



## *Belief in God*

### CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

In this chapter we will address the following questions:

- ◆ Are There Different Notions of God?
- ◆ Can God's Existence Be Proved?
- ◆ Can God's Existence Be Disproved?
- ◆ Is There Life after Death?

*Religious thinking, believing, feeling are among the most deceptive activities of the human spirit. We often assume it is God we believe in, but in reality it may be a symbol of personal interests we dwell upon. We may assume that we feel drawn to God, but in reality it may be a power within the world that is the object of our adoration. We may assume it is God we care for, but it may be our own ego we are concerned with.<sup>1</sup>*

## *The Nature of God*



“Do you believe in God?” has become a common question. A simple “yes,” “no,” or “I’m not sure” might appear to be adequate, but further probing could indicate that these are less-than-satisfactory responses. Unless explained, the meaning of the word “God” for the questioner might be different from that for the respondent; the person asking the question could mean “an energy force,” the individual responding could mean “a spiritual essence within.” Without some explanation, communication of ideas does not take place.

Belief in God, in one of its many forms, has occupied a central position in religious faith and practice. Humans throughout the ages have felt a sense of dependence on someone or something beyond their own resources. This sense of dependence may manifest itself in many ways, depending on the intellectual and cultural development of the individual or group. The non-literate tribe smears a stone with grease to appease their deity; Plato expresses reverence for the Idea of the Good; Muslims kneel and pray to Allah at various times of each day; worshippers participate in praise of God in synagogues and cathedrals; mystics reach that “dreamless sleep” of the soul’s liberation—in all these there is a similar goal, a relationship with ultimate reality, or the “Sacred Ultimate.”

### THREE ISSUES

There are three basic issues associated with belief in God: God and the Idea of God, worship preceding ideas, and the incompleteness and insufficiency of ideas.

***God and the Idea of God.*** There is a difference between God and any idea of God. To say that God *is* means that there is an objectively real God independent of human needs and ideas. By definition, God is ultimate reality and exists whether or not humanity exists.

However, *ideas* about God are human attempts to explain or interpret God. Convinced

of the objective existence of God, theologians and some philosophers attempt to “put God into concepts” for the purpose of clarification. Their explanations or ideas are symbols about God; but because symbols change from culture to culture, ideas about God or ultimate reality vary. It is possible that some or all views about God bear little, if any, resemblance to objective ultimate reality. (See *Theology* in Glossary.)

***Worship Preceding Ideas.*** Humanity worshipped a God or gods long before doctrines and philosophical problems concerning God arose. When people discovered other groups with different ideas of God, they were led to ask which ideas, if any, correctly represented God. With the growth of knowledge, some of the older conceptions came to seem inadequate. Thinking people were forced to defend the older views, modify them, or give them up.

***The Incompleteness and Insufficiency of Ideas.*** No individual’s view of God is either final or complete. Our knowledge is growing and incomplete. In addition, we find it difficult to express satisfactorily some of our deepest convictions. The religious person is likely to say that what he or she discovers is not propositions but a relationship with the Sacred.

### TERMS ASSOCIATED WITH GOD

Let us clarify some of the terms used in discussions about the nature and existence of God. **Theism** is the belief in a personal God who is creator of the world and a participant (immanent) in its processes, and with whom human beings can enter “I–Thou” relationships. **Monotheism** is a form of theism that proposes *one* such personal god; **polytheism** says there is more than one God.

**Deism**, a form of theistic belief popular among eighteenth-century and contemporary people, emphasizes the remoteness (transcendence) of God from the world. Several of the founding fathers of the United States were deists, including Benjamin Franklin, Thomas

Jefferson, George Washington, and Thomas Paine.<sup>2</sup> God is the creator and lawgiver, who permits his creation to administer itself through natural laws. This view has been called the “watchmaker view” of the universe: God creates an instrument, the natural universe; he permits it to operate without his interference or participation. A rigorous deist does not view any writings, including the Bible, as revelations from God or participate in private or group prayer to the “absent God.” However, many less rigorous deists pray or seek inspiration from group participation on sentimental occasions or in times of crisis.<sup>3</sup>

**Pantheism** is the belief that God is all, and all is God. “God” is the name we give to all things taken in their totality. The pantheism of the European Middle Ages held that because “God alone truly is, all that *is* must in some sense be God, or at least a manifestation of God.”<sup>4</sup> This form of pantheism remains personal; in some sense God is believed to be “someone.” A different view of pantheism understands God as the *non-personal*, universal spirit that is total reality; here, too, all existence is in God. Both the personal and nonpersonal forms of pantheism understand total existence as an all-inclusive divine reality.

