1

Debating Religion

Religion promises a rewarding relationship with the supreme reality. Religions offer views about what supreme reality is like, how best to relate to it, and why believers benefit from that relationship. Nonbelievers don't deny that reality is impressive, but they doubt that any religion knows best about reality or how to relate to it. Nonbelievers instead use some nonreligious worldview, some account of reality and humanity's relationship with it, that lacks any role for a god. It can seem that believers and nonbelievers, divided by such a wide chasm, would have little to talk about. But appearances can be deceiving.

Religions are also divided, yet believers meet to share and compare their religions. Ecumenical dialogue among Christian denominations is a frequent and familiar pleasure for participants. Dialogue between different religions has also grown. An Ayatollah, an Archbishop, a Pope, or a Dalai Lama are world travelers for cooperation on secular or spiritual matters, urging political reforms and joining peace councils. Less frequently, but no less importantly, theological issues can be the topic. Disagreeing over dogma sounds less promising, but dogma needn't stand in the way of learning. Believers sharing their personal experiences and idealistic hopes can find common ground hidden behind doctrinal walls. Theological arguments for completely different gods may have common features, pointing the way towards shared perspectives.

The God Debates John R. Shook

If religions benefit from comparison and discussion, why can't the nonreligious join the ecumenical conversation? Surely "belief in god" cannot be a prerequisite for getting a seat at the table. What god would a participant in the room have to accept first? Religions as different as Christianity and Buddhism, each dubious that the other's god could possibly exist, would be hypocritical for closing the door to a nonbeliever's doubt that either god exists. There are enough doubters in the world to justify full participation, too. China, Russia, and much of Europe are largely skeptical about a supernatural deity. Even in America, the fastest-growing segment, now almost 20 percent of the adult population, is composed of the "Nones." The Nones typically say they have no particular religion, although many of the Nones still regard themselves as religious or spiritual, even if they don't identify with any denomination or church (see Fuller 2001, Kosmin and Keysar 2008).

The Nones are evidently rethinking god. Supernaturalism isn't the only kind of religion to consider, as well. There are non-traditional Christians, and those influenced by other religious traditions, who suspect that god and nature overlap, interpenetrate, or combine in some way. Many people find religious inspiration and connection through divine or spiritual aspects of nature. Pantheisms and spiritual naturalisms (see Levine 1994 and Stone 2009) are serious worldviews, meriting discussion in the concluding chapter after supernaturalism has been debated. If religions' reasonings are on the agenda for open discussion, why shouldn't outside evaluations of arguments for god carry some weight too? If religions expect their theologies to be persuasive, trying them out on non-traditional minds and nonbelieving skeptics could hardly be a waste of time.

Respectful and rational dialogue among believers and nonbelievers, and everyone in between, holds great promise. This book is most helpful for the curious reader eager to join the conversation, who only needs a clear guide through the debating points and counter-points. But perhaps you looked into this book expecting something even more exciting?

1.1 Religion under Scrutiny

Arguments over religion are getting louder, while respectful dialogue gets drowned out. Debating the existence of god is only one part of a much wider field, the field of religious criticism. Criticism for the sake of criticism has taken center stage. Nowadays, noisy attacks on faith, religion, and believers

get the popular attention. Strident rejection of everything religious attracts the spotlight. Atheism is not new, but the publicity is. Academic debates over god's existence on college campuses draw crowds, but who else is paying careful attention? Unfortunately, debating god has gotten dragged down into the mud of religious criticism, where we can't see the difference between a respectful debate and a dirt-throwing fight. Some religious critics maintain a composed posture, but they aren't imitated enough any more.

The attacks of religious criticism have been around a long time, about as long as religion itself. The complaints are pretty much the same: religious leaders caught as hypocrites; religious people behaving immorally; religious scripture endorsing unethical deeds; religions promoting hatred, conflict, and wars; religions promoting injustice and discrimination; and the like. People often abandon religion because of such issues (read the stories contained in Blackford and Schüklenk 2009). These disappointed apostates probably outnumber those who reject religion on intellectual grounds (ask two preachers, now atheists, Barker 2008 and Loftus 2008, or a Bishop, the nontheist Spong 1998). We are a practical species, after all. From naturalism's perspective, there are ways to explain why people invent and use ideological mythologies for about any purpose, good and evil, people can imagine. The allegations of religion's harms have been catalogued (see Russell 1957, Harris 2004, Hitchens 2007). Science's investigations have been summoned. Perhaps religion is the result of biological and/or cultural evolution (see Firth 1996, Rue 2005, Schloss and Murray 2009, Wade 2009), although evolution can pass on vices as well as virtues (Teehan 2010). Religion's psychological dimensions are also receiving fresh attention (Paloutzian and Park 2005, Newberg and Walden 2009). Perhaps religion consists of viral "memes" contagiously infecting many human minds (see Dawkins 2006, Dennett 2006). While all these examinations of religion are revealing fascinating facts about human beings and their belief systems, god's existence remains a separate question.

Any sophisticated religion, such as Christianity, is intelligently designed for dealing with religious criticism. The faithful can respond that genuine religion is mostly beneficial and ethical. For them, religion is the only fund of joy, hope, and wisdom in the world while atheism is a cruel deprivation of all of this life's meaning and the next life's bliss (Zacharias 2008, Harrison 2008, Hart 2009). Atheism is associated with a foolishly optimistic worldview expecting reason and science to make life better for people (though believers appreciate mathematics and medicine too). People who

lack much hope for this life and really want an afterlife have great incentive to be religious, and they construct social institutions to reinforce collective belief. Some wonder whether humans still need religion, though. Religions may fear that lack of religious belief causes moral and social deterioration, yet today's most advanced, healthy, and peaceful countries are among the least religious in the world (Paul 2009). Believers can reply that most people around the world are still content to believe in a god. Religion has no trouble explaining why there are atheists – there will always be wicked deviants in any society. Atheists are either innocently ignorant so they need to read scripture (Balabat 2008), or they are willfully stubborn so they need to accept grace (Pasquini 2000).

Atheists get blamed for secularization, yet secularization was well underway in the West long before enough atheists accumulated to add support to the separation of church and state. Secularization is not the same as atheism. Secularization has to do with religion's control over the outer world, not over the inner mind. Secularization is the gradual replacement of religious control over major political and social institutions. Political secularization prevents governments from favoring religion and it also protects religions from government interference. Social secularization finds most civil organizations, such as for-profit businesses and non-profit colleges and hospitals, no longer controlled by any religious denomination. America is a good example of a country in which secularism is the norm while most people sustain their faiths. Some of religion's defenders fear secularization, as if peoples' faith in god could depend on religion controlling the world. Curiously, we also hear religion's defenders proudly displaying demographic trends showing how faith is remarkably resilient around the world. If faith is doing so well, perhaps secularization should not be such a terror. Apparently, billions of people can freely enjoy their private faith in god while letting governments do their public jobs (indeed, that was the aim of secularism). Political and social secularization continues, affecting the world as much as faith's propagation (Berger 1999, Bruce 2002, Joas and Wiegandt 2009, Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2009), and both believers and nonbelievers should grasp the global consequences (see the analyses of Berlinerblau 2005, Taylor 2007, Zuckerman 2009). Religions tend to view any competition as another religion, so secularism gets accused of quasi-religious indoctrination and totalitarianism (London 2009). Religions proudly chart the number of their adherents, as if the real god would have the most faithful. Demographics and social statistics measure intriguing trends to track, but they don't track god.

