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Finding a Way In

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this chapter you should be able to

- understand why some people find religion so implausible;
- have a sense of some of the responses that a person of faith might make.

STRUCTURE

- The Social Dimension
- Why Bother with the Christian Worldview?
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Much of the world is very religious. Despite all the predictions to the contrary, our world seems to be becoming more religious rather than less. However, as an Englishman living on the east coast of America, I am aware that many students find it difficult to understand a religious worldview. So, in this opening chapter, we shall start by looking at some of the problems that a typical, thoughtful, European or American student might have with religion. Before we get to the doctrines of the Trinity or atonement, we need to understand why the religious discourse matters.

So let us start with the following questions: What makes some people atheists or agnostics and others persons of faith? This is the starting point of this book. Why do some people find it easy to believe while others find it all so incomprehensible?

The Social Dimension

Perhaps because the founders of sociology were skeptical of religion, it is often assumed that the social explanation for religion is evidence in support of atheism. Emile Durkheim's famous critique was one of the first. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), Durkheim argued that religion provides a socializing force. It brings people together. He establishes his argument by examining "primitive" forms of religion. However, Durkheim has no interest in simply describing the past; instead he visits the past with a view to establishing the truth about the nature of religion for the present. The central claim of the book, Durkheim explains, "is that religion is something eminently social. Religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities; the rites are a manner of acting which take rise in the midst of the assembled groups and which are destined to excite, maintain or recreate certain mental states in these groups."¹ As a result, religion and morality become closely connected. Religion is society's way of imposing certain shared moral values; this, Durkheim thought, explains why moral values seem to have a transcendent feel.

Whether or not Durkheim is right (and he is probably right about much), he offered an explanation for religion that recognized the power of our "socialization" to account for our worldview. Atheists and agnostics are sometimes tempted to dismiss a person's religious beliefs as "simply a result of their upbringing." This approach to religion has its roots in Durkheim's sociology.

The truth, however, is that perhaps we are all "indoctrinated." Many agnostics and atheists grew up in an agnostic and atheist environment: as children they never learned the discourse of faith. For the truth is that faith is learned. Much like language, it becomes part of the furniture of your mind. In the same way that a particular language is learned in a home, so is a particular faith discourse. In the same way that love of country is "instilled," so is love of God.

This was a key insight of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein is a complex thinker, and disagreements about the interpretation of his work abound. However, Wittgenstein recognized that there are many different ways in which language operates. Language is used in a variety of different ways, with different "rules" governing the particular

Box 1 Emile Durkheim (1858–1917)

On April 15, 1858 Emile Durkheim was born of Jewish parents in Épinal, Lorraine, in France. Early on he was recognized as exceptionally gifted. And it was not surprising that he was admitted and flourished at the École Normale Supérieure (the premier university in Paris). In 1882, he became a philosophy teacher. In 1887, he moved to Bordeaux, where he started to articulate a distinctive approach to the social sciences. And in 1913 he moved to Paris. During the First World War, he assisted with the war effort; and he also had to cope with the tragic loss of his son André, who died in 1916. Plagued by illness throughout his life and devastated by the death of his son, he died on November 15, 1917.

1 E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, (New York: Macmillan 1915; first published 1912), p. 10.

Box 2 Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951)

In Vienna, Austria, Wittgenstein was born on April 26, 1889. He was baptized and buried a Roman Catholic, although he was very sensitive to his Jewish heritage (his father's parents had converted from Judaism to Protestantism). Wittgenstein's academic interests started in mechanical engineering and then moved into aeronautics. It was his love of mathematics that provoked his interest in philosophy. He started work with Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) at Cambridge University. His family was extremely rich; in 1913 he inherited a fortune that he then gave away. In 1922 he published his only book, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which he believed solved all the problems of philosophy. Becoming for a short time an elementary school teacher in Austria, he returned to Trinity College, Cambridge in 1929, renouncing his earlier work and determined to revisit the primary issues. The mature Wittgenstein was published after his death in *Philosophical Investigations*. He died in April 1951.

discourse (or language-game). Subsequent commentators on Wittgenstein, for example, D.Z. Phillips, have suggested that different communities use language in different ways.² Atheists operate within one community and use language in one way while believers operate within a different community and use language in a different way.

So religion might well be a result of “social conditioning,” but the point is that everything is. The agnostic and atheist lack of awe is equally a result of social conditioning. The fact that we have all been indoctrinated does not mean that we cannot be rationally reflective. There are still good reasons for believing. There are better and worse forms of indoctrination.

At this point, the reader might object, “But if this is true, if we are all socially determined, then how do we explain ‘conversions’? How does one explain a conversion from faith to atheism (perhaps following the tragic death of a relative) or from Christianity to Islam or from atheism to faith?”

