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# FAITH AND REASON

SECOND EDITION

*Richard Swinburne*

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RICHARD SWINBURNE

Second edition

CLARENDON PRESS · OXFORD

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford ox2 6DP

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Oxford New York

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Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi  
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

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Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece  
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Published in the United States  
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

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First edition published 1981  
This edition first published 2005

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Data available

Typeset by SPI Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India  
Printed in Great Britain  
on acid-free paper by  
Biddles Ltd., King's Lynn, Norfolk

ISBN 0-19-928392-3 978-0-19-928392-7  
ISBN 0-19-928393-1 (Pbk.) 978-0-19-928393-4 (Pbk.)

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

## *Preface to the Second Edition*

*Faith and Reason* was first published in 1981 as the third volume of a trilogy on the philosophy of theism. Although the substance of my views on the kind of faith needed for the practice of religion and the kind of reason which makes it good to practice a religion have not changed, the time has come to update this book in the light of recent writing and in particular to respond to two bodies of writing which constitute significant challenges to those views. The first body of writing is the externalist account of the 'warrant' of religious belief, paradigmatically exemplified in Alvin Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief*.<sup>1</sup> On an externalist account the rationality ('justification' or 'warrant') of any belief, including religious belief, depends on the nature of the process which produces it (about which the believer may be entirely ignorant). By contrast on an internalist account (which I took for granted in the first edition of *Faith and Reason*) the rationality of a belief depends on its relation to introspectible factors, and in particular on its relation to the believer's other beliefs. I argue against the externalist that only rationality in an internalist sense can have any relevance to the believer's conduct. The second body of writing is centred on the claim, an old claim but one recently revived at some length and with some force by John Hick,<sup>2</sup> that the ways of living commended by the major religions are of equal moral worth, and that the creeds of these religions are best understood as expressing the same eternal truth with the aid of different myths. I argue against Hick, that the major religions have different goals from each other, some more worth while to pursue than others; and that Hick has given no good reason to prefer his reinterpretation of traditional creeds over those creeds understood in normal ways. As well as taking account of these two bodies of writing, I am glad to have the opportunity in this second edition to improve the exposition of my own views, and to locate them more firmly in the philosophico-theological tradition of the past two thousand years than

<sup>1</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (Macmillan, 1989); and many subsequent writings.

I did in the first edition. While the second edition has the same structure as the first edition (the same chapter headings and largely the same topics discussed under those headings), and the same conclusions, the text has been largely rewritten.

The first edition was based on the third of my three series of Wilde Lectures given in the University of Oxford in Hilary term 1978. I remain grateful to those who originally elected me to the Wilde Lectureship; and to everyone who has helped me subsequently in my understanding of the issues in oral discussion and in published criticism. I am very grateful to John Hick for most helpful comments on drafts of Chapters 5 and 7, as also for reminding all of us of the value of different religious traditions. And I am very grateful above all to Alvin Plantinga for many exchanges in print and many face-to-face discussions over thirty years, from which I have learned much. If we still don't agree about which possible religious beliefs are rational, we do agree very largely about which actual religious beliefs are true, and that is a lot more important.

Thanks to Oxford University Press for permission to reuse some material from Chapter 12 of *The Existence of God* (second edition) more or less verbatim, in Chapter 7 of the present book. Very many thanks, too, to Sarah Barker for typing and retyping versions of this new edition.

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## Introduction

*Faith and Reason* is the final volume of a trilogy on the philosophy of theism, the claim that there is a God. The first volume, *The Coherence of Theism*, was concerned with what it means to say that there is a God, and whether the claim that there is a God is internally coherent. It argued that the claim is not demonstrably incoherent, that it is proper to look for evidence of its truth, and that evidence that it is true would be evidence that it is coherent. The second volume, *The Existence of God*, was concerned with evidence that the claim is true. It was concerned to assess the force of arguments from phenomena for and against the existence of God. It argued that, although it cannot be proved conclusively that there is a God, on balance the various arguments taken together show that it is more probable than not there is a God. *Faith and Reason* is concerned with the question of what is the relevance of such judgements of probability (either the particular judgement which I reached, or a different one—e.g. that it is very improbable that there is a God) to religious faith.

To give a full answer to this question we must answer a prior question: what is the point of practising a religion, following a religious way as I call it? My answer in Chapter 5 of this book is that there are three goals which a religious person may seek to achieve: that he renders proper worship and obedience to God or gods; gains salvation for himself; and helps others to attain their salvation. The first of these goals is, of course, a goal for only those religions which claim that there is a God or gods; and different religions have somewhat different conceptions of salvation from each other. So in virtue of the different goals sought, there may be more point in following one religious way than in following another. But there is only a point in following some religious way to attain some goal if it is to some extent probable that following that way will lead to that goal, and less probable that follow-

ing some other way (or doing nothing) will lead to that goal. I show in Chapter 6 how a religion's creed gives an explanation of why following its way will get you to its goals, and why following some other way is less likely to get you to its goals. So you need a rational belief that there is some probability that the creed of a particular religion is true before it is rational to follow its way (to practise that religion) in order to reach its goals. You need also a rational belief that it is no more probable that the creed of some other religion which has similar goals is true—for otherwise it would be more rational to practise that other religion. I consider in Chapter 7 how we can assess the relative probability of religious creeds. The whole discussion of these latter chapters thus involves the concepts of belief, rational belief and action, and the criteria for a theory being probably true. So the first part of the book, Chapters 1, 2, and 3, is devoted to a full analysis of these notions and of the respect in which a belief in a creed needs to be rational by being based on arguments from evidence, in order to guide our choice of whether to practise a religion, and, if so, which one. Since in order to follow a religious way you need to make the assumption that the creed of that religion is true, although you do not need to be convinced of this, your conduct is a matter of having faith in the creed of that religion; and that means in the case of a theistic religion faith in God. So the pervading theme of the second part of the book, Chapters 4 to 7, is what kind of faith is required for the practice of a religion, and what kind of faith it is rational to have.

Although I shall seek general results about what kind of faith is required for the practice of any religion, I shall fill them out mainly by considering the kind of faith required for the practice of the Christian religion; and Chapter 4, the first chapter of the second part, considers different accounts of this which Christian theologians have given. This work is thus centred more on Christianity than were its predecessors; and forms a bridge to my later tetralogy on Christian doctrine. It is in no way necessary for a reader to have read the earlier volumes of this trilogy in order to understand this one; this volume does not in any way presuppose the results of earlier ones. But the conclusion of the *Existence of God* (that it is more probable than not that there is a God) together with the conclusions of a later work *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (that, given that it is quite probable on the evidence of natural theology that there is a God, it is highly probable that he

became incarnate in Christ) can be slotted into the results of this work, to obtain a particular conclusion about the rationality of faith in the Christian God.

As in both the earlier works, my primary aim has been to justify my conclusions by rigorous and careful arguments. This has meant, inevitably, that there are long sections on general philosophical topics, the results of which are applied only subsequently to religious issues. I can only ask for patience from those whose main interest lies in my conclusions about religious faith rather than in my discussions about the nature of rationality. Well-justified conclusions about religious faith can only be reached through a thorough understanding of what constitutes rational belief and rational action. The road may be dry and secular, but we shall reach our destination in the end.

# 1

## The Nature of Belief

Many religious traditions extol the virtue of faith, and in the Christian tradition faith in God who has revealed himself in Christ is seen as a major virtue. You need it in order to travel the Christian road to Heaven. But what is it to have faith in God? In the Christian tradition there have been various views on this, and in a later chapter I shall need to distinguish between these views. A major constituent of faith, on most such views, is belief-that, or propositional belief. The man or woman who has faith in God, on these views, believes that there is a God and believes certain propositions about him. However, one view claims that belief-that is not important; what matters is action. The person of faith is the person who acts on, or lives by, the assumption that there is a God and certain other assumptions. There are thus two important concepts which come into definitions of faith, and which require analysis before we can investigate head-on the concept of faith itself: these are the concept of believing that so-and-so, e.g. that there is a God; and the concept of acting on the assumption that (or acting as if) so-and-so, e.g. that there is a God. This chapter will be devoted to analysing these concepts and to exhibiting the relation between them. We shall find that the concept of belief is not a completely clear one, and that to make it useful we shall need to tidy it a bit at the edges.<sup>1</sup>

### BELIEF AS RELATIVE TO ALTERNATIVES

So, then, what is it to believe that so-and-so, that today is Monday or that there is a God? I suggest that the primary concept of belief picked

<sup>1</sup> My discussion in this and the next chapter on the nature of belief and of rational belief overlaps to a considerable extent with my fuller discussion of these topics in my *Epistemic Justification* (Clarendon Press, 2001).

out by public criteria is the concept of believing so-and-so as against such-and-such. Belief is relative to alternatives. You believe one proposition as against another proposition or propositions, and what your belief in the former amounts to depends on what are the latter. The normal alternative with which a belief is contrasted is its negation. The negation of a proposition  $p$  is the proposition not- $p$  ('it is not the case that  $p$ '). The negation of 'today is Monday' is 'it is not the case that today is Monday' or 'today is not Monday'. The negation of 'there is a God' is 'there is no God'. Someone who has the concept of probability can express this contrastive character of belief in probabilistic terms. Normally, to believe that  $p$  is to believe that  $p$  is more probable or more likely than not- $p$ . (I shall use 'probable' and 'likely' in the same sense.) But sometimes a belief is being contrasted with alternatives other than its negation. To believe that Labour will win the next general election may be simply to believe that it is more probable that Labour will win than that anything else will happen (e.g. the Conservatives win, or the Liberals win, or no party wins). To believe that today is Monday may be simply to believe that it is more probable that today is Monday than that it is any other day of the week.

If  $p$  is more probable than not- $p$ , then  $p$  is probable *simpliciter* (and conversely). So my claim is that normally to believe that  $p$  is to believe that  $p$  is probable. (I understand  $p$  being certain as an extreme case of  $p$  being probable; it is  $p$  having a probability of 1 or close thereto.) What can be said in favour of this claim? To start with, if I believe that  $p$  is not probable, I cannot believe that  $p$  is true. If I believe that it is more probable that not- $p$  than that  $p$ , I cannot believe that  $p$ . Examples bear this out. If I believe that it is not probable that Liverpool will win the FA cup, then (barring considerations to be discussed below arising from the existence of a number of alternatives) I cannot believe that they will win. But what about the other way round? Suppose that I do believe that  $p$  is probable. Must I believe that  $p$ ? Clearly, if either I am to believe that  $p$  or I am to believe that not- $p$ , I must believe the former. But might I not believe that  $p$  is probable without believing that  $p$  or believing that not- $p$ ? If I believe that  $p$  is very very probable, surely I believe that  $p$ . Cases where we would say the former are always cases where we would say the latter. If I believe that it is very very probable that Liverpool will win the FA Cup, then I believe that Liverpool will win. The only difficulty arises when I believe that  $p$  is marginally more probable than not. Here we

might be hesitant about whether to say that I believe that  $p$ . The hesitation arises not from ignorance about any unobserved matters, but because the rules for the application of the concept of belief are not sufficiently precise. Maybe some speakers do use 'believe' so that  $S$  has to believe that  $p$  is significantly more probable than not if  $S$  is to believe that  $p$ . But certainly others are prepared to allow that  $S$  believes that  $p$  if  $S$  believes merely that  $p$  is marginally more probable than not. It seems tidier to follow this latter usage. For, if we do not follow this usage, there would have to be some value of probability  $\theta$  between  $\frac{1}{2}$  and 1, such that only if someone believed that  $p$  had a probability greater than  $\theta$  would he believe that  $p$ . But any value chosen for  $\theta$  would be extremely arbitrary. I conclude that, although our ordinary rules for the use of words *may* not be sufficiently precise for my suggestion to be clearly correct as an account of ordinary usage, there is a case if we are to have a clear concept of 'believe' for tightening up usage so that the words of my suggestion do now express an analytic (i.e. logically necessary) truth.