Nothing about religion's capacity to satisfy personal, social, or political needs can determine whether or not a god exists.

Religious criticism in general is directed at believers, not god, and we humans do deserve harsh judgment. Some religion can be used for evil, while nonbelievers can be evil too. Still, religion cannot show that god exists by complaining that nonbelievers tend to be more evil or just want to evade god's condemnation of sin. Pointing to Hitler, Stalin, or Mao as consequences of nonbelief cannot prove the existence of god. Besides, Hitler was religious, hated atheism, and most Nazis were Christians (Steigmann-Gall 2003), while atheist Stalin and atheist Mao eradicated millions for totalitarian power, not for atheism (and Italy's Mussolini, like France's Napoleon, was Catholic). Some perspective over centuries is needed: the deaths from African colonial wars and slave trade, the genocide of American Indians, and the Napoleanic Wars (all conducted by millions of Christians) together approximate the twentieth-century numbers attributed to two atheists. The sheer numbers of twentieth-century dead are appallingly large, but that mostly reflects more murderous weaponry and bigger populations to kill. Not even secularization could be associated with such killing. Democratically secular countries are the least likely to engage in wars or destroy their own populations (Rummell 1998). Nor can religion complain that science is responsible for a world more immoral or warlike. Powers have always used science and technology for murderous ends. Christian kings used the finest weaponry of their times to kill as many as they could, and a Christian president was the first to drop nuclear weapons on civilian populations. National and international struggles tend to overpower religion or even co-opt religion's involvement (see the American Confederacy, Northern Ireland, or the Middle East). The god debates are not about politics or war, however. Religion, like everything else involving humans, can be a benefit and a harm. Some of the faithful can even agree that religions are culpable for their transgressions, by God's own standards, so it is better to follow God directly instead of tracking a religion's beliefs (Carse 2008, Lesperance 2009). There is no way to establish whether god exists by criticizing the conduct of believers or nonbelievers.

Other kinds of religious criticism similarly lack relevance to the god debates. For example, it has been fashionable for skeptics to claim that religious belief is just nonsense, because it cannot be verified and fails to make any claims about reality. This is an odd claim, exposing an ignorance of theology. For centuries, theologians have led the way towards interpreting

scripture in ways other than taking it literally or factually, and understanding god in ways other than attributing mere existence or reality. Interpreting religious claims for their analogical, metaphorical, poetic, aesthetic, or mystical meanings has been a full-time enterprise for Christian theologians ever since they tried to read Old Testament passages as forecasts about Jesus. Perhaps valuable meanings for religious belief are inspirational and transformational. Indeed, nonbelievers can easily agree that religious claims should not be narrowly understood as merely literal descriptions of god and god's work. Curiously, many contemporary theologians complain that atheism overlooks religion's metaphorical, poetic, inspirational, and ritualistic functions. Atheism recognizes these functions all too well, since atheism has always claimed that religious language could not be expressing factual truths about god, so religious language must have quite different functions. Curious too how some liberal theologians dismiss atheism by warning that mere existence is no attribute of a god, even while they reassure believers in the pews that god really exists. If people didn't think that there is a god, such distracting misuses of language could be avoided (and people would not be bothered by atheism). We need some straight talk about god. Rather than get distracted by discussing all the things that religious language can do besides talk about god, the god debates are only about the existence of god.

Another common criticism of religion starts from its love of mystery. Religion does not avoid mystery, to be sure, but does that make religion irrational? Acknowledging mystery doesn't really help anyone in the god debates. Popular religious literature appeals to mystery to defend belief in god. Christians are told that god is so transcendent from this world that people would not discover god through evidence or science, and that the human mind could not consider such a transcendent god as anything but a deep mystery. This strategy is self-defeating; how can the lack of information (the mystery) help create more information (about a god)? This "argument from deep mystery" proposes that, since deep mystery exists, it is reasonable to believe in god. The conclusion doesn't follow, though. God may be quite mysterious, but if god is completely mysterious for humans, then a person's belief has nothing to aim at, nothing to believe in, even if this person really wants to believe. All the same, nonbelievers can't deny the reality of mystery – mystery about what lies beyond current knowledge, and what may lie beyond all future knowledge. Precisely because everyone admits the deep mystery, no one can claim to know what lies out there without contradicting themselves. Deep mystery by itself only produces a skeptical stand-off between believers

and nonbelievers. We shall simply have to see where the evidence and argument leads us.

Distinguishing itself from the wider (and wilder) field of religious criticism, the god debates should stay focused on its own task. Religions, like everything human, need criticism. What is special about the god debates is its tighter attention to the most important question: is supreme reality a god, or not? Having an answer to that question cuts to the core of what religion is, and what it should be. The god debates are worthy of our most serious and careful intellectual efforts. Our timing couldn't be better. Western civilization is in the throes of birthing a new post-Enlightenment worldview. We are sensing the breakdown, the opportunity, and the cost of failure. The religious and naturalistic worldviews now competing for influence in the West must not ignore each other. And Eastern wisdom traditions deserve serious engagement too. Some worldviews are more prepared than others for engaging in dialogue and debate. The final chapter identifies their respective advantages and limitations, and suggests where alliances might prove fruitful. The world is waiting.

1.2 Debating Dogma

For the reader willing to turn away from the spectacle of religious criticism, the god debates beckon. Still, there might be a good reason why more energy goes into attacking and defending the conduct of religions. Respectful dialogue sounds good, but what might debating god's existence really accomplish? Looking to the past, we may despair of hope for any reasonable progress. The world's major religions have had centuries and millennia to carefully formulate their doctrines and arguments. All the same, these theological stances need to be reexamined and perhaps redesigned. Indeed, recent theology, especially Christian theology, has now far surpassed those traditional arguments formulated during a different age. Believers have noticed this as much as nonbelievers, and everyone needs a better education in religion.

Traditional theologies can seem antiquated and alien, cramped by microscopic obsessions over messianic prophets and angelic visitations and virgin births and miraculous healings and blissful trances and karmic avatars. Such fixations on earthly dramas were impressive indeed to Bronze Age wonderment but they bewilder the modern mind's computations. The universe is just so much bigger and wilder to our telescopic view. It's not

just nonbelievers who view theologies like tourists view Stonehenge – wondering that anyone would go to such trouble to build it – but ordinary religious laypeople don't grasp much theology, either. A Catholic may admire Aquinas' theology like she admires a Gothic cathedral, but she intuitively sees how she doesn't live in that civilization any more. Nowadays, a charismatic faith healer or wild-eyed herald of the apocalypse only manages to initiate small cults, to the embarrassment of mainstream religious believers and nonbelievers alike.

If real opportunity for constructive thinking and debate over religion and theology is still available, we must assess the current situation carefully. What are the prospects for religious debate at present, in the twenty-first century? Debating about religion usually doesn't feel like it's worth the effort. The prevalent attitude among nonbelievers seems to be that faith just can't be reasoned with anyway. Regrettably, little serious debate occurs between people of different faiths, too. Most religious people won't endure argumentative challenge for very long, even if conducted in the most polite tones. It's probably not their fault; few laypeople are as informed or trained as their religious leaders in the reasoned defense of doctrines. There is no need to suppose that religious people are less intelligent, more easily confused, or overly sensitive. It would be easier to respectfully debate with lots of people about their religion if they were better educated about their creeds. The same thing goes for nonbelievers who want to discuss religion. You don't have to be a believer yourself to have enough of an understanding of a religion to engage in debate. Before criticizing religion, a nonbeliever should be aware of ways that Christians can theologically explain and defend their beliefs.

