

THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD

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THE EXPERIENCE OF

GOD

BEING, CONSCIOUSNESS, BLISS

David Bentley Hart

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For Richard Shaker
—whose vision of reality often differs
from mine considerably—
in gratitude for forty years of
an indispensable friendship

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Introduction

This is either an extremely ambitious or an extremely unambitious book. I tend to think it is the latter, but I can imagine how someone might see it quite otherwise. My intention is simply to offer a definition of the word “God,” or of its equivalents in other tongues, and to do so in fairly slavish obedience to the classical definitions of the divine found in the theological and philosophical schools of most of the major religious traditions. My reason for wanting to do this is that I have come to the conclusion that, while there has been a great deal of public debate about belief in God in recent years (much of it a little petulant, much of it positively ferocious), the concept of God around which the arguments have run their seemingly interminable courses has remained strangely obscure the whole time. The more scrutiny one accords these debates, moreover, the more evident it becomes that often the contending parties are not even talking about the same thing; and I would go as far as to say that on most occasions none of them is talking about God in any coherent sense at all. It is not obvious to me, therefore, that their differences really amount to a meaningful disagreement, as one cannot really have a disagreement without

some prior agreement as to what the basic issue of contention is. Perhaps this is not really all that surprising a situation. The fiercest disputes are often prompted by misapprehensions, and some of the most appalling battles in history have been fought by mistake. But I am enough of a romantic to believe that, if something is worth being rude about, it is worth understanding as well.

This book, then, will be primarily a kind of lexicographical exercise, not a work of apologetics, though that is a distinction that cannot be perfectly maintained throughout. Honestly, though, my chief purpose is not to advise atheists on what I think they should believe; I want merely to make sure that they have a clear concept of what it is they claim not to believe. In that sense, I should hope the more amiable sort of atheist might take this book as a well-intended gift. I am not even centrally concerned with traditional “proofs” of the reality of God, except insofar as they help to explain how the word “God” functions in the intellectual traditions of the developed religions (by which I mean faiths that include sophisticated and self-critical philosophical and contemplative schools). I shall touch on the essential logic of those proofs where necessary, but shall not devote more attention than necessary to the larger arguments surrounding them. There are many texts that do that already (a few of which are listed at the end of this book), and there is no great need for yet another. By the same token, this will not be a book about theology either, or even about any single religion. The current fashion in belligerent atheism usually involves flinging condemnations around with a kind of gallant extravagance, more or less in the direction of all faiths at once, with little interest in precise aim; I would not want to be any less generous in response.

I know, of course, that there are many persons who object in principle to any fraternization between different religious vocabularies, for various reasons—anxiety for creedal purity, fear that any acknowledgment of commonalities with other faiths might lead souls astray from the “one true path,” intellectual scruples regarding the contradictory claims made by different traditions, fear of a colonialist domestication of “the other,” a firm conviction that no religion can be true unless all others are clearly false, and so on—but those sorts of concerns leave me icily unmoved. For one thing, all the major theistic traditions claim that humanity as a whole has a knowledge of God, in some form or another, and that a perfect ignorance of God is impossible for any people (as Paul, for example, affirms in the letter to the Romans). For another, one can insist on absolutely inviolable demarcations between religions at every level only at the price of painfully unrefined accounts of what each tradition teaches. Religions ought never to be treated as though each were a single discrete proposition intended to provide a single exclusive answer to a single exhaustive question. It goes without saying that one generally should not try to dissolve disparate creeds into one another, much less into some vague, syncretistic, doctrinally vacuous “spirituality.” It should also go without saying, however, that large religious traditions are complex things: sometimes they express themselves in the dream-languages of myth and sacred art, at other times in the solemn circumlocutions of liturgy and praise, at others in the serenity of contemplative prayer—or in ethical or sapiential precepts, or in inflexible dogmas, or in exactly precise and rigorous philosophical systems. In all of these modes they may be making more or less proximate approaches to some dimension of truth; inevitably, however, they must employ

many symbols that cannot fully explain the truth in itself, but can only point toward it. It may be that one faith is truer than any other, or contains that ultimate truth to which all faiths aspire in their various ways; but that still would hardly reduce all other religions to mere falsehood. More to the point, no one really acquainted with the metaphysical and spiritual claims of the major theistic faiths can fail to notice that on a host of fundamental philosophical issues, and especially on the issue of how divine transcendence should be understood, the areas of accord are quite vast.