Although normally the sole alternative to a belief that  $p$  is its negation, sometimes there will be other alternatives. This will be the case where  $p$  is one of a number of alternatives being considered in a certain context. In that case to believe that  $p$  will be to believe that  $p$  is more probable than any one of these alternatives (but not necessarily more probable than the disjunction of the alternatives).<sup>2</sup> Suppose that we are discussing who will win the FA Cup and several teams are being considered. Let  $p$  = 'Liverpool will win the Cup',  $q$  = 'Leeds will win the Cup',  $r$  = 'Manchester United will win the Cup', and so on. Suppose that  $S$  believes that  $p$  is more probable than  $q$ , or than  $r$ , or than any similar proposition, but not more probable than not- $p$ , 'Liverpool will not win the Cup' (the disjunction of  $q$ ,  $r$ , and similar propositions). Does he then believe that  $p$ ? Again, I do not think that ordinary usage is very clear, but I am inclined to think that it favours the view that it is correct to say that  $S$  does believe that  $p$ . If we asked  $S$  'Who do you believe will win the Cup?', he would surely not be lying if he said 'Liverpool' rather than 'I do not believe of any particular team that it will win'. For this reason my earlier suggestion must be expressed as

<sup>2</sup> The disjunction of a number of propositions is the proposition which says that at least one of them is true. The disjunction of  $q$ ,  $r$ , and  $s$  is the proposition 'either  $q$  or  $r$  or  $s$ '. The conjunction of a number of propositions is the proposition which says that they are all true. The conjunction of  $q$ ,  $r$ , and  $s$  is the proposition ' $q$  and  $r$  and  $s$ '.

follows: *S* believes that *p* if and only if he believes that *p* is more probable than any alternative. The normal alternative is not-*p*, but *p* may, on occasion, be contrasted with several alternatives. So the meaning of ‘*S* believes that Liverpool will win the Cup’ will vary with the contrast being made. If the talk is about whether Liverpool will win or not, then to believe that Liverpool will win, I have to believe that it is more probable than not that Liverpool will win; whereas if the talk is about which of a number of clubs will win, to believe that Liverpool will win I have to believe that it is more probable that Liverpool will win than that any other club will win.

Not everyone who believes that *p* has an explicit belief about *p*’s probability: young children, for example, do not have the concept of probability. But my point is that all belief is contrastive and that we can use the concept of probability to draw out what is involved in such contrasts by attributing to believers more explicit beliefs than they may sometimes possess; and thereby (as we shall see) show the consequences of belief for action. Henceforward I shall assume that beliefs can be expressed as beliefs about relative probability, even if not all believers can express this aspect of their beliefs in words.<sup>3</sup> A belief that *p* is, then, a strong belief to the extent to which the subject believes that *p* is a lot more probable than not-*p*.

We can now apply our claim that belief is relative to alternatives to religious beliefs. The normal alternative today to ‘there is a God’ is its negation ‘there is no God’. But to many more detailed religious beliefs in the past there were surely more alternatives than one. The alternatives, for example, to the orthodox faith of the Council of Chalcedon, that Christ had two natures in one person, might naturally be thought of as the various heresies that were its rivals—Nestorianism and monophysitism. In that case, someone who said that he believed that Christ had two natures in one person might thereby be committed only to believing that this view was more probable than that Christ had only one nature in his one person (monophysitism), and more probable than

<sup>3</sup> And even if I regard my own belief that *p* as logically equivalent to a belief that *p* is more probable than not-*p*, I am unlikely actually to regard the latter belief as logically equivalent to the belief that (*p* is more probable than not-*p*) is more probable than the belief that not (*p* is more probable than not-*p*)—though this is a belief about the relative probability of the two propositions which I would acquire if I gave thought to what I was committed by having the former belief. Few of us have very complicated beliefs about relative probability.



that Christ was really two persons (Nestorianism). Someone today who expresses his belief in such propositions may have various alternatives in mind, or he may simply have the negations in mind. Belief-that is relative to alternatives; and, where this is not realized or where the alternatives are not clearly specified, a person who expresses belief may not be saying anything very clear.

I believe that this simple point, generally unrecognized, is of very considerable importance for the Christian religion. What it is to be a Christian believer is unclear until we have made clear what are the alternatives with which the propositions of Christianity are being contrasted. I suspect that in the course of twenty centuries there has developed a more restrictive understanding of what it is to be a Christian believer than existed earlier. In early centuries you had merely to believe that the whole Christian creed is more probable than each of various rivals. In later centuries you are often thought to have to believe that various items of the creed are each more probable than their negation, or that the whole creed is more probable than its negation. I shall argue at a little greater length for this historical conjecture when I come in Chapter 4 to distinguish between the different understandings in the Christian tradition of the nature of faith. When I come in Chapter 6 to consider the kind of faith, and so the kind of belief, that a church ought to demand of its adherents, I shall argue that, whether or not this historical conjecture is correct, the Christian Church of recent centuries has sometimes been too demanding in the beliefs which it requires of its adherents.

The point that belief is relative to alternatives is connected closely with the issue of the conjunctivity of belief. If  $S$  believes that  $p$  and  $S$  believes that  $q$  (where  $p$  is being contrasted with not- $p$ , and  $q$  with not- $q$ ), it does *not* follow that he believes ( $p$  and  $q$ ) (where the alternative to this is its negation (not-both- $p$ -and- $q$ )). It follows only that he believes ( $p$  and  $q$ ), where this is being contrasted with ( $p$  and not- $q$ ), ( $q$  and not- $p$ ), and (not- $p$  and not- $q$ ). For  $S$  may believe that it is more probable that in a match between them  $A$  will beat  $B$  rather than  $B$  beat  $A$ , and more probable that in a match between them  $C$  will beat  $D$  rather than  $D$  beat  $C$ , without believing that it is more probable that both  $A$  and  $C$  will win than that there will be any other outcome of the two matches. Hence it is that many a wise person believes that he has some false beliefs. He believes  $p$ , and believes  $q$ , and believes  $r$ , etc.

because he believes that each is more probable than any alternative (and we may suppose that the only alternative is the negation), but he believes that ( $p$  and  $q$  and  $r$  . . .) is less probable than its negation, that is he believes that he has at least one false belief. The application to Christian creeds, understood as expressions of belief-that, should be apparent. One who believes the Nicene Creed may believe that each item is more probable than any alternative (and we may even suppose that the only alternative is the negation), or that the Creed as a whole is more probable than various detailed alternative creeds as wholes; but he need not believe that the Creed as a whole is more probable than its negation (i.e. the negation of the conjunction of all the items in the Creed, that is the proposition that says that there is a false item in the Creed). He may still believe that somewhere in the Creed (he knows not where) he has made a mistake.

## BELIEF AND ACTION

So much for the connection between believing that  $p$  and believing  $p$  to be more probable than not- $p$  or than  $q$ . But what of the latter, believing something to be more probable than something else, which I called earlier the primary concept of belief? What is it to have such a belief? Belief has consequences for action, for it is in part a matter of the way in which one seeks to achieve one's purposes, the goals or ends one seeks to achieve.

Suppose that I seek to get to London, and I come to a junction in the road. Then clearly if I believe that it is more probable that the road on my right leads to London than that the road on the left does, I shall take the road on the right. More generally, if  $S$  seeks to achieve  $X$  and believes  $p$  to be more probable than  $q$ , where  $p$  entails that doing  $A_1$  will bring about  $X$  and doing  $A_2$  will not bring about  $X$ , and  $q$  entails that doing  $A_2$  will and doing  $A_1$  will not bring about  $X$ , where  $A_1$  and  $A_2$  are the only actions available to  $S$  and cannot both be done, then if  $S$  can do  $A_1$ , he will do  $A_1$  and not  $A_2$ . At least, this holds so long as  $S$ 's beliefs have no other relevant consequences, and  $S$  has no other purposes in life except to bring about  $X$ . The relation of belief to action becomes more complicated if  $S$ 's beliefs have further consequences and  $S$  has other purposes. But, clearly, given all these restrictions, the consequence does follow. I *could not* believe that it is more probable that the right-hand

road leads to London, have the sole purpose in life of going to London, and take the left-hand road.

There may be several actions available to *S* and he may have various beliefs relevant to the attainment of any given purpose. Although he may believe that the right-hand road leads to London and the left does not, he may also believe that if he waits at the junction there is some possibility that he can get a bus which goes to London, or that if he reverses his steps, he will probably find a railway station from which he can get a train to London. The connection between belief and action now becomes more complicated. But what we can still say is the following. If *S* has beliefs about the probability of different actions,  $A_1, A_2, A_3$ , etc., attaining his one goal  $X$ , that it is more probable that  $A_1$  will attain it than that  $A_2$  will or that  $A_3$  will or that any other action will, and if he can only do one of these actions, he will do  $A_1$ . If he believes that  $A_1$  and  $A_2$  are equally likely to attain  $X$ , but more likely to attain  $X$  than any other available action, he will do either  $A_1$  or  $A_2$  in order to attain  $X$ . But if he believes that any action he may do (including doing nothing) would be equally likely to attain  $X$  ( $X$  is just as likely to happen whatever he does or does not do), he cannot do any action in order to attain  $X$ . In order to do an action  $A_1$  in order to attain  $X$  (with the purpose of obtaining  $X$ ) you need what I may call a weak belief about its efficacy—that  $A_1$  is no less likely to attain  $X$  than any other action, but more likely to attain it than some other action (e.g. doing nothing). *S*'s beliefs about the probability of different actions attaining his goal are what I shall call means–ends beliefs. They will normally follow from more theoretical beliefs—e.g. his belief that if he waits at the junction there is a certain probability that he can get a bus which goes to London will follow from beliefs such as that probably buses stop at the junction, probably they are not always full up, and probably those buses go to London.

People have many beliefs which, in fact, never affect their actions, but what the theory that I am advocating claims is that if circumstances arise in which I seek to achieve some purpose, where my beliefs entail that it is more probable that it can be realized by one means rather than some other incompatible means, then if there are no other means, I shall if I can bring about the former means. I may believe it more probable that the Pharaoh of the Exile referred to in the Book of Genesis was Ramses II than that it was any other pharaoh. This belief may, in fact, have no

effect on my conduct. I may not have any other beliefs with which it can join for it to entail a relevant means–end belief, a belief about the means by which some purpose of mine can be achieved. All that the theory claims is that if circumstances were to arise such that this belief together with other beliefs entail a belief about the means by which a purpose of mine can best be achieved, I shall use that means. My belief about Ramses II could well have a significant effect on my conduct. It follows from it that if I am seeking to provide you with true information about the Book of Genesis, I shall do so by saying that Ramses II was the Pharaoh of the Exile rather than by saying that Merneptah was the Pharaoh of the Exile. Further, together with other beliefs my original belief may entail that it is more probable that some document *K* discovered by an archaeologist is a forgery than that document *J* is. In that case it will follow that if I am seeking to acquire a genuine historical document for a museum, I shall acquire *J* rather than *K*.