God-As-Goodness is the notion of God as a metaphor for some kind of all-encompassing goodness. This view is accepted by many contemporary intellectuals who reject all forms of theism and mysticism. This concept of God is concerned with how we ought to live; among intellectuals living in Western civilizations, an emphasis on community and social responsibility is central to notions of God-As-Goodness.

**Agnosticism** means “not knowing.” It continues to be used most frequently in a religious sense. “We do not know whether there is a God”—such is the agnostic’s suspension of judgment about God’s existence. It is possible neither to affirm nor to deny God’s existence. The term **atheism** (without God—*a theos*—or Godless) has a different meaning; the atheist asserts there is no personal God. Far from being a suspension of belief, atheism is the firm conviction that God does not exist.

The views represented here are fundamental ideas about the nature and existence of God. Each has several schools of thought, and most can be found in some form in all the major religions of the world. Philosophers and theologians have for centuries debated the merits of each view and whether one best captures the nature of God in a given heritage. Let us now turn our attention to the concepts of God representative of three traditions: the Hebraic, Greek, and Asian.

### THE HEBRAIC VIEW OF GOD

Throughout their history the Hebrew people perceived different relationships with God; love, mercy, justice, and awe characterized God’s relationship with Israel. That God is the someone who creates what comes into existence is a continuing conviction of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.<sup>5</sup> The God of Israel is not a crude projection of a human being; rather he is perceived as the creative intelligence who fashions reality and reveals his purpose for humanity through chosen agents and events. The “personhood” and other human characteristics of the Hebraic God as portrayed in the Bible and Qur’an are not intended to reduce deity to mortal dimensions and limitations; rather, they portray vividly a God who is *someone*, not *something*. An extension of this view is represented in the following passage:

The categories which come to the fore in this interpretation of God’s nature are person and the various qualities essential to personality, . . . God is literally related to his creation, affecting and being affected by it, is literally involved in space and time, literally suffers and literally intervenes in the historical order to bring about the accomplishment of his purposes so far as he can. God is a free, personal being with various super powers. . . . God has all the essentials which constitute personality.<sup>6</sup>

As symbols of God reflecting their cultures, words such as “Father” and “He” were used in

holy writings and in prayers by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Male symbols conveyed a personal God in language acceptable to those peoples. “It” or “She” would have failed to communicate their experiences of God. The intention was never to equate God with a mortal male or a “man in the sky.” In fact, the writers of the Bible and Qur’an were not speculating about the essence of God; they interpreted his nature only in terms of his activity. Their accent was on his sovereign will, not on his being.

The systematic, intellectual presentation of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam accompanied reflections apart from their holy writings. Theologians sought to proclaim God’s revelation to their own communities of faith and to the world; philosophers attempted to arrive at truth independently of revelation. The theologians worked from their scriptures and the experiences of their religious communities; philosophers, aided by reason, reached for God as well. The two tasks were occasionally blended in one person’s efforts, such as in the writings of Thomas Aquinas.

Because the categories and methods of formal, scholarly philosophy were unknown to the Hebrew mind, the modes of thought developed by the great Greek philosophers entered the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim intellectual efforts at various stages of their respective histories. Concerns with essence, substance, and attributes became an aspect of the three religions. A focus on God’s *being* accompanied emphasis on his *activity*. The God of Moses who delivered the Hebrew people from Egyptian captivity was also understood in terms of Aristotle’s “pure form” and “uncaused cause.” Some of the characteristics of God have been stated within this Greek philosophical mode as follows:

*God is immanent.* God is said to be operative within the structure of the universe, taking a vital part in its processes and in human life. This view is distinguished from the older supernaturalism, which viewed God as operating only from outside the natural order; it is distinguished as well from pantheism, in which God and the universe are one. According to the doctrine of im-

manence, God is conceived as the principle of intelligence, purpose, and causation operating within the creative processes of the world.<sup>7</sup>

*God works in lawful and orderly ways.* As they study the world, observers find a general orderliness that is universal and dependable. Views of God usually are in harmony with the processes discovered in the cosmos.

*God is transcendent.* Many people also believe that God transcends the world process. Immanence and transcendence are not contradictory terms. God is said to exist prior to the world and to be superior to it. Thus “nature” and the “supernatural” can be thought of as separate, and God can be conceived of as operating from above or apart from the world as well as within it.

*God is intelligent and his ways are purposeful.* The world lends itself to intelligent analysis and comprehension. Consequently, we can assume that mind plays a prominent part in its processes. Whatever “more” God may be, God must be at least personal and intelligent, and God is a Being who acts with purpose.

*God is good and beneficent.* Belief in God represents the human conviction that there is an “eternal goodness.” Whenever people have been confronted with what appeared to be a choice between defining God as good or as all-powerful, they have been willing to admit limits to his power rather than to his goodness. God is then viewed as struggling with and for humanity.