Certainly the definition of God I offer below is one that, allowing for a number of largely accidental variations, can be found in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Vedantic and Bhaktic Hinduism, Sikhism, various late antique paganisms, and so forth (it even applies in many respects to various Mahayana formulations of, say, the Buddha Consciousness or the Buddha Nature, or even to the earliest Buddhist conception of the Unconditioned, or to certain aspects of the Tao, though I do not want to upset Western converts to Buddhism or philosophic Taoism by insisting on the point here). There is an old Scholastic distinction between religious treatises written “*de Deo uno*” and those written “*de Deo trino*”: between, that is, those that are “about the one God” known to persons of various faiths and philosophies and those that are “about the Trinitarian God” of Christian doctrine. I want to distinguish in a similar way between, on the one hand, metaphysical or philosophical descriptions of God and, on the other, dogmatic or confessional descriptions, and then to confine myself to the former. This may leave some readers disappointed, and some may wish that I had written a book marked either by more philosophical completeness or by more evangelical zeal. But clarity is a precious

thing, to the degree it can be achieved, if only because it can spare us the effort of needless boring arguments.

Not that clarity is always welcome, at least not by everyone. A straw man can be a very convenient property, after all. I can see why a plenteously contented, drowsily complacent, temperamentally incurious atheist might find it comforting—even a little luxurious—to imagine that belief in God is no more than belief in some magical invisible friend who lives beyond the clouds, or in some ghostly cosmic mechanic invoked to explain gaps in current scientific knowledge. But I also like to think that the truly reflective atheist would prefer not to win all his or her rhetorical victories against childish caricatures. I suppose the success of the books of the “new atheists”—which are nothing but lurchingly spasmodic assaults on whole armies of straw men—might go some way toward proving the opposite. Certainly, none of them is an impressive or cogent treatise, and I doubt posterity will be particularly kind to any of them once the initial convulsions of celebrity have subsided. But they have definitely sold well. I doubt that one should make much of that, though. The new atheists’ texts are manifestoes, buoyantly coarse and intentionally simplistic, meant to fortify true unbelievers in their unbelief; their appeal is broad but certainly not deep; they are supposed to induce a mood, not encourage deep reflection; and at the end of the day they are probably only a passing fad in trade publishing, directed at a new niche market. It is hardly surprising, moreover, that the new atheist vogue should have arisen chiefly in English-speaking countries, where philosophical subtlety is not a virtue very assiduously cultivated in schools or universities. The movement’s only real interest is that it is symptomatic of a larger cultural forgetfulness on the

part of believers and unbelievers alike. I may occasionally mention the new atheist books below, as providing examples of the sort of confusions that I want to get past, but I do not think they warrant more attention than that. And I would appeal to any thoughtful atheist who might wander this way to accept that I say this with good cause and in good faith. The human longing for God or the transcendent runs very deep—perhaps far too deep to be trusted, but also too deep to treat as mere primitive folly—and it has produced much good and much evil in human history. It lies at the heart of all human culture. All civilizations to this point have grown up around one or another sacred vision of the cosmos, which has provided a spiritual environment and a vital impulse for the arts, philosophy, law, public institutions, cultural revolutions, and so on. Whether there will ever be such a thing as a genuinely secular civilization—not a mere secular society, but a true civilization, entirely founded upon secular principles—is yet to be seen. What is certain is that, to this point, most of the unquestionably sublime achievements of the human intellect and imagination have arisen in worlds shaped by some vision of transcendent truth. Only a thoughtless person can possibly imagine that the vast majority of those responsible for such achievements have all clung pathetically to an understanding of the transcendent as barbarously absurd as the one casually presumed in the current texts of popular unbelief. We really ought to put such things away and discuss these matters like adults.

Finally, just as a proleptic defense against certain objections I think I can anticipate, I want to make a few simple points. The first is that, however idiosyncratic my method may sometimes seem, I shall restrict myself to the most classical definitions of God, those

that have the authority of centuries of reflection behind them. This is important to stress for a number of reasons. For one thing, my experience has been that, whenever one begins to describe God in unapologetically metaphysical terms in the context of the current debates, one of the perfunctory accusations that routinely comes floating down from the atheist galleries is that one is only resorting to such cloudy abstractions because religious thought has been backed into a corner by advances in the sciences, which have progressively diminished the area that God has to occupy. Now, the notion that any discovery of empirical science could possibly reduce God's circumstances, so to speak, or have any effect whatsoever on the logical content of the concept of God or of creation is one of the vulgar errors I wish to expose below. But the more important point here is that there is absolutely nothing novel about the language I use in this book; it is a faithful digest of the primary claims made about the nature of God in the traditions I have named above. Far from being some weak, etiolated remnant of the more robust flora of the age of faith, it is the strongest and most comprehensive set of claims about God that it is possible to make. There is no note of desperation or diffidence in this language; it forthrightly and unhesitatingly describes a God who is the infinite fullness of being, omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient, from whom all things come and upon whom all things depend for every moment of their existence, without whom nothing at all could exist.

