

WAS JESUS GOD?

Richard Swinburne

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1 GOD

I assume in this book that, on the basis of evidence such as the general character of the natural world or a person's own religious experience, there is a moderate probability that there is a God of the kind worshipped by Christians, Jews, and Muslims. (I emphasize the 'moderate'. I am not even assuming that the existence of God is more probable than not, as I have argued elsewhere that it is.) In this chapter I shall spell out the nature of the claim that there is God. Then, in the remaining chapters of Part I, I shall set out the central theological doctrines of Christianity (that is, doctrines about the nature and actions of God), and give a priori reasons for believing them to be true. By 'a priori reasons' I mean reasons arising from the very nature of God and from the general condition of the human race why we should expect them to be true. Then, in Part II, I shall argue that, given the moderate probability on other evidence that there is a God and given these a priori reasons, the historical evidence about the life and Resurrection of Jesus and the subsequent teaching of the Church makes it very probable that these doctrines are true. This historical evidence provides what I shall call 'a posteriori' reasons.

The Nature of God

What I mean by my claim that there is a **God** is that there is (at least) one divine person, who is essentially omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly free, and eternal. I shall call this claim 'theism'; it is a claim which Christianity, Judaism, and Islam and many other religions share. I shall assume for the rest of this chapter that—as Judaism and Islam claim—there is only one divine person, and I will call him 'God'. For the next ten pages I shall spell out what it is for there to be a divine person. (I shall refer to God as 'he'; but of course, though personal, God is neither male nor female.) In Chapter 2 and thereafter I shall need to use the word 'God' in a

somewhat wider sense, in order to take account of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

A **person** is a being who has (or, when fully developed, will have) powers (to perform intentional actions, that is, actions which he or she means to do), beliefs, and free will (to choose among alternative actions without being compelled by irrational forces to do one rather than the other); when the beliefs and actions include ones of some sophistication (such as using language). I shall assume throughout this book that humans do have free will and so are persons. Ordinary human persons exist for a limited period of time, dependent on physical causes (their bodies and especially their brains) for their capacities to exercise their powers, form beliefs, and make choices. God is supposed to be unlimited in all these respects, and not to depend on anything for his existence or capacities.

God is supposed to be unlimited in his power; that is, **God is omnipotent**, he can do any action. He can make a physical universe exist, or move the stars, or sustain or abolish the physical causes which sustain humans in existence. He cannot do a logically impossible action, that is, an action which cannot be described without contradiction; and so he cannot make me both exist and not exist at the same time. But since it makes no sense to suppose that I could both exist and not exist at the same time, a logically impossible action is not really an action at all—any more than an imaginary person is really a person.

God is supposed to be unlimited in his beliefs; that is, **God is omniscient**; he has all true beliefs about everything (about which it is logically possible to have true beliefs), and in him they constitute not just beliefs but infallible knowledge. We know some things, and have false beliefs about other things. God, however, knows infallibly how many stars there are, whether it snowed in New York State on 1 January exactly 2 million years ago, and what you are now thinking about. (I will come back shortly to the issue of whether there are true beliefs which it is not logically possible for God to have.)

We humans have bodies. A body is a physical object through which we can make a difference to the world and learn about the world; and ordinary humans are tied down to acting and acquiring information through their bodies. I can only make a difference to the world by doing something with some part of my body—by using

my arm to move something, or my mouth to tell you something. And I can only learn about the world by stimuli landing on my sense organs (light rays landing on my eyes or sound waves landing on my ears, for example). God, being omnipotent and omniscient, is not tied down to acting on and learning about the world through one particular physical object, and so **God does not need a body**.

God is supposed to be a **perfectly free person** in the sense of one whose choices are in no way limited by, that is, influenced by, irrational forces. He only desires to do an action in so far as he sees a reason for doing it, that is, in so far as he believes that it is a good action to do. Paradoxically, any being who is perfectly free (in this sense) will inevitably do in any situation that action which he believes to be the best possible action to do, if there is such an action. The **best action** is that which there is most reason to do. Although we humans are not in general perfectly free, we are sometimes in this situation where we are not influenced by irrational forces. Suppose you have plenty of money and you meet someone who needs some special medicine to keep him alive which he is too poor to buy, then (unless there is some special reason why this would be a bad thing to do) the best action would be to buy the medicine for him. If you believe that this would be the best action, and are not influenced by irrational forces, you will buy the medicine.

Sometimes, however, a perfectly free being will have a choice between two or more possible actions, only one of which he can do, when he believes that none of these actions are better than the other actions. There is, he believes, no best action but there are two or more **equal best** actions. Then he must simply choose which action to do—for no reason at all. We humans are also sometimes in this situation where we are not influenced by irrational forces and have a choice between two or more equal best actions. Suppose that you have only a little money and you meet two people A and B, who both need the special medicine, and you have only enough money to buy medicine to keep one alive. Then although you should give the money to one of those in need, it might be an equal best action to give it to A, and an equal best action to give it to B. There may be no reason for doing one of these actions rather than the other. If you believe this and are not influenced by irrational forces, you will do one of these actions, but which you will do depends on your free choice.

