

# The Errors of Atheism

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## INTRODUCTION

*We need not be forced to religion, against our reason—against what we reasonably believe about the world—to make sense of our lives.*

—Kai Nielsen<sup>1</sup>

A question arises for the honest, open-minded, truth-seeking fallibilist: Is there an idea of God that enhances the otherwise atheistic picture of reality, one that refuses to attribute hyperbolic properties to God such as omniscience and omnipotence insofar as these properties are understood strictly and literally? Can theism “come of age” as Dietrich Bonhoeffer<sup>2</sup> urges and no longer believe in a transcendent realm of the divine, refusing to seek refuge in orthodox Christian dogma in order to attempt to dodge genuine and legitimate philosophical questions about the problem of God? Can the debate about God be revisited without many orthodox Christian theists demanding a supreme *sacrificium intellectus* of those who accept the claim: “God exists”? And can the debate take place without the underlying empirical influences of a certain brand of analytical philosophy going unchallenged and having an undue influence on the outcome of our reasoning about God?<sup>3</sup>

These questions are vital in that centuries of debate about the problem of God have issued numerous credible objections to the traditional Christian conception of God. From the concepts of divine goodness, power and knowledge, to the natural theological ontological, cosmological and teleological arguments for God’s existence to the arguments from religious experience<sup>4</sup> and morality, each of these notions and arguments have met with formidable challenges so much so that the very idea of God is rightly

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<sup>1</sup> Kai Nielsen, *Naturalism and Religion* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 2001), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press, 1953).

<sup>3</sup> Paul M. van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), pp. 13f.

<sup>4</sup> I have in mind here the recognition of such experiences found in William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: New American Library, 1958) and Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, J. W. Harvey (trans.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950).

considered to be an essentially contested concept.<sup>5</sup> But does it follow from this that “the time has come for theology openly and fully to confront the death of God”?<sup>6</sup>

In order to focus my discussion, I shall not enter into a dialogue with orthodox Christian theism—even though I mention it throughout this book. My mention of it assumes the credibility of many, though not all, of the atheistic objections to it, making it overly problematic for further consideration. My main interlocutor is philosophical atheism. So while some of my arguments and claims pertain indirectly to orthodox Christian theism, my intended target of criticism throughout is atheism.

### *Is God Dead?*

Besides erring in the form of a kind of “presentism” in its “immolation of history,”<sup>7</sup> radical theology’s statement that “God is dead” is peculiarly ambiguous. First, it might mean that, sociologically speaking, there is no idea of God. But this implies the denial of an obvious fact of most, if not all, societies, namely, that some idea of God is alive and well in influencing several people in this or that way. Second, it might mean that “God is dead” in the sense that God is no longer alive for people. While this claim seems to make some sense by pointing to the utter discouragement that many people experience when facing problems in the world, wondering where God is to make meaning of it all, strictly speaking the claim makes no sense. The reason for this is that any being worthy of the name “God” cannot die, as by definition God is, among other things, everlasting. Thus something else other than God must be dead, but not God, if in fact God ever existed in the first place. Third, “God is dead” might have the intended meaning that, say, the orthodox Christian notion of God is no longer viable in light of the knowledge of our times. Thus the concept of God<sup>8</sup> is no longer plausible because of our enlightened situation. But strictly

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<sup>5</sup> For a philosophical analysis of the notion of essentially contested concepts, see W. B. Gaillie, “Essentially Contested Concepts,” in Max Black (ed.), *The Importance of Language* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962), pp. 121–146.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Harvey Cox, *The Feast of Fools* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1969), pp. 148, 150.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the distinction between the concept of God and conceptions of God, see Eberhard Herrmann, “On the Distinction Between the Concept of

speaking, it makes no sense to say that “God is dead” in this sense either. For if the orthodox Christian idea of God is incoherent, then this implies that *that* very conception of God is implausible. But this just implies that that notion of God has no referent, which implies that there never was a God corresponding to that idea. But then it might be asked how such a God could be dead when She never existed in the first place? What the death of God theologian or philosopher (such as Friedrich Nietzsche) is entitled to proclaim here is that there has been a set of discoveries over time that reveal to the reasonable and informed person that it is not the case that God exists, assuming that what is under discussion is an orthodox Christian notion of God.

The foregoing suggests that the question of meaning (what we mean when we engage in God-talk) is intimately related to the question of God’s existence. I shall not attempt to dissect these questions, but instead address the problem of God’s existence. But in doing so, I recognize that this question implies questions of what we mean by “God.” Even more important, the question of the existence of God is really one of how we *ought* to think of God, should God exist.<sup>9</sup> So the problem of God is a deeply normative question insofar as meaning is concerned. What exactly is God? That is, what conception of God is viable, e.g., evades all significant rational objections? To answer that God is omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, and the like runs afoul of the problem of evil, but to say that God is “ultimate concern,” the “ground of being,” or the divine spirit of the oppressed is vague, as many philosophers and theologians have already noted.

### *Hybrid Minimalist Theism*

However, the discussion in question has in the Western world focused mostly on the orthodox Christian idea of God. What is needed is a novel approach to this important discussion. As Kai Nielsen implores of analytical *apologia* of orthodox Christian theism in particular, “It is high time that we stop playing that game—put that old horse out to pasture.”<sup>10</sup> In concurring with Nielsen on the implausibility of orthodox Christian

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God and Conceptions of God,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 63 (2008).

<sup>9</sup> This point is recognized in John Hick, *Who or What is God?* (London: SCM Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Nielsen, *Naturalism and Religion*, p. 21.

theism, I propose that we jettison the orthodox Christian idea of God. And I agree somewhat with Nielsen that “If we must do metaphysics, what we need to realize is that physicalism or something close to it is the only metaphysical game in town, if there are any metaphysical games in town.”<sup>11</sup> In light of this observation, I suggest that the discussion proceed along the lines of replacing the orthodox Christian idea of God that is subject to centuries of abuse with a conception of God that understands God in generally demythologized, but primarily in process and liberationist, terms. In short, I shall argue for an unorthodox theism that blends what I take to be some (but not all) of the basic features of process and liberationist theisms, as well as Western radical and secular theism more generally. This is not to discount the possibility that certain Eastern notions of the nature and function of God are of use in this discussion. But my focus shall be on a Western conception of divinity, one that stems in large part from Rudolf Bultmann’s call to demythologize primitive Christian theology.<sup>12</sup>

Just as Bultmann seeks to make the mythology of the Christian scriptures comprehensible to contemporary folk, ridding the *kerygma* of its underlying multistoried universe of transcendent notions of “heaven” and “hell,” for instance, so too will be my approach of attempting to locate a version of theism that can truly engage us today in light of advanced and enlightened scientific and political outlooks. It is a version of theism that