Even when that much is established, however, the more persistent sort of skeptic will often then assert that, be that as it may, it hardly matters what the philosophers and theologians may think, because the "common believer" has only a hazy notion of any of

that, and “most people” think of God in a much more primitive way. On the one hand, this is an entirely irrelevant argument. It is always true, for any shared body of knowledge, conviction, or belief, that the principles and logic of the whole “system” are most fully known only to a few individuals who have gone to the trouble to study them. As a rule, for instance, most persons have only a vague, metaphorical, and largely pictorial understanding of the findings of the sciences; they may know a little *about* particle physics or palaeontology or molecular biology, but they do not really understand any of it, and even what little they know they accept on the authority of others. That would hardly make it intellectually respectable for, say, a young earth creationist to reject the evolution of species or the vast antiquity of the earth based solely on the crude, indistinct, popular misconceptions that “most people” have about such matters. And much the same is true in every sphere of thought—philosophical, political, economic, aesthetic, religious, or what have you. An honest and honorable critic of any idea will always seek out and try to understand the strongest possible formulations of that idea, as well as the most persuasive arguments in its favor, before attempting its refutation. On the other hand, however, I have to note that in this case the skeptic’s complaint is not really true anyway, or at least not nearly as true as he or she imagines. Certainly the average believer may have very little knowledge of the history of metaphysics or the technical language of philosophy, and might not be able to formulate propositions regarding the logic of divine transcendence with the practiced ease of some saturnine old Jesuit in some Midwestern Catholic college’s philosophy faculty or of some frail but strangely effervescent Vedantist sadhu lecturing his disciples by the banks of the Ganges

in Benares. Nevertheless, if one asks that average believer certain questions about what he or she understands God to be, the answers will often be in principle perfectly concordant with the more arcane formulae of the metaphysicians: that God is Spirit, incorporeal, not an object located somewhere in space, not subject to the limitations of time, not a product of cosmic nature, not simply some craftsman who creates by manipulating materials external to himself, not composed of parts, but rather residing in all things while remaining perfectly one, present to us in the depths of our own beings . . . (and so forth). As a practical reality, the God of faith and the God of the philosophers are in many crucial respects recognizably one and the same.

The last point I want to make here is that this book is to a great degree a rather personal approach to the question of God. I do not mean that it is subjective or confessional; rather, I mean that it takes the structure of personal experience—not mine particularly, but anyone’s—not only as an authentic way of approaching the mystery of the divine but as powerful evidence of the reality of God. In a sense, the perspective from which I write might vaguely be described as “Platonic.” I start from the conviction that many of the most important things we know are things we know before we can speak them; indeed, we know them—though with very little in the way of concepts to make them intelligible to us—even as children, and see them with the greatest immediacy when we look at them with the eyes of innocence. But, as they are hard to say, and as they are often so immediate to us that we cannot stand back from them objectively, we tend to put them out of mind as we grow older, and make ourselves oblivious to them, and try to silence the voice of knowledge that speaks within our own experi-

ences of the world. Wisdom is the recovery of innocence at the far end of experience; it is the ability to see again what most of us have forgotten how to see, but now fortified by the ability to translate some of that vision into words, however inadequate. There is a point, that is to say, where reason and revelation are one and the same. I know that, in putting the matter thus, I risk losing the sympathy of a large number of readers—both rationalists and fideists, both the skeptical and the devout—but I hope my meaning will become clear in what follows. God is not only the ultimate reality that the intellect and the will seek but is also the primordial reality with which all of us are always engaged in every moment of existence and consciousness, apart from which we have no experience of anything whatsoever. Or, to borrow the language of Augustine, God is not only *superior summo meo*—beyond my utmost heights—but also *interior intimo meo*—more inward to me than my inmost depths. Only when one understands what such a claim means does one know what the word “God” really means, and whether it is reasonable to think that there is a reality to which that word refers and in which we should believe.