However, unlike a perfectly free person, humans are sometimes influenced by irrational forces. In so far as someone believes that an action is good, they will have a desire to do it. Such desires are **rational desires**; they are in accord with reason. And in so far as someone believes that an action is bad, they will have a desire not to do it. But **humans are sometimes subject to irrational desires**, that is, desires to do bad actions, or desires to do actions less good than a best action, which are stronger than the desire to do the best action. (By one desire being stronger than another one, I mean that the person concerned feels more inclined to yield to it.) A perfectly free being is not subject to irrational desires. Humans, however, are sometimes subject to bad desires, or desires to do a less good action, stronger than any desire to do a best action. But since (given my assumption that humans have free will) irrational desires only influence us and do not compel us, we are free to make the better choice, although it requires an effort of will to do so.

A smoker can choose whether to smoke a cigarette or not. The smoker has reasons for smoking (he likes it) and reasons for not smoking (it will make him more prone to lung cancer). And he may conclude that the reasons for not smoking are better than the reasons for smoking; indeed, that it would be bad to smoke. And yet the smoker may have an irrational desire to smoke, a desire which is stronger than his desire not to smoke (in that he feels more inclined to yield to it); and then he has the choice of whether or not to yield to the desire to smoke.

So, given that humans have free will, there are two aspects to this free will. When we are uninfluenced by irrational desires, we sometimes have a free choice between (what we believe to be) two or more equal best actions. When we are influenced by irrational desires to do an action which is (we believe) bad or less good than a best or equal best action, we can choose whether to do the better action or to yield to the irrational desire.

It is because it is up to us what to do in these two kinds of circumstance that, if anyone had a belief beforehand about what we would do, we would be able to make that belief false. Suppose that I have a choice between mowing the lawn and watching the television; I believe that it would be the best action to mow the lawn but I am subject to a stronger irrational desire to watch the television. What I will do depends on my free choice at that time. If you believe beforehand that I will watch the television, I have

it in my power (by mowing the lawn) to bring it about that your belief proved false. Certainly if you know that my desire to watch the television is a strong one, you may rightly think it probable that I will watch the television, but you cannot be certain. It seems to follow that not even God can have an infallible true belief and so infallible knowledge about whether I will watch the television or mow the lawn. Generally **it looks as if it is not logically possible for God to know infallibly beforehand what a free agent will do** in such circumstances. But since God is omnipotent, it is only because he permits this that we have free will and are sometimes situated in circumstances where we are subject to irrational desires or have a choice between what we believe to be equal best actions. God is himself responsible for there being limits to his knowledge of how we will act; and he can take away our free will and so these limits to his knowledge of the future, whenever he chooses.

God himself, however, is supposed to be perfectly free and so not to be subject to irrational desires. So when there is an action which he believes to in the best available action, inevitably he will do it. Find since, being omniscient, he knows which actions are good and which are better than others, he will inevitably do the best action. He must, however, often have a choice between actions which he believes to be equal best; and for him this choice is simply the choice of which of equal best actions to do. It would seem to be an equal best action for God to arrange the initial state of the universe so that it eventually caused Uranus to rotate in a direction different from that of the other planets, as to arrange that state so that Uranus rotates in the same direction as the other planets. God cannot do both actions. It might have been an equal best action to choose Mary to be the mother of Jesus as to choose any of a number of possible mothers, but Jesus could have only one mother. And so on. But, since God is omnipotent, the range of incompatible equal best actions available to him is so much greater than the range available to us.

Further, God must often be in a situation where we cannot be, of having a choice between an infinite number of possible actions such that each action is, he believes, less good than some other action he could do. And since God knows which actions are good and which are better than others, this means a choice between an infinite number of actions, each of which is less good than some other action he could do. For example, animals which do not eat other animals are a good thing; they can be happy and loving. So

the more of them the better (given that they are spread out among an infinite number of planets, so that they do not crowd each other out). So however many such animals God creates, it would have been better if he had created more. (And he could still have created more, even if he created an infinite number of them.) So although not influenced by irrational forces, **God cannot always do the best action.** He cannot do this when two or more possible actions are equal best; or where—as in the example just given—there is no best or equal best possible action; and he has then to exercise his choice between the actions in an arbitrary way.

It may be, however, that when there is no best action available to God, there may be a **best kind of action** available to God, such that it would be better to do some action of that kind than to do any number of actions of any other incompatible kind. For example, God can create creatures of many different types, including angels, humans, and animals. If it were the case that it would be better to create at least some humans (even if he creates no angels or animals) than to create any number of angels and animals and no humans, or to do an act of any other incompatible kind, then it would be a best kind of action for God to create some humans, although there would be no best number for him to create. If God believed that this is the case, then, I suggest, God, being influenced by reason alone, will inevitably create some humans. And if he believes that there are two or more **equal best kinds of action** available to him he will inevitably do some action of one of these kinds. So God will inevitably always do the best or equal best action, or an action of a best or equal best kind, where there is such an action. But he cannot always do the best action because there will not always be a best action.