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<sup>11</sup> Nielsen, *Naturalism and Religion*, p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> For an excellent philosophical articulation of Rudolf Bultmann’s programme of demythologization of the Christian *kerygma* by a former student of his, see Hans Jonas, *Philosophical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974). My adoption of the general demythologization scheme of Bultmann, however, is not insensitive to finest points of criticism articulated in Dorothee Soelle, *Political Theology*, John Shelley (trans.) (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974). Also see Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, J. T. Swan (trans.) (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972). But neither of these authors’ criticisms denounces the general programme of demythologization itself, e.g., of translating the genuine *kerygma* from mythological language to the language of science, for example. Soelle’s objections include the one that Bultmann does not go far enough. In “existentializing” the *kerygma*, Bultmann fails to politicize it and thus fails to capture part of the genuine message of the historical Jesus, namely, that of liberating the oppressed: “. . . a political interpretation of the gospel is not antithetical to the essential intentions of Bultmann’s theology” (Soelle, *Political Theology*, p. 55). Indeed, as she argues, a truly Bultmannian perspective would provide ways of criticizing political structures such that wars, hunger, aggression, etc., can and ought to be explained in the demythological terms of political criticism rather than simply seen as matters of fate (Soelle, *Political Theology*, pp. 61f.).

I call “minimalist” in that it sheds many of the trappings of orthodox Christian theology in favor of a pared-down conception of divinity that evades the objections to the idea of God it seeks to replace. My hybrid theism resembles in some ways the “secularist” approaches to Christian theism, though it recognizes no special status for Christian revelation. In this way, my version of theism that I refer to as “hybrid minimalist theism” (or, more clumsily, “hybrid minimalist process-liberationist theism”) departs from Bultmann’s which is Christian at least in some minimal sense. Indeed, my theism is not Christian at all, not even in the senses that process and liberation theologies typically are. For it rejects most, if not all, Christian doctrines. It does not even accept the special divinity status of Jesus of Nazareth, arguably the most central Christian doctrine. My hybrid theism evades the numerous and powerful objections to Christian theisms and has a more plausible conception of God. Nonetheless, it is religiously and theologically meaningful despite its thinness.

My hybrid theism is minimalist in at least the following ways. As just noted, it is pared down with respect to orthodox Christian theism’s maximalist set of religious dogmas, a few of which were noted earlier. But my hybrid theism is also minimalist with respect to process and liberationist theisms. That is, it borrows from each what it considers to be of fundamental importance with the goal of both evading objections to classical Christian theism and providing a meaningful account of God and the world. But it does not concur with, for instance, process and liberationist theism’s assent to the doctrine of the authority of the Christian scriptures, or in the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. No doubt there are other beliefs with which my minimalist hybrid theism disagrees vis-à-vis process and liberationist theisms. Nonetheless, the subject of my hybrid version of theism is, as we shall see, quite worthy of the name “God” even if it might be rejected by most Christian theists. The theology that underlies it replaces the supernaturalistic notion of divinity of orthodox Christianity with an idea of God that we can “live with,” both literally and figuratively, that is, if we can live with any idea of God. It is a conception of God’s nature and function that passes, I believe, the test of reason at least better than the orthodox Christian theistic notion of God does.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> My hybrid minimalist theism is not to be confused with David Ray Griffin’s revisionist theism, according to which an explicitly and robust Whiteheadian process “dipolar” conception of God is appropriated in order to answer atheistic charges against a version of Christian theism. Griffin’s theism seeks to revise what is implausible about orthodox Christian theism, and retain the rest of it. But my hybrid minimalist theism, though it draws from process and liberationist

On the question of the possible proper relationship between science and religion, my minimalist hybrid theism concurs with Ian G. Barbour's integrationist perspective<sup>14</sup> which is sympathetic to and consistent with the process theist approach as is mine. But my view makes no appeal to Christianity as having any privileged authority such that its particular doctrines require or even deserve defense.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, unlike most process and other progressive thinkers on the science-religion question, I provide far more than the *en passant* remarks that are infrequently—if ever—offered by such thinkers concerning questions of justice.<sup>16</sup>

### *Hybrid Minimalist Theism and God-Talk*

I have referred to Bultmann's programme of demythologizing the Christian *kerygma*. But it is important to have a better understanding of

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theisms that are somewhat Christian, and though it emanates from the call for the demythologization of the Christian *kerygma*, nonetheless is not revisionist as it does not desire to be associated with Christian theism in any significant theological manner. It is a revolutionary theism that jettisons various Christian dogmas, and without apology. While Griffin's revisionist theism seeks to employ various Whiteheadian process notions to preserve panexperientialism and the afterlife, my hybrid minimalism has no such aim, though my appropriation of certain process and liberationist theistic ideas seeks to evade the classic objections to the traditional Christian theistic "proofs" as well as the problem of evil. Thus it is plain that, unlike the theology of Griffin, my theism is unorthodox and revolutionary, rather than merely revisionistic. Perhaps this is due in large part to the fact that Griffin is a Christian theologian who, unlike many orthodox Christian theists, seeks quite honestly and sincerely to preserve what he can of the Christian faith veritistically by way of revising it responsibly, while I am an agnostic philosopher who wants to get to the truth of the matter of God's possible existence, *come what may*. This is hardly intended to be a criticism of Griffin's work. Instead, my point here is simply to draw attention to the differences between Griffin's revisionist approach and my revolutionary one.

<sup>14</sup> For discussions of the approaches to the possible relationship between science and religion, see Ian G. Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1990), Chapter 1; *When Science Meets Religion* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 2000); S. L. Bonting, *Creation and Double Chaos* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), Chapter 1.

<sup>15</sup> Thus I see as highly problematic the presumptuous attempt to rescue Christianity that we find in Christian process apologists such as Philip Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Here I have in mind the words made in passing in Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science*, pp. 76–77.



his conception of demythologization insofar as it inspires part of my own conception of how to approach the problem of God. Bultmann's existentialist call to demythologize the primitive Christian *kerygma* involves the task of interpreting the Christian scriptures in a way that does not offend a modern scientific worldview while still retaining the most essential message of the *kerygma*. In short, the language of the scriptures must conform to contemporary knowledge-bases, understood in fallibilistic terms. And because of the fallibilist assumption of demythologization, each era will need to perform the task of demythologization for itself. Assumed here is a great degree of intellectual honesty between the self and God. But God is not otherworldly. Rather, God is with us ("Emmanuel") and seeks to work through us, as we are God's "ultimate transmuting" subjects. Thus there is a fundamentally existentialist core to Bultmann's programme: God acts in the world, not as a transcendent being, but as an immanent one.