## THE GREEK VIEW OF GOD

The nature of God in the ancient Greek tradition includes two components: the religious and the philosophical. It was the religious view that was held by the people; the philosophical had little to do with them. The first notions of deity were expressed in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer. In these epics, a hierarchy of gods governed the universe; the most important of the gods was Zeus, the embodiment of order. He was omnipotent as long as he conformed to what was fated; if he acted differently, cosmic chaos would result. The father of gods and mortals, Zeus was not the cre-

ator of the universe. He was quite capricious in his dealings with humans—as was the style of the other gods. The gods of Greece, and later of Rome, were of primary political importance; they “represented the divine guardians of social order and prosperity, and all citizens were expected to participate in their public worship as evidence of their integrity and loyalty.”<sup>8</sup> Such gods left much to be desired for the more thoughtful Greeks. Some attempted to understand the source of existence through the use of reason. Others turned to various mystery religions.

In the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E., the first great comprehensive system of philosophy was developed by the Greek philosopher Plato; his system is the culmination of the stage set by his predecessors combined with his own reasoning. In his search for the unchanging and eternal, Plato proposed that only that which is beyond the universe, space, and time, could be ultimate reality. God for Plato was the essence or Idea of the Good. This Transcendence, of which the universe is a participating reflection, is perfect **Being**.

Aristotle viewed the Eternal as the “Prime Mover” and “Uncaused Cause.” Affirming with his teacher Plato that the world of the senses is a derivative world dependent on a reality other than itself, Aristotle differed from Plato on many details, including those that were theological. However, Aristotle provided a rational method for proving God’s existence, and his concept of God as Unmoved Mover was incorporated centuries later in the writings of Thomas Aquinas.

The dualism proposed by these Greek philosophers established the contrasts between spirit and matter, nonphysical and physical, eternal and temporal, and changeless and changing. From this perspective we inherit the negative terms applied to that which is beyond: **infinite** (*not* finite), **incorporeal** (*not* material), and **immutable** (*not* changing). Other designations of the Transcendent include: “wholly other” (totally beyond human existence) and Being (fundamental reality).

In the second century C.E. in Alexandria, a group of “Christian Platonists” sought to blend

the conclusions of Plato with those of the biblical tradition. The philosophies of Greeks other than Plato, especially of Aristotle and Plotinus, were later to enter the mainstream of Western theological development. To this day, some scholars view this synthesis as enrichment; for others it is a corruption of the Hebraic world view.<sup>9</sup>

## ONE ASIAN VIEW OF GOD

Like the Greek view, a classical Asian view of God includes a “popular” (held by ordinary people) and a philosophic understanding. As early as 3000 B.C.E., the Hindu peoples worshiped gods personifying natural phenomena. Storm gods, fire gods, and eventually creator and destroyer gods typified the unceasing process of life and death, a cyclic process with no ultimate purpose beyond the process itself. Among the major gods are Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver), and Shiva (the destroyer). Stories about these gods are intentionally unhistorical tales, though at the popular level they are often taken quite literally. In Buddhism, many of the gods of Hinduism have found a place, but the focus is on the “Enlightened One,” Buddha himself. Although Buddha was originally the man who showed the way, idealized images of him are found in temples; they are treated as holy and are a focus of worship. In Chinese religion, the veneration of Confucius, ancestor worship, and other lesser forms of deity and spirits form a pantheon.

In an introduction to *The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gita*, a portion of Hindu holy writings, Aldous Huxley proposed a model by which he suggested most world philosophies and religions to be understood. In this introductory essay, the “Perennial Philosophy” is clearly meant to grasp the major motifs of Hindu thought. Huxley’s four characteristics of this way of perceiving reality in all Hindu thought about God convey themes appearing year after year (hence, “perennial”).<sup>10</sup>

A summary of Huxley’s themes relevant to most world philosophies and religions follows:



cate. Kant contends that existence is not a property or a predicate. The discussion was continued by Bertrand Russell in his analysis of the word *exists*.<sup>14</sup>

Some theologians, most notably Karl Barth, see Saint Anselm's argument not as an attempted proof of God's existence but as an unfolding of God's revelation. In this view, the argument does not seek to convert the atheist but rather to lead an already formed religious believer into a deeper understanding of God.

### THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

The next important attempt to demonstrate the existence of God was that of Thomas Aquinas (c. 1224–1274) (see biography and excerpt, pp. 392–393), who (drawing on Aristotle and on Muslim philosophy) (see Maimonides biography and excerpt, pp. 394–395) offers five ways of proving divine existence. The proofs are all based on the same premise; often the cosmological argument is referred to as *the first-cause argument*. It is a deductive argument that states that everything that happens has a cause, and this cause in turn has a cause, and so on in a series that must either be infinite or have its starting point in a first cause. Aquinas excludes the possibility of an infinite regress of causes and so concludes that there must be a first cause, which we call God.

