

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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## Atheism

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Atheists are people who assert that there is no God. They may say that atoms or their component parts in space makeup the sum total of all reality. Whatever the analysis, these people assert that finite physical reality is all there is—that there is nothing else. There are several divisions in this group. One historically prominent group is the Logical Positivists. By an analysis of language, they conclude that theology is not so much false as it is plain nonsense. To them, speaking of God is like saying that the typewriter is the bluish-green sound of the square root of minus one. Theology is not good enough even to be false; it is simple nonsense. Other devotees of scientism are not Logical Positivists. Their theories are called naturalism or humanism, and they would call theology bigoted falsehood. Various political liberals are atheists, and often their socialistic creed attacks theology as a reactionary hindrance to social advancement.

### *Pantheism and Agnosticism*

It is instructive to distinguish between two forms of atheism, for the second form, pantheism, has the appearance of believing in God very much. It indeed asserts the existence of God, and the theory can be called theology. These people do not want to be known as atheists or as irreligious. But they define God as all that exists. Spinoza used the phrase *Deus sive Natura*: God, that is to say, Nature. Some may use the term *Pure Being*, or theologian Paul Tillich's phrase, *The Ground of All*

*Being*. Thus God is the universe itself. He is not its Creator. Since they say that God is the All, these people are called *Pantheists*.

Logically there is no difference between Atheism and Pantheism. To deny that there is a God and to apply the name *God* to everything are conceptually identical. For example, it is as though I should assert the existence of a grumpstein and try to prove it by pointing to giraffes, stars, mountain ranges, and books: together they form a grumpstein, I would say, and therefore a grumpstein exists. The pantheists point to giraffes, stars, and so on, and say, therefore God exists. Those who deny God—atheists—and those who say God is everything—pantheists—are asserting that nothing beyond the physical universe is real. In Christian language, and in common languages around the world, God is as different from the universe as a star is from a giraffe and more so.

There is actually another variety of atheism, though the adherents themselves might strongly object to being called atheists. Technically they are not atheists, though they might as well be. These are the agnostics. They do not assert that there is a God, nor do they assert that there is no God; they simply say that they do not know. They claim ignorance. Ignorance, however, is not a theory one can argue. Ignorance is an individual state of mind. An ignorant person is not required to prove by learned arguments that he is ignorant. He just does not know. Such a person needs to be taught.

Probably most persons in the United States are atheists of a sort. If one should ask them, they would probably say that they believe in God. But they might as well not believe in God for all the good it does them. Unless someone mentions God to them, they never think of him; they never pray to him; he does not enter into their daily plans and calculations. Their lives, their minds, their thinking are essentially no different from the lives of atheists and agnostics. They are "practicing atheists."

### *The Atheist's Argument*

The reader of this may expect to find a straightforward refutation of atheism. But he may be disappointed, for the situation is somewhat complicated. In the first place, one might accuse the atheist of never having proved that the physical universe is the only reality and that there are no supernatural beings. This would be satisfactory, if the term *atheism* means the argued denial of a Deity. But atheists, like agnostics, shift the burden of proof and say the theist is under obligation to demonstrate the truth of his view; but the atheist considers himself under no such obligation. Atheists usually wobble back and forward. Yet, Ernest Nagel, who may be called a naturalist in philosophy, seems to *argue*: "the occurrence of events [he means each and every event without exception]...is contingent on the organization of spatio-temporally located bodies.... That this is so is one of the best-tested conclusions of experience.... There is no place for an immaterial spirit directing the course of events, no place for the survival of personality after the corruption of the body which exhibits it."

This is an atheistic, not an agnostic, statement. He argues that science has proved the nonexistence of God, but the argument is invalid. No scientist has ever produced any evidence that man's intellect ceases to function at death. Since his methods have not discovered any spirit, Nagel assumes there can be none. He refuses to question his methods. Atheism is not a conclusion developed by his methods; rather it is the assumption on which his methods are based.

The agnostic, however, is not so dogmatic. He shifts the burden and demands theists prove that an omnipotent spirit has created and now controls the universe. This is quite a challenge, and it is one that the Christian is duty bound to face. No Christian with intellectual ability can excuse himself by claiming theology is useless hairsplitting. Peter has warned him otherwise. The "practicing atheists" are really agnostics, and we must preach the Gospel to them—and that God omnipotent reigns is part of the Gospel. But they answer, "How do you know that there is any God at all?" A Christian who knows no theology is ill equipped to answer this question. How is it possible to know God? Is he just a trance, a hunch, an ecstatic experience? Is he so transcendent that we can neither know him nor talk about him? Is he not so transcendent? Note that the Christian apologete, *i.e.*, the Christian evangelist, must have a decently clear conception of God before he can satisfy his inquisitors. He must be knowledgeable in theology.