Nonetheless, some have argued, it remains to be seen the extent to which the Bultmannian translation of ancient Christian myths into contemporary scientific language and concepts results in a genuine referent for "God" and other theistic concepts.<sup>17</sup> And this question holds as a challenge to theism whether or not basic theistic claims are linguistically reducible to non-theistic ones. For more than a simple yet comprehensive linguistic reduction is required for eliminability to occur here.

The reason why mere linguistic reduction of religious language to the language of, say, science, cannot straightaway entail the meaninglessness of religious language is due to the fact that G. Frege's Law of Substitutivity of Co-Referential Proper Names implies that such a reduction requires an identity relation between the informational contents of a religious claim, on the one hand, and the reductionist language, on the other. But it is precisely such an identity relation that shows that each claim or set of claims is substitutable for the other in co-referential proper names contexts. This implies that if "God" is meaningful, then the set of reductionist claims that capture "God" are meaningful, and vice-versa. But in no way does this automatically reduce "God" to meaninglessness.<sup>18</sup> A further argument is

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<sup>17</sup> R. Hepburn, "Demythologizing and the Problem of Validity," in A. Flew and A. MacIntyre, Editors, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1955), pp. 227f.

<sup>18</sup> Assumed here is that the principle of substitutivity preserves not only truth-value, but meaning between the terms substitutable one for another under the terms of substitutivity.

required in order to demonstrate that feat.<sup>19</sup> Until this argument is given, there is insufficient reason to reject outright the sense or reference of religious language.<sup>20</sup>

### *Minimalist Theism*

While my aim herein is not to defend to the end this hybrid minimalist theism, the view will be meant to stand the test of internal coherence as well as to evade the many objections to the traditional Christian idea of God. If this is successful, then major progress will be made concerning the problem of God, though not without the significant assistance of those philosophers and theologians cited along the way.

But for my hybrid minimalist theism to have any possible philosophical significance for the problem of God, it must be at least relatively clear at this preliminary stage of the discussion what God is supposed to be, and how God functions in the world. Moreover, this conception of God must be intuitively and rationally coherent. Otherwise, confusion will result.

I shall attempt, then, to provide a minimalist conception of God and theism that rests on no worse linguistic foundations than secular language. Of course, my hybrid minimalist theism accomplishes this in part by rejecting what it understands as inessential theistic beliefs, many of which are said to be found in traditional Christian theism. Nonetheless, some basic theistic claims remain, and must be shown to have at least as much sense and reference as do nontheological statements. I shall attempt to do this in devising my hybrid minimalist theism as a challenge to atheism. Unlike orthodox Christian theism, I shall employ language that uses a minimum of oblique terms so as not to obscure their truth-values. For “statements which fail to pay the necessary price for factuality . . . cannot be counted as statements of fact.”<sup>21</sup> The language of hybrid minimalist theism, I shall argue, is indeed informative in the sense that “God exists” is more plausible than so many leading atheists seem to believe.

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<sup>19</sup> An argument regarding the possible eliminability of collectivist language is provided in J. Angelo Corlett, *Analyzing Social Knowledge* (Totowa: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996), pp. 120–122.

<sup>20</sup> A helpful discussion of religious language is found in van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, Chapter IV.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Donovan, *Religious Language* (New York: Hawthorne Books, Inc., 1976), p. 20.

The question is whether or not in the end it constitutes a successful challenge to atheism.

In arguing thusly, I am not committed to the empiricist position that all religious language must be completely free of nonempirical meanings or implications. For such a view begs the question against theism. Given the nature of theism, one expects to reasonably believe that it might not accommodate well all empirical restrictions on the use of language in order for it to be informative.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, theism cannot philosophically afford to make too many nonempirical claims as not every theological claim is likely to be provided with empirical grounding. And my hybrid minimalist theism does not. My assumption here is that “Oblique language may well be tentative, vague and easily misunderstood, yet can nonetheless be capable of pointing us in the right direction, and thus carrying genuine informativeness.”<sup>23</sup>

The following, then, is my minimalist conception of God. In a sense, it is an attempt to provide a minimalist answer to the factual challenge (by Antony Flew,<sup>24</sup> John Hick,<sup>25</sup> among others) to all religious discourse, namely, that its essentially oblique language be shown to possess informative content. If God, being non-corporeal spirit, is anything in addition to truth and justice, it seems, God is, as Boethius states, good.<sup>26</sup> This I shall not dispute with the traditional Christian theist, though understandings of exactly what God’s goodness amounts to might be a bit unclear.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, it would seem that if God exists, then God is omnipresent because She<sup>28</sup> is spirit, and the most perfectly loving, just, and true being who is the

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<sup>22</sup> This point is based on the arguments of Ian Ramsey, *Religious Language* (London: SCM Press, 1957).

<sup>23</sup> Donovan, *Religious Language*, p. 65.

<sup>24</sup> Antony Flew, “Theology and Falsification,” in Antony Flew and A. MacIntyre, Editors, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1955), pp. 96–98.

<sup>25</sup> John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 93.

<sup>26</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Richard Green (trans.) (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1962), p. 62. It is reason that demonstrates this fact about God, according to him.

<sup>27</sup> For example, is God’s goodness to be found in cancerous illnesses that bring excessive pain to humans and nonhumans? Is God’s goodness to be found in human or other natural evils? Or, is it the case that there is some other origin of the goodness in spite of such evils? Is all goodness such that it originates from God, because, as many theologies have it, God is Good?

<sup>28</sup> I use the female pronoun to refer to God because it is my general writing style to use this pronoun in reference to entities that are genderless, or those that might be of mixed gender, or to refer to a generic someone who is either male

subject of our ultimate concern, the ground of being in the Tillichian senses of these expressions. But is God really omnipotent and omniscient in their strict senses as the Christian tradition suggests? Is God so powerful that She can at any time and in any epistemic circumstance believe both conjuncts of a logical contradiction without violating the law of noncontradiction? Can God make it rain in a particular place and at a particular time while making it not the case that it is raining there and then? The fact is that God is not powerful in this hyperbolic sense, as has already been noted or argued by several philosophers and theologians such as Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Ockham,<sup>29</sup> Paul Tillich, John A. T. Robinson, John Cobb, Jr., and David Ray Griffin.

