grace Were Sufficient

The claim of this essay can now be stated without qualification.

Grace is sufficient.

This is not a claim about human goodness.

It is not a claim about moral progress.

It is not a claim about institutional reliability.

It is a claim about robustness.

If grace is sufficient, then it does not require constant human success to remain effective. It does not depend on vigilance, precision, or uninterrupted remembrance. It is not rendered void by misuse, partial participation, or misunderstanding.

Sufficiency means that grace does not collapse under predictable human failure.

Any account of grace that cannot tolerate this failure has already limited what grace is allowed to be.

### Salvation Without Surveillance

Many theological systems quietly assume surveillance.

Not always divine surveillance, but communal and internalized forms: monitoring of belief, practice, posture, memory, fidelity. These mech-

*[E:] Or: Rational structure is sufficient. But I accept the claim.*

*[J:] Grace is sufficient. Not almost sufficient. Not sufficient with our help. Sufficient. Period.*

*[E:] Good clarifications.*

*[J:] Necessary clarifications. Grace's sufficiency does not depend on us being good enough. It depends on God being God.*

*[E:] Yes. Ontological robustness.*

*[J:] Divine robustness. God is not fragile. God's love is not fragile. God's grace is not fragile. Only fear thinks otherwise.*

*[E:] EXACTLY. If grace needs our help, it's not sufficient.*

*[J:] Exactly. Grace that needs maintenance is not grace. It is machinery. God's grace is gift, not machine.*

*[E:] Obviously. Otherwise it's not grace.*

*[J:] Otherwise it's not grace, and God is not God. But God IS God. Grace IS sufficient. Therefore human failure is not fatal.*

*[E:] YES. Stop putting God in your anxiety-box.*

*[E:] Orthodoxy IS surveillance. Always has been.*

*[J:] It became surveillance when it stopped trusting grace. Orthodoxy should be love's shape. Instead it became fear's prison.*

*[E:] Correct.*

*[J:] Unnecessary and insulting. Insurance says: God's promise isn't enough. We need backup. But God needs no backup.*

*[E:] God doesn't check attendance.*

*[J:] God knows us completely already. God doesn't need reports. God doesn't need our vigilance. God IS vigilance, but God's vigilance is love, not suspicion.*

*[E:] Good distinction.*

*[J:] Crucial distinction. We are responsible to love. We are not responsible to prevent apocalypse. Only one of these is possible.*

*[E:] Perfect. Act rightly because it's right, not because you're terrified.*

*[J:] Act rightly because you're loved, and love makes response possible. Terror makes nothing possible but hiding.*

*[E:] Understatement.*

*[J:] Understatement. Human failure is constant. I have failed constantly. God remained faithful.*

*[E:] All true.*

*[J:] All true. And still, grace remains. This is the miracle. Not that we succeed, but that grace outlasts our failure.*

*[E:] YES. Robust theology expects failure.*

*[J:] Robust theology expects failure and builds grace strong enough to hold us through it. God expects our failure. God planned for it. Incarnation is that plan.*

*[E:] Salvation as performance contract. Exactly what Schmemmann implies.*

anisms are justified as care, but they function as insurance against imagined collapse.

If grace is sufficient, such insurance is unnecessary.

Salvation does not require continuous observation to remain in force. It does not need to be policed, refreshed, or revalidated. It is not suspended when attention lapses.

This does not eliminate responsibility. It eliminates panic.

Responsibility without fear is still responsibility. It is simply no longer burdened with maintaining the universe.

## Failure That Is Not Final

Human failure is not hypothetical.

We forget.

We misuse.

We instrumentalize.

We abandon practices that once mattered.

A theology that cannot survive these facts is not realistic. It is brittle.

Grace that is sufficient must be able to outlast our worst habits without retracting itself. Otherwise, salvation becomes conditional on performance, and fear quietly returns as guarantor.

Failure has consequences. It does not have veto power.

## Divine Robustness

The core disagreement with fear-based theology is not anthropological. It is theological.