My account of the consequences of people's beliefs for their actions, complex though it may sound, is still over-simple in several respects. First, it has ignored the fact that a person may, and normally does, have more than one purpose which he is seeking to achieve; and some of these purposes may be negative ones—he may be seeking to avoid certain outcomes. He does not normally just seek to get to London but to get there without travelling a long time, not seek merely to acquire documents for museums but to acquire them without spending much money, and so on. (Some of his purposes may even be ones which he is not prepared to admit, even to himself—e.g. the purpose of not expressing an opinion different from one accepted by his fellows.) What dictates what he will do is, then, not merely his belief as to whether his action is more likely than some other action to achieve a given purpose, but his belief as to how much more likely it is to achieve his stronger purposes (the ones on which he is most keen) than is some other action. Which action someone will perform depends on just how strong are his various purposes  $X_1$ ,  $X_2$ ,  $X_3$ , and so on; and just how probable he believes that the various actions  $A_1$ ,  $A_2$ ,  $A_3$ , etc. will lead to the fulfilment or non-fulfilment of each of them. Suppose that it follows from my belief about Ramses II that it is more probable that *K* is a forgery than that *J* is. Then if my sole aim is to acquire a genuine document for the museum, I shall acquire *J* rather than *K*. But suppose that I have the further goal of spending as little money as possible, and

*J* is expensive while *K* is very cheap. What I shall do will then depend on my belief about how much more probable it is that *K* is a forgery than that *J* is (if there is not much difference in this respect between them, I am more likely to acquire *K*); and on how keen I am on getting a genuine document as opposed to spending little money. If *J* is very expensive and *K* is very cheap, and I do not mind too much about the risk of *K* being a forgery, I am much more likely to acquire *K*. More generally *S* is more likely to do  $A_1$  the more the purposes which he seeks most to achieve are ones which will, he believes, most probably be achieved by doing  $A_1$ .

Secondly, the account so far holds only in so far as *S* believes that his beliefs have the entailments in question. He will probably believe this if the entailments are fairly immediate, for necessarily a person believes many of the immediate entailments of any proposition which he believes. If I believe that if someone points a loaded gun at a man's heart and pulls the trigger, the bullet will enter the man's heart and make a bullet-sized hole in it, and that if a man has a bullet-sized hole in his heart, he will die immediately, then I can hardly fail to believe that if I fire a loaded gun at a man's heart, he will die immediately. But I may believe a complicated scientific theory which has a remote consequence that doing *A* will bring about not-*X*, and yet I may not realize that the theory does entail this. In that case I may believe the theory and still do *A* in order to bring about *X*. So we need to include among *S*'s beliefs the belief that the relevant means-end belief is a consequence of his more theoretical beliefs before the general claim holds. And conversely if *S* believes that some means-end belief is entailed by his more theoretical beliefs, then—even if it is not so entailed—it is the means-end belief which, together with his purposes, will guide his action.

Thirdly, all that follows from *S*'s beliefs and purposes is what he will seek to achieve, and in particular which bodily movements he will try to make—what he will try to say; how he will try to move his arms and legs. But if he proves unable to make these bodily movements, nothing will happen. He will have tried, and that is all.

And I emphasize that it is all an agent's beliefs (with their various strengths) taken together (including her beliefs about what the other beliefs entail), and all her purposes taken together, which have consequences for what the agent will seek to do and so, on the assumption that she has the bodily powers which she believes herself to have, which

actions she will perform. I shall assume in future, unless stated otherwise, that people believe the entailments of their beliefs and have correct beliefs about which bodily powers they have.<sup>4</sup>

We clearly have non-inferential knowledge of our own beliefs and purposes. Someone's purposes are, paradigmatically, what he consciously sets himself to bring about (and although he may repress some purposes from consciousness, they remain purposes of which he is half-aware, but which he will not admit to himself). Just as a person must know (in some degree) what are his purposes, so he must know which intentional actions he is performing—a movement of your limb would not constitute an intentional action unless you knew that it was occurring and that you were bringing about its occurrence. If someone knows what action he is performing and what purpose he is seeking to realize by it, he must know what are the means–end beliefs on which he is acting, because a means–end belief is a belief about how an action will attain a purpose—although if he is only *half*-aware of his purpose, he may be only *half*-aware of his belief. Since a person knows what he would do to achieve many other purposes which he is not currently seeking to achieve, he has non-inferential knowledge of other means–end beliefs (the ones on which he is not currently acting); and in so far as he does not know how he would set about achieving some purpose, he does not have any relevant means–end belief. He may be consciously aware of the beliefs or, never having given any thought to them, be able to become aware of them by self-examination. But if honest self-examination yields no answer as to which way or ways he would use to achieve some purpose, then he cannot have a means–end belief on this matter. If the person can put his means–end beliefs into words, and is

<sup>4</sup> I assume too, unless stated otherwise, that they believe that their more theoretical beliefs have the means–end entailments they do, with great confidence (with a probability close to 1); and so that the probability they ascribe to the means–end belief is not significantly lower than the probability which they ascribe to the theoretical beliefs. I also assume that different theoretical beliefs have different consequences by way of means–end beliefs. If someone ascribes moderate degrees of probability to two rival theories which each have the same consequences about the means by which some end is to be achieved, they will ascribe a much greater probability to the means–end beliefs than to either of the theoretical beliefs. I thus assume that the probability which people ascribe to a means–end belief is not significantly higher than the probability which they ascribe to any theoretical belief from which it is derived. As we shall see in a later chapter, this latter assumption will require individuating theoretical beliefs (distinguishing between creeds) in terms of the different means–end beliefs which they entail.

not attempting to deceive anyone, he will give a true account of these beliefs. And it seems, too, part of the logic of belief that unless someone is in some way deceiving himself, what he naturally admits to himself about his more theoretical beliefs—that he believes this proposition of astronomy or that proposition of history—rather than what others infer about his beliefs from a study of his behaviour is what he believes. Similarly, with regard to purposes—there may be states of affairs which a person's behaviour tends to bring about, but if she is totally unconcerned about them, then bringing such states about is wrongly called a purpose of hers. And if she is totally unaware that her actions do have such consequences, that they do is no belief of hers. Someone's beliefs and purposes are mental states of which a subject is aware or can be made aware by self-examination.<sup>5</sup>

What applies to beliefs generally applies to the belief that there is a God. Those who have that belief have a certain attitude towards the proposition that there is a God, an attitude of setting it epistemologically above the alternative that there is no God, an attitude which has consequences for the believer's behaviour. In the sense which I have been careful to distinguish, a person must act on his beliefs; he cannot have beliefs which could not in any circumstances make any conceivable difference to his conduct. One who really believes that there is a God will, in some circumstances, act differently from one who does not. What are the consequences for action of a person's belief that there is a God will depend crucially on how strong it is, which other beliefs he holds, and what his purposes are. (Subject to all the qualifications of previous paragraphs) if he seeks to tell the truth, he will say that there is a God. If he also believes that if there is a God, it is the duty of all humans to worship him; and he has the sole purpose of doing his duty, then he will worship. But he may believe that there is a God and yet not worship if he does not hold the other belief or believes also that he will be ridiculed for worshipping God and has the purpose of not being ridiculed stronger than the purpose of doing his duty. And so on.

<sup>5</sup> If there is a sense of 'belief' and 'purpose' in which people may have beliefs and purposes of which they are totally unaware, my concern in this book is not with that sense. My concern is with the beliefs and purposes by which consciously, or at least semi-consciously, people direct their actions.

Whether a person believes that there is a God is something of which he is aware, or of which he can become aware by asking himself whether or not he believes. However, a belief of this kind is, of course, one about which we may be rather more inclined to self-deception than about more mundane beliefs. We may want to believe, although really we do not, and so persuade ourselves that we do; or, conversely, we may want not to believe, although really we do, and yet persuade ourselves that we do not. Clearly some vigilance is necessary here. Because of the possibility of a person deceiving himself about his religious beliefs, public criteria may sometimes show what are someone's religious beliefs rather better than will his apparently honest avowal.

### BELIEF AND EVIDENCE

I claimed earlier that belief is relative to alternatives. To believe that  $p$  can usefully be explicated as to believe that  $p$  is more probable than any alternative. In subsequent discussion I shall assume, unless I state otherwise, that the only alternative to a belief is its normal alternative, that is its negation, and so that  $S$  believes that  $p$  if and only if he believes that  $p$  is more probable than not- $p$ , i.e. probable *simpliciter*. My treatment can easily be generalized to deal with other cases.

But what is it for one proposition to be more probable than another proposition? It is important to distinguish between different kinds of probability. The inductive probability of one proposition (normally some hypothesis) on another proposition (normally evidence relevant to the hypothesis) is a measure of the extent to which the latter proposition (the evidence) makes the former (the hypothesis) likely to be true. Inductive probability is relative to evidence. Whether a proposition is inductively probable or not depends on the evidence-class relative to which the probability is assessed. On the evidence that a certain pack is an ordinary pack of playing cards, the probability that the top card is the ace of hearts is  $\frac{1}{52}$  but on the evidence that it is a normal pack of playing cards and the top card is a heart, the probability that the top card is the ace of hearts is  $\frac{1}{13}$ . There are, as I shall argue briefly in Chapter 2, within very rough limits correct criteria which measure how probable a given piece of evidence makes a given hypothesis. The inductive probability of a proposition as measured by correct criteria,



I shall call its logical probability. However, as I shall illustrate, different people may use slightly different inductive criteria from each other, and inductive probability, as measured by a particular person's criteria, I shall call (his or her) subjective probability. Each person will believe that his subjective probability for some proposition is, in fact, its correct logical probability. Inductive probability of either kind (my main concern) is to be distinguished from statistical probability and physical probability. Statistical probability is simply a proportion of a class. The statistical probability of someone developing cancer before the age of 50 just is the proportion of people in the population who develop cancer before the age of 50 (whether or not anyone knows what that is). Physical probability is a measure of the extent which some event is predetermined by its causes. If, given an initial set-up, it is inevitable that some event will occur, the probability of its occurrence will be 1. Note that on the sole evidence that the statistical probability of an  $A$  being  $B$  is  $p$  (or on the sole evidence that the physical probability of any  $A$  being  $B$  is  $p$ ), the logical probability that a particular  $A$  is  $B$  is also  $p$ . But if the fundamental laws of nature do not fully determine what happens, but merely determine the tendencies or biases in nature towards things happening, then the physical probability of some event may have a value intermediate between 1 and 0. I shall not henceforward be concerned with physical probability; I mention it merely to distinguish it from what does concern me—inductive and (occasionally) statistical probability.

When someone believes that  $p$  is more probable than any alternative, his belief is about logical probability. The logical probability (or the subjective probability) of most ordinary propositions cannot, of course, be given an exact numerical value; the most that one can say about the probability of most ordinary propositions is that one proposition is more probable than some other proposition. If, on some evidence one proposition is more probable than its negation, it has on that evidence a probability of more than  $\frac{1}{2}$ . If some proposition is certainly true it has a probability of 1; if it is certainly false, it has a probability of 0. If it is not stated explicitly what is the evidence in question, the assumption is that the evidence is the total evidence available to the person assessing the probability; or, sometimes it may be, the total evidence available to the community to which he belongs—to say today that it is probable that Einstein's General Theory of Relativity is true is to say that the total evidence available to us today makes it likely that Einstein's General

Theory is true. In statements about an individual's beliefs it is presumably the evidence available to that individual rather than the evidence available to any community which is involved. So my claim that  $S$  believes that  $p$  if and only if  $S$  believes that  $p$  is more probable than any alternative amounts to the claim that  $S$  believes that  $p$  if and only if  $S$  believes that the total evidence is available to him makes  $p$  more probable than any alternative; that, on the total evidence available to him,  $p$  is more probable than any alternative.

But, presumably, the only thing which can make a proposition probable is another proposition, or something formulable as a proposition; and so a person's evidence must consist of propositions which he believes, or has some inclination to believe. And how are these propositions to be distinguished from other propositions which that person believes?

Some of the propositions which a person believes, he believes solely on the grounds of other propositions which, he believes, make the former probable; but some of the propositions which a person believes, he does not believe only for this reason. I believe that a train will leave Oxford for Birmingham tomorrow at 10.11 a.m. solely because it says that it will on the timetable and railway timetables are on the whole reliable (which latter propositions I believe). Yet my belief that the clock says that it is 5.10 is not something which I believe for the sole reason that it is made probable by others of my beliefs or inclinations to believe (e.g. my beliefs that it is now 5.10 and that clocks in this house are usually reliable). On the contrary, I believe that the clock says that it is now 5.10 because it looks<sup>6</sup> to me as if it does say 5.10. My system of beliefs has here an anchorage in what I believe to be my experience of the world.

