**PREACHING DOUBT:**

**TOWARD A METAMODERN HOMILETIC IN THE AFTERMATH OF DECONSTRUCTION**

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Earlier this year, two high-profile evangelical leaders publicly broke up with Christianity. Marty Sampson (Hillsong musician) and Josh Harris (author of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and former sexual purity advocate) both announced that Christianity is no longer for them. Harris, who days earlier posted a picture of himself on Instagram with his wife announcing their separation, followed with another surprising post: “I have undergone a massive shift in regard to my faith in Jesus,” Harris wrote. “The popular phrase for this is ‘deconstruction,’ the biblical phrase is ‘falling away.’ By all the measurements that I have for defining a Christian, I am not a Christian.” Harris apologized to the LGBTQ+ community for his former views and asked for forgiveness for his “writing and speaking” that “contributed to a culture of exclusion and bigotry.” While grateful for his Christian friends’ prayers, he said, “I can’t join in your mourning. I don’t view this moment negatively. I feel very much alive, and awake, and surprisingly hopeful.”[[1]](#footnote-1)Sampson, also in an Instagram post that has since been removed, told his followers it was “time for some real talk,” and went on to disclose, “I’m genuinely losing my faith…and it doesn’t bother me…I am so happy now, so at peace with the world.” He noted the number of preachers that ‘fall,’ the scarcity of miracles, biblical contradictions, the idea that a loving God could send people to “a place” for not believing, the fact that science keeps “piercing the truth of every religion,” and yet, he says, “no one talks about it.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Given the reactions, it is apparent that the double rejection stung the Christian community. In an interview, noted evangelical Franklin Graham responded, saying he does not see them as leaders, and doubted they had “a very strong faith, or if they even had a faith at all to begin with.” Graham continued, “for whatever reason they have decided they’re going to turn their back on God and God’s standards. And I feel sorry for them. They’re in a very dangerous place…out from under God’s protection.” Graham stated he believes the Bible is the word of God, and though he does not understand all of the Bible, he does “believe every word of the Bible.” Graham suggested that the only reason they renounced their faith publicly was to gain publicity. “Otherwise, why [didn’t] they just leave their faith and just be quiet about it? But no, they had to make a big thing about it, trying to get others to follow them, to do the same. And I’d just say, ‘shame on them,’ and ‘you’ll stand before God one day and give an account to Him.’”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Forums buzz with opinions of other Christians. Some are gracious, though the majority have overtones of condescension, anger, dismissal, sadness, betrayal, and bewilderment. On the whole, the responses contain a semantic theme communicated directly and indirectly by the Christian church throughout its history: doubt is unacceptable. Rejoinders categorizing Sampson and Harris as either being rebellious turncoats *or* as having weak faith to begin with, impart a clear message: healthy faith and legitimate doubt are mutually exclusive and irreconcilable.

Harris and Sampson are high profile defectors garnering attention commensurate to their influential status; however, as Barna Group, Pew Research Center, and other entities have indicated, for the past few decades, the church has witnessed a mass exodus of less conspicuous Harrises and Sampsons. The number of those, particularly young people, who reject their faith (or the church’s version of faith) continues to increase, leading Barna Group to label them the “de-churched”—those who “have been churched in the past but are currently on hiatus,” and who represent “the fastest growing segment, presently one-third of the population.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Many of those “opting out of church” are Millennials who don’t find religion or its practices to be important for their lives and who question their belief in God.[[5]](#footnote-5) On their way out the door, more than one third of Millennials say the main factors in their decision are “the church’s irrelevance, hypocrisy, and the moral failure of its leaders.”[[6]](#footnote-6) A significant number of those departing believes that “legitimate doubt is prohibited” in the church.[[7]](#footnote-7) Following closely behind the Millennials is Generation Z—a complex generation that embodies fluidity in ethnicity and culture, gender and sexuality, and, unsurprisingly, religion and spirituality. While nearly 8 out of 10 Gen Zers (though with widely varying levels of certainty) say they believe in God, the Barna Group reports “the percentage of teens who identify as [atheist] is double that of the general population (13% vs. 6% of all adults).”[[8]](#footnote-8) Of those who do believe in God, 59% say that church is not personally relevant to them, and 61% say they can find God elsewhere.