At this juncture, it is also necessary to introduce “reason.” As children, we learn from our parents; we learn a language, a set of values, and a religion. As we encounter different languages, values, and religions, we start to interrogate the worldview given to us by our parents. We ask questions about difference and the reasons for the differences. Language differences we cope with fairly easily; but differences of value and religion are much harder to handle. It is important to use our capacity to think and reason in these difficult areas. And when it comes to religious disagreements, we should use our minds to evaluate which religion makes more sense of the complexity of our experience. Naturally, since each person has been shaped by a multitude of different factors, the weighing by reason of the multitude of different factors (some of which are very particular to an individual's journey) will produce different results. So when it comes to “conversion,” reason often meets social conditioning in interesting ways. Social conditioning remains significant. In the same way a person can grow up thinking in one language, so it is possible for a person to learn a second language and start thinking in that one instead. Learning a second language is difficult. Ideally you must live and submerge yourself in a different culture. But many people manage to do this and as a

2 For D.Z. Phillips see *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994).

result start to think differently. What is true in language is also true in religion. Atheists become Christians and Christians become atheists because of the company they choose. The choice of company creates a challenge to the received worldview of their youth. As a person rationally reflects on two different worldviews, he or she makes a choice.

So a key question is what sort of group do we decide to mix with? We all come to the conversation with a certain givenness: my parents introduced me to faith. But as we grow older, so we decide to select our own conversation partners. The choice of conversation partner is crucial. So on a religious level: if I opt to find a group of Pentecostals then, it is likely, I shall slowly become a Pentecostal; if I opt for a group of Roman Catholics, then I might become a Catholic, and so on. On a political level, if I gravitate towards a group of white supremacists, then there is a danger I shall slowly become racist. However, if I opt to read, watch, and gravitate towards people sympathetic to Michael Moore, then it is likely I shall become a liberal. It is at the point of deciding who we are going to let influence us that we have certain options. And it is at this point we should read. Books open up many different worldviews. It is at this point we can give our reason a more prominent role to evaluate the evidence, explore the implications, and decide which worldview we want to let shape us. This is important: reason and arguments are important players. We need to think about who we are going to read. I should think about a disagreement provoked by reading a book written by someone with whom I am in disagreement. Just because I am conditioned (i.e., there is a certain givenness) does not mean that there are not reasons for my worldview. And as you read this book you will see that I have been shaped by a range of influences – atheists, agnostics, Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists are all important conversation partners. This book is about Christian doctrine; it wants to open up, in a sympathetic way, the Christian worldview.

Why Bother with the Christian Worldview?

A book about Christian doctrine needs to assume that the story of the Christian drama is worth examining and makes sense of the complexity of the world. However, the assumption does need some defending. In Chapter 2, we will examine the whole project of natural theology and the arguments for the existence of God. However, in the rest of this chapter we will describe and respond to some of the main reasons that people find faith rather implausible.

Problems

It Looks Like Religion is on the Way Out

If you are sitting in Germany or the Netherlands, then it looks as though religion is in trouble. Pop into a church and you will find it a gathering place for the elderly. Anyone who is forty years old or younger has better things to do with their Sundays. The secularization thesis – whose most able contemporary defender is Steve Bruce – seems to be vindicated.

There are various versions of the secularization thesis. One popular version states that with the rise of modernity, science, and technology, the premodern nature of

religion has become increasingly apparent. Where gods and spirits explained the weather, we now have the science of meteorology. Where witch doctors used to heal, antibiotics now cure. As modernity spreads across the world, so religion will decline. A more sophisticated version stresses the problem of socialization. Steve Bruce writes:

We may want to explain the secularity of some elite groups (such as professional scientists) by the impact of science and rationalism, but to understand the mass of the population it is not self-conscious irreligion that is important. It is indifference. The primary cause of indifference is the lack of religious socialization and the lack of constant background affirmation of beliefs.³

So, for Bruce, the problem is that people have just stopped caring; they have stopped being interested in religion.

However, the secularization thesis is not supported by the data. Statistically, Asia, the Middle East, South America, and Africa are all robustly religious, even though they have McDonalds, satellite television, and increasingly modern medicine. The United States remains deeply religious. A virtually unchanged 40 percent of Americans sit in church every week (or so they report), and almost all of them insist that their faith is vitally important.⁴ Even in Europe we find many people believing even if they do not belong to any particular church. Grace Davie has documented the ways in which religious life in Europe seems to be “mutating” but not disappearing; she writes,

For particular historical reasons (notably the historic connections between Church and State), significant numbers of Europeans are content to let both churches and churchgoers enact a memory on their behalf (the essential meaning of vicarious), more than half aware that they might need to draw on the capital at crucial times in their individual or their collective lives. The almost universal take up of religious ceremonies at the time of death is the most obvious expression of this tendency; so, too, the prominence of the historic churches in particular at times of national crisis or, more positively, of national celebration. Think, for example, of the significance of European churches and church buildings after the sinking of the Baltic ferry *Estonia*, after the death of Princess Diana or after the terrifying events of 11 September 2001.⁵

Countries with a church tax system continue to collect revenue, even if the donors do not actually attend. And when a crisis erupts, argues Davie, churches are suddenly “used” as a mechanism of coping with the trauma. Although this might not be a

3 S. Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 240.

4 Gallup is responsible for the fairly consistent statistic that 40% of Americans are in church every week; the challenge to this statistic is from the work of Kirk Hathaway who has argued that we do not find in the actual congregation the expected number for this statistic to be true. Even if the statistic speaks to the “intention” of most Americans, it remains true that this reflects on a deep religious commitment. It is not evidence for the secularization thesis. See K. Hadaway, P. Marler, and M. Chaves, “A symposium on church attendance,” *American Sociological Review* 63, 1 (1988): 111–145.