I shall call those propositions which seem to some person to be true and which he is inclined to believe, but not solely for the reason that they are made probable by other propositions which he believes, his basic propositions. Among a person's basic propositions are those propositions which report his perceptions ('I see a clock') or what he perceives ('the clock reads 5.10'), his apparent memories ('I remember

<sup>6</sup> I here use 'looks' in what Chisholm calls its 'epistemic' sense, i.e. in saying that it looks to me as if the clock says 5.10, I am saying that on the basis of my visual experience I am inclined to believe that it is 5.10. See R. M. Chisholm, *Perception* (Cornell University Press, 1957), ch. 4.

going to London yesterday') or what he apparently remembers ('it rained in London yesterday'). He is inclined to believe these propositions, not solely because he believes something else, but because he is inclined to believe that they are forced upon him by his experience of the world.

In terming all such propositions basic I do not mean to imply either that they are known infallibly (i.e. without the possibility of error) or that they are known incorrigibly (i.e. without the possibility of the subject subsequently rationally believing that he has been in error about them) or that they are known at all. On the contrary, the subject will have different degrees of confidence in them (i.e. he ascribes to them different degrees of prior probability, prior that is to taking other propositions into account). I am much more confident that the clock reads 5.10 than that it rained in London on Tuesday two weeks ago. (Maybe it was not Tuesday, but Wednesday when I was in London two weeks ago.) When someone is asked why he is initially inclined to believe some basic proposition, with the degree of confidence in question, the only answer that he can give is that his experience has been such that it seems to him to be probable to that degree. The subject's actual evidence is, then, this set of propositions, reporting what he is initially inclined to believe, together with the degree of prior probability which he ascribes to each representing the degree of his initial confidence in it. A claim that a belief is probable is, then, a claim that it is made probable by this set. A person's evidence set will include propositions which he is initially inclined to believe but not with sufficient strength for them to constitute beliefs without getting support from other propositions; they are propositions to which (if he has the concept of probability) he ascribes probabilities of less than  $\frac{1}{2}$ . For example, I may have caught a glimpse of the colour of a piece of cloth or of the number of a car plate, and on the basis of my experience ascribe a probability of, say, 0.3 to the relevant proposition. Other evidence relevant to the matter in question (e.g. basic propositions about what other witnesses said about it) might then be enough when combined with the evidence of my quick glimpse to raise the probability to more than  $\frac{1}{2}$  and so yield a belief in the proposition. The greater the prior probability of a basic proposition  $p$ , and the greater the conditional probability of a further proposition  $q$  on the basic proposition (i.e. the probability that  $q$  given  $p$ ), the greater the resultant probability of the further proposition. In so

far as the subject believes that the prior and conditional probabilities are great, the more probable he will believe the further proposition to be. A basic proposition acquires the status of a belief and we may then call it a basic belief if its prior probability is greater than  $\frac{1}{2}$ , and it will retain its status as a belief, unless the subject believes that other of his basic beliefs render it improbable. But if it needs positive support from other propositions in order to render it (in the believer's view) overall probable and so constitute a belief, I shall not call it a basic belief.

It may seem strongly to me that I saw a ghost in my room last night. 'There was a ghost in my room last night' is then a basic proposition of mine. But my evidence of what I have read and been told about what kinds of thing there are in the world may, in my view, make it very unlikely; and so I do not, in fact, come to believe what seemed to me, on the evidence of my senses at the time, to be the case. Whether the basic proposition wins through in such circumstances depends on the believer's judgement of its prior probability (his initial degree of confidence in it) as opposed to his assessment of the probability on his other evidence of some proposition which conflicts with it, and how improbable the latter makes the original basic proposition. Once basic propositions have acquired the status of beliefs, they help to promote further beliefs, which, in their turn, may interact back with basic propositions. Long observations by *S* of the behaviour of swallows makes it probable, *S* believes, that *p* 'virtually all swallows fly south from England in autumn'. Believing this, *S* then thinks that he has seen a swallow one December day. The latter proposition *q* is a basic proposition in which *S* has high initial confidence. But *S*'s confidence is diminished because *S* believes that his past observations make *p* probable and so make it probable that he has misobserved on this occasion. But then he may think that he has seen two more swallows in December in England (*r*) and hold this basic proposition with sufficient confidence so that (*q* and *r*) no longer—in his view—make *p* probable; and so *q* re-acquires sufficient probability to become a belief.

In saying that people believe things if and only if they believe that their evidence makes them probable, I do not imply that they often make very explicit calculations. Normally, for example, people do not consider directly whether their evidence makes some proposition probable (or rules out some would-be basic belief), but only whether their other beliefs do this, but this is on the assumption (which can be

questioned) that those other beliefs are rendered probable by evidence. Once a proposition (e.g. 'there are no such things as ghosts') is admitted into the belief-corpus, it plays its part in promoting further beliefs, without the extent of its own evidential support very often being brought explicitly into question.

Nor do I imply that a person who, on some evidence, believes a proposition can say why his evidence makes the proposition probable, can state explicitly the inductive criteria (i.e. criteria for one proposition making another probable) which he uses. I may believe that someone to whom I was introduced was hostile to me because of the way he smiled at me, without being able to say *why* the latter is evidence for the former. A professional reasoner may be able to set out his reasons; but if a person cannot do that, he may be guided by reasons all the same.

A person's basic propositions may include not merely ordinary reports of things perceived and remembered, but his 'hunches' and 'intuitions' which he thinks are justified by the experiences to which he has been subjected, but cannot say why. Someone lost in a wood may have a strong hunch that a particular path is the way home—without this hunch having grounds which he can state. A person's basic propositions may even include propositions reporting experiences of telepathy or propositions reporting future experiences or even universal propositions covering both past and future. (For whether or not people can see into the future, some people believe that they can.)

Then there are the basic propositions which people find themselves inclined to believe, not on the basis of *experience* but because *reason* seems to show them true. Intuitively it seems to us that those propositions must hold. Our beliefs in the truth of many of the propositions which philosophers claim to be analytic or logically necessary<sup>7</sup> are often basic beliefs. My belief that if *A* is taller than *B* and *B* is taller than *C*, then *A* is taller than *C* is not based on experience, but on reason. It is part of the armoury of reason with which I come to experience. The

<sup>7</sup> A proposition *p* is analytic or logically necessary if and only if its negation (the proposition 'it is not the case that *p*') entails a contradiction. Thus 'all squares have four sides' is analytic because 'not all squares have four sides' entails a contradiction; it involves a claim that there is a figure with four equal sides and four equal angles which does not have four sides. A proposition which does not itself contain a contradiction and whose negation does not entail a contradiction is called synthetic or logically possible. For a more detailed account of when propositions are analytic and when they are synthetic, see my *The Coherence of Theism* (Clarendon Press, 1977), Ch. 2.

same applies to my belief that  $2 + 2 = 4$  and my beliefs that various other propositions of mathematics are true. The belief of those who believe that every event has a cause is also often a basic belief, an assumption with which they approach experience rather than a belief derived from experience. And, as we shall see in Chapter 2, many beliefs about the correctness of inductive criteria are also basic beliefs.

And, finally, basic propositions include very general propositions about what there is in the world and how things work—‘the Earth is hundreds of millions of years old’, ‘China is a big country’, ‘almost everyone dies before they reach the age of 125 years’, ‘Newton’s laws of motion are (at least for medium-sized bodies moving with moderate velocities) approximately true’.<sup>8</sup> We normally do not recall how we came to learn these things, but we believe that we did learn them, have been told them often, and that everything else we learn fits well with them. They have the status of basic propositions to which the believer ascribes a high degree of prior probability, and often form our background beliefs (or ‘background evidence’ or ‘background knowledge’) which we take into account in judging the probability of beliefs of more limited scope. Then, even if several people tell you that George Shevashkili is 200 years old, and they have seen his birth certificate and been told by his relatives that this is so, you will be inclined not to believe what you have been told. The claim is outweighed by background evidence that almost everyone dies before they reach the age of 125 years.

A person may continue to believe a proposition while his evidence for it changes. I may a few years ago have assembled a lot of historical evidence which, I believed, made it probable that Jesus was raised physically from the dead. I therefore believed the latter proposition. I may now have forgotten the historical evidence, and yet continue to believe that Jesus was raised. My evidence now may be only that I once

<sup>8</sup> In *On Certainty* (trans. Dennis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe, Basil Blackwell, 1969), Wittgenstein stresses the importance in forming the framework of our conceptual system of very general propositions which we are taught as children. He discusses such examples as that the Earth has existed long before our birth, that the Earth is round, that men’s heads are not full of sawdust, that cars do not grow out of the ground. Wittgenstein claims (401) that ‘propositions of the form of empirical propositions, and not only propositions of logic, form the foundation of all operating with thoughts’, and (318) that ‘there is no sharp boundary between methodological propositions and propositions within a method’.

did, honestly and conscientiously, examine historical evidence and reach the conclusion that Jesus was raised. This evidence about my past investigation may be my present grounds for belief.

With all of these qualifications needed to save the claim, my original claim that someone (who has a belief about relative probability) believes  $p$  if and only if he believes that his total evidence makes  $p$  more probable than any alternative, namely (normally) more probable than not, may seem to be becoming trivial. For originally it might have seemed to rule out a person having beliefs for which he could not cite public evidence. But now it turns out that it is compatible with a person having almost any beliefs, supported or not supported by any public evidence or indeed anything expressible in words. Where someone's belief has no evidence expressible in words, we just say that the proposition believed is one of his basic propositions which acquired the status of a basic belief because he had such confidence in it that it was not overruled by any other evidence. Yet, although this is so, the claim is far from useless, for it provides a framework in which we can describe kinds of beliefs in terms of the different kinds of evidence by which they are supported and the different criteria of probability involved in the judgement that certain evidence supports a certain belief. Further, it still does rule out certain apparent possibilities. It means, for example, that someone can only believe a proposition  $p$  which she believes that the public evidence renders improbable if she believes that she has the kind of access which people have to their perceptual experiences or to the deliverances of reason, to something which makes it probable that  $p$ . Consider the mother who purports to admit that all the public evidence seems to indicate that her son is dead and yet says that she continues to believe that he is alive. If she really continues to believe this, she must believe either that the public evidence does not show what others think that it shows (e.g. because there are hidden discrepancies in it) or that she has private evidence which counts the other way. If she claims to believe that the son is alive, not on the basis of anything else, and so treats it as one of her basic propositions, she is, in effect, claiming clairvoyance; for she is claiming the sort of justification for it that others claim for ordinary perceptual propositions. My formula brings this out.

The same goes for the person who claims to believe that there is a God, while admitting that public evidence seems at first sight to count against his belief. He must claim either that the public evidence has been

wrongly assessed or that he has private evidence. He may claim that while at first sight it looks as if the various arguments do not render probable the existence of God, in fact their force has not been appreciated by the public; or that there is public evidence which others have not noticed which does render probable the existence of God. If his appeal is to private evidence, it may be to something other than his apparent experience of God, which makes the existence of God probable—e.g. it might be his own apparent experience of the presence of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who, he might reasonably claim, could only be present to him if God had kept her in existence after her death. Otherwise ‘there is a God’ will be functioning as that person’s basic proposition. But in that case he is claiming an awareness of God similar in some respects to the awareness people have of material objects, or perhaps in this case an awareness of the truth of the proposition ‘there is a God’ similar in some respects to the awareness people have of the truth of ‘ $2 + 2 = 4$ ’. My account of belief brings this out.

My account rules out the suggestion that someone could believe a proposition while believing that all the public evidence rendered it improbable and that he had no other evidence. That surely is so. For what sense can we make of the suggestion that Holmes can believe that Smith is innocent of the crime of which he is charged, while believing that, on balance, all the evidence points to his guilt (including evidence about Smith’s character, etc.)? ‘There’s no doubt’, Holmes says, ‘that the public evidence shows strongly that Smith is guilty. I have no hunch or feeling that it shows anything else. What I know of his character and the clues which the police found point to his guilt and I have nothing else to go on, except this public evidence.’ Someone who heard Holmes say this and believed him to be truthful would naturally report Holmes as believing that Smith was guilty.