For James F. White and others who use generational research data to figure out how to bring young people back to church, being “relevant” seems to mean creating an artificial church habitat, using contemporary music styles, talking to young people, wearing trendy clothes, or offering Instagram-friendly Bibles.[[9]](#footnote-9) However, for many young people, being “relevant” means being awake to the human situation, being civically engaged in dealing with issues such as unemployment and terrorism,[[10]](#footnote-10) working toward solutions for racial justice and immigration,[[11]](#footnote-11) and thinking about issues of gender—including being “sensitive to ways that the pressure for men to be traditionally masculine can lead to negative social impacts.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

When Gen Zers see churches not only *not* working to promote equality, for example, but also being part of the problem by reinforcing compulsory gender roles and expressions, or using self-deceptive semantics such as, “we *accept* LGBTQ, we just don’t *affirm* LGBTQ” to dodge accusations of intolerance or homophobia, as though they have found a linguistic loophole that will make a discernable difference to the way LGBTQ+ persons feel in their churches, then no amount of “relevant” music or technology is going to be enough to convince Gen Zers to attach their identity to those churches. Because of technology and instant/constant access to information, “Gen Z are bombarded with messages and… can quickly detect whether or not something is relevant to them.”[[13]](#footnote-13) So much for strategizing with generational research to lure Generation Z back into the fold. Jana Riess, in her blog, “Flunking Sainthood,” points out that Generation Z “can sniff out inequality and white male privilege like a basset hound…why, then, would…Gen Zers fall in line with churches that so obviously disregard gender equality?”[[14]](#footnote-14) Demographer William Frey, from the Brookings Institution, says, “They kind of look at the rest of us older people as something to push aside,” Frey says. “Not in a bombastic way, but basically just sort of shrug their shoulders and say, ‘Let’s move on from all this.’”[[15]](#footnote-15)

While many saints assume church outsiders haven’t “found” Jesus, “More than two-thirds of skeptics have attended Christian churches in the past—most for an extended period of time.”[[16]](#footnote-16) As one blogger says, “The church may want to stop focusing on those elusive and extremely sensitive ‘seekers’ for a while, because now, even believers are starting to leave the church.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

Given the large-scale evacuation of young adults and others from the church, it is reasonable to assume that in addition to the de-churched “dones” on the outside, there are also “almost dones” on the inside—people who have not left, but whose faith is withering on the vine. According to research at the University of Colorado, “On any given Sunday, there are 7 million people sitting in the pews who report that they are on their way out the door, never to return.” Church attendees and even leaders such as Harris and Sampson are essentially experiencing the death of God —or at least the death of religious conceptions of God—being inwardly confronted by complexities and challenges that increasingly swamp what remains of their faith, and the only conversations they can honestly and safely have about doubt are outside the church.

The blame for the emergence of religious confusion and doubt is typically affixed to postmodernism and its deconstructive tendencies—an accusation that may be well founded. But cultural theorists have been writing an obituary for postmodernism for years (noting the morphological changes that push beyond the characteristics of the postmodern trend) and are eagerly scanning the horizon for a new trend to materialize as the next identifiable cultural era.

The cultural progression that seems to be emerging as the offspring of postmodernism is a somewhat protean trend many call “metamodernism,” a self-descriptive term whose prefix *meta* “derives from Plato’s *metaxis*, describing an oscillation and simultaneity between and beyond diametrically opposed poles.”[[18]](#footnote-18) This movement “between and beyond” and transcending opposing poles is recognizable in current culture: in the fluidity of musical genres, in which artists collaborate and mix elements to intentionally create genre-defying compositions; hybridized “spatial realities” as seen in images of [metamodern architecture](https://www.google.com/search?rls=en&q=metamodern+architecture&tbm=isch&source=univ&client=safari&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjG89ax_7HhAhURRa0KHctADjAQsAR6BAgJEAE&biw=1234&bih=753); genre-bending novels by authors such as Neil Gaiman and David Foster Wallace; “gender-fluid and pansexual” characters such as Loki in Marvel’s new young adult novels;[[19]](#footnote-19) and [poetry](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/on-american-metamodernism_b_4743903), [art](https://buff.ly/2ME4zkt?fbclid=IwAR3MWyEnq0HFfYyCqJCGZWmNNgoU6w2bAtzvayVnjJG2YDFcgGF7YVpNhoc), and cynical yet warm and human “mockumentaries” and TV shows such as “Modern Family” and “Community.” Metamodernism appears to evince an ironic and speculative post-postmodern aesthetic that is “at once coherent and preposterous, earnest and somewhat self-defeating, yet ultimately hopeful and optimistic.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