PART ONE



God, Gods, and the World

A man who is asleep and deeply dreaming still usually has some awareness of the real world around him, and often this awareness shapes his dream. This means in turn that, while he sleeps, his dream is the only form in which he can know and interpret the world that he inhabits. He hears a wind chime ringing somewhere outside his open window, but in his dream it is transformed into the tolling of a bell in a high tower on a distant hill. A breeze enters at the window and passes over him, but to him it is the wind blowing through the valley in which he stands as he gazes upward toward that tower. The wind also causes the leaves of a tree below his window to rustle softly, but to him it is the sound of reeds stirring along the banks of a stream nearby, as a golden snake slips silently into the flowing water. The first pale light of morning reaches him from the window, but to him it is the last pale light of evening, before the night entirely descends over the valley. He hears the voice

of someone who loves him trying to rouse him gently from his sleep, because it is time for him to awake, but he hears it as the mysterious and vaguely menacing voice of a stranger, coming from far away, and from some place he cannot see.



“God” Is Not a Proper Name

I

An absolutely convinced atheist, it often seems to me, is simply someone who has failed to notice something very obvious—or, rather, failed to notice a great many very obvious things. This is not any sort of accusation or reproach. Something can be incandescently obvious but still utterly unintelligible to us if we lack the conceptual grammar required to interpret it; and this, far from being a culpable deficiency, is usually only a matter of historical or personal circumstance. One age can see things that other ages cannot simply because it has the imaginative resources to understand what it is looking at; one person’s education or cultural formation may have enabled him or her to recognize meaning where others will find only random disorder. If a man raised in a culture without any written language, for instance, or anything analogous, were to happen upon an abandoned city built by a vanished civilization that long ago copiously recorded its history, literature, philosophy, and music in indelible ink on imperishable paper, and stored the whole archive in a great and indestructible library, every-

thing he could ever hope to know about that ancient people would be laid out before him in those books; but it would mean nothing to him. The situation would not be entirely hopeless: sooner or later he or one of his compatriots would probably realize that the letters of that unknown alphabet were more than bland decorative motifs pointlessly preserved in irregular sequences, and would begin to grasp the mysterious principle behind them. Even then, though, real understanding would lie only at the end of a long and excruciatingly laborious process.

This may be a somewhat defective metaphor, however; I am not even entirely sure how I wish it to be taken, or whether it constitutes more of an exaggeration or an understatement. Seen in one way, certainly, contemporary atheist discourse is not separated from the language of the great theistic traditions by anything as vast as the abyss separating that illiterate explorer from the meaning of those texts. If it were, things might be much simpler. Unfortunately, one of the more insidious aspects of today's public debates over belief and unbelief is that they are often sustained by the illusion that both sides are using the same words in the same way; since there are no immediately obvious linguistic barriers to overcome, each side understands the other just well enough to be deceived into thinking that both are working within the same conceptual frame. There are times when that illiterate explorer's blank stare of incomprehension, accompanied by a long tentative silence, would be dearly welcome. Seen in another way, however, the separation may actually be a great deal more radical than my metaphor suggests. After all, once the illiterate culture has solved the enigma of those texts and penetrated their fascinating veils of symbols, it might find a people much like its own on the other

side, with many of the same beliefs and intuitions and expectations of the universe. I sometimes wonder, however, whether in the case of modern atheism and theistic tradition what is at issue is the difference between two entirely incommensurable worlds, or at least two entirely incommensurable ways of understanding the world. It may be that what the atheist lacks the conceptual means to interpret may be nothing as elementary as a foreign language or an alien medium of communication, but rather the very experience of existence itself.

In the end, though, I doubt that the problem is really as extreme as all that. I retain a belief, however naive, in a sort of universal grammar of human nature, which makes it possible to overcome any cultural or conceptual misunderstanding; and, without discounting the immense power of culture to shape and color our encounter with the one world that we all together inhabit, I also believe there are certain common forms of experience so fundamental to human rationality that, without them, we could not think or speak at all. They make all other experiences possible, from the most quotidian to the most extraordinary; they underlie and animate all the great ventures of the human intellect: art, science, philosophy, and so forth. Starting from that most primordial level, reciprocal understanding is always in principle possible, assuming there is enough good will on both sides. All I want to do in the pages that follow is to attempt to explain, as lucidly as I can, how traditional understandings of God illuminate and are illuminated by those experiences.