In reply to these kinds of points, it might be noted that even the conservative Protestant Christian orthodox position on the nature of God admits that “It is no more a limitation of power that it cannot effect the impossible, than it is of reason that it cannot comprehend the absurd, or of infinite goodness that it cannot do wrong.”<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, though, it is said that “God cannot contradict Himself, He is able to do whatever He wills, . . .”<sup>31</sup> The precise nature of the power of God, then, is an open question. It is also unclear whether God is omniscient in some absolute sense. For if the problem of nonnatural evil is telling, then God’s omnibenevolence and omnipotence cannot make it such that God could permit evil if She knew

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or female. I am attempting to avoid complicity in centuries of sexist bias in referring to God, though I suppose I am participating in an opposite kind of sexism, or perhaps even a kind of patronizing of theological feminism as some might aver. But in light of the deeper problems facing the God hypothesis, this is the very least of the problems with which one ought to be concerned. If the God hypothesis is resolved in favor of some version of theism, then I surely will begin to address the nature of God in terms of gender, and if or how God ought to be refereed to along those lines. It is beyond the purview of this book to look beyond the most fundamental of theistic concerns, namely, whether or not God exists. Thus issues of gender are not considered, not even in the discussion of liberatory theisms. For it is assumed that whatever liberation theologies might bring to bear on the matter of God’s existence entails the freedom of the truly oppressed, regardless of gender.

<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the Catholic theological tradition, with few exceptions, holds to a notion of “relative omnipotence.” By this is meant that God is omnipotent relative to the things God cannot possibly do due to logical limitations. I owe this insight to Thomas Maloney.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977 reprint), p. 409. Originally published in 1871.

<sup>31</sup> L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 1 (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), p. 210.

about it in advance. As James Baldwin poignantly asks about God's omnibenevolence and the plight of blacks in the U.S.: "If His love was so great, and if He loved all His children, why were we, the blacks, cast down so far?"<sup>32</sup>

Of course, "It is not simply evil, but pointless and irredeemable evil, which would be incompatible with the character of God as Christians conceive him."<sup>33</sup> However, this being so, it is not the case that the agnostic critic of theism has the burden of showing "that there could be no way of justifying evil in the world" and that "it is logically impossible that God should have a morally sufficient reason to allow evil of the sort that we encounter in the world."<sup>34</sup> Philosophically speaking, the theist makes the claim that God exists. Against the truth of this claim, critics offer as evidence that evil exists and pose a challenge to the ideas of divine omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and omniscience, all properties that are attributed to God by most theists. Contrary to Basil Mitchell, then, it would seem that it is the theist rather than the atheist who has the burden of explaining the existence of various sorts of evil given the orthodox Christian definition of "God." This is not to deny, however, that the atheist has the burden of her own claims to defend, as we shall see in a subsequent chapter.

So there is serious question concerning the exact meaning and limits of God's omnipotence and omniscience, contrary to traditional Christian doctrine, assuming the idea of divine omnibenevolence. But does this spell doom for theism? Is there no retreat to a more plausible and viable form of belief in God that would render atheism dubious? Is the open-minded theist forced by logic and reasonableness to simply accept the self-contradictory nature of what I am calling the orthodox Christian religious belief in the nature of God? If so, does this spell the demise of orthodox Christian theism? Must it mean that the honest theist should become an atheist? Or, is it the case that theism worthy of the name (perhaps even Christian theism worthy of the name) can be rescued from the onslaught of criticisms that plague traditional Christian theism, for example? Is a nontraditional theism possible, one that reconceptualizes God in more philosophically viable and minimalist terms? Might God really be "less" (in terms of the quantitative content of the divine attributes are concerned) than so many seem to think She is? If so, might it imply that such a notion

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<sup>32</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: The Dial Press, 1963), p. 45.

<sup>33</sup> Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief*, p. 10.

of God would make God “too small”<sup>35</sup> to be worthy of prayer-offerings and worship? And even if it turns out that God is not what orthodox Christian theisms say She is, does this imply insurmountable conceptual trouble for theism? Or, is it rather the case that orthodox theism proclaimed and defended a hyperbolic conception of the nature and function of God? And if so, then surely theism itself cannot be blamed for such poor understanding on the part of many of its most spirited and most intelligent adherents.

### *Hybrid Theism*

I shall delve into some of the depths of radical Christian theology, especially process and liberation theologies, in order to provide what I take to be the strongest defense of theism against the assault of objections to God’s existence proffered over centuries by some of the most highly respected philosophers. I do not here recount those criticisms, or the traditional proofs for the existence of the God of traditional Christian theism. That is quite well-trodden philosophical and theological terrain, and I have little, if anything, to add to those discussions. However, in reconsidering the nature and function of God via theologies of process and liberation, I, like them, follow the call to demythologize the nature and function of God from what most think God is to what God actually is, should She exist at all. In so doing, it might turn out that there is a notion of God that, unlike that of the notion of deity often defended by traditional Christian theists, is plausible enough to evade the vast and powerful objections confronting the notion of God of traditional Christian theism. To the extent that this dialectical move succeeds, it will, all relevant things considered, represent an important step forward in the discourse about God’s existence.

In drawing on some of the conceptual resources of process and liberation theologies in providing answers to some important atheistic concerns, I am aware of the disagreements between these two approaches to theology. In fact, some liberation thinkers have distanced themselves from what they consider to be European theorizing altogether, including the secularization of Christian theology and its roots in the theological programme of Bultmann.<sup>36</sup> For example, while Griffin has done much especially in recent

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<sup>35</sup> J. B. Phillips, *Your God is Too Small* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961).

<sup>36</sup> José Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), Chapter 4.

years to set forth the case for process theism,<sup>37</sup> and liberation theologians such as James H. Cone and Gustavo Gutiérrez have done the same for their respective views,<sup>38</sup> my approach shall be ecumenical insofar as it seeks to bring these theologies into the forefront of discussion in analytical philosophy of religion. This is significant not only because most liberation theologians do not find process theology as friendly to their enterprise perhaps due to liberationist commitments to the authority of scripture and some of the orthodox doctrines of God, but also because most process theologians tend to merely mention the importance of racism and oppression in the world. In contrast, I shall employ key elements of each of these theistic perspectives and combine them into one voice that can supplant traditional Christian theism and thereby pose serious challenges to atheism's claim that it is not the case that God exists.<sup>39</sup>

### *Attacking Atheism*

One main purpose of my philosophical investigation into the problem of God is to discover whether or not atheism is sufficiently well-founded for

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<sup>37</sup> David Ray Griffin, "Process Philosophy of Religion," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 50 (2001), pp. 131–151; *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

<sup>38</sup> James H. Cone, *Speaking the Truth* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986); *Risks of Faith* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Essential Writings* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996).