The metamodern aesthetic walks in the tension of contradictions and incongruities, self-consciously and intentionally transcending and suspending itself between binaries. This is also the paradigm in which religious hybridity has flourished, where individuals engage in a “build your own” religion/spirituality that adopts varied components from the religious and ideological marketplace that may or may not contradict one another. In the context of the metamodern cultural moment, a healthy faith and a legitimate doubt can and do co-exist.

In the world of Franklin Graham-style “faith,” many preachers preach from what they believe is a secure position of given premises (i.e. metaphysics, Creation/God metanarratives, scripture as ultimate authority*,* etc.), believing pulpit time is for propositional preaching and formation of congregation members whose attendance is evidence of acquiescence. Exegetical leaps over chasms of doubt are acceptable, weekly exhortative booster shots for anemic faith are sufficient, and preachers can be content with “the simple juxtaposition of a reductive hermeneutics.”[[21]](#footnote-21) However, if a percentage of church members are passing through a “doubt journey” or “atheistic fire,”[[22]](#footnote-22) perhaps homileticians should accept the metamodern challenge and accompany them in the flames with an intra-sermonic hermeneutic of suspicion that actually *affirms* doubt as a necessary component of faith.

In his book, *Otherwise Preaching*, John McClure introduces a “deconstruction of preaching” that exits “through the deconstructions of the four overlapping authorities that have bequeathed preaching to us: the authority of the Bible, the authority of tradition, the authority of experience, and the authority of reason.” The purpose of this “exiting” is to create “redemptive space within discourse.” Ideas, McClure says, “can be deconstructed, placed under erasure, and then reclaimed…as new ground in which to grow ideas that are other-wise.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Maybe if we applied the concepts of deconstruction and the possibilities of reconstruction to sermonic content, leaning in to metamodern skepticism and tension while also claiming metamodernity’s optimism and reconstructive intent, we could use a hermeneutic of suspicion to create an oscillating, “redemptive space” for both doubt *and* faith that is “otherwise” to the metamodern conversation. Feasibly, we would find ourselves on an “open horizon” with potential for “a postreligious faith for a postreligious age.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

Perhaps unwittingly anticipating metamodernity in his essay “Religion, Atheism, and Faith,” Paul Ricoeur argues in favor of atheism as a means by which we reach a better-situated faith.[[25]](#footnote-25) Atheism, in this context, “is not limited in meaning to the mere negation and destruction of religion.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Rather, he sees it as both a “division” and a “link” between religion and faith, and an important critique that unmasks religious culture and identifies the representations of culture that are symptomatic of underlying “fear and desire.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Atheism, this way, is a gift that helps untangle faith from the “product[s] and projection[s] of our own weakness.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

Prominent theologians, Christian philosophers, and ministers throughout Christian history have admitted to experiencing crippling doubt and claimed it strengthened their faith. Some, such as Paul Tillich, view doubt as a necessary component of faith.[[29]](#footnote-29) Similar to Ricoeur, Derrida links atheism and faith: “I think we may have some doubts about the distinction between atheism and belief in God. If belief in God is not also a culture of atheism, if it does not go through a number of atheistic steps, one does not believe in God.”[[30]](#footnote-30) He goes on to say, “In order to be authentic… belief in God must be exposed to absolute doubt.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

Even with historical precedence for the importance of doubt, homileticians do not typically address profound doubt from the pulpit. Rather, it seems the preacher’s role is to eschew and excise doubt, to momentarily acknowledge doubt as a superficial speed bump on the way to Hebrews 11. Doubting and critiquing faith, then, are dirty things we do by ourselves when no one else is watching. But should these “atheistic steps,” as Derrida calls them, be a solitary journey, or should doubt be liberated and recognized from the pulpit for its value to faith?[[32]](#footnote-32) Would doubters stick around for the conversation instead of renouncing faith?