### *The Wrong Reply*

Now, the answer to the agnostic's very pertinent question is rather complex, and the reader must not expect anything simple. Furthermore, the answer given here will appear unsatisfactory and disappointing to some very honest Christians. For these reasons the present reply to agnosticism will begin with an explanation of how *not* to answer the question. If this seems a cumbersome and roundabout way of going at it, and the impatient non-theologian wants immediate results, it must be pointed out that the initial choice between two roads determines the destination. Choose the wrong road and one ends up lost and confused. Remember Bunyan's Christian and how he looked down two roads, trying to see which one was straight. Then there came along a swarthy pilgrim in a white robe who pointed out to him, with great confidence, which road Christian should take. It ended in near disaster. Therefore we shall begin by pointing out the wrong road.

Now, I do not wish to say that those who recommend the wrong road in the present matter are flattering deceivers whose white robes are hypocritical disguises. On the contrary, a large

number of respectable and honest authors, from Aristotle to Charles Hodge and Robert Sproul, insist that the best and indeed the only way to prove the existence of God is to study the growth of a plant, the path of a planet, the motion of a marble. They support this seemingly secular method by quoting *Psalm 19:1*— "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth his handiwork." Therefore we should study astronomy to refute the atheist and to instruct the agnostic. Paul says that God's omnipotence can be deduced from the way a little boy shoots a marble—a thing that has been made. Some stalwart Romanists boast that Paul foresaw and placed his stamp of approval on Thomas' Aristotelian argument.

There are two difficulties with this enthusiastic recommendation. The first is not conclusive, but those who approve of the argument must pay attention to it. The difficulty is its difficulty: It is a very hard method. The second difficulty is its virtual uselessness.

The first difficulty—inconclusive evidence and a hard method to prove—can be best addressed with a few examples. Suppose we can get a microscope and examine the internal phloem of the *Lycopersikon esculentum*. Botany is even worse than theology in its use of long and technical words. We get a clear picture of the internal structure of a plant, but we cannot discover God by a detailed, microscopic look into a tomato. If we carefully observe the motion of the planets, we will see that the squares of their periodic times are proportional to their mean distances from the Sun. If we succeeded in getting this information, we could conclude that God is a great mathematician and that salvation depends on understanding mathematics. Essentially, this is what the ancient Greek philosophical school of the Pythagoreans said. They believed that a happy life after death was the reward for studying arithmetic and geometry.

People hold a somewhat similar view today who think that all the problems of this world can be solved by science. But unlike the Pythagoreans, contemporaries do not believe in a life after death, nor do they think the laws of astronomy can prove there is a God. To change their minds by deducing

the existence of God from the laws of science would be extremely difficult and perhaps impossible. If by some other method we first know there is a God, the study of astronomy might show that he is a mathematician. But we would have to know God first.

However, the mere fact that an argument is difficult and complex does not prove that it is a fallacy. Geometry and calculus may drive students to despair, but the theorems are usually regarded as valid deductions. Contrariwise, when one examines the argument as Thomas actually wrote it, serious flaws appear. In another work, I have detailed some of Thomas' fallacies. One of them is a case of circularity, in which he uses as a premise the conclusion he wished to prove. Another is the case of a term that has one meaning in the premises and a different meaning in the conclusion. No syllogism can be valid if the conclusion contains an idea not already given in the premises.

The conclusion therefore is: The so-called "cosmological argument" is not only extremely difficult—since it would require a great amount of science, mathematics, and philosophy to prove it—but it is inconclusive and irremediably fallacious. This is no way to answer the atheists.

The second difficulty is that even if such an argument were valid, it would be useless. This objection applies more to modern authors than to Aristotle. Aristotle's notion of god was quite clear: the Unmoved Mover, thought thinking thought; and this metaphysical mind has a definite role in the explanation of natural phenomena. But the god of contemporary empiricists seems to have no role at all; mainly because the meaning they attach to the word *God* is utterly vague.

As examples of these arguments, one can mention Yale Philosophy Professor John E. Smith's *Experience of God*; Frederick Sontag's *How Philosophy Shapes Theology*; a few years earlier Geddes MacGregor of Bryn Mawr published *Introduction to Religious Philosophy*. There are many such books; it is not my intention to discuss any of these individually. My point is: When they try to support a belief in god, their arguments are no

better and often worse than those of Aristotle; and if some plausibility is found in them, the reason is that their notion of what god is is so vague and ambiguous that the reader imposes his own definite ideas. In their context, the arguments are virtually meaningless. Furthermore, the vague god of these views is useless. Nothing can be deduced from his existence. No moral norms follow a definition of god; no religious practices are contained in a description of god.

