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Faith Today

'I just don't know what to believe anymore'

By Father Edward K. Braxton
NC News Service

"Well, Father, I guess I am still a Catholic, sort of. But I really don't believe in God anymore," the student said.

I have heard that seemingly contradictory statement many times in universities. It is a dramatic reminder that atheism is still a real possibility. It may take the form either of philosophical or practical atheism.

Some people relate scientific and technological developments to atheism's existence. Others cite the influence of philosophical, sociological and political thinkers who interpret religious belief in a negative light.

The Catholic student reading Marx, Nietzsche and Freud and not also reading St. Thomas Aquinas, Cardinal John Newman, Father Karl Rahner or the documents of Vatican Council II, might well conclude that religion is based on magic and superstition; that belief is the result of fear and dread.

Today's students are likely to ask:

—Is it still reasonable to believe there is such a reality as God in the traditional understanding of that word?

—Even if the universe does have an ultimate power behind it that we may call God, who can say that Christ uniquely reveals this reality?

—If Jesus is admitted, did he intend to establish what we know as the church?

With such questions, students may eventually undergo a shift in their understanding of religion. For example, they may embrace what some call "relativism," regarding all religions as more or less equal.

Or they may even go on a pilgrimage into another religious tradition, declaring that faith is a matter of historical circumstances and personal choices.

Bouts with relativism or atheism are part and parcel of the

life of the mind that is so much present in university life. This is a time when students probe, investigate, question, theorize, doubt, reject and probe anew.

But atheism is not essentially an abstract theory. In the end, human experience plays a big role in leading a person to believe in God or to reject belief.

Arguments are not enough. Believers cannot easily persuade unbelievers to share their faith. And unbelievers cannot easily persuade believers to adopt their view.

The experience of evil is one of the main factors leading a person to believe that there is no God. When people see innocent youths who are striving to lead a decent life suddenly stricken by terminal cancer and dying in a hospital room, while others who are unjust die at home in their own beds after a long full life, they ask: Why? How?

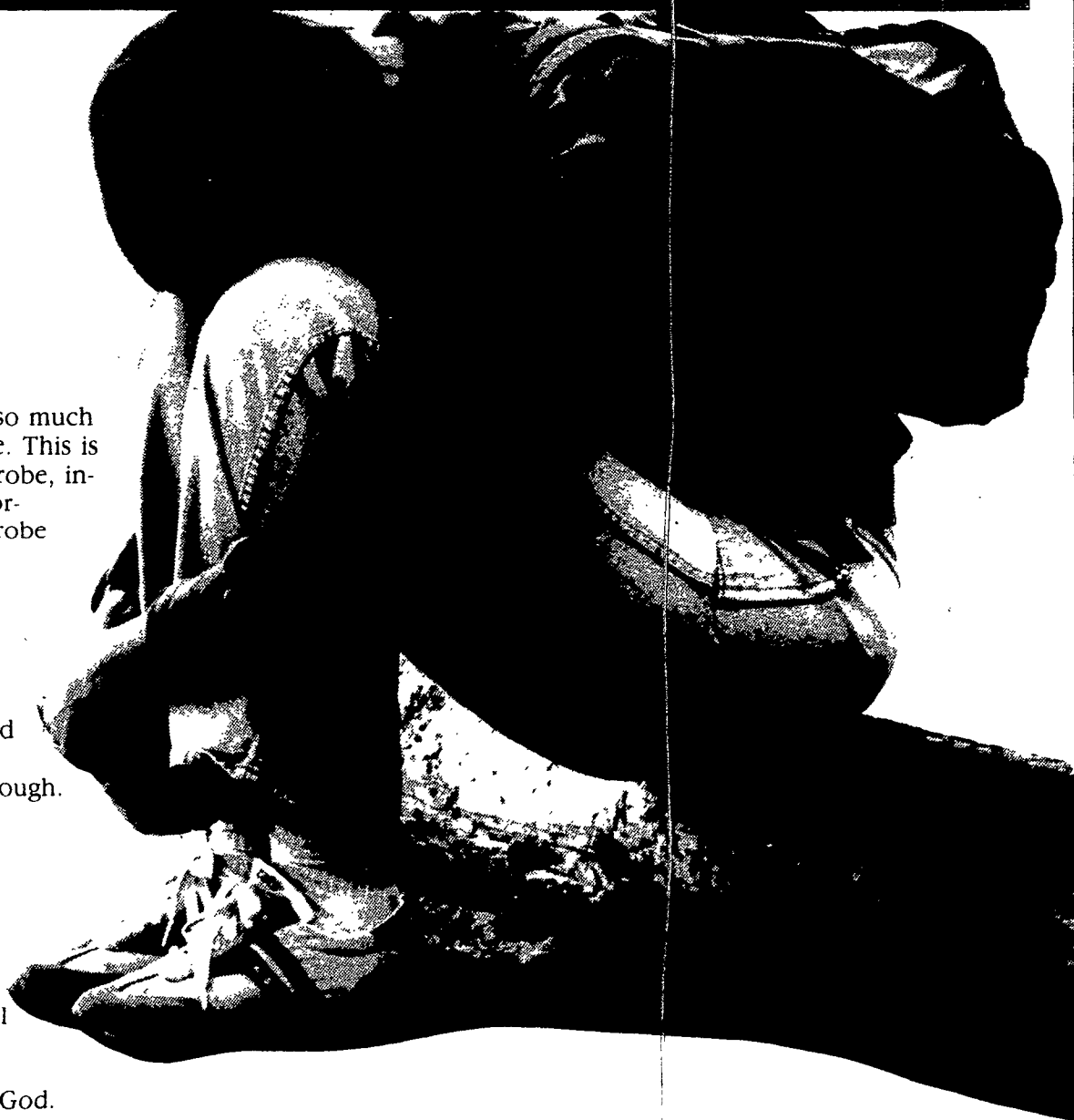
If there is a God why do these things happen? Such questions become most acute when the experiences are personal, touching oneself, or one's family and friends.

Thoughts of suicide may accompany the conclusion that there is no God. For atheism can be a form of hopelessness.

For some people, to conclude that there is no God is to conclude that life is a tale told by an idiot, so much sound and fury signifying nothing. But not always.

Many people believe there is no God and lead productive, hope-filled lives, showing as much love and concern for their neighbor as do believers.

When one thinks of atheists, a stereotype may come to mind. We may think of an "atheistic communist" out to destroy Christian faith. But some people are



Matters of belief and unbelief are seldom clear-cut. There are many dimensions to atheism, writes Father Edward Braxton, just as there are many dimensions to faith.

atheists in practical terms. These people actually may go to Mass on Sunday and pray.

They are practical atheists because they have made a "god" of some material good such as money or power. Thus they are idol worshipers. Or perhaps they never allow the God they say they believe in to touch their personal lives.

What sense does it make to profess belief in God, while treating other human beings like dirt or despoiling the earth God has given?

If we believed in God, we would love God; if we loved God, we would love everything God created.

Belief and unbelief, therefore, do not begin and end in the mind. They are influenced by

total human experience. Sports activity, listening to music, learning about art, exploring nature and falling in love may shape belief far more than an argument in a book. The same is true of personal loneliness, frustration, suffering and a deep awareness of the misery in the world.

The university student or anyone else struggling with belief and unbelief does well to reach out to others for support, challenge, understanding.

It is in such encounters that one may begin to touch the mysterious and elusive God, dwelling in the community of faith.

(Father Braxton directs the Catholic student center at the University of Chicago.)