Should respectful debating about religion be deemed impossible just because of the current situation, for both believers and nonbelievers, in religious education? That would be hasty and unfortunate judgment. We should instead expect, as many religious intellectuals have hoped, that debating would inspire deeper knowledge of one's religious beliefs. After all, religions are hardly strangers to debate. Many religious texts contain examples of debating. For example, accounts of debates between Jesus and Jewish rabbis can be instructive for Christians, while Krishna's arguments to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita teach Hindus. Questioning and debating has helped shape many religions (Berger and Zijderveld 2009). Most major religions today explain their beliefs in sophisticated ways, designed to widely persuade and withstand scrutiny. Such sophistication resulted from internal doubts, disagreements, and debates among religious leaders, scholars, and

laypeople. Examples abound. Confucianism originated in philosophical meditations. Much of modern Hinduism and Buddhism developed in the context of intellectual argumentation as rigorous as any in the Western philosophical tradition. Both Judaism and Islam have produced some of the world's finest religious literature and heights of philosophical thought. It is impossible to understand the Catholic Church if its 1700-year record of theological systematizing, and council debating and voting by bishops, is overlooked. The fragmentation of modern Protestantism into thousands of denominations and churches is, from a certain perspective, nothing but a long tale of disputation in the pews over ever-finer points of scripture interpretation, theological doctrine, and church practice. Religion's intellectual progress, like any kind of learning, always begins from doubt. Fanaticism, not doubt, is the greater danger for religion.

It might be supposed that underlying all this debating are fundamental dogmas, a special set of beliefs, that never get modified or questioned. Actually, questions about which dogmas are most fundamental, and what practical implications such dogmas have, are the questions most theologically interpreted and thoroughly debated during a religion's historical evolution. Christianity is no exception. Christian theology was powerfully developed through systematic "apologetics," in which Church Fathers organized reasoned justifications for core doctrines in order to facilitate conversations and conversions among the better-educated in the culturally Greek and Latin world. Apologetics remained a central activity for Christian theologians, whose competing systems of religious thought have frequently rivaled their secular philosophical counterparts.

Is anything and everything about a religion really up for questioning? What about god's existence? Surely that can't be up for debate among the faithful. Well, which god are we talking about? A Christian is quickly tempted to reply, "You know, *the* God, the god that all we believers accept." However, a religion's believers will not all share the identical conception of that god. Let's use Christianity as a paradigm case. There are numerous rival conceptions of the Christian God available to believers. Is God only as described in the New Testament, or does the Old Testament add essential details about God? Are there three separate divinities (God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit), or does God consist of three persons in one (the Trinitarian theory), or does God have a unique and unchanging nature? If Jesus is eternally divine, does that mean that a god really died on the cross, or was only a human being sacrificed for other humans' sins? Are all of God's and Jesus' commandments throughout the Bible legitimate and binding rules, or

are only some of them truly God's will for us now? Is this God still supplying new revelations to special people down to this day, or does the Bible record the final Word of God? Did God create the world in one great act and then rest for ever, or does God continually remake and adjust the world with fresh miracles? Does God precisely plan out everything that happens in the world, or does human free will control some of the world's destiny? Is this God loving and merciful towards all, or is wrathful punishment this God's priority? Does eternal punishment really await the damned, or does God want everyone to eventually get into heaven? Does God answer prayers from only Christians, or does God listen to non-Christians too? Might Hitler be in heaven (if he repented right before death) while Anne Frank is in hell (for being Jewish)? These sorts of questions about God's character and motivation can proliferate quickly. Even complicated ways of reconciling some of these opposed notions have been vigorously debated.

Furthermore, other religions have raised these issues and taken attitudes towards Christianity. The debating advice in this book wasn't written just for nonbelievers and Christians. The reasons that Christians give for their beliefs have long had global interest, and the god debates have generated defenses of god in general (such as Armstrong 2009) and of Christianity in particular (such as McDowell 2006 and D'Souza 2007) which are quite readable for laypeople of any belief or no belief. The twenty-first century now presents an almost unprecedented opportunity to meet and compare religious doctrines on a planetary scale. Tough questions from the nonreligious, who emerged in the last fifty years as a small minority of the world's population, are also posed by the peoples of many other faiths, who together comprise the large majority. Non-Christians may be inquisitive about Christianity's supernaturalism and spirit–body duality, or about its theistic god of limitless power and knowledge. Christianity's peculiar dependency on alleged miracles involving Jesus may strike some non-Christians as somewhat familiar (if their own religion is also based on miracles by divine visitors to Earth), or as strangely exotic. The Christian manner of erecting a moral and social code upon carefully selected Bible verses, and endlessly arguing over which verses matter most, also arouses curiosity.

Christianity is ready for this higher level of dialogue on the global stage. Christianity from its early origins has been an evangelical movement reaching out to convert all who would listen, regardless of their prior religious or intellectual views. Cultural mutation has been Christianity's strength powering its growth. Over two millennia, Christianity has borrowed and incorporated tools of persuasion from the civilizations around it,

including aspects of Judaism and other older religions, along with adapted parts of Greek and Islamic logic and philosophy. If Christianity is well prepared for debating a newly evolved skepticism, it is only because its doctrinal framework is intelligently designed, for arguing with both internal heretics and external rivals. Many internal heretics (preferring the role of "reformer") founded their own varieties of Christianity, and in turn were obligated to explain their new doctrines. Christianity now presents to the world a paradigm of interfaith dialogue. Its numerous denominational species, from Greek Orthodoxy to Pentecostal Fundamentalism, are all highly adapted in the competitive campaign for followers.

Continuing their spread around the world, Christian denominations are taking advantage of new technologies of mechanical travel and electronic communication invented in the twentieth century. Priests and missionaries no longer follow the dusty roads opened by the silk trade or the sea routes charted by mercantile shipping. And it is no longer merely the church intelligentsia who shoulder the entire burden of sharing the message and advancing their own denomination. A better-educated class of churchgoers emerged during the past 200 years, knowledgeable about much more than just the scripted creeds, and getting familiarized with theological reasonings explaining them. The internet then released this intellectual energy from the pews and broadcast it around the world. There are far more personal websites about religion than church-run websites. Ecumenical discussion and debate, led by laypeople as well as by ecclesiastics, is a fascinating worldwide web phenomenon. Other religions are available for exploration and discussion on the internet too. There are fewer and fewer good excuses for remaining ignorant about one's religion.