That may seem a somewhat minimalist project, I know, but the conviction behind it is not; in fact, it could scarcely be more "maximal." Just to make clear what my peculiar prejudices are, I

acknowledge up front that I do not regard true philosophical atheism as an intellectually valid or even cogent position; in fact, I see it as a fundamentally irrational view of reality, which can be sustained only by a tragic absence of curiosity or a fervently resolute will to believe the absurd. More simply, I am convinced that the case for belief in God is inductively so much stronger than the case for unbelief that true philosophical atheism must be regarded as a superstition, often nurtured by an infantile wish to live in a world proportionate to one's own hopes or conceptual limitations. Having said this, though, I have to qualify it, because it is a much more limited assertion than it at first appears to be. I do not mean that there is anything intellectually contemptible in being formally "godless"—that is, in rejecting all religious dogmas and in refusing to believe in the God those dogmas describe. One might very well conclude, for instance, that the world contains far too much misery for the pious idea of a good, loving, and just God to be taken very seriously, and that any alleged creator of a universe in which children suffer and die hardly deserves our devotion. It is an affective—not a strictly logical—position to hold, but it is an intelligible one, with a certain sublime moral purity to it; I myself find it deeply compelling; and it is entirely up to each person to judge whether he or she finds any particular religion's answer to the "problem of evil" either adequate or credible. I also do not mean that there is any deep logical inconsistency in an attitude of agnostic aloofness from all theologies and spiritual practices; one either finds them plausible or one does not. When I say that atheism is a kind of obliviousness to the obvious, I mean that *if* one understands what the actual philosophical definition of "God" is in most of the great religious traditions, and *if* consequently one

understands what is logically entailed in denying that there is any God so defined, *then* one cannot reject the reality of God *tout court* without embracing an ultimate absurdity.

This, it seems to me, ought to be an essentially inoffensive assertion. The only fully consistent alternative to belief in God, properly understood, is some version of "materialism" or "physicalism" or (to use the term most widely preferred at present) "naturalism"; and naturalism—the doctrine that there is nothing apart from the physical order, and certainly nothing supernatural—is an incorrigibly incoherent concept, and one that is ultimately indistinguishable from pure magical thinking. The very notion of nature as a closed system entirely sufficient to itself is plainly one that cannot be verified, deductively or empirically, from within the system of nature. It is a metaphysical (which is to say "extra-natural") conclusion regarding the whole of reality, which neither reason nor experience legitimately warrants. It cannot even define itself within the boundaries of its own terms, because the total sufficiency of "natural" explanations is not an identifiable natural phenomenon but only an arbitrary judgment. Naturalism, therefore, can never be anything more than a guiding prejudice, an established principle only in the sense that it must be indefensibly presumed for the sake of some larger view of reality; it functions as a purely formal rule that, like the restriction of the king in chess to moves of one square only, permits the game to be played one way rather than another. If, moreover, naturalism is correct (however implausible that is), and if consciousness is then an essentially material phenomenon, then there is no reason to believe that our minds, having evolved purely through natural selection, could possibly be capable of knowing what is or is not true about reality as

a whole. Our brains may necessarily have equipped us to recognize certain sorts of physical objects around us and enabled us to react to them; but, beyond that, we can assume only that nature will have selected just those behaviors in us most conducive to our survival, along with whatever structures of thought and belief might be essentially or accidentally associated with them, and there is no reason to suppose that such structures—even those that provide us with our notions of what constitutes a sound rational argument—have access to any abstract “truth” about the totality of things. This yields the delightful paradox that, if naturalism is true as a picture of reality, it is necessarily false as a philosophical precept; for no one’s belief in the truth of naturalism could correspond to reality except through a shocking coincidence (or, better, a miracle). A still more important consideration, however, is that naturalism, alone among all considered philosophical attempts to describe the shape of reality, is radically insufficient in its explanatory range. The one thing of which it can give no account, and which its most fundamental principles make it entirely impossible to explain at all, is nature’s very existence. For existence is most definitely not a natural phenomenon; it is logically prior to any physical cause whatsoever; and anyone who imagines that it is susceptible of a natural explanation simply has no grasp of what the question of existence really is. In fact, it is impossible to say how, in the terms naturalism allows, nature could exist at all.

These are all matters for later, however. All I want to say here is that none of this makes atheism untenable in any final sense. It may be perfectly “rational” to embrace absurdity; for, if the universe does not depend upon any transcendent source, then there is no reason to accord the deliverances of reason any particular au-

thority in the first place, because what we think of as rationality is just the accidental residue of physical processes: good for helping us to acquire food, power, or sex but probably not very reliable in the realm of ideas. In a sense, then, I am assuming the truth of a perfectly circular argument: it makes sense to believe in God if one believes in the real power of reason, because one is justified in believing in reason if one believes in God. Or, to phrase the matter in a less recursive form, it makes sense to believe in both reason and God, and it may make a kind of nonsensical sense to believe in neither, but it is ultimately contradictory to believe in one but not the other. An honest and self-aware atheism, therefore, should proudly recognize itself as the quintessential expression of heroic irrationalism: a purely and ecstatically absurd venture of faith, a triumphant trust in the absurdity of all things. But most of us already know this anyway. If there is no God, then of course the universe is ultimately absurd, in the very precise sense that it is irreducible to any more comprehensive "equation." It is glorious, terrible, beautiful, horrifying—all of that—but in the end it is also quite, quite meaningless. The secret of a happy life then is either not to notice or not to let it bother one overly much. A few blithe spirits even know how to rejoice at the thought.