So what of Tertullian, who claimed that ‘the Son of God died’ is ‘worthy of belief, because it [is] absurd’; that ‘He was buried and rose again’ is ‘certain because it [is] impossible’?<sup>9</sup> There are ways in which we can interpret Tertullian as making an intelligible claim. For example, we could suppose that ‘absurd’ and ‘impossible’ are being used in ‘inverted comma senses’. ‘Absurd’ could be taken to mean ‘apparently absurd’, and ‘impossible’ to mean ‘impossible by normal standards’. Tertullian

<sup>9</sup> ‘Credibile est quia ineptum . . . certum est quia impossibile.’ *De Carne Christi* 5.



might be saying that one would not expect a true claim about a matter of very deep significance to look plausible or likely at a first glance by the average person; true propositions of very deep significance must be very different from normal propositions about the world of sense, and true claims of very deep significance will, in consequence, seem absurd at first glance. Hence, Tertullian might be saying, the fact that a claim purporting to be a very deep truth seems absurd at first glance is evidence that it is such a truth. Similarly, he might be saying that because the most significant and fundamental events must be very different from normal ones, they will be impossible if one supposes that only normal events occur—so a claim about such a happening would be more likely to be true if it concerned the apparently impossible.

But if Tertullian is saying that the fact that some proposition really is ‘absurd’ or ‘impossible’ is grounds for believing it to be true, then we must respond that not merely are these not good grounds for believing a proposition, but that no one *can* believe any proposition on the ground that it is absurd or impossible. For to claim the latter involves claiming that all the evidence counts against the proposition. And if Tertullian believes that all the evidence is against a proposition, he must believe that that proposition is improbable, and in that case he cannot believe that it is true. He may die rather than deny the proposition in public; he may, in some sense, plan his life on the assumption that the proposition is true, but he does not *believe* it. There are logical limits to the possibilities for human irrationality, and even Tertullian cannot step outside them.

### BELIEF IS INVOLUNTARY

All of this has consequences for the question of the voluntariness of belief. In general, a person cannot choose what to believe there and then. Believing is something that happens to someone, not something that he does. I believe that today is Monday, that I am now in Oxford, that Aquinas died in AD 1274, etc. I cannot suddenly decide to believe that today is Tuesday, that I am now in Italy, or that Aquinas lived in the eighteenth century. That belief is involuntary was a claim of Hume’s. ‘Belief consists’, he wrote, ‘merely in a certain feeling or sentiment; in something, that depends not on the will, but must arise from certain

determinate causes and principles, of which we are not masters.<sup>10</sup> But what Hume does not bring out is that this is a logical matter, not a contingent feature of our psychology. For if my arguments so far are correct, then a person believes that  $p$  if and only if he believes  $p$  over against not- $p$  because he believes that his evidence supports  $p$  rather than not- $p$ . This can be usefully explicated as: he believes that the total evidence available to him makes  $p$  more probable than not- $p$ . His beliefs are a function of his basic propositions (and the degree of confidence he has in them) and his inductive criteria. If his beliefs were to be under his voluntary control, then either his basic propositions and the degree of his confidence in them or his inductive criteria would have to be under his voluntary control. Yet our reason for trusting our basic propositions is our conviction that they are formed by outside factors independently of our will. If I were to control at will my basic propositions and the degree of my confidence in them, I would know that I controlled them; and hence I would know that whether a proposition was among my basic propositions was not determined or even influenced by whether what it reported was the case. If I chose at will to believe that I now see a table, then I would realize that this belief originated from my will and so had no connection with whether or not there was a table there, and so I would know that I had no reason for trusting my belief, and so I would not really believe. A similar point goes for our inductive criteria. If I were to decide there and then what to count as evidence for what, I would realize that I was doing this, and so that my resultant beliefs were the result of my choice and so not in any way connected with whether or not things were as they claimed. It is because one set of inductive criteria seems to me intuitively correct and my use of those criteria is not under the control of my will, that I trust that the resultant beliefs indicate how things are. If I decided there and then whether to adopt historical criteria which ensured that no evidence counted as evidence for the physical resurrection of Christ, or to adopt criteria which ensured that just one piece of testimony for that event would by itself make the occurrence of that event very probable, then I would know that I had no reason for trusting the resultant belief, and so I would not really believe it.

<sup>10</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (first published 1739; (ed.) L. A. Selby-Bigge, Clarendon Press, 1967) Appendix, 624.

While I cannot change my beliefs at will, what I can do is to set myself to change them over a period. I can set myself to look for more evidence, or investigate the correctness of my inductive criteria, knowing that that *may* lead to a change in my beliefs. Or I can deliberately set about cultivating a belief—e.g. by looking selectively for favourable evidence, and then trying to forget the selective character of my investigation. I can bring before my mind the evidential force of certain evidence, and try to forget about the evidential force of other evidence. And I can try to persuade myself that my old inductive criteria were incorrect criteria. All this can, and does, happen, and in a later chapter I shall inquire if it is ever a good thing that it should happen. But the point here is that at any instant our beliefs are dependent on the view we then have of the evidence. If we knew that some attitude of ours depended on our will, it would not be a belief.

#### THE GROUNDS FOR ATTRIBUTING BELIEFS TO OTHERS

Although a person's public behaviour may be formally compatible with his having all sorts of extraordinary beliefs and purposes, we infer from their public behaviour to the beliefs and purposes of others, and we do so using certain inductive criteria (in the wide sense of criteria which yield probable results), and in particular we use the principle of simplicity. We attribute to other people the simplest set of beliefs and purposes which would lead us to expect the behaviour that they exhibit. Hence, we attribute to people relatively stable purposes and beliefs. We assume that (other things being equal) the beliefs and purposes manifested in someone's actions today and yesterday are similar; that different people have similar beliefs and purposes; and that people's beliefs change when presented with stimuli in regular and similar ways. A principle derivative from the principle of simplicity is the principle of charity. Other things being equal, we assume that other people have purposes of a kind that we also have ourselves, and come to acquire beliefs in ways similar to those in which we do—which is simpler than to suppose that different purposes and methods of belief-acquisition operate in different people. Application of these principles of simplicity and charity allow us to reach reasonably well-justified conclusions about what someone

believes. If we show to a person *S* other people being killed by being shot in the heart, we reasonably suppose that *S* will come to believe that shooting in the heart kills (since we ourselves would come to hold that belief when shown what *S* was shown), and so if we then see *S* intentionally shooting someone else *T* in the heart, we infer that he believes that he will kill *T*, and so has the purpose of killing *T*. We assume (by the principle of simplicity) that purposes do not come and go completely randomly, and so, if failing to hit *T* with his shot, *S* then tries to strangle him, we infer that *S* believes that strangling kills (because *S*'s purpose of killing *T* has remained). Another principle that we use (which may be derivable from the principle of simplicity) is the principle of testimony—that normally people tell the truth. And so on. Hence, in the absence of grounds for supposing otherwise, we believe what others say about their beliefs and purposes. (I shall discuss these inductive criteria of simplicity and testimony more fully in the next chapter.)

Although we infer to someone's beliefs from his behaviour by means of such principles as the principle of simplicity, we assume that the conclusion yielded thereby is only probable, not necessarily true. *S* may ask *R* for an aspirin, *R* may take a pill out of his aspirin bottle and give it to *S*, *R* may in general have behaved benevolently towards *S* so far; yet the pill turns out to be a cyanide pill which kills *S*. We infer from his generally benevolent behaviour that *R* did not have the purpose of killing *S*, and hence that he did not believe that the pill would kill *S*. But we could be wrong, and *R* could know that we were wrong. A person's beliefs (like his purposes) are not necessarily what an inference from his observable behaviour by the principle of simplicity would lead us to infer that they are. Belief is thus an inner attitude towards propositions which is manifested in action and often evidenced by public criteria, but which exists independently of its manifestations and of evidence shown in public behaviour.

The account that I have given of the nature of belief brings out, I believe, what is right in the main philosophical theories about the nature of belief. For a functionalist, belief and purpose are inner states which are such that when combined in certain ways they cause public behaviour, beliefs being caused by the outside environment in certain regular ways. But, contrary to the functionalist, sometimes a person may acquire a belief in a quite abnormal way; and—as we have just seen—the public behaviour entailed by beliefs and purposes may be entailed

by different belief–purpose pairs (*R*'s belief that the pill was aspirin and his purpose to please *S*; or *R*'s belief that the pill was cyanide and his purpose to kill *S*) between which public behaviour cannot discriminate. Hence, we need also Hume's view that a person's belief is an inner attitude towards a proposition, which he can elicit by asking himself whether he believes so-and-so.

### ACTING ON ONE'S BELIEFS

The account of belief which I have been expounding in this chapter involves the view that in a crucial sense a person inevitably will act on his beliefs. If I believe that *p* is more probable than *q*, and that *p* entails that doing action *A*<sub>1</sub> will bring about *X*, and that doing *A*<sub>2</sub> will not bring about *X*, and my sole purpose is to bring about *X*, then (if I have no other relevant beliefs) I will do *A*<sub>1</sub> rather than *A*<sub>2</sub>. In this way a person cannot but act on his beliefs. Yet people are often criticized for not 'acting on' or 'living by' their beliefs. This seems to suggest that it is one thing to have a belief, another to act on it. What is being said when it is said that someone does not act on his beliefs? I suggest that one of three things may be meant. My account of belief allows that although in the sense which I delineated a person must act on his beliefs, in these senses he may not. In considering each sense I shall consider in particular how someone may fail to 'act on' his belief that there is a God.

First, and least commonly, a person may fail to 'act on' his beliefs because he fails to draw those consequences for action which, in fact, follow from his beliefs. I did explicitly make the assumption, when analysing the connection between belief and action, that people believe the entailments of their beliefs, and so the means–ends beliefs entailed by their more theoretical beliefs; but, as we saw, they might not. Thus, to take the religious example, someone may believe that there is a God, and also believe a whole series of religious propositions about God of a traditional Roman Catholic kind. The believer may be a teacher of religion in school and have the purpose of teaching in school nothing but true religious doctrines. He may nevertheless teach out of a book which teaches things inconsistent with the religious propositions that he believes. He may teach these things because he fails to realize that they

are inconsistent with his beliefs. In this way he fails to act on his beliefs. His failure is a failure of logic.

Secondly, a person may fail to 'act on' her beliefs because she lacks other beliefs with which the former can mesh to give rise to consequences for action. If a belief is of a theoretical kind logically remote from that person's other beliefs, it may carry little in the way of consequences for action in the circumstances of her life. That person's failure to act on that belief will then arise from her having few other beliefs which make the former applicable to the circumstances of her life. It is in this way that many people fail to 'act on' the belief that there is a God. If someone believes that there is a God and has the purpose of telling the truth as she sees it when asked on religious matters, then when asked if there is a God she will say that there is a God. But someone's belief that there is a God carries little else in the way of consequences for action unless she has other religious beliefs with which it can mesh. For unless the believer has in addition beliefs about what a God wants her to do or about what a God has a right to demand of her, then, whatever her purposes—e.g. whether she wants to please God or to hurt him, to do her duty or not—the mere belief that there is a God dictates nothing in the way of action. The beliefs of a mere theist, someone who believes that there is a God but has little in the way of more detailed beliefs about him, carry so little in the way of consequences for action compared with the beliefs of, say, a fairly conservative Christian. Both act on their beliefs in the original sense which I analysed, and yet there is so little for the former to act on. Someone whose religious beliefs are to give rise to much in the way of action may need not only a number of religious beliefs but also some simple factual beliefs. I may believe that there is a God and that he has commanded me to help the poor and underprivileged, have the purpose to do what he commands, and yet fail to help the people on my doorstep through a failure to realize that those people are poor and underprivileged.