5 G. Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case; Parameters of Faith in the Modern World* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002), p. 19.

particularly demanding expression of it, the draw to a religious life is still very much there. It is undoubtedly true that modernity has not created thousands of atheists and agnostics. Scratch a European and you will find underneath the apparently indifferent exterior a person interested in “New Age” movements and “spirituality.” The few atheists and agnostics assume that most of their friends are just like them. This is not true.

Nevertheless, there is a mood shift. Charles Taylor’s study *The Secular Age* is a quest to answer the following question: “Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?”⁶ His answer is complicated. But, in summary, he sees a shift from a state where the self and the world almost merge (the self is porous) to a state in which our mind is independent from the world (the self is buffered). The result, he explains, is our immanent frame. We are stuck in a world where the meaning is determined by our mind (rather than found in the external world), where the natural world is largely autonomous (with God at best outside the system), providence and ethics are grounded in the design of the machine, and our horizon is now confined to the immediate. We have lost our metaphysical self-confidence. But as we have already seen from the work of Grace Davie, religious is just below the surface. And Taylor suspects this is because we find this immanent frame hard. We find the horizon limited.

So let us concede there is in certain countries in the West and parts of the United States (mainly coastal and urban America) a mood that finds uncomplicated believing difficult. Nevertheless, even here, there is still considerable interest and even sympathy to faith. It is quite wrong to see religion on the way out; it is much more complicated than that.

Science has Displaced Religion

Nevertheless, my agnostic conversation partner might retort, “Since science has explained the world far more effectively than religion ever could, is it not the case that religion ought to be disappearing?”

It is true that the story of the religion and science debate often looks like that. Along came the Copernican revolution and the church – on the basis of Aristotle (384 BCE–322 BCE) – opposed it. Galileo provided decisive observational evidence that the earth is spinning around the sun;⁷ and for stating and maintaining this, until forced to recant, was placed under house arrest by the Roman Catholic Church. Along came Charles Darwin, with his elegant hypothesis of natural selection that contradicts the historicity of Genesis 1, and the church offered implausible alternative accounts, such as the young earth hypothesis or the suggestion that the earth was created with the appearance of age.

It is undoubtedly true that overall the church did not react wisely to the story of science. In my view, it created a needless battle. We shall see in Chapter 2 how the new physics has proved to be a friend of religion. The church should have never worried about the cosmology of the universe: it was mainly the authority of Aristotle which was

6 C. Taylor, *The Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press, 2007), p. 25.

7 Perhaps I should stress that with the advantage of hindsight it is easy to be very critical about the players in the Copernican revolution. There were plenty of thoughtful people who had strong arguments against Galileo.

at stake; and although Aristotle is important, he is not that important. As we shall see in Chapter 6, we should have never argued with science on Genesis 1. The Victorian church seems to have lost sight of the genre of the creation stories. When God said “Let there be light,” we shouldn’t imagine a big mouth uttering words. Instead we see that the creation is brought about by the words of God, which means that through creation we can see God disclosing Godself. The genre of the creation story is closer to poetry: it was never intended as a historical account.

Science, I shall argue in Chapter 2, needs theism (a belief in a personal God). But for now, we shall note that the charge is definitely not proven.

Metaphysics is Impossible

Metaphysics is literally “after the physics.” The term was originally used by Aristotle. However, in this context, we are using the term to represent all attempts to describe ultimate reality. It was Thomas Huxley who first coined the expression “agnostic” in the nineteenth century. He explained,

When I reached intellectual maturity, and began to ask myself whether I was an atheist, a theist, or a pantheist; a materialist or an idealist; a Christian or a free-thinker, I found that the more I learned and reflected, the less ready was the answer; until at last I came to the conclusion that I had neither art nor part with any of these denominations, except the last. The one thing in which most of these good people were agreed was the one thing in which I differed from them. They were quite sure that they had attained a certain “gnosis” – had more or less successfully solved the problem of existence; while I was quite sure I had not, and had a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insoluble. And, with Hume and Kant on my side, I could not think myself presumptuous in holding fast by that opinion ... So I took thought, and invented what I conceived to be the appropriate title of “agnostic”. It came into my head as suggestively antithetic to the “gnostic” of Church history, who professed to know so much about the very things of which I was ignorant; and I took the earliest opportunity of parading it at our Society, to show that I, too, had a tail, like the other foxes.⁸

Box 3 Thomas Huxley (1825–1895)

Huxley was born in Ealing, London, on May 4, 1825. His father could only afford to pay for him to attend school for two years. However, thanks to Huxley’s passionate interest in reading, he managed to obtain a scholarship to study at Charing Cross Hospital. Trained as a surgeon, he travelled around the world in the navy collecting marine invertebrates. When Charles Darwin published *Origins of Species*, Huxley became his most outspoken supporter. In June 1860, he was the respondent to Archbishop Samuel Wilberforce. He is best known for his contributions in science, but he also wrote widely on politics, religion, and ethics. He died on June 29, 1895.