Ricoeur’s primary concern in his discourse on atheism and faith is not homiletics.[[33]](#footnote-33) He disqualifies himself from homiletical responsibility, saying “the philosopher is not a preacher.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Ricoeur *does* provide subtle critiques for preachers, however. One of the reasons “the philosopher is not this prophetic preacher” is “the philosopher, as a responsible thinker, remains suspended between atheism and faith. For he cannot content himself with the simple juxtaposition of a reductive hermeneutics.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Ricoeur imagines how preachers might attempt to use his ideas, but as a philosopher, not a preacher, “his task is not to reconcile, within a feeble eclecticism, the hermeneutics that destroys the idols of the past and the hermeneutics that restores the kerygma.” He says, “To think is to dig deeper until one reaches the level of questioning that makes possible a mediation between religion and faith by means of atheism.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Ricoeur says preachers may be tempted to leap over “this last stage of our itinerary” and go directly to “faith.”[[37]](#footnote-37) He dryly adds, “Only a preacher with the freedom of Nietzche’s Zarathustra would be able to make such a radical return to the origins of Jewish and Christian faith, and at the same time, make of this return an event which speaks to our own time.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

Perhaps Ricoeur’s critiques of “reductive hermeneutics” and “feeble eclecticism” in preaching are well-aimed. There is always the temptation for preachers to create faith gimmicks, to fabricate flimsy questions for convenient homiletical conquests, to create atheistic straw men that are easily destroyed in a triumphalist 30-minute homily, offering “proof texts” as apologetic ammunition (though for metamodernism proof texts are the rhetorical equivalent of shooting blanks), or as Ricoeur says, to proffer “a clever and hypocritical method of taking back with one hand what one was forced to relinquish with the other.”[[39]](#footnote-39) However, a preacher who wants to preach the *depths* of faith must be willing to walk through the valley of the shadow of doubt alongside her congregation.

To strengthen faith, many preachers have (perhaps unknowingly) employed an early homiletic version of William J. McGuire’s inoculation theory—a communication theory that suggests that small attacks on belief strengthen its defenses with “immunizing efficacy.”[[40]](#footnote-40) John Broadus, for example, whose work influenced generations of preachers, noted there are believers “whose religious affections and activity might be encouraged by convincing and impressive proofs that these things are so. Even in cases in which reasoning seems superfluous,” he says, “it may be greatly useful, since its object is not so much to prove what is not yet believed as to fill the mind with the evidence.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Research indeed reveals evidence “that persuasive message recipients become resistant to attitudinal attacks in the same way that bodies become immunized from viral attacks.” [[42]](#footnote-42) However, the accomplishment of a sermonic “vaccine” is not so much a strengthened faith as it is a more protected naïve faith. The motive for introducing a metamodern deconstruction/reconstruction to sermons is not to vaccinate faith against attack. Rather, it is to *alter the ontology of the faith altogether*, so it is not the same naïve faith it was before.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Some preachers, concerned about listeners becoming trapped in disillusionment, hesitate to bring doubt into the pulpit, fearful they would be releasing naïve faith into wide-open spaces of suspicion where it may or may not survive. However, this kind of preaching does not abandon listeners in a deconstruction zone. Ricoeur, in proto-metamodern style, follows his hermeneutics of suspicion with a hermeneutic of reaffirmation, accepting only the gifts from atheism that purify faith. In a way, metamodernism, with its wary skepticism, optimism, and desire for reconstruction, offers promise of a post-critique faith that is aware of the ironies, incongruities, and contradictions, and seeks a redemptive space where those discordant questions are invited into the worship of a dialetheistic[[44]](#footnote-44) and queer God,[[45]](#footnote-45) who themself exists in a multiplicity of divine paradoxes, tensions, and possibilities.