In the Thomistic (thinkers who follow Thomas Aquinas) tradition, as represented by many Roman Catholic theologians, the cosmological argument for the existence of God has been given considerable emphasis. We must, it is affirmed, differentiate between the accidental and the essential features of reality, or between the temporary objects of experience and objects that are permanent. Every event or change presupposes a cause, and logically we must go back to an uncaused, self-existent cause or to a self-existent Being. This Being is the principle of explanation for the universe taken as a whole and the condition of its orderly development, as well as its permanent source or ground.

*Criticisms of the Argument.* David Hume and others criticized this argument. They ask, "What was the cause of the First Cause?" and they suggest that the series of causes may have had no beginning. If every event must have a cause, why, it is asked, do we stop with God? If there can be uncaused events, then is a concept of God necessary? To these criticisms, some have replied that this argument is not just a temporal argument from effect to cause but an argument in the "order of being," in that God is said to be the "highest order of being" and, as such, he is the "uncaused cause" of whatever exists, including, for example, an endless series of events.

### THE TELEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

The teleological argument, or the argument from design or purpose in the world, is among the most popular of the theistic arguments. The order and the progress in the universe disclose an immanent intelligence and purpose. Take, for example, the long process of development leading to the human brain and mind. The process has produced minds that begin to understand the world, and it has produced thought and understanding. How could this occur unless the course of evolution were directed by an infinite mind?

The teleological argument was elaborated by William Paley (1743–1805). He argued, for example, that the human eye must represent an intelligent creator's design; it would be absurd to attribute the biological development of the eye to "chance." Paley's analogy of the watch conveys the argument well: I may explain the existence of a rock lying on the ground by references to natural forces such as volcanic action, wind, and rain. However, if I see a watch lying on the ground, I cannot explain its existence in the same way; the complex arrangement of the watch's wheels, springs, and other parts, all operating together accurately, requires the postulate of an intelligent mind responsible for its being. Paley argued for the existence of God based on the complex and orderly functioning of the



**Excerpt from Saint Anselm:**

*Proslogion*; Preface (c. 1077)

After I had published, at the pressing entreaties of several of my brethren, a certain short tract (the *Monologion*) as an example of meditation on the meaning of faith from the point of view of one seeking, through silent reasoning within himself, things he knows not—reflecting that this was made up of a connected chain of many arguments, I began to wonder if perhaps it might be possible to find one single argument that for its proof required no other save itself, and that by itself would suffice to prove that God really exists, that He is the supreme good needing no other and is He whom all things have need of for their being and well-being, and also to prove whatever we believe about the Divine Being. But as often and as diligently as I turned my thoughts to this, sometimes it seemed to me that I had almost reached what I was seeking, sometimes it eluded my acutest thinking completely, so that finally, in desperation, I was about to give up what I was looking for as something impossible to find. However, when I had decided to put aside this idea altogether, lest by uselessly occupying my mind it might prevent other ideas with which I could make some progress, then, in spite of my unwillingness and my resistance to it, it began to force itself upon me more and more pressingly. So it was that one day when I was quite worn out with resisting its importunity, there came to me, in the very conflict of my thoughts, what I had despaired of finding, so that I eagerly grasped the notion which in my distraction I had been rejecting.

St. Anselm, *Proslogion*; *Monologium*; *An Appendix in Behalf of the Fool by Gaunclon*; and *Cur Deus Homo*, trans. S. N. Deane (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1939).

**THE MORAL ARGUMENT**

The moral argument for belief in God is grounded in human beings' moral nature. The argument has been stated from a number of points of view, but there are basically two forms in which it is found.

One form is as a logical inference: from objective moral laws one infers a divine Law Giver, or from the fact of our conscience, sense of obligation, or sense of duty one infers a moral

God. "If, as is the case, we feel responsibility, are ashamed, are frightened, at transgressing the voice of conscience, this implies that there is One to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed . . . If the cause of these emotions does not belong in this visible world, the Object . . . must be Supernatural and Divine."<sup>15</sup>

A second form of the moral argument is based on the presence of moral values; strictly speaking, it is not an argument at all. It claims that anyone who is seriously committed to re-



## Saint Thomas Aquinas



Thomas Aquinas (c. 1224–1274), Catholic theologian and philosopher, was born in Italy and educated under Benedictine and Dominican monks and at the universities of Naples, Paris, and Cologne. He received a doctorate in theology at the University of Paris and taught there until 1259. He then spent ten years lecturing at Dominican monasteries in the area of Rome, after which he returned to Paris to teach and write. He studied the major works of Aristotle extensively and engaged in various intellectual controversies.