⁸ Thomas Huxley, as quoted in <http://infidels.org/library/modern/mathew/sn-huxley.html> (accessed November 29, 2016).

In popular usage the word “agnostic” often means unsure. Huxley, however, believes it is impossible for puny little people to know about ultimate reality. Here we are in the middle of space–time, stuck on a small planet in an insignificant solar system, which is one among many solar systems. How on earth (pun intended) could we ever work out with any meaningful confidence what the source of all this is like? Huxley insisted that the only proper answer is to surrender to our ignorance. We cannot and never will know.

Again, a full response to this will be developed in Chapter 2. For now let us think a little about Huxley’s expectations for knowledge. Let us try a thought exercise: imagine, if you can, your brain on a laboratory bench attached to a powerful computer. Imagine further that there are five leads (one for each sense) attached from your brain to the computer. Let us suppose that this computer generates the impression of your body (your physical appearance) and then all the subsequent experiences that your body enjoys. Let us further imagine that the computer program is interactive: so when your mind makes a decision, the experiences generated by the computer change. Now consider the following question: is it possible that this could be the case? Can you disprove the possibility that your mind is not attached to a computer and everything you experience is just a computer-generated experience?

Now of course it is possible that this is true. But no one believes it is. There are some possible explanations for reality that we need to exclude because they are so extremely improbable. It is true the external world might not exist, but we all know it does. And we certainly all behave as if it does.

There are many complex events, of which we are right in the middle, that we attempt to explain. We attempt to formulate a hypothesis to make some sense of the event, for example, the nature of the brain, the mystery of love, and the powerful bonds between a parent and a child. Just because it is complicated and we are part of what we are trying to explain, we do not simply surrender to agnosticism. It is true that there are many possible explanations for these things. It is also true that complete certainty is impossible, but we can still distinguish between accounts that are more likely and less likely.

One sickness that pervades modernity was this absurd expectation for knowledge – if we cannot be completely and utterly sure then we cannot claim to know.⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*¹⁰ has described the damage that this sickness has caused. Many Europeans reasoned thus:

- 1) Knowledge depends on complete certainty.
- 2) We cannot be certain of anything – including whether there is an external world and what is true in metaphysics.
- 3) Therefore we have no knowledge.

9 This is a complex area. One distinction, which is popular among philosophers, is to concede that knowledge does require certainty, but that rational belief does not. Given certainty about the existence of the world is not available, I would want to suggest that “knowing” cannot entail certainty. To eliminate every theoretical area of uncertainty would mean that we would not even know that tables and chairs exist. My view is that knowledge claims can make certain basic assumptions. This is developed further in I. Markham, *Truth and the Reality of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999).

10 A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988.

Box 4 René Descartes (1596–1650)

Descartes was a Frenchman born in 1596 near Tours. With an initial Jesuit education, he discovered a passion for mathematics. He trained in law and then joined the Dutch military. He started writing in 1619, ranging widely in his themes: he wrote on optics, meteorology, and geometry. But it was when he moved to Amsterdam that he started work on his best known work, *Discourse on the Method* (1637), which was followed by *Meditations on the First Philosophy* (1641). In 1649, Queen Christina of Sweden asked him to become a philosophy tutor in Stockholm. However, his health could not cope with the demands being placed upon him. He died in 1650.

With this reasoning, European culture invented relativism. Each culture has different beliefs; there is no way of knowing which culture has the true beliefs; therefore we must just resign ourselves to our ignorance and culturally conditioned beliefs.

The big mistake underpinning relativism is an unreasonable expectation for knowledge – the quest for complete certainty. Where did this absurd expectation for knowledge come from? Most historians of ideas blame Descartes (1596–1650). Living in the seventeenth century, he was responsible for raising in an acute way the whole modern problem of epistemology. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641),¹¹ Descartes set out on his quest for a sure foundation for all knowledge claims. He starts the first meditation by asking whether the external world exists and decides that he cannot exclude the possibility that he is dreaming. In the second meditation he reflects on the nature of mathematics and logic. Can he be sure that $2 + 2 = 4$? He decides that he cannot be sure because it is possible that a malignant demon is tampering with his mind. (Incidentally, at this point Descartes is in deep trouble because a malignant demon that is tampering with his rational processes means that he cannot any longer have any confidence in the power of reason and deduction and therefore he can't rationally justify any further steps in his argument.) Nevertheless, on he goes. So is there anything about which Descartes can be certain? After much thought he decides that he is sure of one proposition (a proposition is a fact-asserting sentence). He is sure that he – Descartes – doubts everything. Hence he arrives at his famous statement: *cogito ergo sum* – I think therefore I am.