II

There have been atheists in every age, of course, but much of modern Western atheism is something quite novel in human history: not mere personal unbelief, and not merely the eccentric doctrine of one or another small philosophical sect, but a conscious

ideological, social, and philosophical project, with a broad popular constituency—a cause, a dogma, a metaphysics, a system of values. Many modern atheists object to that description, of course, but only because they are deceiving themselves. When it first arose, however, like any new creed, modern atheism had to win its converts from other adherences; and so its earliest apostles were persons who had for the most part been formed by a culture absolutely soaked in the language, images, ideas, and sentiments of belief. All of them had at least some understanding not only of the nature of religious claims but of the pathos of faith. No matter how much the new convert may have hated his or her native religion, a complete ignorance of its guiding ideas or of its affects and motives was all but impossible. And this remained the case until only fairly recently. Now, however, we have arrived at an odd juncture in our cultural history. There has sprung up a whole generation of confident, even strident atheist proselytizers who appear to know almost nothing about the religious beliefs they abominate, apart from a few vague and gauzily impressionistic daubs or aquarelle washes, and who seem to have no real sense of what the experience of faith is like or of what its rationales might be. For the most part, they seem not even to know that they do not know. It is common now for atheist polemicists (A. C. Grayling is a particularly dazzling example here) to throw off extraordinarily sure and contemptuous pronouncements about the beliefs or motivations or intellectual habits of Christians or of religious persons in general, only to end up demonstrating an almost fantastic ignorance not only of remarkably elementary religious tenets, but of the most rudimentary psychology of belief. And, in general, what is most astonishing about the recent new atheist bestsellers has not

been the patent flimsiness of their arguments—as I have noted, they are not aimed at an audience likely to notice or to care—but the sheer lack of intellectual curiosity they betray.

This is not a very terrible indictment, I suppose. No one is obliged in the abstract to be curious about religious claims. Still, though, if one is going to go to all the trouble of writing a book about the deficiencies of religious ideas, one should probably also go to the trouble of first learning what those ideas are. The major religions do, after all, boast some very sophisticated and subtle philosophical and spiritual traditions, and the best way for the enterprising infidel to avoid recapitulating arguments that have been soundly defeated in the past is to make some effort to understand those traditions. The physicist Victor Stenger, for instance, wrote a book not long ago with the subtitle *How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist*. Had he only inquired, any decently trained philosopher with a knowledge of the history of metaphysics, ontology, and modal logic could have warned him of the catastrophic category error in that phrase—suggesting as it does a fundamental misunderstanding not only of the word “God” but of the word “science” as well—but apparently he did not inquire, and as a consequence the book he wrote turned out to be just a long non sequitur based on a conceptual confusion and a logical mistake. Or consider Richard Dawkins: he devoted several pages of *The God Delusion* to a discussion of the “Five Ways” of Thomas Aquinas but never thought to avail himself of the services of some scholar of ancient and mediaeval thought who might have explained them to him, perhaps while strolling beside the somberly gliding Thames on some long, lustrous Oxford afternoon. As a result, he not only mistook the Five Ways for Thomas’s compre-

hensive statement on why we should believe in God, which they most definitely are not, but ended up completely misrepresenting the logic of every single one of them, and at the most basic levels: Not knowing the scholastic distinction between primary and secondary causality, for instance, he imagined that Thomas's talk of a "first cause" referred to the initial temporal causal agency in a continuous temporal series of discrete causes. He thought that Thomas's logic requires the universe to have had a temporal beginning, which Thomas explicitly and repeatedly made clear is not the case. He anachronistically mistook Thomas's argument from universal natural teleology for an argument from apparent "Intelligent Design" in nature. He thought that Thomas's proof from universal "motion" concerned only physical movement in space, "local motion," rather than the ontological movement from potency to act. He mistook Thomas's argument from degrees of transcendental perfection for an argument from degrees of quantitative magnitude, which by definition have no perfect sum. (Admittedly, those last two are a bit difficult for modern persons, but he might have asked all the same.) As for Dawkins's own attempt at an argument against the likelihood of God's existence, it is so crude and embarrassingly confused as to be germane to nothing at all, perhaps not even to itself.¹