The writings of Aquinas, all in Latin, include a number of large theological treatises, disputations on theological and philosophical problems, and commentaries on certain books of the Bible and on twelve treatises of Aristotle. His greatest works are *Summa Contra Gentiles* (1259–1264), to aid in the conversion of the Moors in Spain, and *Summa Theologica* (1265–1273), a systematic synthesis of Christian theology and Aristotelian philosophy.

Thomas Aquinas stands in a position of special respect in the field of Roman Catholic scholarship. In 1323, Pope John XXII canonized him as a saint, and he is called the *Angelic Doctor*. The ecclesiastical law of the Catholic Church, revised in 1918 (Canon 589.1), states that students for the priesthood are to study at least two years of philosophy and four of theology, “following the teaching of St. Thomas.” The epithet “Thomist” has been applied to the followers of St. Thomas Aquinas.

**Excerpt from Aquinas:**

*Summa Theologica*: Question II,  
Third Article (1265)

*I answer that*, The existence of God can be proved in five ways. The first and more manifest way is the argument from motion. It is certain, and evident to our senses, that in the world some things are in motion. Now whatever is in motion is put in motion by another, for nothing can be in motion except it is in potentiality to that towards which it is in motion; . . . Therefore, whatever is in motion must be put in motion by another. . . . But this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover; seeing that subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are put in motion by the first mover; . . . Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.

The second way is from the nature of the efficient cause. . . . There is no case known in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now in efficient cause it is not possible to go on to infinity. . . . Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.

The third way is taken from possibility and necessity, and runs thus. We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to corrupt, and consequently they are possible to be and not to be. . . . Therefore, if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence. . . . If at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist; and thus even now nothing would be in existence—which is absurd. Therefore we cannot but postulate the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing others their necessity. This all men speak of as God.

The fourth way is taken from the gradation to be found in things. . . . Therefore there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God.

The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world. . . . Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God.

Saint Thomas Aquinas, The “*Summa Theologica*” of *St. Thomas Aquinas*, Part I, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1920).



**Excerpt from Maimonides:**  
*Guide for the Perplexed* (c. 1190)

The object of this treatise is to enlighten a religious man who has been trained to believe in the truth of our holy Law, who conscientiously fulfils his moral and religious duties, and at the same time has been successful in his philosophical studies. Human reason has attracted him to abide within its sphere; and he finds it difficult to accept as correct the teaching based on the literal interpretation of the Law, and especially that which he himself or others derived from those homonymous, metaphorical, or hybrid expressions. Hence he is lost in perplexity and anxiety. If he be guided solely by reason, and renounce his previous views which are based on those expressions, he would consider that he had rejected the fundamental principles of the Law; and even if he retains the opinions which were derived from those expressions, and if, instead of following his reason, he abandon its guidance altogether, it would still appear that his religious convictions had suffered loss and injury. For he would then be left with those errors which give rise to fear and anxiety, constant grief and great perplexity.

This work has also a second object in view. It seeks to explain certain obscure figures which occur in the Prophets, and are not distinctly characterized as being figures. Ignorant and superficial readers take them in a literal, not in a figurative sense. Even well informed persons are bewildered if they understand these passages in their literal signification, but they are entirely relieved of their perplexity when we explain the figure, or merely suggest that the terms are figurative. For this reason I have called this book *Guide for the Perplexed*.

Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedlander (New York: Hebrew Publishing, 1881).

norms need not be located outside the natural order; they need not point to a transcendent Sacred Ultimate.

#### **THE ARGUMENT FROM SPECIAL EVENTS AND EXPERIENCES**

People have been convinced throughout the ages that they have had a personal experience or witnessed a special event proving the exist-

tence of God. The “dreamless sleep” of the Eastern mystic, feelings of cosmic unity with the universe, healings, answers to prayers, visions, and testimonies of reliable persons are different from the purely rational and inferential arguments just discussed. The participants base their claims on varying degrees of empirical evidence ranging from a “sensed” Otherness to an immediate consciousness of the Transcendent.

*Criticisms of the Argument.* Personal experiences and witnessed events might move the agnostic toward a belief in God; the believer's faith might be further confirmed. But, would the atheist be convinced?

A pivotal question is often overlooked in this discussion. "Prove to me that there is a God," demands the challenger. One might appropriately respond, "What kind of proof will you accept?" If one of the classical arguments (ontological, etc.) will not fill the order, perhaps an event will, something observable. But what? Even the sudden appearance of a Being who performs all sorts of feats need not be convincing; observing and photographing an executed man emerging from a tomb would not be proof of the existence of a God. *Interpretations of any event can and do vary, according to the outlook of the perceiver.* The mystical experience of the Hindu holy man in his private event; even if the atheist achieved the identical states, he or she could interpret it atheistically. In similar fashion, the atheist witnessing a resurrection of an executed man could interpret the event in ways that do not require a belief in the existence of God. Unusual events and unique experiences of startling magnitude have occurred throughout history; in and of themselves they compel neither belief nor disbelief. They are interpreted by the observer's criteria.