Descartes achievement was to set up an impossible standard for knowledge – a standard that his own argument does not reach. One does not know until one is completely sure. If one works with this standard for knowledge, then it is not surprising that one does not know very much. Everything is in trouble: science, knowledge that another loves me, mental activity, and of course metaphysics.

Knowledge claims must make certain assumptions. Science assumes both the existence of the external world and that this world is intelligible. So every scientific hypothesis could be doubted. However, we find ourselves persuaded of a scientific hypothesis (for example the rather elegant hypothesis of natural selection to explain the fossil record and the development of life on earth) because of its *explanatory power*. A good

¹¹ Descartes first sketched out the argument in 1637 in his *Discourse on Method*. However, his *Meditations on First Philosophy* is his best known work and is a fuller formulation of the argument.

hypothesis explains the data in a simple (without recourse to complicating entities or improbable factors) and comprehensive way.

On one level, the claim that “God is” can be treated much like a scientific hypothesis. As we shall see in Chapter 2, we live in a complex world. We need to explain the reality of love, the order in nature, our religious experience, and our sense of moral obligation. The best explanation for this complex data will, I suggest, be the claim that God exists.

Agnosticism Makes More Sense

Where problem number three stresses the impossibility of metaphysics, this problem wants to stress the positive attractions of agnosticism. Even allowing for the promise in the next chapter that theism will be presented as the best explanation for the complex data of the world, it still leaves many questions unanswered. There are many religions in the world – which one has the truth? Is the experience of God an Allah, a Trinity, a Brahma, or a Buddha-Nature?

The problem here can be illustrated by looking at the following thought exercise. Imagine you are sitting in the middle of a large room. Around the edge of this room is one representative of each of the major religious traditions in the world. Along with the major traditions – Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jews, Christians, and Muslims – some of the smaller and more recent traditions – Ba’ha’is, Mormons, and New Age advocates – are represented. Each person is given half a day to present his or her tradition. Your task is to decide which tradition is true. Each person is a superb and effective communicator; so each tradition has an equal chance. How would you decide which one is true?¹²

The difficulty is that even if (and this remains a big if) one can argue for some divine reality, we are still left with the problem that we “don’t know” which religion best represents the interests of the divine.

Now thinking about this problem introduces another dimension to being “religious.” Reasons are clearly central. However, it is equally important to recognize the centrality of practices. A decision for faith is not a simply a matter of belief. Religion has as much to do with practice as belief. It was Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) who saw this most closely with his famous wager. The argument breaks down into five steps.

Box 5 Blaise Pascal (1623–1662)

In his short life of thirty-nine years, Pascal shaped the disciplines of mathematics, science, and philosophy. Educated by his eccentric father, Pascal exhibited a natural capacity for mathematics. After his father died, Pascal was required to administer his father’s estate, which he combined with an interest in scientific experimentation and continuing to make developments in geometry and philosophy. His best known philosophical works are *Pensées* (published 1642) and *Provincial Letters* (published 1657).

¹² I have used this thought exercise in several places in my work. It was originally developed in my *A World Religions Reader*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 17.

- 1) Let us assume that the agnostic is right and that we cannot be sure if there is a God. Pascal starts from the place of the agnostic. He is assuming, as John Hick puts it, “epistemological agnosticism” (i.e., there is no rational way of knowing for sure whether God is or is not).¹³
- 2) Nevertheless the agnostic must make a choice.
Now this is Pascal’s insight. A decision must still be made. The reason why a decision is forced is because faith is to be practiced. And with practices you cannot be agnostic. So, for example, I am either going to pray or not pray. If I try to decide not to decide, then I end up not praying. Or I am going to go to church or not go to church. If I decide not to decide, then I don’t go to church. All agnostics behave like atheists. They in effect make a decision. So Pascal explains,

Yes; but you must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked. Which will you choose then? Let us see. Since you must choose, let us see which interests you least. You have two things to lose, the true and the good; and two things to stake, your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to shun, error and misery. Your reason is no more shocked in choosing one rather than the other, since you must of necessity choose. This is one point settled. But your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is.¹⁴

Embedded in the above quotation is the rest of the argument, which then runs as follows:

- 3) If you opt for unbelief and get it right, then you will have extinction; if you opt for unbelief and get it wrong, then you risk damnation.
- 4) If you opt for belief and get it wrong, then you will get extinction; if you opt for unbelief and get it right, then you will get eternal life.
- 5) So gamble on happiness: you have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

Much has been made of the problems with the argument. Pascal assumes that there is really only one religious option, but this ignores the sheer range and diversity of religions in the world. Many faithful believers are unhappy with faith being turned into a prudent gamble. However, his major challenge to the agnostic remains: faith is to do with behavior. With behavior you cannot be agnostic.