Good actions can be divided into those that are **obligatory** (or **duties**), and those that go beyond obligation and which we call **supererogatory**. I am obliged (it is my duty) to pay my debts, but not to give my life to save that of a comrade—supremely, ‘supererogatorily’ good though it is that I should do so. To fail to fulfil an obligation is to do something **wrong**. A person is in some way at fault for doing what is wrong, and if he believes that he is doing wrong, he is blameworthy for doing it; but he does not deserve praise merely for fulfilling his obligations (doing his duty). And he is in some way meritorious for doing what is supererogatory; and if he believes that he is doing something supererogatory, he

is praiseworthy for doing it. Positive obligations normally arise because of benefits received (I owe my parents much because they have done much for me) or because of commitments, explicit or implicit. I must keep my promises and pay my debts because I have explicitly committed myself to doing so. And I must feed my children because by bringing them into existence I have implicitly committed myself to doing so. Negative obligations—obligations not to do things—normally concern not damaging other people. It is wrong to steal or kill (possibly subject to some qualifications). Obligations are a limited set of good actions, and most of us can fulfil all our obligations, although sometimes we find ourselves with incompatible obligations. Although God cannot always do the best, he can always fulfil all his obligations. As the source of the existence of all other beings, he does not owe anyone anything as a result of benefits received or for any other reason; and since there is good reason to ensure this, he will ensure that he never enters into commitments which he could not fulfil. For example, he will never promise to one person that he will do some action and also to another person that he will not do that action. And since it is always a best action to fulfil an obligation when one has no conflicting obligations, **God will fulfil all his obligations.** Paradoxically, then, God, being perfectly free and omniscient, can do no bad action and above all (within the class of bad actions) no wrong action.

It follows from the argument of the last few pages that we must understand God being **perfectly good** as God doing no bad actions and many good actions, and always doing the best action or an equal best action (or action of a best or equal best kind) where there is one available to him.

God is also a **source of moral obligation** in that his command to us to do some action makes it obligatory for us to do that action when it would not otherwise be obligatory. Many truths of morality hold whether or not there is a God. Clearly it is good to feed the starving and obligatory to keep promises (possibly subject to certain exceptions), whether or not there is a God. But among truths of morality which hold independently of God is the truth that we have an obligation to please our benefactors (those who are the source of much good to us)—within limits. It is because of this that children have a (limited) obligation to please their parents (those who are not merely biological parents but nurturing

parents who feed, clothe, educate, and care for them in many other ways). And an obvious way to please benefactors is to obey their commands. But if there is a God, he is so much more the source of good things to us than are our parents. He keeps us in being from moment to moment, and all the good things which our parents and others provide for us they can provide only because God allows them to do so. So if God commands us to do some action, it will be our duty to do it. Maybe there are limits on what God has the right to command; having created humans as free rational creatures, perhaps he does not have the right to tell them what to do every minute of their lives. But, if so, being perfectly good, he will not command anyone to do what he has no right to command. For to command what you have no right to command is wrong.

God is **eternal**. But this has been understood in two different senses: either as the claim that God is timeless (he does not exist in time, or at any rate in our time) or as the claim that God is everlasting (he existed at every moment of past time, exists now, and will exist at every moment of future time). In my opinion the timeless view is incompatible with everything else that religious believers have wanted to say about God. For example, it does seem strongly that God being omniscient entails that he hears the prayers of humans at the same time as they utter them; yet on the timeless view God does not exist at the same time as (simultaneously with) any moment on our timescale. For this and other reasons I shall in future understand God being eternal as God being **everlasting**; though it might be possible to re-express much of the rest of what I have to say on the assumption that God is timeless rather than everlasting. Being everlasting, God is unlimited in the time during which he exists.

Because God is omnipotent, and omniscient, everything else that exists exists only because he knowingly causes or allows someone else to cause it to exist. Hence he could have prevented the universe from ever existing and he could annihilate it at any moment. So its existence from moment to moment depends entirely on him; in that sense **God is creator and sustainer of the universe** and of all that it contains. The universe may or may not have always existed—we do not know whether the universe had a beginning. But if it had a beginning, God brought it into existence then; and if it has always existed, God has always kept it in existence.

Being omnipotent, omniscient, etc. are properties of God. God, like individual persons, stones, tables, and planets, is a thing; philosophers sometimes call these things 'substances'. **Substances have properties:** a certain table may have the properties of being brown, square, and weighing 5 kg. Some of the properties of substances are essential to them. A property is an essential property of a substance if that substance could not lose that property without ceasing to exist. Being brown is not an essential property of my table: the table could continue to exist if it were repainted red. But occupying space is an essential property of the table: if it ceased to occupy space, it would cease to exist. The properties of substances include both their monadic properties (properties which they have in themselves apart from their relations to other substances) and their relational properties (their relations to other things). Being brown, square, and weighing 5 kg are monadic properties; whereas 'being 10 ft away from a wall' or 'being made by a carpenter' or 'being an elder brother' are relational properties.