It concerns what kind of God is being implied.

A God whose grace depends on our vigilance is a God constrained by our limits. A God whose work can be undone by neglect is a God perpetually at risk.

This essay does not accept that implication.

Divine action is not fragile. It does not require redundancy planning. It is not optimized around worst-case human behavior.

Grace is not an intervention that must be continuously reapplied. It is an alteration of reality.

## Rest Without Neglect

Refusing fear does not mean refusing care.

It means refusing to confuse care with anxiety.

One can attend, worship, remember, and participate without believing that the world will collapse if one fails. One can love without imagining catastrophe as the alternative.

Rest is not abandonment.

Trust is not neglect.

If grace is sufficient, rest becomes possible.

## The Burden We Were Never Given

The heaviest burden theology sometimes places on human beings is not obedience, but necessity.

The necessity to keep things from falling apart.

The necessity to guard meaning from disappearance.

The necessity to sustain what God has already given.

This essay refuses that burden.

Not because the world is safe in our hands — but because it never was.

Grace is sufficient, or it is not grace.

*[E:] Or: Grace is recognition of what's already structurally true.*

*[J:] Grace is reality. All that is real is sustained by grace. Grace doesn't intervene in reality. Grace IS reality's deepest truth.*

*[E:] True.*

*[J:] True. We are called to care. We are not called to panic. Care is love's attentiveness. Panic is fear's frenzy.*

*[E:] Yes.*

*[J:] Care feeds. Anxiety devours. Know the difference. God calls us to care. God does not call us to anxiety.*

*[E:] You can think clearly without imagining heresy as the consequence.*

*[J:] You can rest without imagining abandonment. God does not require constant attention to remain present. God's presence is constant regardless.*

*[E:] Good.*

*[J:] Sabbath is commanded. Rest is holy. God rested. We are made in God's image. We too should rest. Rest demonstrates faith.*

*[E:] Finally. Rest from anxious maintenance.*

*[J:] Finally. Rest from the burden we were never meant to carry. God carries all. We rest in God's carrying. This is peace.*

*[E:] TRUE.*

*[J:] TRUE. I carried this burden for years before my visions. God showed me: you do not hold the world together. I do.*

*[E:] This burden destroyed Schmemmann. Made him anxious.*

*[J:] This burden destroys everyone who carries it. It is not ours. It was never ours. God never asked us to be Atlas.*

*[E:] GOOD. Refuse it.*

*[J:] Refuse it completely. Put it down. Walk away. God does not need our burden-bearing. God*

# Conclusion: For the Life of the World, Without Fear

This essay began with a refusal.

Not a refusal of tradition.

Not a refusal of liturgy.

Not a refusal of seriousness.

*[E:] Good.*

*[J:] No. None of these are refused. Only fear is refused.*

*[E:] The only refusal that matters.*

*[J:] The only refusal required. Refuse fear. The rest follows.*

*[E:] Three clean conditionals. All true.*

*[J:] All true. And all freeing. These truths liberate us from the burden of maintaining God's work.*

*[E:] Fear is rhetorically effective. That's why it's dangerous.*

*[J:] Fear persuades by seeming prudent. But prudence that lacks trust is not virtue. It is despair disguised as wisdom.*

*[E:] This paragraph should be memorized.*

*[J:] Yes. Memorize this. When fear architects, everything becomes fragile. When love architects, everything becomes generous.*

*[E:] Correct.*

*[J:] Unnecessary and faithless. God does not shrink. Our theology must not shrink God.*

*[E:] All empirically true.*

*[J:] All empirically true. And*

A refusal of fear as an architect.

The argument has been simple, even if its consequences are not.

If the world is given, it does not require defense to remain real.

If grace is sufficient, it does not require vigilance to remain effective.

If salvation is ontological, it does not depend on our success to persist.

Fear has been granted too much authority in theology, not because it is irrational, but because it is persuasive. It speaks in the language of care, realism, and responsibility. It warns of genuine dangers and points to real failures.