Agnostics like to imagine they are in between atheism and belief. However, Pascal points out to them that this is largely an illusion. Agnostics behave like atheists: they like to imagine all the options are still open, but in terms of behavior they neither go to church nor pray. They live like atheists. Agnosticism only makes sense if atheism is true.

Naturally this still leaves the problem embedded in the thought exercise. Religious diversity is a major challenge. In Chapter 9, we will look at the challenge of religious diversity in some detail. Suffice to say for now, it is important to remember that there is a fundamental agreement across religious traditions: they all agree that atheism is mistaken.

¹³ See J. Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, 2nd edn. (London: Collins Fount, 1978).

¹⁴ B. Pascal, *Pensées*, as found at <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/pascal/pensees.iv.html> (accessed November 29, 2016).

And when it comes to the disagreement, it is very easy for us to imagine that each religion is completely separate from every other religion. The truth is that there is endless interplay and development between traditions. Judaism gave birth to Christianity and Islam. Hinduism is the root of Buddhism. Islam and Hinduism shaped Sikhism. Furthermore, given the complexity within each religion, there is hardly a religious idea that is not to be found within each tradition. So, for example, Hinduism is often depicted as pantheistic (God is in all), while Christianity is seen as theistic (there is a personal God separate from creation). Yet Hinduism has theistic strands and there are Christians who are pantheistic in their understanding of God.

As a lifestyle option, agnosticism does not exist. And I want to suggest that the problem of religious diversity is not a decisive argument for agnosticism. Indeed, the universal witness of the religions that there is a transcendent entity is a major challenge to the agnostic.

Religion is Horrid and Cruel

For some critics of religion, the problem with religion is less intellectual and more moral. The problem with religion, these critics complain, is that often it is linked with violence. A.N. Wilson states the problem thus:

Religion is the tragedy of mankind. It appeals to all that is noblest, purest, loftiest in the human spirit, and yet there scarcely exists a religion which has not been responsible for wars, tyrannies and the suppression of the truth. Marx described it as the opium of the people; but it is much deadlier than opium. It does not send people to sleep. It excites them to persecute one another, to exalt their own feelings and opinions above those of others, to claim for themselves a possession of the truth. If we read St Paul's famous hymn to Charity in his Epistle to the Corinthians, we see an incomparably exalted view of human virtue. "Charity suffereth long, and is kind. Charity vaunteth not itself ... rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth." When we consider the behavior of the huge preponderance of religious people and religious organizations in the history of mankind, we come to realize that Religion is the precise opposite of what St Paul calls Charity. Religion, far from suffering long, makes a point of establishing itself as the sole highway to salvation, and brooks no dissent from those who have the temerity to disagree with it. Religion is not kind; it is cruel. Religion does not rejoice in the truth. In fact, all the major religions go out of their way to suppress the truth and to label those who attempt to tell the truth as heretics. Religion vaunteth itself, is puffed up; but worse: by trying to bring good things to pass, it brings very evil things to pass. Like a human psychopath it is a war with all its own best instincts, because it knows, if these impulses were followed, it would destroy itself.¹⁵

Wilson goes on to document countless illustrations of the cruelty of religion: the damaging role that religion has played in Northern Ireland and Israel/Palestine; the history of religious wars, the intolerance towards those who disagree with a religion

¹⁵ A.N. Wilson, *Against Religion* (London: Chatto and Windus Ltd, 1991), pp. 1–2.

(especially the Salman Rushdie controversy), and the reluctance of the church to take progressive ethical positions (e.g., on the rights of women – see the next problem). The temptation is to conclude that religion is a deeply destructive entity: even if the world is not going to outgrow religion, it does not deserve any encouragement.

Such is the power of religion, it is important to recognize that religion is often a force for evil in the world. For a person of faith, the study of religious history is deeply painful. One cannot evade the history of Christian anti-Semitism or the brutality of the Crusades or the propensity of the church to support patriarchy rather than justice. One must resist the temptation to distinguish between “true religion,” which does not do these wicked things, and “bad religion,” which is religion being used by political and economic entities for unjust ends. It is clear that many of the most devout were involved in heinous acts. Popes who no doubt prayed and loved Jesus did authorize the Crusades; Muslims who prayed five times daily have become suicide bombers and blown up many innocent people; and it was Bible-believing Christians in the Dutch Reformed Church who constructed a biblical justification of apartheid. Sincere people of faith have behaved in extremely wicked ways.