<sup>39</sup> I am also cognizant of at least some of several other thinkers whose views about the nature of God seem remarkably similar to those found in the radical theologies I shall employ, especially with regard to my appropriation of process thought. F. Schleiermacher, for example, holds that God is that which is recognized by way of human experience and wherein God is the universe and the unity underlying it. The "Meliorist" theologians, also called "social theologians," of the 19<sup>th</sup> century held immanentist conceptions of God. And Josiah Royce called God "the immanent spirit of the community." One question facing such conceptions of God is whether E. G. Brightman was correct in thinking that they expand the notion of God so that we have "too much of God," including God as being responsible for evil in the world, thus posing conceptual difficulties for the idea of divine omnibenevolence. And at least as far back in the history of ideas as B. Spinoza, known among other things as that "God-intoxicated man," divine immanentism is defended. Thus my philosophical investigation into God's nature and function is cognizant of the fact that other immanentist thinkers predate those discussed herein. But since this project is not one in the history of ideas, but rather focused on particular problems related to the question of God, I beg the reader's forgiveness in not having paid due tribute to what other of the great minds throughout history have written on the subject.

us to call into question its rejection of theism on the basis of its allegedly refuting orthodox Christian theism. For if theism worthy of the name can answer or evade plausibly some or all of the objections to the traditional Christian notion of God, then this would appear to cast doubt on atheism's claim to plausibility insofar as it asserts (by definition of "atheism") that it is not the case that God exists. Indeed, it would expose the "Godless delusion," which is the delusional spell under which an atheist suffers when she mistakenly—often arrogantly—believes that the self-proclaimed refutation of one particular form of theism, such as traditional Christian theism, spells the justification of atheism. This delusion, it turns out, rests on the cluster of "errors of atheism," which are discussed in Chapter 2. What is needed are not more atheists who are as guilty of uninformed, dismissive, and bellicose dogmatism as are many orthodox theists.<sup>40</sup> What we need, as Harvey Cox states in reference to Umberto Eco, are "thinkers who know what they are talking about when they disagree with theologians, interlocutors who are incredulous but not principled skeptics." We need those who "may not themselves believe in God, but realize how arrogant it would be to declare . . . that God does not exist."<sup>41</sup> Like Eco, what we need are atheists who are genuinely open to the deepest questions of religious faith.<sup>42</sup> Why? Because not only is the question of God's existence "still viable and valuable, but that respectful disagreement on very basic issues is still possible."<sup>43</sup> This is precisely what I seek to bring to analytical philosophy of religion at this juncture.

So the contributions of this book are multifarious. Unlike most discussions within analytical philosophy of religion today that either constitute *apologia* of traditional Christian theism and assume a set of controversial ontological, epistemological, and metaphysical assumptions about the nature of God and what constitutes acceptable Christian faith, or simply assume with many atheists, on the other hand, that God does not exist, I shall challenge atheism (as it is set forth by some of its most philosophically sophisticated proponents) by revealing some fundamental logical and conceptual flaws some such philosophers have committed, and I shall not do so by defending traditional Christian theism. Rather, the theism I set

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<sup>40</sup> A similar point is found in David Lack, *Evolutionary Theory and Christian Belief* (London: Methuen, 1957), p. 18.

<sup>41</sup> Harvey Cox, "Introduction," in Umberto Eco and Carlo Maria Martini, *Belief or Nonbelief?* M. Proctor (trans.) (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1997), p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> Cox, "Introduction," pp. 5–6.

<sup>43</sup> Cox, "Introduction," p. 10.



forth is one that does not depend for its plausibility on any particularly or uniquely Christian doctrine as it seeks to be theologically neutral in the sense that its theology proper is minimalist, absent the rather burdensome conceptual baggage of most theologies whether Western or Eastern.

Moreover, on the assumption that, in the main, the objections of Immanuel Kant, David Hume, J. L. Mackie, and some others to the traditional theistic “proofs” for God’s existence are telling *against orthodox Christian theism*, it does not follow that atheism is justified in more than a rather weak sense as the justification of atheism is only as strong as the strength of the theism that it defeats. On the other hand, exposure of the fallacious reasoning of some leading atheists does not provide relief for defenders of orthodox Christian theism, as the latter cannot be resurrected merely by the interpolation of unorthodox theologies which themselves condemn orthodoxy in crucial ways.

The most plausible position at this juncture of the debate about God is the New Agnosticism. Its respect for certain radical theologies does not allow it to commit the atheist’s errors. But nor does it (blindly or otherwise) accept orthodox Christian faith or orthodox theism of any kind. If there is a future for God in the world, it must be at least the God of process and liberation theologies. Among other things, it must be a God whose workings in the world are reconcilable with sound science and justice for oppressed peoples. While this might not provide a complete account of a plausible or sound theism, it certainly points us in the right direction. In secularist theological terms, we might say that the matter of attempting to resurrect a viable conception of God in the contemporary paradigm “lies not in the stars, and not with God, but with ourselves.”<sup>44</sup> By this is meant that we must cast off the mantle of orthodox Christian theological antiquity and rethink the nature and function of God in terms that speak truth to power politically, socially, ethically, and scientifically. Hiding behind the masks of orthodox ideologies does no one any good. In particular, it does God (should She exist) no good to be misrepresented by such orthodox theological and religious arrogance and presumptuousness as is often the case. The time has truly arrived to discard the veriphobia<sup>45</sup> that prohibits most from following the arguments wherever they lead us. This applies to theists, atheists, and agnostics alike.

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<sup>44</sup> Cox, *The Feast of Fools*, p. 34.

<sup>45</sup> I borrow this term from A. I. Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 7–9.

*The New Agnosticism*

As a philosopher, I must conduct my investigation honestly and rigorously, and with as little bias as possible. Dissenting voices—even those that provide discomfort to us and, as Tillich might say, “shake our foundations”<sup>46</sup>—must be considered with all of the seriousness we can muster. Only then can we make intelligent and fair-minded decisions about the existence of God. Only then will we take (the problem of) God seriously. There are plenty of traditional Christian theists who believe this or that without honest and adequate reflection and consideration of evidence. On the other hand, there are numerous atheists who deny the existence of God but without having in a serious way considered alternative theologies to the traditional one in the Western tradition,<sup>47</sup> or even beyond that.<sup>48</sup> The world can certainly do without impudently nescient minds, regardless of their ideological persuasion. Perhaps what are most needed now are epistemically responsible cognizers, rather than close-minded atheists, theists, or agnostics.

It is understandable why popular Christianity would mistake God for a personal, supernatural, and transcendent being. But what is particularly opprobrious is that many leading atheists, including respected philosophers, continue to do battle with theists as if traditional Christian theism articulated the *only* notion of God that requires refutation in order to establish atheism. Yet this ignoring of more plausible theisms by atheists has, curiously, endured for generations, as noted by Ian Ramsey: “. . . ‘popular Christianity has always posited such a supreme personality’. But those who think in this way include not only ordinary Christians but also ‘our contemporary linguistic philosophers’ in so far as ‘for all their sophistication’ they still ‘continue to do battle’. . . for the existence or non-existence

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<sup>46</sup> This phrase is taken from Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948).

<sup>47</sup> For further ways in which to construe Christianity, see Ninian Smart, *In Search of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979).