There aren't many excuses for believers to avoid the god debates, either. If a Christian would be ready for answering questions from people of other faiths, why not people of no faith as well? The basic questions, about the Christian god, Jesus, the Bible, etc., all remain the same. Answering them should proceed no differently, whether replying to a Muslim, a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Taoist, or a nonbeliever. Learning from debating god with nonbelievers should be much like learning about a different religion. Sharing in faith is hardly a requirement for learning. Actually, close sharing could be an impediment to learning. You don't learn much from someone who already agrees with you. Too often ecumenical dialogue presumes the strange notion that only people having large overlapping areas of faith can benefit. By this rule, any two denominational cousins within Protestantism, like Presbyterianism and Congregationalism, would have more to learn

from each other than two different religions, such as Christianity and Buddhism. But that doesn't make any good sense. The most interesting and important aspects of your own religion are probably those arousing great curiosity in a person from a very different religion. Learning is principally about acquiring good answers for yourself – and the more questions you are asked, the more answers you must supply. The opportunities to learn from discussing religion with an nonbeliever range from learning how to explain the basic beliefs of Christianity all the way to learning where Christian justifications for its doctrines can most effectively answer skeptical questions.

Dialogue about religion with atheology should not be viewed as a distasteful encounter or a tiresome chore. It is not for everyone, to be sure. On the other side, many nonbelievers avoid debating with Christians, too. Debating has a reputation for being confrontational and unpleasant. People involved in debates are usually more interested in "winning" than learning. Even the label of "debate" carries the expectation that everyone already has their mind made up. If debating is only about winning, and confessing to learning something is an automatic "loss," then total close-mindedness seems necessary. Not surprisingly, then, we think of debating as a stiff competition between inflexible positions. If that is all debating could be, then no one could be blamed for avoiding it. We should all avoid dogmatism, and seek educated knowledge.

1.3 Theology and Atheology

The god debates involves theology, and theology can be intimidating for believers and nonbelievers alike. To become knowledgeable about religion, theology is unavoidable. When religion elevates its intellectual level, it develops a theology. In our god debates, we will cover much of philosophy of religion and philosophical theology, focusing on Christianity and, by implication, related theistic religions of Judaism and Islam. Christianity calls the supreme reality by the name of 'God' and urges faithful beliefs about this god. Christianity is a supernaturalistic religion, holding that its god shares no essential properties or powers with the physical world of nature and this god does not overlap in any important way with nature. Christianity is a theistic religion, as its god is taken to the only god, the almighty god, and a personal god who cares for creation and humans. Christianity is a theological religion, as its core doctrines have been shaped

by theological efforts to explain and defend its supernatural and theistic worldview.

What is theology? Thoughtful religious people who try to reasonably explain god and relationships with god are doing theology. The term "theology" comes from a Greek combination of words: *theos* means god, and *logos* means reason. Theism is a worldview that includes a god, and theology tries to explain that theistic worldview. The Greek language can also add the prefix 'a' at the start of a word to form another word for its contrary. Many English words were borrowed from these Greek combinations, such as apathy (a-pathos, or "not caring") and atheism (a-theos or "not godly"). Just as "atheism" is the contrary of "theism," theology has a contrary in "atheology." Atheology is the intellectual effort to explain why a worldview should not include any god. Where theology offers reasons to believe in a god, atheology criticizes those reasons and skeptically denies god's existence.

Since Christian theology the focus of our god debates in this book, the kind of atheology involved would be accurately labeled as "Christian atheology," but we'll only use "atheology." In a discussion of many religions, different atheologies would have to be specified. There are as many atheologies as theologies, one for each religion. Hindu atheology is quite different from Christian atheology, for example.

Atheology is narrowly focused on questioning the existence of anything divine or supernatural, but it not primarily about atheism. Atheology is for almost everyone, not just atheists, because most religious believers deny other religions' gods. Atheists do atheology in debating about gods, but many religious people are good at atheology, too – atheology skeptically targeting someone else's god. When a Christian forms a reasoned justification for rejecting Islam or Hinduism, for example, Islamic atheology or Hindu atheology are undertaken. Christian intellectuals who specialize in explaining and debating why Christianity is the more reasonable religion are quite good at atheology. In fact, most of the people doing atheology are religious believers, not atheists. An atheist would simply be someone who accepts the view of "complete" atheology that all atheologies about all religions are reasonable, and so the atheist is skeptical towards all religions and gods. But all thoughtful religious believers are partial atheologists: they can appeal to some reasons why they don't believe in other gods. The atheist just believes in one less god than the theist.

In succeeding chapters we will explore arguments in both theology and atheology. They are complex enough that they deserve the labels of

"philosophical theology" and "philosophical atheology" respectively. Philosophical theology consists of the search for the best reasoned justifications for a religion; the converse of philosophical theology would therefore be philosophical atheology: the search for the best reasoned justifications for skeptically rejecting religious claims about gods. There are two basic types of philosophical atheology. "Negative" philosophical atheology skeptically reacts to the positive theological arguments supporting religious claims about god. By showing how such arguments fail, the reasonable default position is to be skeptical towards god. "Positive" philosophical atheology constructs its own positive arguments based on reason and available knowledge which try to show that specific gods (such as Christianity's theistic god) do not exist, or that they are highly improbable. Because this book is primarily concerned with theological arguments and skeptical responses to them, negative philosophical atheology is more thoroughly discussed. Occasionally, as opportunity arises, some of the important positive philosophical atheology arguments are presented as well.

Because philosophical atheology appeals to what we do know about ourselves and nature, and it considers naturalism as a fair rival to supernaturalism for skeptical comparison, philosophical atheology takes nature seriously. Philosophical atheology is not equivalent to science or naturalism, however. Naturalism is a general understanding of reality and humanity's place within reality. Naturalism can be briefly defined as the philosophical conclusion that the only reality is what is discovered by our intelligence using the tools of experience, reason, and science. Naturalism is about as old as the few religions which still survive to challenge it. The so-called "Axial Age" from around 800 to 300 BCE saw a sudden explosion of religious and philosophical creativity in Europe, the Middle East, India, and China. Greek philosophy and science was invented; Judaism became monotheistic; Zoroasterianism enveloped the Persian empire; Hinduism was transformed by the Vedanta theology in the Upanishads; Buddhism arose to challenge Hinduism; Taoism was systematized in the Tao Te Ching; and Confucianism was founded.

What caused this sudden eruption of sophisticated thought? There are two main explanations, and these hypotheses are compatible with each other. First, all four of the main centers of civilization – Europe, the Middle East, India, and China – were suffering from political fragmentation and civil wars. Much of the moral and political philosophy from the Axial Age arose in efforts to deal with these severe political crises. Second, all four of these civilization centers learned about the amazing discoveries of

Babylonian astronomers made during the period of around 1600 to 900 BCE. The Babylonian astronomers were the first to accurately record and calculate the regular motions of the heavenly bodies. Suddenly a brand new idea detonated in the imagination: the universe is ruled by law. This idea brought immense changes to every aspect of civilization, from Greece to China. Religions had to adapt and absorb this amazing idea of universal and perfect law. In the Middle East, gods laid down natural laws. In India, the gods upheld righteous dharma. In China, the way of the Tao controls everything. In Greece, natural science was born. Although naturalism is most often associated with its Western philosophical and scientific tradition, other naturalisms began during the Axial Age as well. Taoism has often been understood as a naturalistic philosophy, since the ultimate power of the Tao is still part of nature. Several important varieties of Buddhism have no beliefs about the afterlife or anything supernatural. The Carvaka school of Hindu philosophy, notable for its defiant materialism and atheism, also dates from this Axial Age. For over 2600 years, religions in the major centers of civilization have been matched by a powerful alternative that looks to nature alone.