Yet in the same way it would be wrong to condemn secularism and secularists because of the abuses of Stalin’s regime, so one should not condemn religion because of its evil and violent past. The truth about the evils exercised in the name of religion should not obscure us from other truths. Religion has, for example, provided us with Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, and Mother Teresa. Religion has inspired amazing music and poetry. Religion has helped millions of people cope with seemingly unbearable tragedy. Religion has underpinned the campaign for civil rights and justice. Although it is true that if religion did not exist, we would not have had the Crusades; it is also true that we would not have had the concept of human rights.¹⁶

The fact that religious people have often behaved in deeply wicked ways does not mean that the claims underpinning the religious worldview are false. It might all be true. At this stage to proceed with the rest of the book, we simply need a sense that Christianity is worth investigating. The violent history of religions is not, I suggest, a sufficient reason to refuse to investigate the truth claims of Christianity.

Religion Reinforces Patriarchy

It was Elizabeth Cady Stanton, back in 1895, who summarized the challenge of Christianity and patriarchy in her very elegant introduction to *The Woman’s Bible*. She writes:

The Bible teaches that woman brought sin and death into the world, that she precipitated the fall of the race, that she was arraigned before the judgement seat of Heaven, tried, condemned and sentenced. Marriage for her was to be a condition of bondage, maternity, a period of suffering and anguish, and in silence and subjection, she was to play the role of a dependent on man’s bounty for all her material wants, and for all the information she might desire on the vital questions

¹⁶ I am assuming that the language of human rights owes much to the Roman Catholic development of the concept of natural law. I defend this claim in my *Theology of Engagement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

of the hour, she was commanded to ask her husband at home. Here is the Bible position of women briefly summed up.¹⁷

Let us concede there is considerable force in this objection. From the home to the religious institution sexism abounds. In the home, studies have shown that religious people are more likely to endorse “benevolent sexism.” Benevolent sexism is the view that women are “more righteous and virtuous than men” and therefore “require male protection.”¹⁸ Faith creates gender stereotypes that leads to an unequal set of relationships between men and women. Teaching on “headship,” “submission,” and “obedience” has been responsible for marital abuse. From Dr. James Dobson (the founder of Focus on the Family) to Bishop T.D. Jakes, the theme of submission and the evil of divorce have left many women in abusive marriages.¹⁹ Meanwhile religious institutions are often dominated by men. The sacred narratives are dominated by men (women appear as wives, sisters, and very occasionally as heroes); the ordained leadership is dominated by men. There is a whole set of associations that are problematic. Women are linked to embodiment and therefore sexuality; and the goal of faith is to cultivate the spirit and keep the sexual under control. Ergo, we find religious institutions advocating the control of the woman. The Blessed Virgin Mary is held up as a role model making both virginity and motherhood central (the combination of which is difficult for a woman to hold together). And religious institutions were not at the forefront of the liberation of women. All in all, this is a major obstacle to faith.

So how do we respond? Throughout this book, we shall explore how many feminist theologians are bringing a feminist lens to Christianity. Many theologians are persuaded of Elizabeth Johnson’s simple affirmation, “Wherever women are violated, diminished,

Box 6 Benevolent Forms of Oppression

Benevolent forms of oppression are variations on prejudice that can appear to be well-meaning or positive (or at the very least, benign). This terminology most often appears in relationship to sexism. Benevolent sexism might involve “chivalrous” actions that assume women to be frailer than men, for example, or media accounts that focus on a woman’s appearance or family roles and downplay or omit her professional achievements. In other areas, benevolent prejudice tends to appear as positive generalizations of groups, such as “All Asians are hard-working” or “All gay guys are fun.” These forms are just as oppressive as hostile prejudices because they deny the uniqueness of the individual. Additionally, at least one study indicates a strong positive correlation between benevolent sexism and hostile sexism, suggesting that all variations of prejudice are ultimately malevolent.²⁰

17 E. Cady Stanton, *The Woman’s Bible*, 1895, Rpr. edn. (New York: Arno Press, 1972), p. 7.

18 M. Mikolajezak and J. Pietrzak, “Ambivalent Sexism and Religion: Connected Through Values,” *Sex Roles* 70 (2014): 399.

19 K. Joyce, *Quiverful: Inside the Christian Patriarchy Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009).

20 P. Glick, S. Fisk, A. Mladinic, et al., “Beyond Prejudice as Simple Antipathy: Hostile and Benevolent Sexism across Cultures,” *Journal Of Personality and Social Psychology* (November 2000) 79 (5): 763–775.

have their life drained away, God's glory is dimmed and put at historical risk: hence sexism is religiously unconscionable."²¹ And feminist theologians have shown how radical the teaching and behavior of Jesus is in respect to women. Women figured prominently in the Jesus movement.

But more importantly, prophetic movements that challenge injustice are an intrinsic part of the Christian tradition. A core conviction that Christians share is that the universe should be just because the creator of the universe is just. When a group is oppressed, then that violates the very intentions of the creator. God cannot abide worship from a hypocrite. Worship of God implies the recognition that God is holy, righteous, and just. To worship God and then oppress one's neighbor is manifest hypocrisy. This is what the Prophet Amos meant when he has God saying,

I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
²² Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and
grain-offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:21–24)²²

As it happens, our atheist friends are not much better. Ashley F. Miller is right to complain that the non-religious movement “has continued to be dominated by white men who hold traditional privilege and power, in much the same way that they do throughout society.”²³ Miller's explanation for this is that atheism carries such a cost that women and people of color will “suffer far greater social costs by identifying with atheism than white men.”²⁴ This is, of course, conjecture. Perhaps a simpler explanation is that patriarchy is so endemic that it is difficult for any group to eradicate. However, for the purposes of this book, the invitation for now is to give Christianity a chance. Before we cross to equally patriarchal atheism, we should see how Christianity adapts to one of the major moral issues of our age.

