

[1968. In *Encyclopedia of Christianity*. Edwin A. Palmer, ed. Wilmington, Delaware: National Foundation for Christian Education.]

GOD, THE EXISTENCE OF

That God exists is the basic doctrine of the Bible, without which the atonement, justification, and all the rest would be meaningless. Christian belief therefore is based on Christian theism. Though Christian theism is obviously contrary to atheism and polytheism, because of what the Scriptures say about the nature of God, it is also distinguished from deism. This latter, though admitting and even claiming to prove the existence of God, denies that God directly controls or intervenes in history. The deists picture the universe as a clock, or other mechanism, which God constructed so well that it runs by its own laws and needs no further thinking. Miracles never happen; prayer is useless; and whatever “salvation” there may be depends not on a man's morality. In spite of recognizing the existence of God, then, this God of design is not the God of the Bible.

Since the Bible does not demonstrate the existence of God but only asserts it, men have turned to philosophy to satisfy themselves. In traditional philosophy, emphasis falls on the existence of God rather than on the nature of God, though these cannot be separated in Christian thought. It is argued that no one has ever tried to demonstrate the doctrine of the Trinity—though Augustine used some analogies. Admittedly, knowledge of the Trinity comes only through revelation. Further, it is asserted that there would be no sense to the question, What is God? unless God actually exists. Therefore many philosophers and theologians, putting the nature of God in second place, have thought it possible to prove or demonstrate the existence of God on natural or nonrevelational grounds.

One view is that the idea of God is innate or inborn. According to this there is really no proof of God's existence; the idea does not arise from some combination of experiences; man is simply born with the idea already formed. This view is bolstered by the claim that the idea of God is *de facto* universal. And if everyone, without exception, has this idea, does not this show that men are born with it? To this John Locke replied that the idea of God is not in fact universal, or at any rate no one could prove it is universal; and even if it were, this would not prove it innate, for it might have been derived from experiences that all men have, such as a view of the stars, or the perception of a body in motion. From the view that the idea of God is innate or inborn, men have turned to the theistic proofs or arguments for the existence of God.

The Ontological Argument.—Somewhat allied to the theme of innate ideas, though providing more of a proof of demonstration, is the eleventh-century Ontological Argument of Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury. This argument has its roots in Augustine who, early in the fifth century, had closely connected the activity of thinking with the work and therefore the existence of God in our

minds. Augustine argued first that knowledge is possible because no one can doubt his own existence. One must exist even to doubt and be mistaken. Furthermore, logical forms are certain; for example, *either* you are asleep, *or*, you are awake. We may not know which, but we are certain of the disjunction. Mathematics is also certain. We do not judge that three times three happens to be nine. We judge that it *must* be so. Since the truths of logic and mathematics are universal and necessary, they cannot have been derived from any limited, individual experience. These truths are eternal and, transcending the finite mind, they must be ideas in the mind of God, who Himself is Truth. Thus we know God, for our minds are in contact with Him.

Anselm, about A.D. 1100, developed this Augustinian argument with a brilliant reconstruction. By definition God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived. We have this idea. Even the fool, when he says, "There is no God," has the idea, or he could not make his denial. But God is One who cannot exist merely in the mind, for that which exists both in the mind and also independently of the mind is greater than that which exists in the mind only. Since God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived, He must exist independently of the mind. Indeed, it is impossible to conceive of God's non-existence. A thing that could possibly fail of existence is not so great as something that could not possibly fail of existence. Hence, that than which nothing greater can be conceived cannot be conceived not to exist. Why then, since this is so obvious, does the fool say there is no God? Why, answers Anselm, except that he is dull and a fool!

The Cosmological Argument.—The Ontological Argument above presupposed a rationalistic epistemology that was not shared by Aristotle, Aquinas, and John Locke. These men held that all knowledge is based on sensory experience, and therefore if God's existence can be proved, the proof must start with the observation of physical objects around us. An argument on this basis is called the Cosmological Argument. Aristotle and Aquinas, for Aquinas did little more than repeat Aristotle, began with such an assertion as, It is evident to the sense of sight that this stone, this ship, this rain-drop, is moving. Now, nothing can cause itself to move. Not even an animal can move itself. Everything that is in motion must be set in motion by something else. Note carefully that whatever is in motion is "potential" in relation to the end of its motion. The mover is "actual." Nothing can be potential and actual simultaneously in the same respect. The actually hot fire moves the actually cold but potentially hot water so that the water becomes actually hot like its mover. But the regress from a thing moved to a moving mover cannot be infinite. If it were, there would be no first mover, and therefore no second mover, etc. The conclusion is that there is a First Unmoved Mover, and one understands this to be God.