Modern naturalism is primarily indebted to the boldness of Greek rationalism and science. The origins of science come from such theorizing about what nature is made of and how nature works. In this new scientific way of thinking, more complex things are to be explained in terms of simpler things, and fairly unpredictable events are to be explained in terms of more predictable regularities. A religious mode of thinking proceeds in the opposite manner: simpler things are to be explained by more complex things, and regular patterns are explainable by unpredictable events. For example, a religion may say that human beings (simpler) were created by a god (more complex), or that the pattern of the four seasons (fairly regular) was instituted by a divine act (not predictable), or that a moral rule (strictly valid) was ordered by a god's command (which could have been otherwise). Religious thinking attempts to apply ways we understand each other in our attempts to understand nature around us. Religions are basically about complex and unpredictable events happening at special times to privileged peoples. Such anthropocentric (humanity-centered) reasoning actually is highly unreasonable when applied to the world, since it privileges the human perspective all out of proper proportion to nature. Instead of privileging one perspective, natural science tries to offer explanations that can work from anywhere. Simple things and predictable regularities, valid anywhere in the universe, are precisely what science seeks.

Finding their all-too-human gods unsatisfying, many Greek intellectuals put their confidence in scientific thinking. Greek philosophers, starting with Thales and the Ionian school around 600 BCE, offered speculations about the origin and constitution of the world that left little or no role for gods or spirits. Perhaps everything is made of one of the four basic elements known to the Greeks. One philosopher suggested water, another fire; another proposed that underlying the elements is a more fundamental, formless energy that can become anything. Democritus (*c.*400 BCE) declared his radically materialistic view that only tiny atoms and gaps of empty space really exist. Aristotle (*c.*350 BCE) catalogued a wide variety of these speculations, and added his own reasoned theories. Skepticism about the gods was more openly discussed. By 100 BCE, sophisticated schools of Greek philosophy argued their merits, and in turn they taught Western civilization, including its Christian component, how to reason. Today's naturalism takes advantage of the vast amount of scientific knowledge we now possess. But the naturalistic spirit is far older than experimental science, and traces its birth back to the very origins of reason itself.

While philosophical atheology relies on reason, it is not equivalent to naturalism and it does not presuppose naturalism. Philosophical atheology does require the use of ordinary common sense and logical reasoning, but it does not presume that naturalism is superior to supernaturalism. As we shall see in later chapters, some kinds of theology try to justify religion on grounds other than human reason and knowledge, so they would dispute the ability of philosophical atheology to fairly judge supernaturalism. However, philosophical atheology is not a rival religion or worldview or philosophy, so it really isn't a competitor to supernaturalism, but only a neutral critic. All the same, a highly successful philosophical atheology, capable of justifying skepticism about the supernatural, tends to send the skeptic in the direction of naturalism as an alternative worldview. Furthermore, we shouldn't forget how many people feel "in between" supernaturalism and naturalism and aren't sure whether labels such as "agnosticism" or "atheism" are good fits for them.

Nonbelievers who reject traditional theistic Christianity have many options for positive worldviews. Besides other nontheistic religions, there are many kinds of pantheisms, spiritualisms, and mysticisms, along with varieties of humanism and naturalism. Forming a positive worldview is hard enough; selecting a label for oneself from a limited menu is even harder. Demographers polling people in America and around the world consistently find that few nonbelievers prefer the label of "atheist" for labeling their

own position (Zuckerman 2007). This reluctance probably has more to do with the perceived meaning of atheism rather than the actual views of nonbelievers. Besides its strongly negative connotations, attached to the label by believers' scorn or fear towards atheism, the term "atheism" became associated with dogmatism. Nonbelievers, quite understandably, do not want to be perceived as evil or dangerous, or stubbornly dogmatic. It is ironic how believers could accuse atheists of dogmatism, when the word "dogmatic" was a preferred label for true religious believers since the early days of the Christian Church. The meaning reversal that happened to "dogmatic" in turn caused "atheism" to shift meaning. In earlier centuries, an atheist was simply a skeptical nonbeliever, characterized by an inability to be dogmatic about religion (Thrower 2000, Hecht 2004). This lack of dogmatism was precisely what distinguished the wayward atheist who strayed into ignorance about religious matters. Unable to be persuaded by sacred scripture, religious creed, or theological reasoning, atheists expressed their unbelief and uncertainty. That's how you could tell a religious believer from a nonbeliever back then: the religious person pronounced their confident knowledge about religious matters, while the atheist could only admit hesitant ignorance. Nowadays, however, the atheist is often accused of dogmatism.

The rise of the label "agnostic" is connected with the strange fate of the term "atheism." In the 1860s Thomas Henry Huxley recommended "agnosticism" – the contrary of "gnostic," a Greek term for knowledge. An agnostic recommends admitting our lack of knowledge about any ultimate reality, such as a "supreme being" or whatever caused the universe. Huxley offered agnosticism as a reasonable stance towards not just any religion's overconfident dogmas but also about any philosophy's overreaching conclusions as well. Skeptical towards both theology and metaphysics, Huxley and many other rationalists adopted "agnosticism" as a convenient general category for their conservative philosophical stance. The agnostic is not a complete philosophical skeptic who claims to know nothing. The agnostic's standard of knowledge is just our ordinary reliable (not perfect or infallible) knowledge of the natural world around us. While presently unable to know anything about ultimate reality using these empirical tools of intelligence, the agnostic, like everyone else, is able to know plenty of other things about the natural world, where ordinary human investigations yield practical and reliable results.

Since agnosticism's conservative approach to belief is also the basis for atheism, confusion between atheism and agnosticism immediately ensued,

and has not stopped since. What exactly is the relationship between agnosticism and atheism? An agnostic, like an atheist, does not accept supernaturalism, specifically, because no supernatural belief has yet passed the reasonable standard of empirical knowledge, and so a confession of ignorance is the only conclusion. Despite the obvious overlap between agnosticism and atheism, the impact of agnosticism in the 1800s and early 1900s had the rhetorical effect of clearing a middle ground between religious belief and atheism. This adjustment in turn affected the meaning of "atheism." If the agnostic cannot know that supernaturalism is right, and if the atheist isn't an agnostic, then the atheist must therefore be someone claiming to know something about the supernatural. What might an atheist claim to know? The common meaning of 'atheism' began to shift towards "disbelief in god" and "the denial that god exists" so that many people began taking atheism to mean "it can be known that nothing supernatural exists." The agnostic, on the other hand, could still be religious through other means besides the intellect (such as faith), so that there could be agnostic theists as well as agnostic atheists (see Flint 1903).

It is not easy to track dictionary definitions of "atheism" over the centuries, since this subject, so distasteful to Christians, rarely received its own entry. By the time the term began regularly appearing in dictionaries, around the turn of the twentieth century, the distinction between two kinds of atheism was already noticed. The eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1911) was the earliest edition of that reference work to include atheism. It distinguishes between dogmatic atheism and skeptical atheism. Dogmatic atheism "denies the existence of god positively" while skeptical atheism "distrusts the capacity of the human mind to discover the existence of god." The entry goes on to add that skeptical atheism hardly differs from agnosticism. But skeptical atheism kept fading from view, lost in the glare of its new cousins, agnosticism and dogmatic atheism. Dogmatic atheism is now widely taken to be the only kind of atheism, especially in the recent form of a "new atheism." This new meaning for atheism has achieved common parlance, dictionary affirmation, and philosophical usage. Instead of being an ignorant skeptic about the divine, an atheist is now supposed to be just another overreaching gnostic possessing confident knowledge about ultimate reality. Agnosticism has now re-emerged into popular view as a nonbelief option to atheism's dogmas and religion's faith.