The biggest challenge for metamodern-minded preachers may not be the dones or the “almost dones” in the pews—it may be the believers whose buoyant belief systems keep them bobbing in the shallow end of religion, removed from the depths of doubt. While believers will claim to have faith, what they actually have is belief. This is more than a simple semantic distinction. Faith requires doubt that accepts risk and refuses certainty.[[46]](#footnote-46) Faith wrestles with cognitive dissonance and engages not in belief, but in an intentional suspension of disbelief.[[47]](#footnote-47) Belief, on the other hand, as James Carse suggests, “marks the line where our thinking stops, or, perhaps better, the place where we confine our thinking to a carefully delineated region.”[[48]](#footnote-48)

Confined, hermetic thinking sequesters believers from doubt and outside “others”—and also, perhaps, from a deeper faith. Isolated thinking empowers a self-satisfied sense of being bearers of “*the* truth,” energizing the hubris of colonizing mission, rendering itself unsusceptible to the inconveniences of social and theological humility and self-reflexivity. It is oblivious to the critique mirrored back to it by generations of “apostatized” thinkers and doubters—a critique that questions the church’s theology and traditions regarding rigid male/female binaries and accompanying hierarchical gender roles, abuses of power, shameless devotion to a white male/masculine God, and prejudicial practices designed to exclude a messy and beautiful spectrum of humanity that does not conform to the western ideal “Christian” social construction.

How, then, does a metamodern homiletic go about the task of affirming (or even introducing) doubt and purging Christianity of its “life-denying components” when its bastions are fortified by an army of battle-ready believers content with the “truth” they already have? When the church is willing to make shallow cosmetic changes in order to create the artificial environment of worship it thinks young people want, but is not willing to allow rhizomatic change that would actually be meaningful to a younger generation? When the church desires to form others, but is averse to the possibility of being formed, and fiercely guards its comatose theology against awakening into a living, ambulatory—and therefore unmanageable—thing?

The foundation of metamodern preaching, it could be argued, is the disruption of the divine “normative,” the breaking of the invisible mirror onto which our human conceptions of God are projected, the smashing of the ideological casts we formed according to our likeness and into which we pour our molten preferences for a God worthy of our worship. Our conceptions of God are ciphers by which we interpret humanity—and vice-versa—which may explain why Christianity has been comfortable for so long with racial inequities, gendered hierarchies, ecological degradation, and the exclusion of non-normative “others,” which, as it happens, are the same key issues over which young people are leaving the church. Megan DeFranza points out Calvin, among others, understood that “theological anthropology and theology proper are mutually conditioning.” In other words, “How we conceive of God affects how we conceive of the human and how we interpret the image of God. Likewise, how we conceive of humans affects how we conceive of the image of God and also impacts our understanding of God.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

While we have secular and religious cultural depictions of the divine, theologically speaking, the Bible does not reveal much about the person and image of God, reminding us we “know in part” (1 Cor 13:12)—which means when it comes to the ontology and physicality of God, there are gaps in our perception. The human brain, according to neuroscientists, is not satisfied with gaps. Research indicates when there is an interruption in sight or sound in its environment, the brain’s visual and auditory systems supply missing information by filling in gaps. Scientists say it is a matter of efficiency—most of what we see is incomplete, so the brain furnishes the missing pieces for itself. If it didn’t, then “every time you looked at an object from a slightly different view, it would be a different object that would be very confusing and difficult to cope with.” [[50]](#footnote-50) Filling in visual gaps helps the brain understand the world around it. Human ears do the same thing when in conversation or listening to music, for example. When irrelevant sounds in the environment obscure what we are trying to listen to, the brain creates an “auditory continuity illusion” that restores “sounds of interest even when they are partially masked.” [[51]](#footnote-51)