<sup>48</sup> For just a few discussions of alternative ways of understanding God and religion, see Emile Durkeim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1915); Lewis M. Hopfe, *Religions of the World* (Beverly Hills: Glencoe Press, 1976); Robert E. Hume, *The World’s Living Religions* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959); John B. Noss, *Man’s Religions*, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1974); Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1976); *Worldviews* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1983); Huston Smith, *The Religions of Man* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1958).

of such a being.”<sup>49</sup> So not only is traditional Christian theism epistemically and religiously irresponsible for not taking dissenting theological voices sufficiently seriously, atheist philosophers are guilty of proclaiming that atheism is justified when they, considered collectively, have not even taken at most more than an occasional glance at the ongoing and sophisticated attempts to reconcile the most fundamental elements of Christianity with good science and philosophy. This reveals atheism (as it is argued by many leading atheists) to be presumptuous, ignorant, and superficial. How can so many atheists confidently proclaim that it is not the case that God exists, or even as some “more careful” atheists do, that it is probably not the case that God exists, if only one (popular) notion of God is defeated? Is that not a bit too akin to an athlete’s outperforming one (albeit popularly supported) contender, and then loudly and seriously proclaiming that she is the world’s best at that competition, without even attempting to recognize—much less compete against—other major competitors? Would we not refer to such a person as a rogue, foolish, misinformed, or even witless? And how much more embarrassing would it be if it turned out that the defeated athlete was not even close to being one of the best at that competition? I suggest that this is analogous to the situation that we have in philosophy of religion regarding atheism and its self-proclaimed defeat of theism.

However, as the agnostic Bertrand Russell implies, one need not be either a Christian in the traditional sense, or an atheist. Indeed, one ought not to be either, given the difficulties faced by each. Inspired not only by a host of Christian theologians of the past and present, but also by the most “profane” of agnostic philosophers such as Russell<sup>50</sup> and atheists like Mackie, I seek to clarify what is at stake in the debate concerning the existence of God, and to provide the most reasonable answer to the question of God’s existence given the main points of what has been argued thus far in the history of the debate about God’s existence. This is a tall order indeed, as many a thinker in centuries past attempted the same, and with limited results.

What is needed is a clarification of the basic issues and a clearing of the conceptual table in the debate about God, one that neither seeks to defend the existence of a particular notion of God come what may, nor one that

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<sup>49</sup> Citing John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), pp. 11, 12, 13, 40 [Ian Ramsey, *Christian Discourse: Some Logical Explorations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 63].

<sup>50</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Atheism: Collected Essays: 1943–1949* (New York: Arno Press, 1972).

seeks to boldly infer (however equivocally) that because one major notion of God is defeated that this somehow, by some mystical feat of logic, proves atheism. What we need is a New Agnosticism, one that seeks to evaluate the problem of God's existence only after seriously considering the various options before us, philosophically and theologically speaking. In the end, the New Agnosticism might lack sufficient reason to affirm some meaningful form of theism. But this does not mean that it fails to leave open the door for further inquiry. So it denies for the time being atheism's claim that it is not the case that God exists because the atheist has failed to demonstrate this in her haste to disprove a most implausible set of hypotheses in traditional Christian theism. But as clarified in the Preface, the New Agnosticism also disagrees with the claim that "God is dead"<sup>51</sup> insofar as this statement makes reference to the traditional Christian theistic idea of the nature and function of God. For this would appear to imply that that notion was alive to begin with. If the traditional notion of God is implausible, then that "God" never existed to begin with! And it is time that we become at least honest enough about God to recognize this as a theological datum.<sup>52</sup> As Robinson, following the demythologization programme of Bultmann and the existentialist theology of Tillich, argues, the crude notion of God being supernaturalistically "out there" or "up there" must be rejected as it is an obstacle to healthy religious faith.<sup>53</sup>

Suffice it to say that the New Agnosticism, with its serious consideration of an unorthodox hybrid minimalist theism, picks up where the "death of God" and radical theology movement entered Christian theology decades ago. Without apology, it seeks to bring with some depth various of the ideas of radical theology from the periphery of theological debate into the core of the philosophical discussion about God's existence. Only then, and if the evidence affords it, can atheists claim without equivocation and with more epistemic authority and trustworthiness that it is not the case that God exists. Only then, and if the evidence supports theism, can theists commit themselves to belief in God without uttering irresponsible nonsense.

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<sup>51</sup> By this I mean that the conceptual content of the sentence is empty.

<sup>52</sup> For more on these issues, see J. L. Ice and J. J. Carey, Editors, *The Death of God Debate* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967); D. L. Edwards, Editor, *The Honest to God Debate* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963). Also see Gabriel Vahanian, *The Death of God* (New York: George Braziller, 1957). For a philosophical perspective on the death of God idea, see, of course, Walter Kaufmann, Editor, *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: The Viking Press, 1954).

<sup>53</sup> Robinson, *Honest to God*, pp. 41f.

It is time to take the problem of God more seriously than ever before. We need a synthesis of philosophy of religion and some of the central themes of some radical theologies into dynamic conflict for the sake of discovering the truth about the question of God's existence and functioning in the world. But unlike the typical Western theistic approach, the one adopted herein assumes no starting point that affirms the existence of God, as does the fideist philosophy of religion of Alvin Plantinga.<sup>54</sup> But it also fails to deny the possibility of God, at least until all plausible options are seriously considered. For it is believed that the bringing of radical theologies into the forefront of philosophy of religion will effect a dramatically more fruitful and engaging dialectic in philosophy of religion that will challenge in tremendous ways atheism and theism alike to reconsider their respective pre-theoretical commitments. Unless all (or at least, many more) reasonable proposals about the existence of God are taken into serious consideration and analyzed, we are in no position to take leave of God<sup>55</sup> once and for all, whether this means to finally deny the existence of God, or to affirm the most plausible and adequate notion of the divine reality in the world.

One might wonder whether some form of agnosticism is the best answer to the problem of God and if it is even possible to encourage philosophers to consider more seriously the plausibility of radical theologies. Would it not be reasonable to think that as a result of this enterprise either theism or atheism will stand as the more plausible position on God? While this is a reasonable position to take, I shall take a more aporetic one, consistent with Socrates' arguments as represented in Plato's dialogues.<sup>56</sup> In other words, I shall take whatever meaningful progress can be made in answering plausibly criticisms of the traditional Christian theistic notion of God to warrant an invigoration of agnosticism rather than a simple acceptance of theism. And since in the end the investigation might eventuate in the repudiation of any theism worthy of the name, atheism cannot be ruled out absolutely. Hence, the New Agnosticism serves as a call to rethink the question of God, but in terms that have never been at the forefront of discussions in analytical philosophy of religion.