God is supposed not merely to be omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly free, and eternal, but to be so essentially—if God ceased to be omnipotent, omniscient, or perfectly free, he would cease to exist; and (since being eternal is also an essential property of God) a being who could cease to exist could never have been God at all. God cannot commit suicide. **These properties are essential to God.** They belong to God's nature or essence. But **God has other properties which are non-essential** (accidental or contingent); he has these accidental properties because he chooses to have them. Among these properties is being creator and sustainer of the universe: the universe exists only because he chooses that it should exist. The exact degree of our power, knowledge, and freedom are, of course, not properties which make ordinary human persons the particular people we are (although we need to have, at least when fully developed, some degree or other of these properties). I remain the same person if I forget many things or lose the power to move my legs.

Ordinary human persons could be duplicated in that there could be a different person with exactly the same properties, monadic and relational, as I have. There could be in another world exactly like this world in all other respects another person exactly like me in his appearance, mental life, and history, and writing

a book entitled *Was Jesus God?* Or, instead of me, my parents could have produced a different son with exactly the same genes, who went on to have the experiences and live the life which I have lived—without me ever having existed. You can see this by imagining yourself being shown before your birth a film of what will happen in a future world (and which would picture in some way all the experiences and thoughts which the inhabitants of different bodies would have). You would still want to know whether you would live in that world and which body and which experiences and thoughts you would have. Philosophers sometimes express this point by saying that each human being has (as well as some properties essential for all humans) a **thisness**, which is not a property or combination of properties but something underlying those properties which makes him or her the particular human they are. Although ordinary humans have thisness, not all things have thisness. Gravitational fields, for example, do not have thisness; any gravitational field which had the same strength, shape, and size as the one which surrounds our earth would be that gravitational field. And it is a controversial issue whether fundamental particles, such as electrons and protons, have thisness; and so, for example, whether the world would be any different if you exchanged the positions of two electrons.

Does God have thisness? Fairly few philosophers and theologians have faced this question, but those who have claim in effect that God does not have thisness. For example, Augustine (the great theologian who was a bishop in North Africa in the fourth century AD) denied that God is properly called a ‘substance’ that ‘has’ properties. God, Augustine claimed, is more properly called an ‘essence’ because he ‘is’ his properties. That is, the essential properties of God which I have listed (and perhaps deeper properties from which these derive) are what makes God God. This means that things couldn’t be different in the respect that a different God (with all the same properties as the actual God) was in charge of the universe. For any being who had all the same properties as the actual God would be the actual God. For reasons of a kind which I shall give later in this chapter, I think that Augustine’s view is correct: if there is a God, **God does not have thisness**. If so, then it will be an aspect of the divine nature that he has no thisness; it will not be a contingent feature of God. We shall see in Chapter 2 that, if God has thisness, there are important consequences for the doctrine of the Trinity.

As well as having the properties which I have analysed so far, God is supposed to be in some sense a ‘necessary being’, but, like ‘eternal’, this has been understood in different senses. Some philosophers hold that God is a logically necessary being in that ‘There is no God’ involves a contradiction. That seems to me manifestly false. ‘There is no God’ makes a coherent claim (does not involve a self-contradiction) which we can understand, even if we believe it to be false. But all theists wish to maintain that **God is an ontologically necessary being** in that his existence is not contingent on anything else: no other individual or physical or metaphysical principle causes (or has any share in causing) the existence of God. But how this is to be understood depends on whether there is more than one divine person, and so I shall postpone discussion of this issue until Chapter 2.

Reasons to Believe That There Is a God

Different people have different reasons for believing that there is a God. Some people have deep private ‘religious’ experiences, as it seems to them, of the presence of God. Others believe that there is a God on the basis of testimony; that is, because their parents or teachers or priest tell them that there is a God, and they think their parents or whoever are knowledgeable and trustworthy. It seems to me that **religious experience** provides a good reason for believing—so long as that experience is overwhelming, and you don’t know of any strong objections to the existence of God. If we didn’t believe that what it seems to us obvious that we are experiencing (perceiving or feeling) is really there, when there are no good reasons for doubting that that thing is really there, we couldn’t believe anything. And the **testimony** of others that there is a God also provides a good reason for believing—so long as everyone tells us the same thing, and we don’t know of any strong reasons why they might be mistaken. If we didn’t believe what others told us, for example, about history or geography, until we had checked it out for ourselves, we would have very few beliefs. But I think that very few people have overwhelming religious experiences, and in the modern world most people come into contact not merely with those who tell them that there is a God but also with those who tell them that there is no God,

and most people are aware of strong objections to the existence of God.

So I think that most people in the modern world need to have their experiences or the testimony of others reinforced by reasons to suppose that the objections to the existence of God do not work. But instead or as well as such reasons, they also need a positive argument for the existence of God which starts from very obvious observable data if they are to have good reason to believe that there is a God. And for some people such an argument will provide the sole basis for their belief. Arguments of this kind are called **arguments of natural theology**. I believe that there is a good argument for the existence of God from the most general features of the universe. I have given this argument in other places, including in the short companion book *Is There a God?*. All I can do here is to show what kind of argument it is.