This Cosmological Argument not only presupposes an empirical or sensory epistemology; it also depends on Aristotle's theory of physics, which he works out in detail in his *Physics*, Books II-VII.

The summary just given could not possibly be a valid argument unless every syllogism in a long linkage were itself valid. The definition of motion, actuality, and potentially, not to mention many items conveniently omitted, would all have to be unimpeachable. This is unlikely. Not to mention the theories of time and place, the definitions of motion, potentiality, and actuality are in fact circular. Aristotle uses motion to define potentiality, and then he uses the latter to define the former. In the next place, Aquinas has used the conclusion itself as one of the premises. The conclusion is, There is a First Mover. But this is what he has assumed in order to rule out infinite regress. Therefore his argument is circular.

Another objection is more complicated, but very embarrassing to contemporary Jesuit philosophers. Thomas Aquinas had a high regard for the negative theology of Dionysius the Areopagite. This author was not the convert of the Apostle Paul, as Aquinas thought, but a neoplatonic mystic of the fifth century who copied long sections out of Proclus. His idea was that we have no positive knowledge of God. We do not know what He is; only what He is not. Aquinas thought that this negative knowledge was legitimate knowledge, and he also denied that we have any positive knowledge of God. The predicates we attach to God, such as wise, good, powerful, do not have the same meaning they have when we apply them to men. No predicate can be used *univocally* with God and man. But he diverges from pure negativism by asserting a third form of knowledge, less than positive but more than negative. It is *analogical* knowledge. The predicate good, e.g., does not have the same definition when used of God and man; but there is some (poorly defined) similarity or analogy between God's being good and our being. But it is not only predicates that have analogical meaning. Since the simplicity of God's being requires His essence to be identical with His existence, even the verb *to be* does not have the same meaning when applied to God that it has when applied to other objects. But if this is so, the Cosmological Argument must be invalid. Its premises use *is* or *exist* in one sense, the sense applicable to things, physical things in motion; but the conclusion uses *is* or *exists* in a different sense, a sense applicable only to God. However, it is clear that no argument can be valid unless the terms retain the same meaning throughout.

Karl Barth stresses a final objection to Aquinas' argument, the last sentence of which is, "And this is what one understands to be God." Barth asseverates that this cannot be understood to be God. He points out the embarrassment of RC theologians in trying to pass from their Aristotelian First Mover, a neuter *ens realissimum* or *summum bonum*, to a living, loving, acting Trinity. In fact, one may conclude that if the Cosmological Argument were valid, Christianity would be false.

The Teleological Argument.—In modern times attempts have been made to formulate the Cosmological Argument without its Aristotelian embarrassments. Most often the cosmological has been replaced by the Teleological Argument. These two are alike in being based on experience—in contrast

to the ontological. But whereas the cosmological is based on the minimum experience of bare existence of something or other, the Teleological Argument appeals to the complexities, the interrelationships, the functions, and design of the world. William Paley (1743-1805) gained renown by his striking illustration: If one finds a watch on the seashore and examines its mechanism, one is forced to conclude that it had an intelligent designer. In the same way the mechanism of the universe proves the existence of God. When appeal is also made to the existence of persons, one is not restricted in the conclusion to a neuter *Primum Movers* but more easily asserts the existence of a personal God.

Although the bases of the Teleological Argument are many, depending on whether one refers to a watch, the physiology of the eye, or to a vegetable like a cabbage, the logical form is always the same. David Hume (1711-1776) criticized the logic, to which Kant added one additional point. One of Hume's arguments is that if the world is a mechanism like a watch, and if the watch needs a designer, the designer too, requires a previous cause (his parents no doubt) and so on *ad infinitum*. Rather than enter this infinite regress, why not say that the world's principle of order is immanent?

Again, if we base our knowledge of God on experience and infer that God must be a person, an intelligence like ourselves, it would follow that God is not perfect. Since we make mistakes, we cannot conclude that our inferred cause does not. Or if we enlarge our notion of God by appeals to natures, its tragedies, earthquakes, famines, and tornadoes must be referred to the same cause. Perhaps the imperfections of nature are evidence of the existence of several gods working at cross purposes; or there may be but one god who previously made even worse worlds than this, who is improving his technique and will make a better one next time.