Whether through sight or sound, the human brain continually constructs its circumambient world, using imagination to create a continuity illusion, and what it constructs becomes its truth. This holds potential for understanding how and why people understand God in particular ways. If our minds fill visual or auditory perceptual gaps, this “deputizing” of the imagination may also happen with other perception “gaps”—such as supplying phenomenological evidence to support religious experience, or filling in the missing pieces of an aggregate picture of God. Do our brains construct an illusory God that then becomes our “truth”? Further, if we believe we are created in God’s image, what *social* consequences derive from believing in the image of a God whose mystery has been imaginatively trespassed, whose *via negativa* has become *via imaginatio*? If God is imagined male, how does that impact perceptions of what it is to be female, trans, or intersex? If God is imagined white, how does that impact perceptions of what it is to be a person of color? If God is heterosexual, (i.e., the “bridegroom”) how does that impact perceptions of what it is to be a non-hetero person? If our imaginations supply auxiliary information to fill out our understanding of the divine, then it is also our imagination that figures deeply into our understanding of humanity. Our mental construction of the *imago dei* determines what in humanity “fits” with the image of God and what does not.

While it may be tempting to criticize the “imagining” of God, the fact is we do not have enough information about the God who *is* in order to conjure a complete image, and it is natural for people to “fill in the gaps.” It is not the *imagining* that is necessarily the issue; rather, it is *what* we imagine—what we plug those theological holes *with*—that we must allow our homiletic to interrogate. What we *imagine* of God is open for inquisition, because it is not the absolute, unmitigated given revelation of Godself. It is human-supplied content, coming from our culture of religion, our subconscious or pre-conscious brain soup, our values, our preferences, our desires, our fears, which maintains our illusion of continuity.

Some of the supplied continuity is a projection of self. Jean-Luc Marion compared “idolatrous” divine experiences to “an invisible mirror” in which people only see projections, forgetting “that the God they worship is only a God made after their own likeness.”[[52]](#footnote-52) Durkheim, also, believed that humans create God in their own image, a philosophy called “projection theory, in which individuals view God as they view themselves.”[[53]](#footnote-53) The underlying purpose for maintaining “images of God that confirm their self-views,” Benson and Spika explain, is “in order to avoid cognitive dissonance. In this way, both projective and attributional theories are perpetuated by similar self-affirming psychological mechanisms.”[[54]](#footnote-54)

Ironically, we “conceive of God in ‘our image,’ in idealized human terms,” contends Wesley Wildman, and “we are instructed then to imitate God.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Our idealized self-image of the divine becomes authoritative as we hold ourselves accountable for imitating sacralized projections of ourselves. It is no wonder deconstruction of one’s picture of God can be painful; in some measure, our deconstruction of God is also the deconstruction of ourselves.

In addition to being self-projections, these imaginative constructions “are also conditioned by the prodigiously diverse contexts in which they are first created and then received and transformed,” says Wildman. He imagines what would have happened if the idea of a Black God instead of a European God had been the prevailing image in the early colonies in America, and if “African slavery in America would have been impossible to rationalize the way it was.”[[56]](#footnote-56) We can minimize “anthropomorphic defects” in our divine imaginings by paying attention not only to “models” we create, but also to “the purposes served in the making of them.”[[57]](#footnote-57) Who benefits from the God we’ve imagined? Who is excluded, or damned, or less than? And which conceptions perpetuate the “life-denying” components of Christianity that need to be revoked?

Due to limits of imagination, God is necessarily “reduced” to a size befitting our cognitive capacities. However, God *Godself* is not restricted “to that which human beings can know, represent, or experience of God…the mode of God’s epiphany should be unconditional and thus not restricted to the limits set forward by any mode of (human) knowledge whatsoever.”[[58]](#footnote-58) Instead of reading biblical descriptions of God as *hints* of God’s multi-dimensional eternality, many people read them instead as *parameters* around God’s being.

Wildman suggests a kind of “apophaticism” in thinking about our ultimacy model, our picture of God, which “is radically permissive, promoting precision and play, and inspiring vigorous conceptual wrangling until the very last and best of our concepts fracture into shards at our clay feet.”[[59]](#footnote-59) For many people—including preachers—the prospect is a frightening exercise in “unbridled fantasy mated with unconstrained relativism.”[[60]](#footnote-60) Compared with our unbridled tendency to create God in our *own* image, however, perhaps we could use a little bit of “unconstrained relativism” in exploring God outside the limits of our conditioned imagination.