Not only religious matters are subject to such interpretation. Economists, psychologists, physicists, and other investigators *interpret* data. Those who believe that the universe is not fundamentally real can logically dismiss all empirical data as a source of knowledge. What is the nature of evidence that will convince us of something? Are there different kinds of evidence for different kinds of experiences? Issues such as the existence of God, like every other problem of human knowledge, confront us with several possible answers.

### REFLECTIONS ON "PROOF"

In the course of human history no universally accepted proof of God's existence has been

developed. The classical proofs of reason were proposed by philosophers such as Aristotle and by those already committed to a belief in a Judeo-Christian-Islamic God. Atheists remain unconvinced by them; many theists from different traditions view them as incomplete.

It is interesting that in the biblical literature the deity never compels belief. Insisting on preserving human freedom to choose faith, the biblical writers portray God's encounters with human beings in manners that permit doubt. To do otherwise, to compel belief, would violate the sacredness of human freedom, a major motif in biblical thought.

In those forms of mysticism that view Ultimate Reality or God as beyond all thought and sense experiences, "proof" is even more elusive. Neither reasoned arguments nor appeals to observable events are capable of providing evidence for a deity or reality wholly other than time, space, and thought. Mystical experiences cannot be described or verified. Whether or not a person experiences a spiritual reality is a matter of belief, based on that person's interpretations of a profound, individualistic, inner experience. Although such experiences may be perceived as evidence of God's existence, some people explain them in terms of human psychology or physiology.

We need to recall here Blaise Pascal's (1623–1662) "Wager," which treats the existence of God as a mysterious puzzle; we can take a position on the basis of calculated risks. If we wager that God exists and we're correct, we might well gain salvation; we would lose little if we're mistaken. If we bet there is no God, we stand to gain little if we are right, and we may lose salvation if we are wrong. Pascal proposed that we wager that God exists.

It is likely that there can be no conclusive "proof" of the existence of God that all individuals will accept. John Baillie quotes with approval the statement of William Temple to the effect that "all occurrences are in some degree revelations of God," and the statement of Paul Tillich that "there is no reality, thing, or event which cannot become the bearer" of revelation.<sup>17</sup>



the perspective of a developing universe. For persons who interpret the universe, including humanity, as completed or perfected, this view is unsatisfactory; a theist who interprets the Genesis accounts of creation literally would reject this position. For other people, it can be an obstacle to belief in God; why would a God design the process of creation such that the innocent suffer? Although the process may not be intended as punishment, it can be readily perceived as such.

5. "Evil" is a term used for immoral decisions and their consequences. Intentional and unintentional acts that inflict harm on the innocent and the guilty are moral evils. The human capacity to make good and bad choices allows for the possibility of harmful results. This view is an obstacle to belief in God for those who believe God should intervene in human affairs to keep individuals from suffering the consequences of their bad choices or the choices of others.

*The Central Issue.* Each interpretation of evil leaves a central question unanswered: Would God permit the conditions for evil? More specifically, would God punish both the innocent and the guilty? Would God allow a rival to inflict harm on humanity? Would God create the world in such a way that people suffer? Would God permit immoral human decisions to result in the suffering of the innocent.<sup>19</sup>

Theists do not ignore the central issue and allied questions. In various ways, they comprehend evil so that it is not an obstacle to belief for them.

## HUMAN NEEDS

A second major ground for disbelief in God is the view that belief in God is only the result of wishful thinking and social convention. Some psychologists propose that an individual's need for a father figure, for dealing with the unknown, for overcoming fears and suffering, and for cop-

ing with other immaturities contribute to humanity's creation of all gods. Some sociologists propose that people grouping together have similar corporate needs and therefore create their gods as social fictions.

From a philosophical viewpoint, these "explanations" are inadequate. Even if all persons and all societies have been, are, and will be in need of a god or gods, the actual existence of God is thereby neither proved nor disproved. *Ad hominem* considerations must be set aside when the *issue* of God's existence is debated. Whether or not God or gods exist is a philosophical problem independent of the alleged motives and needs of humans.

## LANGUAGE ABOUT GOD

Another obstacle to belief in God is that the word *God* has so frequently been expressed in language, symbols, and assumptions that have lost their meaning and appeal to modern people. "God-language" that reflects the outlook and culture of another age and is not relevant to contemporary experience tends to lose its meaning and appeal. The problem of the truth or falsity of religious language has been brought to the fore in recent decades by a group of philosophical or logical analysts who claim that there are only two kinds of statements that convey knowledge and that may be judged true or false. There are analytic statements such as are found in logic and mathematics, which are true by definition, and empirical statements of fact, which can be objectively tested or verified. Because metaphysical and theological statements are not of this nature, the metaphysical theses and the religious convictions about a reality beyond the realm of the empirical world are brushed aside as meaningless.