Theism, the claim that there is a God, is an **explanatory hypothesis**, one which purports to explain why certain observed data (or evidence) are as they are. Many scientific or historical hypotheses are explanatory hypotheses: they purport to explain data which the scientist has observed in his laboratory or the historian has discovered in the course of an archaeological investigation. **Such a hypothesis is probably true in so far as it is a simple hypothesis which leads us to expect the data which are otherwise unexpected** (that is, make it probable that those data would occur, when otherwise it is not probable that they would occur), **and fits in with** 'background evidence' or '**prior evidence**'. Suppose that there has been a burglary: money has been stolen from a safe. The detective puts forward the hypothesis, to explain the money having been stolen, that John robbed the safe. If John did rob the safe, it would be quite probable that his fingerprints would be on the safe, that someone might report having seen him near the scene of the crime at the time it was committed, and that money of the amount stolen might be found in his house. These are data to be expected with some modest degree of probability if John robbed the safe, and much less to be expected if he did not rob the safe; they therefore constitute positive evidence, evidence favouring the hypothesis. On the other hand, if John robbed the safe, it would be most unexpected (it would be most improbable) that many people would report seeing him in a foreign country at the time of the burglary. Such reports would constitute negative

evidence, evidence counting strongly against the hypothesis. I shall call evidence of either kind **posterior evidence**, the consequences to be expected or not to be expected if the hypothesis were true. In so far as a hypothesis makes it probable that we would find all the data we find, and in so far as it would be improbable that we would find these data if the hypothesis were false, that increases the probability of the hypothesis. The more probable it is that we'd find the data if the hypothesis were true, and the more improbable it is that we'd find the data if the hypothesis were false, the more probable the data make the hypothesis.

But a hypothesis is only rendered probable by data in so far as it is **simple**. Consider the following hypothesis as an explanation of the detective's positive data: David stole the money; quite unknown to David, George dressed up to look like John at the scene of the crime; Tony planted John's fingerprints on the safe just for fun; and, unknown to the others, Stephen hid money stolen from another robbery in John's garage. If this complicated hypothesis were true, we would expect to find all the positive data which I described, when it is not nearly as probable otherwise that we would find the data. But the data do not make the complicated hypothesis probable, although they do make the hypothesis that John robbed the safe probable; and that is because the latter hypothesis is simple. A hypothesis is simple in so far as it postulates few substances and simply describable properties, few kinds of substances and simply describable properties, including properties of behaving in simple ways. The detective's original hypothesis postulates only one substance (John) doing one thing (robbing the safe) which leads us to expect the data; while the rival hypothesis which I have just set out postulates many substances (many persons) doing different things.

But as well as the posterior evidence of the kind which I illustrated, there may be background evidence, or **prior evidence**: evidence which is not a (probable) consequence of the truth or falsity of the hypothesis in question, but comes from an area outside the scope of that hypothesis. We may have evidence about what John has done on other occasions, for example, that he has often robbed safes in the past. This latter evidence would make the hypothesis that John robbed the safe on this occasion much more probable than it would be without this evidence. Conversely, evidence that John has lived a crime-free life in the past would

make it much less probable that he robbed the safe on this occasion. A hypothesis fits with such prior evidence in so far as the prior evidence makes probable a theory (e.g. that John is a regular safe-robber), which in turn makes the hypothesis in question more probable than it would otherwise be.

The criteria for assessing the detective's hypothesis apply generally to assessing hypotheses proposed by scientists or historians. If a scientist's data are such as he expects to find (that is, are such as it is probable will occur) if his hypothesis is true, that makes the hypothesis more probable than it would be otherwise. If they are such as he expects not to find (that is, are such as it is probable will not occur) if the hypothesis is true, that makes the hypothesis less probable than it would be otherwise. The simpler the hypothesis, the more probable it is; and a very simple hypothesis is a lot more probable than any other hypothesis. And if the hypothesis is concerned only with a narrow field (e.g. the behaviour of a single planet), it has to fit with what we know about the wider physical world (e.g. how other planets behave). For many hypotheses there may be no relevant prior evidence, and the greater the scope of a hypothesis (that is, the more it purports to tell us about the world), the less prior evidence there will be. For a very large-scale theory of physics (such as quantum theory) there will be few physical phenomena apart from those within its scope (which it purports to explain), and so little, if any, prior evidence.

The data (the **posterior evidence for theism**) to which arguments of natural theology typically appeal include the most general features of the universe: that every particle of matter behaves in exactly the same lawlike way as every other particle (obeys the same 'laws of nature', for example, Newton's law of gravity); that the initial state of the universe (the Big Bang) and the laws of nature are such as to bring about the eventual existence (some 13 billion years later) of human beings; and that these humans are conscious beings (have a mental life of thought, feeling, and choice). In *Is There a God?* and elsewhere I argue that, in virtue of God's omnipotence and perfect goodness, it is quite probable that these data would occur if there were a God (because he would bring them about); and very improbable that they would occur if there were no God.