When unshielded by denial, people often recognize that God, or their conception of God, is inadequate. “While their experience of life has grown in a score of directions, and their mental horizons have been expanded to the point of bewilderment by world events and by scientific discoveries, their ideas of God have remained largely static,” J. B. Phillips says. [[61]](#footnote-61) The God we attached to felt boards in Sunday school and prayed to at bedtime with eyes squeezed and little fingers folded is not the God an adult can worship, “unless he is prepared to deny his own experience of life. If, by a great effort of will, he does do this,” Phillips says, “he will always be secretly afraid lest some new truth may expose the juvenility of his faith…it will always be by such an effort that he either worships or serves a God who is really too small to command his adult loyalty and cooperation.”[[62]](#footnote-62) It may be worth considering that perhaps new generations don’t want to leave *God*—maybe they are seeking a more expansive God they can’t find in church, and the only alternative is to leave that God behind along with the church of their childhood.

The metamodern homiletic exposes the juvenility of that faith, revealing the inadequacies of a constructed God, exposing us to the noise of clashing metaphors, until idolatrous divine conceptions crumble. What happens when the too-small, one-dimensional idol we have imagined as a stand-in for the infinite God falls off of its pedestal, dethroned and deconstructed, finally disappearing in the implosion of its own inadequacy? For some, that is the end of God; they lose the will to faith, succumbing to the disillusionment of pulling back the curtain to find what they hoped in and prayed to is not what they thought, bitterly unwilling to expose themselves to the vulnerability of seeking beyond the tomb, beyond what they can control or understand.

Richard Kearney explores this a/theistic liminality, asking, “What comes after God? What follows in the wake of our letting go of God? What emerges out of that night of not-knowing, that moment of abandoning and abandonment? Especially for those who—after ridding themselves of ‘God’—still seek God?”[[63]](#footnote-63) He proposes a “third way,” a path “between atheism and theism: those polar opposites of certainty that have maimed so many minds and souls in our history.” Kearney calls this third way, “anatheism,” by which he means “God after God.” Anatheism, Kearney says, is an “idiom for receiving back what we’ve given up as if we were encountering it for the first time.”[[64]](#footnote-64) What we receive is not simply a re-do of our previous experience; rather, it is the experience of opening up to the future with a “holy insecurity,” a truth-seeking “not knowing” that prepares us to receive what we were too full to receive prior to this death of God.[[65]](#footnote-65) This is the place beyond deconstruction to which metamodern homileticians want to lead congregations, where we enter “into a clearer understanding of the fact that what is at issue with the death of God is not God but our understanding of God.”[[66]](#footnote-66)

Given the immense potency of the pulpit for the deconstruction and reconstruction of a shared worldview between pastor and congregation, the task takes on another dimension. The preacher must be an assassin, methodically eliminating the puny gods we have imagined and worshiped in hopes that eventually, the believers can join the doubters in seeking God after God.

This metamodern moment offers an unprecedented theological opportunity to be inspired by a culture and a generation that sees itself as fluid, and that could help us see God and God’s people as fluid, as well. To accept doubt as part of faith. To be open to possibilities that break traditional norms. For some churches, it is a welcome progression. For others, held captive by traditional social and religious structures, the response is fear, uncertainty, defensiveness. It will take a special homiletic to speak a bigger God into those contexts—a metamodern homiletic that discerningly causes the kind of trouble that will open up new spaces for conversation and understanding, and will turn the hearts of people toward God and each…“other.”

1. https://www.instagram.com/p/B0ZBrNLH2sl/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Leah MarieAnn Klett, “Hillsong Writer: ‘I’m Genuinely Losing My Faith,’” accessed August 18, 2019, https://www.christianpost.com/news/hillsong-writer-reveals-hes-no-longer-a-christian-im-genuinely-losing-my-faith.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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32. Ricoeur demonstrates in his essay that the critique goes both ways—we also challenge the mask behind which accusers make their accusations. He called out Nietzche’s “accusation of accusation” that “falls short of a pure affirmation of life.” He also determined that nothing is “finally decided” except those certain points of atheistic accusation that find their mark in religious cultural representations and unmask false projections. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 442. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
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