Now, none of this is to say that, had either man taken the time to understand the ideas against which he imagined he was contending, he would not have rejected them all the same. The Five Ways, if properly understood, are far richer and more interesting than Dawkins grasps, but they are certainly not irresistibly persuasive (nor are they intended to be). While it is usually imprudent for any scholar to stray too intrepidly outside the boundaries of

his or her expertise, at least without a trained guide, there is no reason why a scientist committed to some form of philosophical naturalism, who is as willing to learn as to pontificate, should not enter the debate. Not that, at the moment, there is any real public debate about belief in God worth speaking of. There is scarcely even a public conversation in any meaningful sense. At present, the best we seem able to manage is a war of assertions and recriminations, and for the most part each side is merely talking past the other. And the new atheists have yet to make a contribution of any weight whatsoever. If one could conclusively show that the philosophical claims the major religions make about the nature and reality of God were fundamentally incoherent or demonstrably false, that would be a significant achievement; but if one is content merely to devise images of God that are self-evidently nonsensical, and then proceed triumphantly to demonstrate just how infuriatingly nonsensical they are, one is not going to accomplish anything interesting. For the sake of harmony, I for one am more than willing to acknowledge that the God described by the new atheists definitely does not exist; but, to be perfectly honest, that is an altogether painless concession to make.

Would that I could, however, lay the blame for many of these misunderstandings entirely to the charge of the atheists. I cannot, sadly. Late modernity in the West has been marked, as no other period ever has, by the triumph of ideological extremism. The twentieth century gave birth to fundamentalism in religion, but also in politics, social theory, economics, and countless other spheres of abstract conjecture and personal commitment. Radical materialisms bred mass murder, radical political movements and radical religious fideisms bred terrorism; never before had abstract

ideas proved to be such lethal things. What the cause or causes of this peculiarly modern pathology might be is a fascinating but tangential question here. Whatever the case, the results have spanned the full spectrum, from the unspeakably tragic to the ineffably banal. It is true that a great deal of the rhetoric of the new atheism is often just the confessional rote of materialist fundamentalism (which, like all fundamentalisms, imagines that in fact it represents the side of reason and truth); but it is also true that the new atheism has sprung up in a garden of contending fundamentalisms. There would not be so many slapdash popular atheist manifestoes, in all likelihood, if there were not so many soft and inviting targets out there to provoke them: young earth creationists who believe that the two contradictory cosmogonic myths of the early chapters of Genesis are actually a single documentary account of an event that occurred a little over six millennia ago, and that there really was a Noah who built a giant ark to rescue a compendious menagerie from a universal deluge, or Hindu nationalists who insist that Rama's Bridge was actually built by Hanuman's monkeys, and so forth. Here, certainly, the new atheism has opponents against which it is well matched.

It should be noted, though, just out of fairness, that the emergence of fundamentalism in the last century was not some sort of retreat to a more original or primitive form of faith. Certainly the rise of the Christian fundamentalist movement was not a recovery of the Christianity of earlier centuries or of the apostolic church. It was a thoroughly modern phenomenon, a strange and somewhat poignantly pathetic attempt on the part of culturally deracinated Christians, raised without the intellectual or imaginative resources of a living religious civilization, to imitate the evidentiary

methods of modern empirical science by taking the Bible as some sort of objective and impeccably consistent digest of historical data. It is of course absurd to treat the Bible in that way—though, frankly, no more absurd than thinking that “science shows that God does not exist”—but it is also most definitely *not* the way the Bible was read in the ancient or mediaeval church. The greatest Church Fathers, for instance, took it for granted that the creation narratives of Genesis could not be treated literally, at least not in the sense we give to that word today, but must be read allegorically—which, incidentally, does not mean read as stories with codes to be decrypted but simply read as stories whose value lies in the spiritual truths to which they can be seen as pointing. Origen of Alexandria (185–254), in many ways the father of patristic exegesis, remarked that one would have to be rather simple to imagine that there could have been “days” before the creation of the sun, or that God literally planted an orchard with physical trees whose fruits conferred wisdom or eternal life, or that God liked to amble through his garden in the gloaming, or that Adam could have hidden from him behind a tree; no one could doubt, he said, that these are figural tales, communicating spiritual mysteries, and certainly not historical records. As Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c. 396) said, if one does not read scripture in a “philosophical” fashion one will see only myths and contradictions. And it was something of a theme in patristic texts that one must not mistake the Genesis narratives for scientific descriptions of the origin of the world. If nothing else, it would have offended against many Christian philosophers’ understanding of divine transcendence to imagine that God really made the world through a succession of cosmic interventions; they assumed that God’s creative