One can have a certain academic respect for an atheist who flatly denies God and life after death. He says clearly what he means, and he uses the term *God* in its common English meaning. One can have almost as much respect for the pantheist, even though he does not use the term *God* in its ordinary meaning. At least Baruch Spinoza and others identify god explicitly with the universe. But what can our reaction be to the view of Professor H. N. Wieman? He insisted on the existence of god, but for him god is not even all the universe—he, or it, is only some part of the universe. Namely, god is a complex of interactions in society on which we depend and to whose essential structure we must conform if maximum value is to be realized in human experience. So? How does this definition of god stack up against the *Shorter Catechism*? Therefore, Christians should be more concerned about what kind of God exists rather than about the existence of God.

### *The Meaninglessness of Existence*

At first it may seem strange that knowledge of *what* God is more important than knowledge *that* God is. His *essence* or nature being more important than his *existence* may seem unusual. Existentialists insist that existence precedes essence. Nevertheless, competent Christians disagree for two reasons. First, we have seen that pantheists identify god with the universe. What is god? —the universe. The mere fact that they use the name god for the universe and thus assert that god "exists" is of no help to Christianity.

The second reason for not being much interested in the *existence* of God is somewhat similar to the first. The idea *existence* is an idea without content.

Stars exist—but this tells us nothing about the stars; mathematics exists—but this teaches us no mathematics; hallucinations also exist. The point is that a predicate, such as existence, that can be attached to everything indiscriminately tells us nothing about anything. A word, to mean something, must also not mean something. For example, if I say that some cats are black, the sentence has meaning only because some cats are white. If the adjective were attached to every possible subject—so all cats were black, all stars were black, and all politicians were black, as well as all the numbers in arithmetic, and God too—then the word *black* would have no meaning. It would not distinguish anything from something else. Since everything exists, *exists* is devoid of information. That is why the *Catechism* asks, What is God? Not, Does God exist?

Now, most of the contemporary authors are extremely vague as to what sort of God they are talking about; and because the term is so vague, the concept is useless. Can these authors use their god to support a belief in life after death? No ethical norms can be deduced from their god. Most pointedly, their god does not speak to man. He is no better than "the silence of eternity" without even being "interpreted by love." Atheism is more realistic, more honest. If we are to combat the latter, we need a different method.

### *The Proper Reply*

The explanation of a second method must begin with a more direct confrontation with atheism. If the existence of God cannot be deduced by cosmology, have we dodged the burden of proof and left the battlefield in the possession of our enemies? No; there is indeed a theistic answer. Superficially, it is not difficult to understand; but, unfortunately, a full appreciation of its force requires some philosophic expertise. A knowledge of geometry is of great help, but it is seldom taught in the public high schools. One cannot realistically expect Christians to have read and to have understood Spinoza; and Protestant churches usually anathematize plain, ordinary Aristotelian logic.

In geometry there are axioms and theorems. One of the early theorems is, "An exterior angle of a triangle is greater than either opposite interior angle." A later one is the famous Pythagorean theorem: the sum of the squares of the other two sides of a right triangle equals the square of its hypotenuse. How theological all this sounds! These two theorems and all others are deduced logically from a certain set of axioms. But the axioms are never deduced. They are assumed without proof.

There is a definite reason why not everything can be deduced. If one tried to prove the axioms of geometry, one must refer back to prior propositions. If these too must be deduced, there must be previous propositions, and so on back *ad infinitum*. From which it follows: If everything must be demonstrated, nothing can be demonstrated, for there would be no starting point. If you cannot start, then you surely cannot finish.

Every system of theology or philosophy must have a starting point. Logical Positivists started with the unproved assumption that a sentence can have no meaning unless it can be tested by sensation. To speak without referring to something that can be touched, seen, smelled, and especially measured, is to speak nonsense. But they never deduce this principle. It is their non-demonstrable axiom. Worse, it is self-contradictory, for it has not been seen, smelled, or measured; therefore it is self-condemned as nonsense.

If the axioms of other secularists are not nonsense, they are nonetheless axioms. Every system must start somewhere, and it cannot have started before it starts. A naturalist might amend the Logical Positivist's principle and make it say that all knowledge is derived from sensation. This is not nonsense, but it is still an empirically unverifiable axiom. If it is not self-contradictory, it is at least without empirical justification. Other arguments against empiricism need not be given here: The point is that no system can deduce its axioms.

The inference is this: No one can consistently object to Christianity's being based on a non-demonstrable axiom. If the secularists exercise their privilege of basing their theorems on axioms, then so can

Christians. If the former refuse to accept our axioms, then they can have no logical objection to our rejecting theirs. Accordingly, we reject the very basis of atheism, Logical Positivism, and, in general, empiricism. Our axiom shall be, God has spoken. More completely, God has spoken in the Bible. More precisely, what the Bible says, God has spoken.