The distinction between agnosticism and atheism has been additionally confused because a fourth competitor to gnosticism reemerged in the 1800s, in the form of "fideistic theism" or "fideism" for short. Disdain for

intellectual paths to god was hardly new for Christianity (mysticism was always an option, and Protestant Martin Luther denounced abstract theological argumentation, for example). Drawing on the Latin root word for "faithful" or "loyal," fideistic theologians recommend faithful belief in god despite the absence of any conclusive empirical or logical demonstration. Religious belief is not fideism, nor is fideism defined by contradicting reason. Fideism is similar to agnosticism in this crucial respect: they both agree that the supernatural cannot be defended by reason and cannot be known. As a theological stance, fideism is a strange partner to traditional theology, since the original aim of theology was to rationally defend belief in god. Perhaps fideism is more of an abandonment of theology's reasoned defenses of theism, calling for a return to straightforward religious conviction, pure religious emotions, and sincere witnessing. Fideistic theology has had plenty of help. Philosophical fideisms inspired by Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Schleiermacher, William James, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and others sought new harmonies between reason and faith; still more thinkers sought faith's liberation from reason entirely.

Forms of fideism multiplied throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and competed for attention from Christians (see Penelhum 1983, Phillips 1986). Modern fideism discovered additional allies as it questioned reason's supremacy. In the first half of the twentieth century, fideism received support from the social sciences such as anthropology and sociology, which treat religions as practices of communities. If religion is essentially about what your community traditionally preaches or practices, then nonbelievers could not share any reasonable common basis for criticizing faith. In the second half of the twentieth century, some kinds of fideism partly merged with various postmodernist views urging suspicion towards the pretensions of reason and science. If reason and science either fail to yield any knowledge, or only manages to yield incomplete and partial knowledge, then the grounds for dismissing religion shift dramatically or even vanish. Could fideism deliver knowledge of god where reason could not? Or perhaps fideism better opens a path to god that is not properly a kind of knowledge at all? Fideism tended to provide Christians divergent methods of seeking god, but it gave many Christians encouragement despite traditional theology's troubles.

Fideism also encouraged Christians to define atheism as the claim to know that nothing supernatural exists. After all, if such knowledge is impossible, atheism is disproved, and the resulting admission of agnosticism is simultaneously a potential vindication for fideism. Fideists

recommending agnosticism are not contradicting themselves; the confession that the intellect cannot reach god helpfully justifies reliance on faith instead. Agnosticism also proved useful against atheism. Debates between believers and disbelievers began to take the form of "If you can't prove my god doesn't exist, then you have no basis for criticizing my faith." The only way for the nonbeliever to back out of this fideistic trap is to appeal to the original skeptical principle behind atheism: where one cannot know anything, one should not believe. The fideist adopts the contrary principle: where one cannot know, one should faithfully believe, at least where Christianity is concerned. The accusation by the skeptical atheist that fideism is precisely the abandonment of reason is simply met by the fideist's reply that believing without reason's assent is the essence of religious belief. Christians sometimes echo Martin Luther's declaration of "Faith alone!" A Christian, recalling Jesus' emphasis on believing in him, and taking belief in the words of the Bible as bedrock, is quite capable of setting aside intellectual theologies in favor of dogmatic faith.

In a way, the reemergence of fideistic theology presents an opportunity for skeptical atheism to constructively rejoin the god debates. When the skeptical atheist complains that human reasoning cannot reach any god, the fideist replies that its god cannot be reached by unaided reason. If the skeptical atheist urges doubt towards all gods, the fideist replies that such doubt is inevitable so religion uses faith to reach the Christian god where reason fails. It turns out that fideism and skeptical atheism share much in common: they agree that there is insufficient reason to believe in god, and that a Christian's belief in a god is ultimately sustained by faithful conviction. An atheist believes in less than a Christian, to be sure. Yet, if the fideist insists that believing in god cannot be justified by evidence or reason, the skeptical atheist entirely agrees. Even though the competition between skeptical atheism and fideism in the god debates has been getting fiercer, it becomes harder to see what they are disagreeing about.

The skeptical atheist – the original and genuine atheist – faces an odd sort of competition even from other atheists. Some people who have no belief in god cast their doubt towards science's pretensions and naturalism in order to defend an uncertain agnosticism (Berlinski 2009, Corlett 2010). Other nonbelievers want to retain faith and spiritualism while they discard god (Comte-Sponville 2009, Schaeffer 2009, Antinoff 2010). Distinctions between 'positive' and 'negative' atheism, and between 'strong' and 'weak' atheism, have appeared in the literature (for example Martin 2007). However, definitions of these types of atheism vary across atheists, and

too often such definitions are designed more to deal with confusions with agnosticism, or to avoid any need to justify disbelief, than to describe how actual nonbelievers think about god. Fortunately, a clear and simple definition of atheism is already available: an atheist is someone who does not believe in any gods. It must be immediately added that an atheist does not have any faith in a god, either, just in case we could imagine someone lacking belief but having faith. Whatever it may take for a person to take god's existence seriously, an atheist does not have it. The essence of atheism is lack of a belief that god exists.

To repeat, an atheist is someone who does not believe in any gods. But you wouldn't know this just by asking people. It sounds like four views have gotten stubbornly entrenched. One view says that atheists are those denying the specific theistic god of Judaism/Christianity/Islam; another says that atheists are those who deny that any god exists; still another says that atheists claim to know that no god exists; while a fourth view says that atheists simply lack belief that god exists. They are also arguing over how many atheists there are, and whether atheism can avoid all burden of proof in the god debates. This chaos is affecting agnosticism, which is now looking like a useless category; skeptical atheism encompasses agnosticism entirely. Agnostics used to know where they didn't know where to stand, but now they don't even not know what it is that they are not supposed to believe or to not believe. Agnostics can't define themselves, but they do like to define atheism as excessive confidence that no god exists, just like religion's defenders.

There are understandable causes for disagreement over a precise meaning for "atheism." Lexicographers point to the Greek *a-theos* for the origin of the term. However, atheists can select among interpretations of prefix and term: what about "anti" *theos* (denial of the gods), or maybe "non" *theos* (not believing in gods), or "anti" theism (denial of a specifically theistic god). Translations can't decide this issue. Demographers often describe an atheist as someone who will reply to a pollster, "Atheism? Yes, that's me. I think that God does not exist." But few people make that selection, especially in America, where only 2–3 percent seem willing to apply that understanding of atheism to themselves. Self-identity atheism can make an atheist feel lonely. By contrast, lacking the belief that a theistic god exists may broadly cover at least one-fifth of the world's population (by including nature-worshippers, pagans, pantheists, spiritualists, agnostics, people unacquainted with the notion of a god, infants, comatose people, etc.). Atheists seeking guarantees that all default burden of justification rests on religious believers also admire this broadest category of absence of belief. However, the notion

that broad atheism needs no justification is wrong, since mere ignorance is unjustifiable (that's why we value education).