Hume admitted (*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part V) that if we knew *a priori* that God was infinite and good, we could satisfactorily explain the faults of nature on the basis of our ignorance. But the question is, Can one prove the existence of an infinite and good God on the bases of experience? The suggested reply in the Teleological Argument has begged the question.

Induction, on which every empirical argument depends, requires a setting forth of many cases. We believe that inflation will follow from large increases in the national debt because this has happened many times. If we had observed only one instance of inflation, no conclusion could be drawn. We have previously seen many watches and many watchmakers, so that if we see another watch, we suppose there was a watchmaker. But we have never seen many worlds and many world makers. Therefore no conclusion can follow our observation of this world. To tell the truth, we have never even seen this world, as a whole: we have seen only some parts of it. We do not really know that the universe is a mechanism, like a watch. Therefore no conclusion can be drawn.

So far as experience goes, the universe may be a living organism with its principles of

organization within it. We see more trees than watches, and we note that a tree by its seed imposes order on the next generation without having knowledge of that order. Such unconscious purpose is more frequent in our experience than the rational effects of man's contrivance. Daily experience shows that reason arises from generation, never generation from reason. If, therefore, we wish to select a model for the universe, a vegetable does better than a machine. There is no evidence, no inductive argument whatever, to support the supposition of an intelligent, transcendent cause.

Indeed, Hume's philosophy does away with causation entirely. And Kant is not essentially different in denying that causation among phenomena or appearances cannot be extended to noumena, things in themselves, or God. Kant's only addition to these criticisms is that the Cosmological and Teleological Arguments presuppose the validity of the Ontological. Experience gives no information about the properties and attributes of the supreme being whose existence the Cosmological Argument seeks to prove. Only an ontological, an *a priori*, argument could arrive at a being of absolute necessity, an *ens realissimum*.

Descartes' Argument.—Returning, then, to the Ontological Argument we find that Descartes (1596-1650) restated it in simpler form: God by definition is the being who possesses all perfections; existence is a perfection; therefore God necessarily exists; so that the denial of God's existence is as much a contradiction as the denial that a triangle has three angles.

In this argument Kant finds two main flaws. First, the idea of necessity has always been illustrated historically by geometrical propositions, such as, a triangle necessarily has three angles. But all such examples are examples of necessary judgments, not of necessary things. The angles are necessary to the triangle. But if both the triangles and its angles are together denied, no contradiction results. Similarly, "God is omnipotent" is a necessary judgment, for to assert God and deny omnipotence is a contradiction. But if one denies God's existence, omnipotence and all the other attributes disappear with the subject, and no contradiction is possible. Accordingly, discussion of a necessary being, as distinct from a necessary judgment, is meaningless.

The second flaw in the argument is its mistaken assertion that existence is a perfection. To affirm that God exists is not to add an extra attribute to the list of omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and so on. The affirmation of God's existence is the positing of God with all His attributes. Kant illustrates with a hundred dollars. The content of the subject and of the concept are identical. A hundred real dollars contains no more than a hundred conceived dollars. If the content of the existing dollars were greater than the concept, the concept would not be a representation of the entire hundred dollars. Of course, so far as one's bank account goes, a hundred real dollars is one hundred dollars more than the conceptual dollars; but the objective reality does not add any extra

predicate to the concept. Therefore the minor premise of Descartes' argument ruins it.

Conclusion.—When now a contemporary theologian insists that the existence of God is demonstrable, not precisely in the form of the arguments discussed above, but none the less the same argument in a modified form, one must ask, What, in detail, is this modified form? Until it is spelled out in all its premises, no one can discuss it. When it is spelled out, it is likely that the objections presented will apply.

In spite of the RC claim that Paul the apostle put his stamp of approval on Aristotle and Aquinas in Romans 1:19-20, it is clear that the Bible offers no argument to prove God's existence. The heavens indeed display the glory of God; but a modern scientist who had no prior conviction of God could see there only a display of nuclear energy.

It is noteworthy that Luther (an Occamist) and Calvin, who seems to have held both Plato and Aristotle in low esteem, had no natural theology. Calvin at the beginning of his *Institutes* denied that we first know ourselves and secondly infer God's existence. God for Calvin is the first object of knowledge, and this knowledge comes, not from nature, but by revelation. When the zeal of Protestantism began to cool in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, natural theology revived. This was particularly true with the Lutherans, but it is also true of the Reformed Church. Is there ground for hope that the late twentieth century will see a renaissance of Calvinism, a rejection of natural theology, and an adherence to Scriptural revelation?

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