act is eternal, not temporal, occurring not at a discrete instant in the past, but rather pervading all of time. Basil of Caesarea (330–379) argued that the “beginning” mentioned in the first verse of Genesis ought not to be thought of as a moment of time, as such a moment would itself be something divisible, with a beginning of its own that would then itself have had to have a beginning, and so on *ad infinitum*; rather, he said, creation should be conceived of as the eternal, indivisible, and immediate bringing into existence of the whole of creation, from its beginning to its end. Many of the Fathers—Origen, John Chrysostom (c. 349–407), Augustine (354–430), for example—took “beginning” as a reference to the eternal “principle” of God’s *Logos*. Thus it made perfect sense for Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine to speculate that, while the act of creation is timeless, the world had unfolded progressively in time, out of its own intrinsic potencies and principles, with nature itself acting as the craftsman. And such was the pattern of “higher” biblical exegesis for centuries thereafter. Certainly anyone searching mediaeval commentaries on the creation narratives of Genesis for signs of fundamentalist literalism will be largely disappointed. There is a good reason why, among Darwin’s contemporaries, even as orthodox a Christian thinker as John Henry Newman (1801–1890)—who was, among other things, a great patristics scholar—could find nothing in the science of evolution contrary to or problematic for the doctrine of creation.²

Not that we need to exaggerate the sophistication of Christians or of religious persons in general down the centuries, or imagine that they could foresee future advances in cosmology, geology, or genetics. Intelligence, education, curiosity are always variable properties, and the average person as a rule has only a vague interest in

what the remote origins of the world may have been, or where the demarcation between legend and history lies. Moreover, no ancient thinker, however brilliant, had access to modern knowledge regarding the age of the earth or the phylogeny of species. What we can say, however, at least with regard to Western culture, is that it was not until the modern period (and, really, not until the late modern period) that a significant minority of believers became convinced that the truth of their faith depended upon an absolutely literal—an absolutely “factual”—interpretation of scripture, and felt compelled to stake everything on so ludicrous a wager. Now the Bible came to be seen as what it obviously is not: a collection of “inerrant” oracles and historical reports, each true in the same way as every other, each subject to only one level of interpretation, and all perfectly in agreement with one another. As I say, this was largely the result of a cultural impoverishment, but it also followed from the triumph of a distinctly modern concept of what constitutes reliable knowledge; it was the strange misapplication of the rigorous but quite limited methods of the modern empirical sciences to questions properly belonging to the realms of logic and of spiritual experience. I think it fair to say that the early fundamentalist movement opposed itself to Darwinism not simply because the latter seemed to contradict the biblical story, and not even simply out of dismay at the rise of the eugenics movement or of other forms of “social Darwinism” (though that was definitely one of the issues involved); rather, many genuinely believed that there was some sort of logical conflict between the idea that God had created the world and the idea that terrestrial life had evolved over time. This was and is a view held, of course, by any number of atheists as well. In either case, however, it is a bizarre belief. After

all, one assumes that fundamentalist Christians and fundamentalist materialists alike are aware that Christians believe God is the creator of every person; but presumably none of them would be so foolish as to imagine that this means each person is not also the product of a spermatozoon and ovum; surely they grasp that here God's act of creation is understood as the whole event of nature and existence, not as a distinct causal agency that in some way rivals the natural process of conception. Somehow, though, even in the minds of some Christians, God has come to be understood not as the truly transcendent source and end of all contingent reality, who creates through "donating" being to a natural order that is complete in itself, but only as a kind of supreme mechanical cause located somewhere within the continuum of nature. Which is only to say that, here at the far end of modernity, the concept of God is often just as obscure to those who want to believe as to those who want not to. Ours is in many ways a particularly unsubtle age.

III

There are two senses in which the word "God" or "god" can properly be used. Most modern languages generally distinguish between the two usages as I have done here, by writing only one of them with an uppercase first letter, as though it were a proper name—which it is not. Most of us understand that "God" (or its equivalent) means the one God who is the source of all things, whereas "god" (or its equivalent) indicates one or another of a plurality of divine beings who inhabit the cosmos and reign over its various regions. This is not, however, merely a distinction in