These confusions over atheism can be straightened with a couple more distinctions. An atheist is someone who does not believe in any gods, that much is still clear. Lack of belief in something will ordinarily have two causes: inattention and skepticism. That's why two main varieties of atheism are constantly promoted. It is crucial to grasp that "not believing that god exists" is different from "believing that god does not exist." Both positions are genuine kinds of atheism, and may be conveniently labeled as "apatheism" and "skeptical" atheism. Apatheism combines "apathy" and "theism" to label people inattentive about god and religious matters; apatheists lack belief in a god because they are not paying attention to religion and don't care enough to think about god. Skeptical atheism is doubtful disbelief towards god and religious matters; skeptics lack belief in god because they have considered religion and believe that god probably does not exist. "Strong" atheism is the extreme end of skeptical atheism where some people confidently assert that no god exists.

Apatheism by itself offers no rational justifications for itself – an apatheist doesn't know or care enough to bother. A genuine case of an apatheist is a person who would not rationally justify such lack of belief, since she either has no concept of god to think about, or she has no interest in thinking about what little she has heard about gods. The notion that an apatheist believes that god does not exist or that an apatheist is skeptical towards god can't make much sense. The typical apatheist simply does not have that affirming belief or active doubt. In response to the question, "Do you believe that god does not exist?" an apatheist is likely to instead reply in this fashion: "What are you talking about?" or "A notion of a god seems meaningless to me," or "I have no idea," or "I have no belief about that." It is more correct to simply say that the apatheist does not have the belief that a god exists, rather than supposing that the apatheist believes that god does not exist. Apatheists are the wrong people to ask for justifying lack of belief. Justifying apatheism must come from some other atheist position. That's the job of an educated skepticism. This skeptical atheism is doubt towards all gods on the grounds that available information and sound reasoning shows how it is improbable that any god exists. The skeptical wing of atheism composes the "disbelievers" portion of the larger whole of "nonbelievers."

Religion's defenders often show a preference for defining atheism as the strongest claim to know that no god exists. If atheists cannot justify such an extravagant claim (and they can't – see the next section), perhaps belief in

god then appears reasonable? This tactic fails, since it uses the wrong definition of atheism and conveniently forgets how religious believers do claim extravagant knowledge of a supreme infinite being. It is religion that credits an extraordinary capacity for knowledge to humans, not atheism. Those who propose the existence of something always have the burden of justification. This is especially valid where religion is involved: extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. Theology well realizes that skeptical atheism is the bigger problem than apathy; theology accordingly demands that skepticism justify itself. It is too late for the skeptic to announce apatheism or agnosticism (which is just a flavor of skepticism anyway) in order to dodge this demand. Such dodging is unnecessary. Skeptical atheism has an educated position and a task of responding to theology with atheology in the god debates.

Successful atheology would diminish the likelihood that supernaturalism is true. Since skeptics believe that nature exists (a sane and commonsense belief shared even by supernaturalists), their doubt towards supernaturalism leaves naturalism as their default worldview. Positive philosophical atheology goes the farthest to defend and apply natural scientific explanations, so it blends into the effort to provide philosophical naturalism with its firmest foundations. Strong atheists are typically those who are persuaded by both negative and positive philosophical atheology, and hence they take naturalism to be the only reasonable worldview.

1.4 Could Atheism Prove God Doesn't Exist?

Some readers may wonder about faster shortcuts in the god debates, some ways of proving whether god exists once and for all. Strong atheism might supply such a shortcut – are there any proofs that god cannot possibly exist? There are some strong atheists who feel confident about such proofs.

For example, some atheists are so impressed by the argument from the existence of evil that they conclude that this argument proves that god cannot be omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent. There are many ways for Christian theology to reply to this argument, and we will cover the ensuing debate in a later chapter. But suppose, just for a minute, that there is a perfectly valid argument for that negative conclusion. Well, what could that argument exactly prove? Only one thing: that one specific kind of god cannot exist – a god having omnipotence, omniscience, and benevolence. Two lessons are learned here. First, the atheist is reminded that there might

be other kinds of gods. Second, the theologian is reminded that it is possible, in theory, to prove that some specific gods do not exist.

There are two basic ways to design nonexistence proofs. The "dialectical nonexistence proof" argues that two or more characteristics of a specific god are logically incompatible. A definition of something having logically incompatible characteristics can only be the definition of a necessarily nonexistent entity. Successful dialectical nonexistence proofs can show that specific kinds of gods cannot exist. For example, many Christians believe both that god is perfect and that god can suffer along with us. Maybe these two characteristics are contradictory. Figuring out how a perfect being can suffer requires conceptual refinements to god to avoid the negative verdict of a dialectical nonexistence proof. And even if these refinements go badly and one characteristic of god must go, theology can revise its conception of god. Avoiding dialectical nonexistence proofs is, from a flexible theology's point of view, just another way for humanity to learn more about god.

The other kind of proof confronts a specific kind of god with the actual existence of something else, where it is necessarily impossible that both can exist together. This "evidential nonexistence proof" attempts to demonstrate that some specific god cannot exist, if something else (the "disprover") actually does exist. Of course, this sort of proof works only if there is conclusive evidence of the actual existence of the disprover. Theologians can simply deny the existence of the disprover. Consider the example from the previous paragraph. What sort of evil could disprove the existence of god? Christian theology has available means to insulate god and god's plan for the universe from any and all possible evidence. By this tactic, what appears to be evil really isn't; what certainly seems evil (such as the Holocaust) still has god's approval as good, for all we know. A debate over god and evil then sidetracks into a debate over the extent of our knowledge of god. Here's another example. If theology admits that natural evolution shows how god did not create humans, theology can propose that god did design the natural laws responsible for humanity's origins, so evolution cannot prove that no god exists. Science has always kept theology busily defensive, constructing a more and more sophisticated god.

Positive philosophical atheology can offer demonstrations that specific and inflexible gods do not exist (see Martin and Monnier 2003, Everitt 2004, Stenger 2007, Schlagel 2009). Positive philosophical atheology has plenty of material to work with. Logic, obvious evidence, and scientific knowledge can rule out a wide variety of gods, and render highly improbable many

more kinds of gods (see Martin and Monnier 2006). Still, the number of potentially conceivable gods (some have already been thought of, but most have not) far outruns the number of disprovable gods. The human imagination will, in all likelihood, forever stay ahead of reason's logic or science's facts. There are simply too many creative ways to intelligently design fair compromises between science and religion (see Clayton 2000, Frank 2009, Drees 2010), so long as science remains humble and religion stays flexible. An excessively strong atheist claim of proof that no god can possibly exist only overstates any actual success, ignores imaginative theology, and encourages religious believers to assume that all atheists (and naturalists) claim to know that no god exists.

Worse, permitting the god debates to collapse into pondering proofs that no god exists only perpetuates a runaway "atheism vs. theology arms race" which no one can win. Theology has the task of defending religion against atheism, so arguing against disproofs of god can then take priority over positively arguing for god. Laypeople cheer on theologians protecting god from refutation, but defensive theology only makes the conception of god more complicated, and changes the target of skepticism. That forces atheists to design ever more intricate arguments against that god too, and when these arguments fall short of proving that this god can't exist, believers rejoice at the atheists' dismay and congratulate themselves for their faith in a more complicated god. Over time, theology can construct a conception of god so sophisticated that the average believer can't understand it any more, leaving god quite mysterious. Theology needn't worry about mystery, of course; believers can hardly fault god for being somewhat mysterious. However, the runaway theological race against atheism has gone too far. Mystery itself now seems like a theologian's best defense, resulting in blind fideism. It is just too easy to proclaim a mysterious god, deride dogmatic atheism's inability to prove that such a mysteriously unknowable god cannot exist, and conclude that the faithful should not be criticized (a procedure exemplified by Hedges 2008).