The way in which I have spelled out the hypothesis of theism earlier in this chapter has the consequence that **theism is a very simple hypothesis**. It postulates the existence of one entity (one

god, not many gods), with very few very simply describable properties. A person with no limits to his power, knowledge, freedom, and life is the simplest kind of person there could be. Infinite power is power with zero limits. Infinite knowledge is knowledge with zero limits because it involves no limit (except one imposed by logic) to the number of well-justified true beliefs. Perfect freedom means that the person's choices are unlimited by irrational desires. Eternity means no temporal limit to life. And God being ontologically necessary, meaning that there are no others on whom he depends, obviously fits well with his other properties. It is also simpler to suppose that God has these properties essentially, for that makes God a more unified being; it means that the divine properties not merely do not, but could not, come apart. And it is simpler to suppose that God is what he is solely in virtue of his essential properties; that is, he has **no underlying 'thisness'**—for that is a more economical supposition. It means that it is not an extra truth about how things are that this God rather than that God is in charge of the universe. If God does not have thisness, any God in charge of the universe would be the same God as any God in charge of the universe. God being what he is in virtue of the essential properties which I have listed makes God not quite a person in the sense in which we are 'persons'.

Theism is such a wide-ranging hypothesis (it purports to explain all the most general features of the universe) that there is **no prior evidence**; all the evidence (whether positive or negative) is within its scope—posterior evidence. So if I am right that theism is a very simple hypothesis, which makes it quite probable that there would be a universe with the most general features which I have described when this would be very improbable otherwise, there is a good argument from this posterior evidence to the probable existence of God. In arguing in this way, I have sought to articulate a rigorous argument of a kind which many philosophers, Christians, Jews, Muslims, and others have been giving for the past two or three thousand years.

Theodicy

Not merely do most people need positive arguments in favour of the existence of God if they are to have good reason to believe

that there is a God, but they also need grounds to believe that arguments against the existence of God do not work. And that in particular means grounds to believe that arguments against the existence of God from the fact that there is much pain and other suffering in the world do not work. Like many other philosophers, I have attempted to produce a 'theodicy' (an explanation of why a good God would allow suffering), among other places in *Is There a God?* It attempts to show that it is not improbable that, if there were a God, such suffering would occur.

The basic structure of my theodicy, which is relevant to subsequent chapters of the present book, is as follows. A good God who creates humans does not merely want to make us happy (in the sense of doing what we want to be doing). He wants us to be good people and to be happy in being good people, and he also wants us to become good people by our own choices. **God wants to give us deep responsibility for ourselves and each other.** And he wants us to choose to exercise our responsibility in the right way. So he takes a big risk with us. He gives us free will and power to make a difference to our own future and to the future of each other, and leaves it up to us how we choose to exercise our power. Our choices, as I noted earlier, are influenced by our desires, but, given that we have free will, they are not fully determined by them. We can only have deep responsibility for ourselves if we have the power to ruin our lives (for example, by taking heroin), or alternatively to live greatly worthwhile lives. We can only have responsibility for others if it really is up to us whether things go well or badly with those others; so we must have the power to hurt them or neglect them, as well as the power to benefit them. And if we are to have great responsibility, God must allow us to hurt each other a lot. Humans are so made that each time we make a good choice, it becomes easier to make a good choice next time; and each time we make a bad choice, it becomes easier to make a bad choice next time. If I tell the truth today when it is difficult, it will be easier to do so again tomorrow. But if I lie today, it will be harder to avoid lying tomorrow. So gradually over time we change the desires which influence us, and **we may eventually form either a very good character or a very bad character.**

However, if the only suffering in the world were that caused by humans (or allowed to occur through human negligence), many of us would not have very much opportunity to make those crucial

choices which are so important for forming our characters. **Humans need the pain and disability** caused by disease and old age if we are to have the opportunity to choose freely whether to be patient and cheerful, or to be gloomy and resentful, in the face of our own suffering; and the opportunity to choose freely to show or not to show compassion to others who suffer, and to give or not to give our time and money to helping them. God cannot do the logically impossible: he cannot give us the freedom to hurt each other and at the same time ensure that we won't. Hence if God is to give us the great goods that I have described, he must provide us with bad desires and pain and other suffering in significant strength—at least for the short period of our earthly lives. I am not claiming that he must provide these bad things, only that he must provide them if he is also to give us the great good things. I am inclined to think that it would be an **equal best action for God to create humans** with the great goods which I have described together with the bad things which must accompany them, **and an equal best action for God not to create humans** with either the good things or the bad things.