Influenced by the methods of linguistic analysis that seemed to deny the meaningfulness of statements that cannot be objectively verified, and by tragic events of the twentieth century such as wars, violence, and death camps, a number of Protestant leaders of the 1960s asserted that "God is Dead."<sup>20</sup> This outlook reflects the



its origin, a “world soul,” or with an Absolute. In some Asian religions, the self may enter lower forms than that of humans, as determined by the law of *karma*. It may, however, finally escape the wheel of rebirths and gain unity with a non-personal Sacred Ultimate. Doctrines of *karma*, reincarnation, and the transmigration of souls are found in various forms of religions originating in India—notably, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. These views, however, are not what most people in the West mean by life after death. They believe in the persistence of personal identity in some sphere or plane other than the present earthly one. Does a person persist as a conscious self after what we call death?

The beliefs about life after death in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are understandably entwined with their beliefs about human nature. In the earliest biblical and Qur’anic passages, a person is conceived as a “living soul,” flesh-animated-by-soul, a psychophysical unity. A person is not perceived as having an immaterial soul encased in a separable body. A noted scholar of Islam has pointed out, “the Qur’anic doctrine of the soul is that man’s soul is a corporeal, material substance, thin and tenuous as air, fine and light as vapor, permeating the body as sap in trees.”<sup>25</sup>

Beliefs about life after death as it relates to human nature are found in two forms in the Hebraic traditions. First, the ancient Hebrew view stressed survival of the Hebrew people as a community rather than as achieving an individual, personal life beyond the grave. Because there is no detachable soul, death brings about the individual’s demise. The ongoing people of God, including a person’s legacy of children and deeds, continues. In a rather undeveloped form, some Hebrew people held to a vague notion that the dead lingered on in a region outside or under the earth, not in God’s presence. Not particularly attractive terms designate this spot: “Ditch,” “Pit,” “Realm of Death,” and “Sheol.” Preventing a future of total extinction and giving sharp focus to *this* life, such a secondary religious tenet does suggest the continuance of a component, however minor, of human nature. The precise nature of this element was simply not of

concern. Just before the New Testament period, Hebrew civilization pictured a different life after death, which included a restored communion with God. As was the case in earlier times, philosophical speculations about the nature of existence in the life hereafter were secondary.

Second, central to Christian and Muslim theologies is the view that by acts of God persons may be resurrected for everlasting life. Forms of continued self-awareness also found their ways into Jewish thinking. Although convictions about the features of the next life vary, the mode of understanding of the three Hebraic traditions is quite different from an automatic **immortality** of an eternal soul. Grounded in the psychosomatic unity position, the Hebraic traditions affirm a special divine act of re-creation of an embodied, recognizable human personality. Our main point here is that Western religious thought in its most ancient forms stresses human nature as an organic unity; a transfiguration of some sort is necessary (rather than the soul’s automatic discarding of the body) for everlasting life. Notions of “immortality of the soul” enter the Hebraic traditions not in their scriptural roots but in later medieval thought. But at no point have they proposed an “immortal” soul that continues beyond this life unchanged.

### Reflections



In our criticisms of the argument from special events and experiences,

we proposed that interpretations of any event can and do vary, according to the outlook of the perceiver. We also noted that most likely there can be no conclusive proof of the existence of God. We might conclude that beliefs in God and other religious matters are unique because of their requirements for faith. However, in the chapter on science and philosophy, we observed that “All proof must begin with certain assumptions. This is true in science, philosophy, or religion. Some ideas or facts must be accepted as *postulates*—that is, must be taken for granted.” Therefore, whether matters of religion are

unique in other ways, the presence of intellectual faith is not a hallmark of these issues. Faith in God in the sense of trust in someone is admittedly different from trust in postulates; faith in convictions *about* God is not unlike other informed, intellectual faiths.

It is possible to say that the atheist, the agnostic, and the theist are all persons of faith. The atheist believes that no God or gods exist, the agnostic believes in suspending judgment, and the theist believes in the existence of God. Each type of faith is believable if one scrutinizes the tenets of that faith. Each also can be maintained

thoughtlessly; we often call this “blind, uninformed, or naive faith.” A person with examined faith knows its boundaries and can agree to differ; unexamined faith can be simplistic, arrogant, and intolerant.

A central question for the current scientific age is this: can faith in God be credible enough so that a rational individual can maintain integrity as a person of faith? The answer to this query will determine the seriousness with which many other theological issues will be considered as well as the future of much religious belief and practice.



### *Glossary Terms*

**AGNOSTICISM** A profession of ignorance, especially the claim that it is impossible to demonstrate conclusively either the existence or nonexistence of God.