If a sufficiently mysterious god's existence is safe from disproof, has theology achieved a final victory, or has the very idea of god become practically incoherent or meaningless? Perhaps theology should pull back from that brink. For its part, atheism should not get fixated on proving god's nonexistence. Skeptical atheism's use of atheology is sufficient for effective debate with theology. Atheists are not foolish for their humble naturalism and they aren't exposing any logical weakness if they refrain from 100 percent certainty that nothing supernatural exists.

1.5 Could Religion Disprove Atheism?

Nonbelievers persuaded by strong atheism will be naturalists, in the broad sense of taking environing nature to be the reality. There's no shortcut to proving naturalism by disproving god, as we have seen. Might there be a shortcut for believers? In theory, supernaturalists could try to speedily defeat naturalism by showing that nature does not exist, but this tactic is rarely tried. The obvious reason for such reluctance is that any definition of the "supernatural" depends on already possessing a conception of, and belief in, the "natural." Otherwise how could the supernatural be contrasted against anything else, and how could the supernatural be given credit for creating the natural world?

The less obvious reason why supernatural religions are not skeptical towards nature is because those other religions (such as varieties of Hinduism and Buddhism) which do argue that nature is not real still try to explain the illusion, by giving ultimate spiritual reality the credit for generating the illusion of nature. By treating nature as a by-product of spiritual reality, these religions actually bring nature and spirit into close relationships, tending to result in theologies that look more like pantheisms. Instead of sharply dividing spirit from nature, many of these Eastern theologies tend to integrate them. Genuine supernaturalisms instead depend on sharp dichotomies between the spiritual and the natural. A supernatural religion, at the very least, must explain how it distinguishes the supernatural from the natural. This can be done efficiently by defining the supernatural in terms contrary to the properties of nature. For example, if the natural only has physical properties, obeys natural laws, exists within space/time, and so forth, then the supernatural can be defined as having no physical properties, need not obey natural laws, is not constrained by space/time, etc.

We should admit that at least nature exists. One shortcut refutation of naturalism wants to set a higher standard for naturalism. This "argument from imperfect naturalism" goes like this:

1. Naturalism is the worldview which says that science explains everything.
2. Science does not explain everything.
3. Naturalism is false. (From 1 and 2)
4. If naturalism is false, supernaturalism is true.

Therefore,

Conclusion. Supernaturalism is true.

The second premise is correct, but the first premise uses a poor definition of naturalism. Naturalism has never been properly defined in such a simplistic and refutable way. Some naturalists prefer something like "science would eventually explain everything" but such confidence does not even represent the majority of naturalists. Naturalism is more complicated than that. Without starting a second book about naturalism in this section, it suffices to say that naturalism accepts the environing world as understood by careful observation, reasoning, and scientific inquiry, and rejects anything too mysterious or too immune from investigation. Naturalism, like science, doesn't have all the answers, nor does it expect to have all the answers. Naturalism does prioritize rational intelligence, however. Might naturalism's strength actually be a weakness in the god debates?

Perhaps reliance on intelligence could be naturalism's weakness against religion. A second shortcut argument for supernaturalism, an "argument from prejudiced naturalism," accuses the strong atheist of an intellectual prejudice against religion:

5. There are a variety of means (using evidence, argument, intuition, etc.) to advance the reasonableness of Christianity.
6. Any skepticism towards the reasonableness of Christianity must be grounded on premises that already favor scientific method and naturalism's worldview instead.
7. It is unreasonable to appeal to biases favoring science and naturalism to complain about Christianity's claim to reasonableness.

Therefore,

Conclusion. Christianity is reasonable regardless of naturalism's skepticism.

This shortcut argument won't work either. Christianity might still be unreasonable, regardless of any perceived bias in skeptical complaints against it. For example, much skepticism towards Christianity is not based on science or naturalism, but just logical common sense. An atheist can refuse to believe stories about gods or miracles, for example, simply because those stories display the sorts of omissions, inconsistencies, and exaggerations that characterize mythical legends.

Neither skeptical theism nor naturalism claims to perfectly know all reality. What follows? It cannot logically follow that someone else must know, like a supernaturalist. Yet there is enormous tactical and rhetorical benefit to be gained by surviving skeptical criticism, appreciated by theologians worried about fewer people coming to church.

A popular literature defending Christianity against atheism is hitting the bookstore shelves. The core message to Christians often amounts to "Just keep the faith, and be assured your faith is not unreasonable." Instead of trying to explain theological justifications for dogmas to lay Christians, these books defensively react to atheism's criticisms. Does an atheist say that Christians commit too much violence? Well, most evil-doers couldn't have been real Christians anyway, and as for the rest, the Bible nowhere says that people are perfect. Does an atheist say that Jesus didn't rise from the dead? Well, Gospel testimony might not rise to the courtroom expectation for crime-scene evidence, but why should everyone adopt such a high scientific standard? Does an atheist say that the universe looks like it only accidentally produced life? Well, science can't rule out a god's intervention in the course of evolution. Does an atheist say that mystical experiences are hallucinations? Well, since so many people have had them, who's to say that they aren't caused by contact with god? Does an atheist complain about too much evil in the world? Well, an all-powerful creator's plan would make it hard for us limited creatures to figure it all out. Does an atheist show that a purely rational argument disproves some particular god? Well, the real god of Christianity actually has somewhat different qualities that are immune from rational criticism.

A third shortcut argument for religion replies to criticisms of religion's practical and intellectual defenses by pointing out that things really aren't so bad. Why abandon the faith when such criticisms miss their mark?

8. The criticism that religion suffers practical failures only targets some regrettable by-products of religion, not the core teachings or benefits of the Christian faith.
9. The criticism that religion is not verified by science only repeats the point that science cannot comprehend the supernatural, so Christian faith is unaffected by science.
10. The criticism that religion cannot be approved by pure reason only rules out some odd gods, not the actual god of Christian faith.
11. Even if each argument for god can't show that god exists, they can be added together to increase the reasonableness of believing in god, so Christian faith can't be unreasonable.
12. Neither practical reason, scientific reason, nor pure reason can rule out Christian faith as completely unreasonable.

Therefore,

Conclusion. Faith in Christianity is not unreasonable.

This conclusion shouldn't really surprise anyone. A faith too reasonable wouldn't exactly be faith. If a Christian's conception of god is imaginatively flexible enough, it can stay ahead of reason.

What do all three of these shortcut arguments for god have in common? Notice how they all depend on making claims about what can't be known, rather than teaching believers about what religion can know. Theology can do better than that. Only stalemate results from shortcut tactics by either side. There is no theological shortcut to dismissing atheism, just as there is no atheological shortcut to dismissing god. Only a careful examination of all the specific theology–atheology debates can reveal where any advantage may lie. Chapter 2 distinguishes five types of Christian theologies, and subsequent chapters examine the arguments of the god debates.