As our creator and benefactor who provides for us lives full of so many good things, **God has the right to impose on some of us bad things**—not just bad desires, but suffering—and to allow us to be hurt by others, if this is necessary for our own well-being or the well-being of others. Parents have a very limited right to allow their children to suffer for the sake of some good to others. They have the right to send a daughter to a neighbourhood school which she will not enjoy very much, in order to cement community relations. And they have the right to entrust a younger son to the care of an elder son, even if there is a risk that the elder son will hurt the younger son to some degree, in order that the elder son may have the responsibility for his younger brother. It is nevertheless **a great privilege to be of use to someone else**, not just by what you choose to do but by what you are allowed to suffer. The girl sent to the neighbouring school is privileged to be allowed to contribute to cementing community relations by her less than enjoyable schooling. The rights of parents over children are, however, very limited because it is only to a very limited extent that they are the source of the existence and well-being of their children. God, who keeps humans in existence from moment to moment and gives them all their limited powers and freedom,

has a far greater right to impose suffering on humans for some good purpose. But in my view God's right to impose suffering is also limited: he must provide lives for us in which there is more good than bad. When we take into account the great benefit of life itself and the great benefit to any sufferer of the privilege of being of use to others, there will be few earthly lives in which the bad exceeds the good (except in those cases where a person chooses to live a life of this kind). But if there are any humans in whose lives (not as a consequence of their own choices) the bad exceeds the good, God has an obligation to give to those humans at least a limited life after death in which the good exceeds the bad; and in his omnipotence he can and must do this.

Such is the very broad outline of my theodicy. A theodicy is a necessary part of a natural theology, which most of us need if we are to have a good reason to believe that there is a God.

Christian Doctrines

Christianity makes certain further claims about God, what he is like and what he has done and will do, beyond those described in the opening section of this chapter. The purpose of this book is to discuss these further claims, the doctrines which distinguish Christianity from other religions. Most of these doctrines concern Jesus, a Jew who was born around the first year of the Christian era (AD 1), lived and taught in what is now Israel and its surrounding territories, and died in about AD 30, crucified by the occupying Roman army at the instigation of the Jewish authorities. (Since Christians regarded him as the 'Messiah', the new king whom God had promised for Israel, they called him 'the Christ', meaning 'the anointed king'.) Some of these doctrines are fairly easy-to-understand historical claims: for example, the Resurrection of Jesus (that he rose from the dead in his human body three days after his Crucifixion). Other doctrines are sophisticated metaphysical doctrines: for example, the doctrine of the Trinity, that there are three divine 'persons', 'the Father', 'the Son', and 'the Holy Spirit', who together form one God; and the doctrine of the Incarnation, that Jesus was 'the Son', the second person of the Trinity who (while remaining divine) became human in Jesus. And Christian doctrines also include certain moral doctrines, that is, specifically

Christian views about which actions are good or bad, obligatory or wrong.

I claimed earlier that an explanatory hypothesis is probably true in so far as it is a simple hypothesis which fits in with 'prior evidence' and leads us to expect data which are not otherwise to be expected. I pointed out that, when we are considering theism, the hypothesis that there is a divine person, and our data are the most general phenomena we can observe, there will be no prior evidence. But we come now to the more detailed hypothesis of Christian theism (the specifically Christian doctrines about God). We will already have a view about how probable is theism by itself ('bare theism') on the evidence described earlier (our own religious experience, the testimony of others, and the very general features of the universe, and also the data of pain and other suffering). All this evidence taken together gives a certain degree of probability to the existence of God (that is, that there is a divine person of the kind described earlier); and the more probable it makes the existence of God, the more probable it makes Christian theism. For clearly Christian theism can be true only if bare theism is true; but since Christian theism makes further claims beyond those of bare theism, this earlier evidence will not make Christian theism as probable as it makes bare theism.

The earlier evidence which formed the posterior evidence for bare theism forms the **prior evidence for Christian theism**. The reader must consider (in the light of arguments to be found in *Is There a God?* or elsewhere) how probable or improbable that evidence makes the hypothesis of bare theism (as I have expounded it). The more probable it makes bare theism, and the more probable bare theism makes Christian theism (that is, the more probable it is that, if there is a God, the specially Christian doctrines about him are true), the more probable it makes Christian theism. To the extent to which this holds I shall say that Christian theism 'fits in' with the prior evidence. That prior evidence therefore gives a certain **prior probability** to Christian theism (it provides a priori reasons for believing it to be true); and the better Christian theism fits in with that evidence, the greater is that prior probability.

I contrast this prior evidence with the **posterior evidence for Christian theism**, which is the historical evidence about Jesus and the subsequent Christian Church. (This provides a posteriori reasons for believing Christian theism to be true.) In so far as the

historical evidence is to be expected if Christian theism is true and not otherwise (that is, in so far as Christian theism makes it probable that this historical evidence will occur, when it would not be probable otherwise), that will raise the probability of Christian theism well above its prior probability, and give it what is called its **posterior probability**, its probability on the total available evidence.

The prior evidence for Christian theism will make it probable (to some degree, large or small) that there is a God of the kind which I have analysed earlier, in particular an omnipotent and perfectly good God. And **God's perfect goodness makes it probable that he will do certain things** rather than other things. For we have some understanding of what a good person will do. Good people try to make other people happy, happy in doing and enjoying worthwhile things (but not happy in causing pain to others). Good people try to help other people for whom they are responsible (for example, their own children) to be good people themselves. Good people seek to share what they have with others and to cooperate with others in all these activities. Good people forgive those who make reparation and ask for forgiveness. But also, as I claimed earlier, good people may sometimes to a limited extent and for a limited period allow those for whom they are responsible to suffer and to cause others to suffer if only by so doing can some good purpose be achieved.