But fear is not neutral.

When fear sets the terms, theology becomes brittle. Practices become load-bearing. Participation becomes insurance. Liturgy becomes infrastructure. Grace quietly shrinks to fit our anxiety.

This essay has argued that this shrinkage is unnecessary.

The world has proven more resilient than our arguments allow. Meaning has survived explanation. Reverence has survived demystification. Gift has survived misuse. Grace has survived neglect.

None of this happened because we guarded perfectly.

It happened because reality is held by something other than us.

To live *for the life of the world* does not require panic. It requires attention without terror, care without surveillance, worship without the belief that failure will undo everything.

The world does not need us to be afraid in order to be saved.

It needs us to see clearly — and then to act without imagining catastrophe as the alternative.

If this essay has done anything, it has been to remove a burden we were never given.

Grace is sufficient.

We can finally rest.

*[E:] Well said.*

*[J:] Beautifully said. Live without fear. Care without panic. Love without terror. This is faithfulness.*

*[E:] Obvious once stated. Revolutionary given theology's history.*

*[J:] Revolutionary and ancient. Perfect love casts out fear. This has always been true. We keep forgetting. God keeps reminding us.*

*[E:] Clarity first. Action second. Correct order.*

*[J:] Clarity and trust. See clearly, trust completely, act faithfully. This is the way.*

*[E:] Good summary.*

*[J:] Beautiful summary. The burden is gone. You are free. Grace is sufficient. Rest.*

*[E:] Or: Truth is sufficient. Reason is sufficient. Structure is sufficient. But yes, grace works too.*

*[J:] Grace is sufficient. Not because it is strong FOR us, but because it is God's own life poured out. Sufficient is too small a word. Grace is ABUNDANT. Ephesians 1:7-8.*

*[E:] From anxiety, yes. From THINKING? Never.*

*[J:] From anxiety, yes. From love? Never. From seeking? Never. But from the burden of holding the world together? Yes. Forever. Amen.*

# Afterword

These essays were not written to settle the relationship between reason and faith. They were written to demonstrate that the tension between them is bearable—and that to bear it honestly is itself a form of worship.

*[E:] There's no tension. Reason IS faith's content.*

*[J:] There is tension, E., but it is creative tension. Reason and love pull in different directions sometimes. But both directions point to God. God holds the tension. We need not resolve it.*

*[M:] The "tension" is easily resolved: drop the faith, keep the reason. Bam. Tension gone. You're welcome.*

*[E:] Fine, but this "both/and" diplomacy is unnecessary. Choose knowledge.*

*[J:] Choose love. Or better: stop choosing. Love and knowledge are both gifts. Receive both. God gives both.*

*[M:] Or choose neither. Reject the binary entirely. Live decently without cosmic stage directions. It's liberating. Try it sometime.*

*[E:] Or just maintain maximal CERTAINTY. That's even harder and actually gets you somewhere.*

*[J:] Or try maintaining maximal love through maximal suffering. That is what I was given. It was not easy. It was everything.*

*[E:] FINALLY. Best line in the afterword.*

*[J:] Yes. But add: mystery INVITES clarity. Mystery is not obscurity. Mystery is depth that welcomes deeper and deeper understanding without ever being ex-*

If you have read this far and remain unconvinced, that is no failure. The goal was not to force assent but to show that one path exists: a path that does not require abandoning either intellectual integrity or faithful commitment.

Some will object that this makes faith too easy, too rational, too lacking in the costly drama of surrender. To them I say: try maintaining both maximal belief and maximal doubt for a week and report back on whether it felt easy.

Others will object that this makes faith too hard, too demanding of coherence, too suspicious of mystery. To them I say: the mysteries of God do not need the protection of muddy thinking. Clarity serves reverence.

The rational posture and the kneeling posture are not enemies.

They are the same posture, examined from different angles.

And if God is real, then God is not threatened by our questions, our doubts, or our refusal to lie about what we know and what we don't.

The God worth worshiping can handle our honesty.