**ANTHROPOMORPHISM** The attributing of human qualities to the nonhuman realm or to nature. The term may refer to the portrayal of God as having human form, characteristics, or limitations.

**ATHEISM** Denial of the existence of a personal God.

**BEING** That which exists; sometimes used for the infinite, God, or ultimate reality.

**DEISM** A belief that affirms the existence of a God who has created the universe, but who remains apart and permits His creation to administer itself through natural laws—a view fairly prevalent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; may be understood as a version of theism.

**IMMANENT** Indwelling, or operating within the process. An immanent God is within the structure of the universe and/or takes a vital part in its processes. The term is used in contrast with *transcendent*. Religions view their concepts of God as immanent, as transcendent, or as both.

**IMMORTALITY** The doctrine that the soul survives death.

**KARMA** In Hinduism, the cosmic law of sowing and reaping, of cause and effect in human life. The law determines the form that will be taken in each new existence or rebirth. Action is seen as bringing upon oneself inevitable results, good or bad.

**MONOTHEISM** The belief that there is only one (usually personal) God.

**PANTHEISM** The view that everything is coextensive with God; God is in all, and all is in God.

**POLYTHEISM** Belief in many personalized gods.

**THEISM** The belief in a personal God, the creator of the world and immanent in the world’s processes, with whom we may come into intimate contact.

**THEODICY** Justification of God’s goodness in the face of evil.

**THEOLOGY** Literally, the theory or study of God. In practice, the term is used for the system of doctrines of some particular religious group or individual thinker. Natural theology stresses reason and empirical evidence; revealed theology emphasizes revelation as the basis for our knowledge of God.

**TRANSCENDENT (TRANSCENDENCE)** That which is beyond what is given in experience. In theology the term means that God is outside of or beyond nature.



## GROUNDS FOR DISBELIEF IN GOD

1. The presence of evil in our world has been a great obstacle to religious faith. Many interpretations of the nature of evil have attempted to resolve this problem.
2. A second ground for disbelief is the conviction that belief is only the result of wishful thinking and social convention.
3. Another obstacle to belief in God is that the word “God” has frequently been expressed in language, symbols, and assumptions that have lost their meaning and appeal to modern people.
4. The grounds for disbelief are not conclusive. Persons have several options: (1) to make the judgment to suspend judgment, (2) to be convinced affirmatively, and (3) to be convinced negatively.

## PERSONAL SURVIVAL AFTER DEATH

1. People who believe in personal survival after death may mean quite different things: biological, social, impersonal, or personal survival.

2. Religious views as exemplified in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam support personal survival after death.

## REFLECTIONS

1. The presence of intellectual faith is not unique to religion; such faith is also present in science and philosophy.
2. The atheist, the agnostic, and the theist are all persons of faith. Each position can be maintained after thoughtful, careful scrutiny of the arguments and evidence. Each can also be maintained uncritically.
3. A central question for the current age of science is: can faith in God be credible enough, so that a rational individual can maintain integrity as a person of faith?



## *Study Questions and Projects*

1. Do you agree or disagree with the assertion that the question of the existence of God and of religious truth or falsity is one of the most momentous issues we face because it determines whether the things we care for most are at the mercy of the things we care for least? Discuss.
  - (a) “The individual who refuses to face facts doesn’t believe in God.”
  - (b) “A little philosophy inclineth man’s mind to atheism, but depth in philosophy bringeth man’s mind about to religion.”  
—Francis Bacon
  - (c) “Originally God made man in his image, and man has ever since returned the compliment.”—Voltaire
  - (d) “The God of any group of people is the object of their highest loyalty, adoration, allegiance, awe, reverence, devotion.”  
—Durant Drake
2. Is it possible for people to think of God as both transcendent and immanent and be consistent in their views? Explain why you think this is or is not possible.
3. Comment on the following statements, and tell to what extent you think they can be accepted.
  - (a) “The individual who refuses to face facts doesn’t believe in God.”
  - (b) “A little philosophy inclineth man’s mind to atheism, but depth in philosophy bringeth man’s mind about to religion.”  
—Francis Bacon
  - (c) “Originally God made man in his image, and man has ever since returned the compliment.”—Voltaire
  - (d) “The God of any group of people is the object of their highest loyalty, adoration, allegiance, awe, reverence, devotion.”  
—Durant Drake
4. What are the historic or classic arguments for belief in God? Do some of these arguments appear to have more weight than others?
5. Explain what is meant by the “argument from personal experience” as a basis for belief in God. Give some examples of the different forms such experience may take, and evaluate them.
6. Indicate some issues that need to be kept clearly in mind when one considers the problem of belief in God. Do you agree that our knowledge in this, as in other fields, is never adequate or final?





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