We derive this understanding of what it is to be a good person by reflecting on what a good ordinary human person will do. But a divine person of course, although personal, is different from ordinary human persons. And so we must reflect what difference it would make to how a good person would act if there were no limits to his power, knowledge, etc., and if he were the source of the existence from moment to moment of all other things. I shall be suggesting in subsequent chapters that this prior understanding of what God is likely to do in virtue of the sort of being he is gives us some prior reason for supposing the various Christian doctrines to be true. What they tell us (for example, that God became human, or provided atonement for our wrongdoing) is, I shall be arguing, the sort of thing that it is probable that a God would do—just as, if John is a habitual criminal, that makes it probable that he will commit another crime. But such reflection can only give us *some* idea of what God is likely to do. There are many different equally good actions

which a good God might do, some of them incompatible with each other. It might be equally good, for example, for God to let us try to discover for ourselves some moral truths (for example, whether abortion and euthanasia are always wrong or sometimes permissible), or to tell us all the answers to disputed moral questions. It is good for God to let us try to discover these things for ourselves; but it is also good for us to know the answers in order to help us to avoid doing what is wrong, and if we haven't had total success in discovering all the answers for ourselves, it might be equally good for God to reveal the answers to us, as to let us go on trying to discover them. And even if moral reflection tells us that God would be quite likely to do a certain action (for example, to reveal moral truths to us), it cannot tell us when and where he will do this. Analogously, mere reflection on the fact that John is a habitual criminal will show that he is likely to commit another crime, but it cannot tell us when and where he will do this. In both cases we need posterior evidence.

In the case of divine action, the **posterior evidence is historical evidence** that such and such an event has occurred in human history which it is to some extent probable that God would bring about and would have been unlikely to occur unless God had brought it about; for example, evidence that some prophet rose from the dead. I shall be arguing that God has reason to reveal certain truths to us via a prophet, and that to show that what the prophet teaches is indeed a revelation from God he needs to associate that teaching with a great miracle, a violation of laws of nature which God alone can bring about. So if we have evidence that some prophet who taught what (in virtue of its content) looks like a revelation from God, and was killed for that teaching, subsequently rose from the dead, that is—I shall be arguing—posterior evidence that what the prophet taught is true. The posterior evidence is evidence of the occurrence of an event which the prior evidence gives us some reason to expect, but about which we need posterior evidence to make it overall probable that it occurred and to inform us where and when it occurred. The stronger the prior evidence (that is, the more probable it makes the existence of God), the weaker the posterior (historical) evidence may be while still making it overall probable that Christian doctrines are true. And even if the prior evidence (e.g. from natural theology) for the existence of God is not very strong, still if the posterior evidence for Christian doctrines

is strong, it may yet make those doctrines overall probable, and thereby, of course, make theism itself probable.

While different kinds of Christians (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, monophysite, 'Nestorian', Anglican, and Protestant) have slightly different beliefs from each other, I shall be concerned only with the **central doctrines of Christianity, common to virtually all Christians** from very early in the Christian era. These consist, as I noted earlier, of historical, metaphysical, and moral doctrines. I shall group together the central doctrines of the two former kinds and call them 'theological doctrines' (doctrines about the nature of God and his actions in the world). These were all formulated in what was for a thousand years the common creed of virtually all Christians, **the Nicene Creed**, given its final form by the Council of Constantinople in AD 381. (It is called the 'Nicene Creed' because the Council of Constantinople claimed that this creed put into words the main claims of the Council of Nicaea held in AD 325. The group of those who rejected this creed (called 'Arians') very soon became a small minority, and then virtually ceased to exist.) The Creed (translated from the original Greek) is as follows:

I believe in one God, Father almighty, maker of Heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of the same essence as the Father; through him all things were made. For us humans and for our salvation he came down from the heavens, and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became human. He was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried; he rose again on the third day, in accordance with the Scriptures, and ascended into the heavens, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who together with Father and Son is worshipped and together glorified; who spoke through the Prophets. In one Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins. I await the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come.

In the next five chapters of Part I, I shall elucidate these theological doctrines; and also lay out the a priori reasons for believing them to be true. That is, I shall consider how far it is

made probable by the nature of God as described so far (and by very general facts about the human race and its history) that God would have the further nature and act in human history through some human person and community in the way that these doctrines claim that he acted through Jesus and his church. Then, in Part II, I shall analyse the posterior evidence, the relevant historical evidence which we need in order to show that these doctrines are true of Jesus and the Christian Church—in particular that Jesus was not merely a human person but God living among us. So I shall be discussing each of the doctrines contained in the Creed both in Part I (to consider the a priori reasons for believing them) and in Part II (to discuss the a posteriori reasons.) I have entitled Part I ‘God Loves Us’ because I shall argue that God would have shown his love for humans by acting in human history in the way described. I have entitled Part II ‘God Shows Us That He loves Us’ because I shall be arguing that (given the prior evidence) the posterior (historical) evidence shows that God has acted in this way. But before coming to the issue of how we may expect God to act towards us, I argue that we may expect God to have a certain nature beyond that which I have described so far, a nature asserted by the Creed in the doctrine of the Trinity.