Faith is Just a Psychological Projection

It was Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) who argued that religion is a projection of our earthly father (who provides comfort and security) into the skies. In *The Future of an Illusion* he explains,

21 E. Johnson, *She who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), p. 15.

22 Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV.

23 Ashley F. Miller, “The Non-Religious Patriarchy: Why Losing Religion has not meant losing white male dominance,” *Crosscurrent* June 2013, p. 211.

24 *Ibid.* p. 215.

Box 7 Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)

Brought up a Jew in Vienna, Austria, Freud developed the broad outlines of modern psychology. He spent much of his life working with Joseph Breuer. One of their key ideas is that many neuroses are a result of traumas developed in childhood. As Freud stressed the centrality of sexual attitudes in childhood, Breuer parted company with him. Freud's finest work is probably his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (published in 1900).

As we already know, the terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection – for protection through love – which was provided by the father; and the recognition that this helplessness lasts throughout life made it necessary to cling to the existence of a father, but this time a more powerful one. Thus the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fears of the dangers of life; the establishment of a moral world-order ensures the fulfillment of the demands of justice, which have so often remained unfulfilled in human civilization; and the prolongation of earthly existence in a future life provides the local and temporal framework in which these wish fulfillments take place.²⁵

Freud goes on to argue that given this is so manifestly what religion is, it is unlikely to be true. Therefore, understanding the psychological cause of religion will help us free ourselves from its influence.

Freud is on one level right. All beliefs about the world have a psychological cause. I believe that $2 + 2 = 4$. The psychological cause of this belief was an intimidating elementary school teacher who taught me the basics of mathematics. However, the psychological cause has nothing to do with the truth or falsity of the belief. One is guilty of the genetic fallacy when one confuses a psychological cause with the truthfulness of a belief. As we saw when we looked at Durkheim, we are all socially conditioned. In the same way there is a psychological explanation for all beliefs: there is a psychological explanation for the atheist and agnostic. Furthermore a religious person could argue that all Freud has done has been to identify the God-given mechanism that creates the need for the transcendent. In other words, God wanted humans to draw a parallel between the “ideal” earthly parent and the heavenly one. The psychological doorway to belief that Freud has identified is the one that God always intended.

The Next Stage

In this opening chapter we have looked at seven reasons that faith is viewed as problematic. There are many other reasons, for example, the problem of evil and suffering. However, given the problem of evil and suffering is a major theme in this book, we shall take this difficulty with us into the following chapters. In this chapter, I have confined the discussion to defending the following: first the persistence of religion; second, that

²⁵ S. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, translated by W.D. Robinson-Scott. Revised and newly edited by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1973), pp. 30–31.

science is not an enemy of religion; third, the legitimacy of metaphysical claims; fourth, the impossibility of living as an agnostic; fifth, that the violent history of religions does not justify the refusal to examine the truth claims of Christianity; sixth, that Christianity should be given the chance to respond to patriarchy rather than that those who find its patriarchal history problematic switch to equally patriarchal atheism without affording it this opportunity; and finally, that a psychological explanation is compatible with religion being true.

With these preliminaries out of the way, we now need to start the important work of exploring Christianity in some detail.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- 1 Can you think of any other major obstacles to faith that are not considered in this chapter?
- 2 Take one of the responses to a problem in this chapter and reflect on how an agnostic might disagree with the response.
- 3 Do you think that modernity is slowly and gradually undermining religious belief?
- 4 Why has the relationship between science and religion been so difficult? What can be done to improve the relationship?
- 5 Do you agree with Charles Taylor that there has been a mood shift in modern society? Why is this?
- 6 Can you be a feminist and a Christian? Is there a difference between a feminist Christian and a Christian feminist?

Glossary

Agnostics: at a popular level, the term describes people who are not sure whether God exists. More technically, an agnostic is a person who thinks that we can never know the truth about metaphysics.

Atheists: people who do not believe in the existence of God. Some atheists are also “secular humanists” (i.e., people who believe that society should be free from religious influences and affirm the importance and value of humanity).

Genetic fallacy: the view that to identify a social or psychological genesis for a view or position precludes the possibility that the view or position is true.

Metaphysics: literally, “beyond physics.” Any attempt to describe ultimate reality.

Relativism: the view that certain disagreements (especially religious and moral) are unresolvable and one’s perspective will be determined by one’s culture.

Secularization: the process that has seen a decline in the significance of religious institutions in society in Western Europe.

