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Introduction

There was a time when the philosophical debate between believers and religious sceptics turned principally on the question whether the existence of God could in some way or another be rationally demonstrated. Believers thought that it could and religious sceptics thought that it could not. A minor religious tradition, a tradition often referred to as fideistic, thought that this whole way of posing the question of belief and scepticism rested on a mistake. In the nineteenth century this minority tradition became a powerful strand of philosophically sophisticated religious belief with a diverse and extensive representation. We live in the shadow of this tradition; our general intellectual climate *vis-à-vis* religion is this: while some of the details of Hume's and Kant's treatment of the proofs for the existence of God are defective, it is clear enough in the light of their work that it is not reasonable to expect that we are going to get a proof or demonstration, in any plausible sense of these terms, of the existence of God. It is, no doubt, a mere logical possibility that there could be empirical evidence for the existence of a Zeus-like God – a sort of cosmic Mickey mouse – but such a God would hardly be an appropriate object of religious belief. Moreover, even if it were, to believe in the existence of such a Zeus-like God is to have a groundless belief in a God whose existence could be, but as a matter of fact isn't, well-grounded. It is important to note that reflective believers are as dismissive of such superstitious religious belief as are sceptics. Rather the God to be believed in by such believers is construed as an infinite individual transcendent to the world. This – or so it is widely believed – is the God to be believed in if Judaeo-Christian-Islamic religious belief is to be a serious option for a contemporary person living in a scientific culture. When it is said that it is no longer reasonable to believe that God's exis-

tence can be demonstrated, it is this conception of God that is being referred to. We need not claim that we have an *a priori* proof that such a demonstration is impossible. We can content ourselves with the recognition that (1) the often careful, sustained and repeated attempts at proofs in the past have failed and (2) that with arguments essentially derived from Hume and Kant (though beefed up and amended in certain respects) we have very good reasons indeed for believing that no proof of the existence of such a God will succeed in the future. Moreover, if God's existence cannot be rationally established it cannot be established at all. This is not to make a God of Reason but simply to be clear about what it is to establish something.

However, the Fideist tradition itself tells us that it is pointless, unnecessary and perhaps even religiously inappropriate to seek proofs. We should instead accept God humbly on faith. God is *Deus Absconditus*. A non-mysterious, fully intelligible God could not even be the God of Judaeo-Christianity. But in seeing clearly that God is *Deus Absconditus*, it has struck many, sceptics and fideistic believers alike, that religious belief is radically paradoxical and that the concept of God is problematic. What is at stake in much contemporary debate between belief and unbelief is whether the concept of God is so problematic that we must, if we would be non-evasive, conclude that God is so utterly incomprehensible as to make belief in God incoherent and irrational for a person who recognises what is at issue, or whether alternatively this deeply paradoxical belief makes just enough sense to make it the case that a leap of faith is not irrational. What is centrally at issue is whether or not it is the case that a belief in a transcendent God is a coherent though still thoroughly baffling belief. We can hardly have faith in God if we do not in at least some reasonable way have some understanding of *what* we are to have faith in. Faith requires at least *some* understanding.¹ The key question in present perplexities over Christian, Jewish and Islamic belief is whether non-anthropomorphic God-talk has sufficient sense to make faith a coherent option.

It is this logically prior consideration that I wrestle with in this book. Because I wish to probe this in some reasonable depth, I do not, once again, rehash the tired cluster of questions turning around the proofs for the existence of God or the

problem of evil. It is about as clear as can be that such proofs will not work and it is almost as clear that no *a priori* disproof of God's existence turning on the problem of evil will work either. If God is the ultimate mystery Christians say He is, then it is possible to take His ways to us to be beyond our understanding. It isn't that the faithful need blinker themselves about the vast amount of suffering in the world. They can and should say they do not understand it. God's ways are beyond our understanding.

That there is no proving or disproving God's existence is fairly extensively realised in our contemporary intellectual culture, but cultural change is not uniform and there remains, as strange cultural artifacts, a couple of brave Quixotic souls, fantastically struggling against the stream, who try to use modal logic to give an *a priori* demonstration of the existence of God. These modal-logic-with-God philosophers are philosophical equivalents of a back-to-Newton movement in physics. It is very difficult indeed to work up much enthusiasm, unless one is simply enamoured of puzzles, for those rehashed versions of the ontological argument. But these baroque arguments have been met and I do not return once again to that barren discussion but turn to the logically prior and religiously more significant question of whether God-talk makes sufficient sense to make religious belief a viable option for a philosophically literate person living with some self-awareness in a scientific culture. I should add that I have on previous occasions examined the traditional arguments for the existence of God. If I were to return to that project some new moves would need to be gimmicked up to meet the newest arguments of an ontological type but still I would not say anything now essentially different from what I have argued on those occasions.²

While I write from inside the analytical tradition, I try to write here not only for other philosophers but in such a way that I come to grips with the reflective concerns of human beings, and not just with the concerns of a small and rather esoteric group of academics.³ Religion and its significance for human life has been one of these questions and it is with a cluster of questions centring around those concerns that I wish to wrestle. I do indeed argue with a number of contemporary philosophers and sometimes the argument takes a linguistic turn. But my

concern with these matters of conceptual analysis is instrumental. I care about getting clear about the concept of God and about the logical status of God-talk only to the extent that attaining that clarity will help to provide us with a handle on the question whether we should believe in God. It is this question that is at the centre of my attention.

If I were to start once again to write this book from scratch, I would in places adopt a less verificationist idiom, but, in spite of what would be a somewhat changed idiom, I think very little of substance would change. Empiricism has had a bad press in the last few years. My suspicion is that the case against it has been overstated and that it has been split off from realism in an unnecessary and undesirable way. But, even if I am mistaken in that belief, the move to a Wittgensteinian or hermeneutical approach or to a Kuhnian, Feyerabendish or Rortyan historicism will not 'save religious beliefs'. Christians claim that 'Christ is the Truth and the Way' and Jews and Moslems make claims which aim at having a similar authoritative weight. If such claims get the constructions that such philosophical accounts would have to put on them, they will no longer have the authority that believers believe they must have to make religious belief a live option. What the faithful demand of religious belief could not be met by such reconstructions or demythologisations.

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