The other beliefs which a person lacks in order that certain beliefs may carry consequences for action may not be simply beliefs that some proposition is more probable than some alternative, but beliefs that some proposition is very much more probable than some alternative. Someone may believe certain propositions, but only believe them mildly probable; whereas the consequences for action would only follow if he believed them very probable. Thus, suppose *S* believes very strongly that

there is a God, and that, on balance, just probably, God wants to be worshipped in church on Sunday morning. *S* has the purpose of doing what God wants, but also the equally strong purpose of going to the football game on Sunday morning. In the end he goes to the football. He does so, because—he believes—it is only marginally more probable than not that he will be doing what God wants by going to church; but—he believes—it is very probable indeed that he will succeed in going to the football, just by getting on a bus. So—he believes—he would be more likely to achieve his second equally strong purpose than the first. If he had believed much more strongly that God wants to be worshipped, he would have gone to church.

Thirdly, a comment that a person does not ‘act on’ his beliefs may really amount to a comment that he fails to have certain purposes (or have them in sufficient strength). Although he does ‘act on’ his beliefs in the way which I originally delineated, he does not do those actions which we think that it would be good that he should do, given those beliefs, because he lacks certain purposes. Thus, someone may believe that there is a God, and yet fail to worship God or render thanks to him—through a failure to have the purpose to worship whatever God there may be, or through a failure to have any purpose to express gratitude to any one who has benefited him. Or someone may believe that there is a God, who gives to (and only to) the virtuous a life of deep happiness after death, and yet fail to be virtuous through a failure to have the purpose of getting a life of deep happiness after death. In these cases we describe a person as not ‘acting on’ his beliefs, because we think that it would be good for him to have the purposes in question.

In all cases where a person would do an action  $A_1$  rather than  $A_2$  if his beliefs relevant to it were stronger, he would also do  $A_1$  rather than  $A_2$ , if his purpose to achieve the believed consequence of  $A_1$  was stronger, relative to his purpose to achieve the believed consequence of  $A_2$ , and conversely. The failure may be either one of belief or one of purpose; how we classify it will depend on whether we think that the person has wrong beliefs or wrong purposes. This is illustrated by the Sunday morning example. If *S* had had a much stronger purpose of doing what God wants, he would have gone to church despite the considerable probability (only slightly less than  $\frac{1}{2}$ ) that God does not want him to go

to church, because he would then have wished above all not to fail to do what God wants him to do.

A person is culpable only for failing to try to do what he believes that he has a moral obligation to do.<sup>11</sup> So, desirable though it is that everyone's true beliefs should be strong ones, someone is only culpable for failure to do those actions which are such that he believes that it follows from the purposes on which he believes that he has an obligation to act that he ought to do them. As I argued earlier, a person cannot there and then choose his beliefs; and so any culpability there may be for failure to have beliefs can only be culpability for failure to acquire them over a long period. A person may have obligations to pursue inquiries leading to possible changes of belief, or to cultivate specific beliefs over a period; and how far there are such obligations I shall investigate in Chapters 2 and 3. But a culpable failure to act on some belief at a time can only be a failure of purpose. It is a failure to have (i.e. to seek to fulfil) those purposes which that person believes that he ought to have (i.e. ought to govern his behaviour). It is a failure to have certain purposes or to have them in sufficient strength. Clearly, we can believe that there are certain purposes which ought to govern our actions, and yet fail to have those purposes. We may recognize an obligation to seek our long-term well-being or to worship any God there may be, and yet, while holding beliefs that God exists and wants us to do so-and-so, and will provide long-term well-being for those who do what he wants, fail to act on those beliefs through a failure to have the purposes which we recognize that we ought to have. Such failure is culpable failure to 'act on' beliefs in the third sense—i.e. the failure is basically one of purpose rather than one of belief.

We have now seen that one of three things may be meant when it is said that someone fails to act on his beliefs. However, in the primary sense which I delineated earlier a person cannot fail to act on his beliefs—for a person's beliefs necessarily dictate the ways in which a person seeks to achieve his purposes.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> I develop the view that culpability (or blameworthiness or subjective guilt) belongs to someone only in so far as he fails to try his best to do what he *believes* that he ought to do (or does what he *believes* that he ought not to do) a little more fully on pp. 37–8.

<sup>12</sup> It always appears strange when people have beliefs and yet in some sense do not 'act on' them. This fact led Newman to distinguish between two kinds of assent to propositions, 'notional' and 'real'. (J. H. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, first published 1879, University of Notre Dame Press, 1979.) Notional assent involves



## ACTING ON ASSUMPTIONS

As well as talking of people acting on their beliefs (which in our primary sense they must do), we may also talk of them acting on assumptions. The only point of talking of this arises where the assumptions are propositions which the agents do not believe. For example, an Englishman in Turkey who speaks no Turkish and seeks directions from a native, will, if he believes that the native speaks English, address him in English. He will do just the same if he does not believe that the native speaks English (so long as he believes that there is at least a slight probability that the native speaks English). This will be because only if the native does speak English will the Englishman be able to achieve his purpose (obtaining comprehensible directions), and so, realizing this, as he does not speak Turkish, he does the only action which has any chance of achieving his purpose. We may then describe him as acting on the assumption that the native speaks English. Or, again, a person trapped in an underground cave may believe that none of the several exits leads to the surface. He may, nevertheless, take a certain exit, because only by taking some exit has he any chance of achieving his purpose of getting to the surface. We may say of him that, although he does not believe that this exit leads to the surface, he is acting on the assumption that it does. These examples suggest the following relation between having a belief and acting on an assumption. To act on an assumption that  $p$  (or to act as if  $p$ ) is to do those actions which you would do if you believed that  $p$ . It is to use  $p$  in your practical inferences, to take it for granted when working out what to do. If you do  $A$  on the assumption that  $p$ , you believe that there is a small probability that  $p$ , and that given the existence of at least that probability, no other action is more likely to realize your purpose than  $A$ . Hence, you would still do

unthinking, nominal, half-hearted or unconvinced belief; real assent involves living conviction. He contrasts them by saying (87) that 'we shall not... be very wrong in pronouncing that acts of notional assent... do not affect our conduct, and acts of belief, that is, of real assent, do (not necessarily, but do) affect it'. But what Newman calls 'notional assent' clearly has some effect on conduct—e.g. it may make a difference to what we say in casual conversation, even if it does not make a difference to what we are prepared to die for. Beliefs differ in strength and, as we have seen, for that reason differently affect conduct. There seems no justification for making a sharp division between two kinds of belief or 'assent'.

*A* if you believed that the probability that *p* was greater, and so you would do it if you believed that *p*. In short, when a person acts on an assumption that *p* his action can also be described as acting on the belief that there is some (albeit small) probability that *p*.

Pascal recognized the difference between believing that there is a God and acting on the assumption that there is a God. He replies to someone who says 'But I can't believe' with the following recipe for how to acquire belief that there is a God: 'You want to be cured of unbelief and you ask for the remedy; learn from those who were once bound like you and who now wager all they have. They behaved just as if they did believe, taking holy water, having masses said, and so on. That will make you believe quite naturally.'<sup>13</sup> Acting 'as if', i.e. on the assumption that *p*, is thus distinguished from belief as a state causally efficacious in producing belief that *p*.

<sup>13</sup> B. Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (Penguin Books, 1966), No. 418.

## 2

# Rational Belief

In Chapter 1, I considered the nature of actual belief. We saw how in a sense all beliefs give rise to action and must be based on evidence. But not all beliefs are rational or epistemically justified in the sense that they arise in a way which makes it probable that they are true. There may be various reasons why it is a good thing that someone should hold some belief, e.g. that it gives him peace of mind or prevents him beating up his wife. But normally by far the most important reason which makes it good that someone should hold some belief is that that belief is true, because without true beliefs we cannot fulfil our purposes (that is, attain the goals we seek). But since certainly true belief is so often unattainable and we have to make do with beliefs as probable as we can get them, I shall consider different, more specific senses in which a belief may be rational in the general sense of arising in a way which makes it probable that the belief is true. But before coming to this central issue of the chapter, I need to consider the notion of goodness, that is moral goodness, and how we can discover which actions and states are morally good. We shall need this result in order to consider when it is morally good or obligatory to investigate our beliefs and when we are culpable for not doing so, as well as other crucial issues later in the book.

### MORAL GOODNESS

By ‘moral goodness’<sup>1</sup> I mean overall goodness, and by ‘moral badness’ I mean overall badness. Many actions are good in some respects but bad

<sup>1</sup> I put forward in this section certain views about moral goodness with only fairly brief argument in their defence. For fuller discussion and argument, see my *Responsibility and Atonement* (Clarendon Press, 1989), chs. 1 and 2, and my paper ‘Morality and God’, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 3/2003, 225. 316–28.

in others. Giving large amounts of pocket-money to a child is good in the respect that he will get pleasure out of spending it, but bad in the respect that having too much money he will not learn self-discipline. Often it is not easy to weigh the competing reasons against each other so as to determine whether it is overall better to do a certain action than to refrain from doing it. Sometimes, however, it is very evident how that comparison is to be made. It is overall better not to torture children despite the goodness of the pleasure which the sadist might get from torturing. A morally good action is one which is overall better to do than not to do. However, not all morally good actions are duties (that is, morally obligatory). One action might be overall better than another without one having an obligation to do it. For obligations are actions which we owe it to somebody to do. I owe it to others to pay my debts and keep my promises to them, not to wound or kill them or steal from them. I owe it to my children to feed and educate them, and to my parents to care for them in their old age. But unless this has bad effects on others or in so far as I owe my talents to God (or my parents or teachers) and so have a duty to use them in a good way, it does not seem very plausible to suppose that I have a moral obligation to read works of great literature even though it is overall better that I should read the works of great literature rather than do nothing. Also, there are actions of greater service to others than duty requires; these are not merely good but supererogatorily good, yet not duties. It is supererogatorily good for a soldier to throw himself on top of a grenade which is about to explode in order to save the life of a comrade, but he certainly has no duty to do so. A morally bad action is one which it is better not to do than to do. But, again, there are two kinds of morally bad actions: wrong actions, that is ones which it is obligatory not to do; and ones which are bad but not wrong. It is wrong to rape, or to kill just for fun; yet only bad but not wrong to read a work of pornography (unless this will have a bad effect on others; or in so far as I owe my talents to God or parents or teachers). An action which is such that it is just as good overall to do it as not to do it is a morally indifferent action.

Our obligations to do positive actions (as opposed to our obligations to refrain from actions) normally arise in one of three ways. They may arise from undertakings given freely to others (that is promises) or actions of benefiting them (begetting children creates an obligation to feed and educate them), or from benefits received and not freely rejected

(our obligations to care for our parents and obey the laws of the land are of this kind). With very rare exceptions, it is always better to fulfil an obligation than to do any other good act instead. Only when I have paid any debts can it be right for me to give money to some great good cause to which I do not owe money (for money which I owe to someone else is not mine to give away). The very rare exceptions to this rule of the precedence of obligations over other good actions only arise in cases where the obligations are trivial (e.g. to keep a promise to meet someone for lunch) and an opportunity arises to do instead a greatly worthwhile supererogatory action (e.g. to save the lives of other people). In a situation where someone has two incompatible obligations, the best action is to fulfil the strongest obligation. If I have an obligation to look after a sick mother and also an obligation to look after a sick aunt, and they live far from each other, the best action is to fulfil the stronger obligation—which is, plausibly, to look after my mother.