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<sup>54</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>55</sup> This phrase refers to the traditional Christian notion of God, and is borrowed from Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

<sup>56</sup> For more on Plato's dialogues and *aporia* in them, see J. Angelo Corlett, *Interpreting Plato's Dialogues* (Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing, 2005). Also see, of course, J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, Editors, *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

So the question remains: Can theism remake itself in order to evade the daunting problems raised against it by some atheists, or will it retreat into the comforts of the orthodox or neo-orthodox fideist Christian theologies of the likes of Augustine,<sup>57</sup> Karl Barth,<sup>58</sup> and Emil Brunner<sup>59</sup> who insist on effectively discontinuing or even blocking these vital discussions with appeals to the primacy of faith and revelation?

Unlike these thinkers, I assume a kind of evidentialist posture throughout, wherein “evidentialism” means that “there is a moral duty to proportion one’s beliefs to evidence, proof or other epistemic justifications for belief”<sup>60</sup> or acceptance. But reason, not revelation, must be our primary guide along the way. And whatever the challenges evidentialism faces because of the limits of reason, it nonetheless stands as the best hope we have in answering questions about God or other matters falling within the range of philosophical discourse and method. That reason is imperfect is surely no good reason to deny its legitimate role (during its better moments) as the arbiter of debates about the existence of God. As Allen Wood argues, “There are no matters in which letting factors other than the evidence influence our beliefs do not violate both our self-respect and to the legitimate claims our fellow human beings make on us as rational beings.”<sup>61</sup>

If God exists, then God expects us to be honest in our quest for truth about the problem of Her existence. And while it may be unreasonable for the atheist to demand that we understand everything there is to know about God in order for it to be reasonable to accept the claim that “God exists,”<sup>62</sup> it is equally unreasonable for the theist to conveniently assign

<sup>57</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, J. K. Ryan (trans.) (New York: Image Books, 1960).

<sup>58</sup> Karl Barth, *Anselm* (New York: Meridian Books, 1960); *Church Dogmatics*, Volumes 1–2, G. T. Thomson (trans.) (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955); *Evangelical Theology*, G. Foley (trans.) (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963).

<sup>59</sup> Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics*, Volumes 1–2, O. Wyon (trans.) (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1952).

<sup>60</sup> Allen Wood, “The Duty to Believe According to the Evidence,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 63 (2008), pp. 7–24.

<sup>61</sup> Wood, “The Duty to Believe According to the Evidence,” p. 24.

<sup>62</sup> Even on a significantly modified and non-hyperbolic idea of God’s nature and function, it is reasonable to expect that some aspects of divinity might remain beyond our understanding, at least for the time being until we discern them by reason. But this assumes that most of what is purported about God’s nature and function is quite understandable to the honest thinker. And it is not to say that there are some aspects of God that are by necessity beyond our comprehension, and that we ought to accept them nonetheless. Reasonable religion, and I might add any acceptable and healthy theology, ought to pass the test of reason at

everything we fail to understand to the mysteriousness of God. As Alfred North Whitehead argues, “The task of reason is to fathom the deeper depths of the many-sidedness of things. We must not expect simple answers to far-reaching questions. However far our gaze penetrates, there are always heights beyond which block our vision.”<sup>63</sup> Contrary to Søren Kierkegaard, Christian faith properly understood is not a blind leap into the dark backward.<sup>64</sup> Instead, it is *pistis*, an act of commitment to God.<sup>65</sup> It is neither contrary to reason nor the acceptance of dogma or creed, nor, as Thomas J. J. Altizer puts it, “radical inwardness or subjectivity,”<sup>66</sup> but rather an act of reasonable dedication to the will of the divine in the world. Religious faith ought, moreover, to be based on an honest search for truth from whatever quarters truth can be discovered.

The general aim of this prolegomenon of sorts to the philosophy of religion is the philosophical pursuit of truth as it pertains to matters of God’s existence. It is vital that this all-important issue be examined with both clarity and respect for responsible positions from various and opposing quarters.

### *Some Basic Assumptions*

At the close of *The Feast of Fools*, Cox writes of Tillich as the “most brilliant practitioner of the theology of culture”<sup>67</sup> and notes that “. . . no one

every turn. As Kai Nielsen states: “We cannot have faith in or accept on faith that which we do not at all understand” [Kai Nielsen, *Philosophy & Atheism* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1985), pp. 23–24]. Again, he writes: “Faith presupposes a *minimal understanding* of what you take on faith” (Nielsen, *Philosophy & Atheism*, p. 94).

<sup>63</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Humanities Press, 1929), p. 519.

<sup>64</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness Unto Death*, W. Lowrie (trans.) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954).

<sup>65</sup> Fred L. Fisher, *Jesus and His Teachings* (Nashville: Broadview, 1972). For contrary conceptions of faith, see William Ladd Sessions, *The Concept of Faith* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Kenneth W. Kemp, “The Virtue of Faith in Theology, Natural Science, and Philosophy,” *Faith and Philosophy*, 15 (1998), pp. 462–477. For a taxonomy of conceptions of faith, though not related so much to the orthodox Christian faith, and how faith relates to belief and acceptance, see Robert Audi, “Belief, Faith, and Acceptance,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 63 (2008), pp. 87–102.

<sup>66</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1966), p. 97.

<sup>67</sup> Cox, *The Feast of Fools*, p. 196.

writes without premises or a point of view. How to be aware of one's premises without being paralyzed by them remains one of the most persistent and fascinating problems with which any writer, theological or otherwise, must learn to contend."<sup>68</sup> It is in this spirit that I lay out the following philosophical assumptions on which I base my approach. I am a realist, ethically, epistemologically, and metaphysically. It is not my purpose to argue for these positions in this book. While as a philosopher I take skepticism seriously at every turn, I do not subscribe to strong forms of skepticism that are logically self-defeating, but rather to the Socratic attitude of continually doubting what I consider for possible acceptance. Epistemologically, I subscribe to a blend of coherentism and reliabilism.<sup>69</sup> Unlike some who deny the relevance and even utility of the laws of logic, I openly but not uncritically embrace them as philosophical advances in human knowledge. Logic and philosophical analysis, I believe, are the primary but not exclusive keys to human understanding, and this includes our understanding about the truth about the problem of God. They are the chief components of reason, which I assume shall be the primary arbiter of human discourse about the problem of God.