Given that, as we almost all believe, there are moral truths, there must be two kinds of moral truths—contingent ones and necessary ones. Contingent moral truths are truths about the morality of particular actions or actions of narrow kinds, whose truth depends on some contingent non-moral state of affairs. Necessary moral truths are truths which are necessarily true, in no way dependent on how the world is in contingent non-moral respects. Contingent moral truths follow from necessary moral truths and contingent non-moral truths. Thus it may be a contingent moral truth that I have a duty to pay you £10. It will only be so if there is some contingent non-moral truth such as that I promised to pay you £10, and a necessary moral truth such as that people always ought to keep their promises. It makes no sense to suppose that a particular action (e.g. killing someone in certain circumstances) is wrong, while another action of exactly the same kind done in exactly similar circumstances is not wrong. If one action of killing is wrong and another one is not wrong, there must be something about the different circumstances of the latter (e.g. that it was committed as an act of judicial punishment, or an act of killing an enemy combatant in the course of a just war) that makes the latter not wrong. And when you have specified all the circumstances that make an action of a certain kind wrong, that it is wrong to do it in these circumstances will be a necessary truth. What applies to wrongness clearly applies also to obligation, goodness, and badness. Hence, if there are moral truths at all there

must be necessary moral truths about which kinds of actions and states are good or bad (obligatory or wrong). That is not to deny that the necessary truths may be complicated ones containing many kinds of qualification and exception.

Someone is objectively morally at fault—I shall call her objectively guilty—if she fails to fulfil her obligations (does what is wrong), whether or not she believes that she is not fulfilling her obligations (is doing wrong). The failure may be due to a false belief about the contingent non-moral circumstances. If I have borrowed money from you and failed to repay because I believe (falsely) that I have already repaid you, I still owe you the money; and so objectively I am guilty for not paying my debt. I am also objectively guilty if my failure is due to a false belief about what are the necessary truths of morality—I may believe (falsely) that children have no duty to care for aged parents; but if I fail to care for my aged parents, I am still objectively at fault, guilty. Since my failure in these cases arises from a false belief and I cannot choose which beliefs to hold at a given time, I do not deserve blame for that failure (though I might deserve blame for not attempting to acquire true moral beliefs, contingent and necessary, in the past.) But I am, in general, culpable or blameworthy—what I call subjectively guilty—if I fail to act at a time on what I believe then to be my obligations (even if they are not, in fact, my obligations) in so far as it is in my power to do so.<sup>2</sup> For the failure here is a failure of purpose, a failure of will. But I need to put two qualifications on this general principle, arising from earlier considerations. If someone believes that he has two conflicting obligations, he is culpable only if he fails to fulfil what he believes to be the

<sup>2</sup> Some thinkers have held a weaker thesis that someone is culpable if and only if he fails to do what he believes strongly that he has an obligation to do, that is believes to be much more probable than not that he has an obligation to do. The issue of whether the belief that one has an obligation needs to be strong before one can be culpable for not fulfilling it has, in effect, been much discussed by Catholic moral theologians, especially during the Jansenist controversies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. (See H. Davis SJ, *Moral and Pastoral Theology*, Vol. 1, 4th edn. Sheed and Ward, 1943), 78–115). The view that one needs a strong belief that one has an obligation before one is culpable for not fulfilling it, is known as ‘Probabilism’—so called because it involves the claim that so long as one believes that there is some moderate probability (which may be significantly less than  $\frac{1}{2}$ ) that one is not subject to a certain obligation, one is not culpable for not fulfilling it. Pascal regarded Probabilism as far too lax, and ridiculed it in his *Provincial Letters*. I share Pascal’s view and endorse in the text the stronger view called ‘Probabiliorism’. But if anyone prefers the weaker view, it can be substituted for the view in the text here and in other places without affecting the main argument.

stronger obligation. And he is not culpable for failing to perform an obligation believed to be trivial, if instead he does a very good supererogatory action, doing which is—he believes—incompatible with fulfilling the obligation. By far the most serious kind of guilt is subjective guilt.

A person is objectively good to the extent to which he fulfils his obligations (subject to the qualifications of p. 36), does many good actions and no bad actions; if there is in some situation a best action or an equal best action (that is a good action such that there is no better action to do, although alternative actions may be equally good), he does such an action. A person is subjectively good to the extent to which he is not culpable and does many actions which he believes to be good and none which he believes to be bad, and always does what he believes to be the best or equal best action where there is one. If someone believes that in some situation there is a best action or an equal best action for him to do which is not an obligation, and he does not do it, he has wronged no one but he has behaved less than perfectly and I shall call him 'quasi-culpable'.

In morality, as in everything else (as we shall see in a bit more detail later), the ground for believing a particular belief to be true is that it seems to be true and that it fits into as simple an overall scheme as we can get which has the consequence that most other things which seem to us to be true are true. It follows that, in order to discover the necessary moral truths, we need to use a method which Rawls called the method of reflective equilibrium.<sup>3</sup>

We start from many particular cases of actual or possible actions in different circumstances which, many of us agree, seem to be good or bad, as the case may be. We then consider simple general moral principles which would yield many of our agreed judgements about the particular cases—for example, the principles 'it is always wrong to cause pain' or 'it is always good to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number'. We then note that some such suggested general principles are inconsistent with the moral judgements which we intuitively make about various particular cases. For example, the former principle has the consequence that doing an action which hurts a child is always wrong, even if it is the only way to cure him of some

<sup>3</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford University Press, 1972, 20–1).

disease. And the latter principle has the consequence that it would be good to execute someone wrongly accused of a crime in order to prevent much social unrest. So we try to form more adequate general principles which fit far more of our judgements about particular cases; and it may be that some of these principles seem so obviously correct that that leads us to regard a few of our judgements about particular cases as mistaken. By proposing different general principles and confronting those who hold differing moral views with their consequences, we may make progress towards agreement on moral matters; that is, towards recognizing correct moral principles. Agreement on necessary principles is, of course, a lot harder to reach on moral matters than it is on non-moral matters. The range of particular judgements initially agreed between those who dispute about the truths of morality is much smaller than is the range agreed between those who dispute about the correct criteria of inductive inference; and we are subject to irrational influences deterring us from changing our moral view. (A change of moral view may dictate an unwelcome change of life style.) But there is no reason to suppose that the moral views of most of us would not converge over time, given exposure to each other's life experiences and each other's arguments.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUE BELIEF

In order to achieve any purpose, except performing such simple bodily movements as waving one's hands and making noises, a person needs true beliefs about which actions of his will achieve that purpose. In so far as actions are morally good, they are of importance. It matters that we do them. And it can only matter that we do some action if it matters that we should succeed in doing it—that we should achieve our purpose. So of course it matters that I have true beliefs about how to achieve purposes which it is morally good that I should achieve. For this reason alone the old slogan: 'it does not matter what you believe; it is what you do that counts' seems to me obviously mistaken. I cannot pay you what I owe you unless I have a true belief about which pieces of paper are money or a true belief about what you can do with a signed cheque. I cannot give you information for which you ask unless I have true beliefs about what words mean, and so on.



The more important it is, the morally better it is, that I should attain some goal, the more important it is that I should try to acquire a true belief about how to do so; and since certain truth is seldom attainable, that means a belief as probably true as I can get it. The more probable is my belief, the less likely it is that I shall go astray by relying on it. And so the better the goal, the more important it is that I should spend time, energy, and money in trying to get a belief about how to reach it as probable as I can get. The attempt to get such a belief will consist in investigation in ways which I shall describe in due course. The more important it is that I should have a satisfying career, the more important it is that I should investigate various possibilities in detail, so that I reach a belief that is very probably true about where that satisfaction is to be attained. By contrast, if I seek to relax for a few hours by reading a novel, it would be foolish to devote five hours to reading reviews of possible novels in order to come to a very probably true belief about which will prove the most relaxing.

If I have a duty to attain some end, I have a duty to acquire a true belief about how to do so. Objectively, the duty is to acquire the true belief. But people are not culpable for not fulfilling a duty if they have done their best to do so, given their other obligations etc. And since we can only do our best, the duty which a person can and must try to fulfil is the duty to investigate adequately, that is to try to get a belief as probably true as can be had—given their other obligations, etc. Hence, I shall usually refer to the duty as the duty of adequate investigation. Since we can only fulfil our obligations if we have true beliefs about what they are, there must be a primary obligation on all of us to investigate what obligations we have. We must investigate both what are the necessary moral truths about obligations (e.g. that people have a duty to pay their debts) and what are the contingent moral truths, that is the moral obligations which, given how the world is, follow from the primary moral truths (e.g. that since I have bought £10 of books from the bookshop, I have a duty to pay the bookshop £10). If, as a parent, I am under a moral obligation to ensure that my children are happily and well educated, then I am morally obliged to investigate possible schools so that I come to a belief that is as probably true as I can get that a certain school will provide happy and good education. If I have a duty to provide true beliefs for others (e.g. for my children when they cannot obtain them for themselves), then I have a duty to acquire those true

beliefs in order to tell others what they are. I may have such a duty either towards my children and others in my care for whom I have a general duty to provide, or towards those in special need for whom I alone can provide. When people are short of food, the person trained in agricultural biochemistry has some obligation to apply his talents to finding out how they can get more food out of the land. Similarly, if we are to do good actions which are not obligatory, we need to investigate which actions are good; and to investigate what are the primary moral truths (e.g. that it is good to read and to help others to read great literature) and what, given the world is as it is, follows from that about which actions are good (e.g. that it is good to read and help others to read Tolstoy's *War and Peace*).

The holding of true beliefs, I have suggested so far, is of moral importance because beliefs tell us the means by which ends can be achieved. This does not, however, seem to be the only reason why the holding of true beliefs is important. The holding of true beliefs seems to be intrinsically valuable, valuable in itself not valuable merely as a means to something else. It is good in itself to have true moral beliefs, not just because they lead me to do the right actions but because they are part of my attitude to the world, and so part of my character. It is good in itself that I shall think it good to help the poor, even if I am in no position to help them; it means that I think of them in the right way. It is good, too, in itself to have true beliefs about the central facts about my life—who my parents are, whether my wife is happy, where my children are, what are the prospects for my future; and also about the nature, origin, and purpose of my particular human community; and the nature, origin, and purpose of the universe itself.<sup>4</sup> Quite obviously, many people seek such true beliefs for their own sake; and obviously the only way to attain true beliefs is to investigate with diligence. We feel that individuals who seek such true beliefs are doing something worth while and that it is

<sup>4</sup> The opening sections of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* give a classical exposition of the view that knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) is of more value for its own sake than for the use to which it can be put, and that the most valuable kind of knowledge is knowledge of metaphysical truth. He writes that we regard people 'as being wiser not in virtue of being able to act, but of having theoretical knowledge and knowing the causes of things' (981b), that this theoretical knowledge is more to be prized than practical knowledge, and that the superior science is that which concerns 'first principles and causes'. The view that I am advocating is certainly not as strong as this. I merely suggest that knowledge (and so the true belief which is involved in it) is valuable for reasons other than its practical utility.

good that they should acquire the true beliefs and communicate them to others. Governments and other benefactors give billions of pounds to scientists to investigate the structure of the atom, the distribution of the galaxies, the history of science and culture, and the geological history of the Earth; and they do not give solely because they suppose that such belief has practical value. But, although it is a good thing that we should acquire and communicate such information, is there a duty on us to do so (for reasons other than practical reasons; that is because of the intrinsic value of true belief)? I suggest there is such a duty on a few people to acquire and propagate true beliefs on these matters, if there is a great need of such true beliefs in the community and those people are alone capable of acquiring and propagating them. If I and a few others alone have the capacity to acquire true beliefs about physics, or psychology, or ancient history, and without our doing so our community would lack this information then, it seems to me, we have a duty to acquire the information and to propagate it. The duty to acquire and propagate true beliefs on these matters may also arise for reasons other than the intrinsic value of such beliefs, and in particular if a person has been given his initial skill at the subject and an opportunity to make new discoveries by the benefaction of others. (If someone is old enough to understand that someone is giving him a good gift, such as his initial skill, he has the right to refuse it. If he refuses it, then there will, of course, be no obligation to use it; but if he accepts it, then the obligation remains.) And, of course, if someone pays my salary for this purpose, or I have promised to do so, then I have a duty to investigate the structure of the atom, or whatever, and propagate my results. But if conditions such as these do not hold and I have no wish to understand the structure of the atom, or the nature of the mind, or the cultural origins of our society in Greece and Rome then, good though that understanding may be, I surely have no duty to acquire it.