While my philosophical commitments are analytically mainstream, my theological commitments are minimalist. Since I was also trained in the Protestant Christian theological tradition, my entire discussion presupposes this framework of discussion. As an agnostic, I want to remain open to the possibility that "God exists" is true, or "It is not the case that God exists" is true. However, I do share some ideas in common with theological moderates and liberals within Christendom. First, I assume that the Christian scriptures are roughly accurate testimonials of some of the beliefs of some of the earliest followers of Jesus, though I do not grant special authority to them beyond that essential aim. I have insufficient reason to believe that these documents, utterly fascinating as they are to study, are divinely inspired, or have any special ethical, religious, or theological authority beyond that of revealing what some early Christians believed about matters of their religious faith. The balance of human reason at its best is a far better guide to ethics and truth than the contents of Christian scriptures.

Second, I assume with Boethius that, if God exists, God is omnibenevolent, but that God is also perfectly just and perfect truth. By this I mean that God would never do or support anything that is not good (I do not mean this in some utilitarian way), but that God always does or supports

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<sup>68</sup> Cox, *The Feast of Fools*, pp. 209–210.

<sup>69</sup> Corlett, *Analyzing Social Knowledge*, Chapters 5–6.



the right thing under any circumstance. In other words, God is morally infallible. Moreover, I mean that God is always on the side of justice and righteousness, so that to know God is to do justice. That God is truth means that She does not accept any false beliefs, or as Aunt Ester in August Wilson's play, *Gem of the Ocean* exclaims, "God don't know nothing but the truth."<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, whatever can be known is known by God, excluding the future. God is not fallible, epistemically speaking, though Her knowledge is limited. I assume that the love of God is or can be made to cohere with these and other truths about God's nature and function in the world.

Another of my assumptions is that there are, in principle, correct all relevant things considered answers to the questions of whether or not God exists and the nature of God. Truth, though context-sensitive, is objective, though not absolute. Furthermore, reason must be our primary guide in approaching and resolving these difficulties. No amount of anti-intellectualism can continue to guide us. Nor can question-begging appeals to the authority of what is deemed by sectarian bias to be divine revelation serve to reveal the truth of the matters for us. If there is a God, then—as most religious people believe—God gave us reason and a brain in which to use it effectively. To refuse to use reason in attempting to understand God is to become derelict in one's religious and epistemic duties. It is time that religious folk own up to the fact that if God exists, then reason is one of Her many and several gifts to humans and some nonhumans. And reason is that primary means by which God is to be understood—even when consulting revelation! After all, revelation admits of interpretation, and that requires the judicious use of reason. Are we to insult God by not using reason, especially regarding the most important questions in life and death? Besides, reason might well be precisely that gift from God by which we can best understand Her, an instrument that can and ought to guide the emotional aspects of human being in the world. Thus a search for the truth about God without reason is a mistake waiting to happen. Indeed, it is a fideistic error that has left many a theist mired in confusion. While it may be true that reason without faith is incomplete, it is surely true that faith absent reason is shallow theology disguised as genuine religiosity!

So reason can and ought to guide religious folk in asking in prayer to God for only what is reasonable because God is reasonable. If God exists, She is not some genie who grants things to those who request them whether

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<sup>70</sup> August Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), p. 54.

or not the requests are reasonable. This is especially true in a world in which reason and religion are all too often alienated from one another, often resulting in unjust wars, mass suicides, monetary fraud, and the like. The careful and proper use of reason, I suggest, can often lead us to truth, justice, and the good. And if there is a God, God possesses at least these properties.

But what precisely *is* reasonable or the right thing to do or believe? This is where we can gain much assistance from Socrates, who in Plato's *Euthyphro*<sup>71</sup> reveals for many a startling truth about what later became known as the divine command theory. To paraphrase the passage: Is something right because God says it is right, or does God say something is right because it is right? In other words, who or what makes something the right thing to do? If God makes something right, then God could have simply declared that everyone ought to become what we would deem evil. What if, as the puritans, Catholics, and other European invaders of the Americas believed, God declared that the "savages" of the Americas be destroyed and their lands stolen in the name of the doctrine of discovery and manifest destiny? What if, as many of these same folk sincerely believed, God declared that African persons ought to be enslaved in order to build a New World? Would this make genocide and slavery the right things to do?

Socrates asks us to think deeply about this problem, concluding that God, being reasonable, could never make such pronouncements as that would run counter to reason. God's judgments must be reasonable, and the implication is that if we do not use reason we are unlikely to understand what God wants us to do. Reason is what reveals whether or not something is correct, and God cannot, being omnibenevolent and omniscient (though not in the strict sense), act contrary to reason and do the right thing. So if God is to act in and through us, we must also act according to reason. This rationalistic theology is not new. But it has important implications for those who believe that they are genuinely religious. This implies that moral obligation finds its source in what the balance of human reason dictates about this or that circumstance.

Richard Swinburne is incorrect, then, to state that "God is thus a source of moral obligation—his commands create moral obligations."<sup>72</sup> This is to misunderstand fundamentally the nature of moral obligation. If God exists,

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<sup>71</sup> John M. Cooper and Hutchinson, Editors, *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

<sup>72</sup> Richard Swinburne, *Is There a God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 15.

then God is or ought to be the source of *religious* obligations, should there be any. But in light of the failure of divine command theory, God's commands are verifiably subject to moral standards that are discovered by way of reason. It is not, as Swinburne claims without supportive argument, that "some moral truths are moral truths quite independent of the will of God."<sup>73</sup> Rather, if Socrates is correct, then it is that all moral truths and obligations are that way.

With this rather concise list of presuppositions in mind, we can surge forward into a new discussion about the possibility of God's existence in analytical philosophy of religion. Further assumptions will be clarified as the discussion progresses and as they are relevant to certain points of argument or analysis. Assuming that many of the arguments of some leading atheists have posed serious and yet inadequately unanswered questions for orthodox Christian theism, my discussion continues the debate about God's existence with an analysis of atheism, followed by a refutation of it, followed by a discussion of the New Agnosticism, and ending with a statement and defense of my hybrid theism as a challenge to atheism.

Can theism withstand atheistic criticism? Can it be shielded from the "wolves of disbelief"<sup>74</sup>? Or, in the end, is atheism the most plausible position on the problem of God? Or, is there for the time being a more plausible, albeit tentative, position that serves as the inference to the best explanation about the most central theistic claim, "God exists"?

Part I of this book explores some of the many errors of atheism, while Part II discusses how the concept of God might be well-grounded in light of orthodox Christian theism's failure to provide an adequate foundation over the course of almost two centuries. In Part II, I graft some features of process and liberation theisms into a minimalist hybrid theism that evades the problems of orthodox Christian theism, posing a new challenge to atheism's claim that it is not the case that God exists, whether this claim is made explicitly or implicitly. The New Agnosticism employs this hybrid minimalist theism as a challenge to atheism and traditional Christian theism.

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<sup>73</sup> Swinburne, *Is There a God?* p. 15.

<sup>74</sup> Nielsen, *Naturalism and Religion*, p. 14.