Some of the sentences of the previous few paragraphs may have seemed to the reader a little awkward, because it might have seemed that what we need to acquire, use, and propagate is not so much 'true beliefs' as 'knowledge'. Sometimes, I suspect, talk of search for 'knowledge' is used simply as a synonym for the search for true belief. But in many contexts knowledge is contrasted with mere true belief; and it is often thought that while true belief is a good thing, knowledge (which includes true belief) is better. Whether it is better is, however, some-

thing which we shall be in a position to consider only when we have investigated what makes for the justification of a belief, since, on some accounts, knowing that something is so involves having a justified true belief that it is so.

## EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION

I shall equate 'rational' belief with 'epistemically justified' belief; my use of 'justification' is to be understood in this sense of 'epistemic justification' unless I specify otherwise. My beliefs are true if (and only if) things are as I believe them to be. My belief that the Earth revolves annually round the sun is true if (and only if) the earth does revolve annually round the sun. But we all want to say that people often hold beliefs which are, in fact, false but which they have no reason to believe to be false and are, in fact, justified in believing. We might say, for example, that most humans in the first century AD held a rational but false belief that the Earth was stationary.

Philosophical theories of justification developed over the past thirty years may be divided into internalist and externalist theories. For an internalist, what makes a belief justified are 'internal' factors, that is, ones of which the believer can become aware by introspection if she chooses, and that means primarily her basic propositions (the evidence from which she starts, or should start if she reflects on the matter) and the criteria by which she judges (or can judge, if she reflects on which criteria she should use) that such-and-such propositions are evidence for such-and-such a further proposition. For an externalist, however, a belief being justified depends on the process by which it is produced being of the right kind, quite independently of whether the believer is, or can become, aware of whether the belief has been produced by a process of the right kind. The process of production being of the right kind is normally spelled out in terms of the process being a reliable one (that is, one which usually produces true beliefs). For example, on one such theory, if I acquire a belief that the clock reads 5.10 by a normal perceptual process, then my belief is justified because perception usually yields true beliefs; whereas, if I acquire it by clairvoyance, then the belief is not justified, because clairvoyance seldom yields true beliefs. But, as I shall illustrate in more detail later, there are many different reliabilist

theories differing in how they measure the reliability of a process. Although each of the many internalist and externalist theories purports to be giving a correct account of the one ordinary-language concept of 'justification', they seem to yield such very different results as to whether or not a belief is justified that they are best regarded as delineating alternative concepts of justification; and then the philosophical issue is in which senses of 'justification' is it important to have, or seek to get, a justified belief.

Note, to begin with, the difference between synchronic and diachronic justification. A belief is synchronically justified if it is a justified response to the situation in which the believer finds herself at a given time; a belief is diachronically justified if it is a justified response to adequate investigation over time. There are many possible internalist and externalist theories of each kind, but I can bring out my main points by considering sharply distinct theories of the different kinds. I shall begin by discussing internalist theories of synchronic justification, which hold that a belief is justified—one is rational in holding it—if and only if it is based on evidence which renders it probable.

A major reason why people have different beliefs from each other is that they have different evidence sets. One person has a basic proposition that he saw Jones near the scene of the crime at the time it was committed; another person may have no such basic proposition. In consequence, even if all their other relevant beliefs are the same, they may hold different beliefs about whether Jones committed the crime: for the basic proposition of the first person that he saw Jones near the scene may (together with all the other evidence) in that person's view raise the probability that Jones committed the crime to more than a half; whereas the second person regards his small evidence set as making it not nearly so probable that Jones committed the crime, not probable enough for him to believe it. I noted in the last chapter the wide variety of kinds of basic propositions (with the accompanying degrees of probability which the believers ascribe to them) which form different people's evidence sets.

#### DIFFERENT INDUCTIVE CRITERIA

Differences of belief may also arise because people differ in their inductive criteria, in the criteria by which they judge that one propos-

ition makes another one probable. (I am counting deduction as a special case of induction, since I count 'making certain' as a special case of 'making probable'. A deductive argument is one in which the premisses, if true, guarantee (i.e. make certain) the truth of the conclusion.) With very few exceptions, however, I think that almost all people use roughly the same inductive criteria in their judgements about science, history, or mundane matters. People believe that some explanatory theory is probable in so far as (1) it predicts accurately many varied data (pieces of evidence) not predicted by rival theories satisfying the other criteria equally well (and does not predict anything found not to occur); (2) fits in well with other explanatory theories (themselves probable on these criteria) in neighbouring fields of inquiry (that is fits in well with background evidence, often called background knowledge); (3) is a simple theory; and (4) has small scope. A theory has larger scope the more information it gives you about more things in more detail. The more you say, the more likely you are to make a mistake. I suggest that the criterion of scope is of relatively less importance than the other criteria, and so I shall largely ignore it future.<sup>5</sup> (1) constitutes the explanatory power of the theory; (2), (3), and (4) constitute its prior probability, its probability independent of successful predictions of observations. The more probable is a theory the more probable are the predictions made probable by that theory. Thus Newton's theory of motion, put forward in 1687 (his three laws of motion and his law of gravitational attraction that every material body attracts every other such body with a force proportional to the product of their masses and inversely proportional to the square of their distance apart), was a very simple theory. The data which it predicted concerned how things behave in many different areas—the regular motions of the moon, of the planets, of the moons of the planets, the regular behaviour of comets and tides and pendula, and the velocities of bodies moving down inclined planes, regularities which there would be no reason to expect on any other simple theory. In this case, there was no background knowledge with which the theory had to fit, for it covered the mechanical

<sup>5</sup> For a fuller account of these criteria, see my *Epistemic Justification*, ch. 4. I understand by a theory 'predicting' accurately that it renders probable the occurrence of the observed data to a high degree of accuracy. Whether the data are discovered before or after the theory was formulated is irrelevant (see *Epistemic Justification*, Appendix); and so it is irrelevant whether the theory *predicts* in a very literal sense.

behaviour of all material bodies, and there were no successful explanatory theories about how bodies had to behave in other respects (for example, in their electrical or magnetic behaviour). For these reasons the cited data made the theory very probable; and also made probable its predictions. Although Newton's theory had very large scope (being concerned with the mechanical behaviour of all material bodies throughout the universe for all of time in very precise detail), this did not count significantly against it—which illustrates the relatively small weight to be given to the criterion of scope.

We use the same pattern of inference when we generalize to the behaviour of ordinary things. It is always simpler to suppose that things will continue to behave (in simple respects) as they have behaved rather than that they will suddenly begin to behave differently. Hence (when there is no other relevant evidence), on the evidence that all of many observed As are B, it is always more probable that all As (observed and unobserved) are B than that any equally detailed incompatible hypothesis is true—e.g. the hypothesis that all observed As (and all unobserved As except for 3 As) are B, and that 3 unobserved As are not B. Also, since by criterion (1) theories which predict better are more likely to be true, the larger the sample of As all of which have been observed to be B, the fewer other theories of the form 'n% As are B' would have made the same predictions, and all these other ones (e.g. the theory '99.9999% As are B') are less and less simple than 'All As are B'. Hence, the more As observed all of which are B, the more probable it becomes that all As are B. Also, it is more probable on evidence that all observed As are B (even if the number of As is small), that theories such as that 95% or 90% As (observed and unobserved) are B are more probable than theories such as that 5% or 10% As (observed and unobserved) are B, and so more probable that the predictions of the former will be true than that predictions of the latter will be true. Hence, it follows that, on the stated evidence, it is always fairly probable that the next A to be observed will be B; and it becomes more and more probable the more As are observed to be B. This principle which justifies generalizing from experience in the above ways, I shall call the generalization principle. Hence, for example, the datum that always in the past cheese left at room temperature for two months has gone mouldy makes it probable that cheese always goes mouldy in these conditions, and also probable that the next piece of cheese left in these conditions will do so.

The cited criteria are again at work in the work of detectives or historians. If the clues are such that you would expect to find them if Jones committed the robbery but not otherwise, that is evidence that he committed the robbery. The hypothesis that the actions of one person caused the clues is simpler than the hypothesis that the separate actions of many different people not acting together caused the clues. And the hypothesis needs to fit with what we know about Jones's character on the evidence of his past behaviour; on this evidence it needs to be not too improbable that he would commit a robbery. (And the claim does not have very large scope—for example, it is more probable that he committed the robbery at some time than that he committed it at exactly 4.30 a.m.) To the extent to which these criteria are satisfied, the clues make it probable that Jones committed the robbery.

Not everyone has the same inductive criteria as the rest of us. In a well-known article, 'Understanding a Primitive Society',<sup>6</sup> Peter Winch described the criteria by which the Azande assess a claim to have put a spell on someone, and pointed out that although they are not our criteria, they are ones which intuitively seem right to the Azande. Even within our own culture there are people with very different criteria from our own—for example, gambling addicts. Thus, a gambler who has just become a father of a baby boy may go to the races and find that a horse called 'Sonny Boy' is running. He immediately judges this an omen; and, on this basis being convinced that the horse will win, bets a large sum on it. His belief arises from the fact that his inductive criteria include a principle roughly to the effect that apparently coincidental resemblances of name between recent important past events in someone's life and future events which can be 'backed' or invested in make it probable that such backing or investment will bring great reward. Most of us do not have such criteria among our inductive criteria. Another gambler may believe that the fact that green has won much more frequently than red at a certain game of roulette is grounds for supposing that red will win next time (and so for betting on red next time), while most of us suppose that that evidence is ground for supposing that green will win next time. This gambler's belief exhibits what is known as the 'Monte Carlo fallacy'.

<sup>6</sup> *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1964, 1, 307–24.



While there may nevertheless be general agreement on the criteria which I described earlier in outline, there may be disagreement about what they amount to in detail. Disagreements between scientists or detectives faced with the same data of observation often arise from their different judgements about which of two theories is the simpler. Scientists with different mathematical training may well differ in their claims about when one scientific theory is simpler than another. To Kepler, his theory that each planet moved on an elliptical path with the sun at one focus no doubt seemed a fairly simple theory. But then he was one of the very few scientists of his time to understand the mathematics of the ellipse. To most of his contemporaries, theories which claimed that the path of a planet was the resultant of many different circular motions may well have seemed simpler. Yet, in general, scientists, detectives, and the rest of us agree when one theory is simpler than another. If we did not, we would never agree about which theory is rendered more probable than another by the data. Scientists could always construct an infinite number of incompatible theories (of equal scope, but varying in simplicity) which are such as to predict any collection of (otherwise improbable) data. And whether a theory 'fits with background knowledge' is a matter of whether the conjunction of the theory with the background knowledge, that is an overall theory, is simple. So, unless we agreed on which of competing theories (fitting with background knowledge) is simpler, we would never agree about which of an infinite number of incompatible theories (and an infinite number of incompatible predictions) were rendered more probable than others by the data. But we do normally agree about which theories and predictions are rendered more probable by data, and so on which theories are simpler than other theories.

Another kind of disagreement about what the criteria amount to in detail concerns the (rough) absolute value of the probabilities of scientific and other theories, and of their predictions. While (subject to the qualification of the last paragraph) scientists and others may agree about the relative probabilities of theories on some particular evidence set, they may disagree about their (rough) absolute value. How many data of different kinds from how wide a spatio-temporal region does some theory need to predict in order for it (or its predictions) to be rendered very probable, or (roughly) twice as probable as not, or more probable than not? Can I reach a probable conclusion about how bodies will

behave on Sirius in 10,000 million years' time from a study of how they have behaved on Earth over a couple of millennia? Although scientists and others disagree about all this, the disagreement exists within a wide region of agreement. So often there is agreement about when it is safe to rely on a prediction of some theory—that is about when some prediction is very probable indeed. A similar kind of disagreement concerns how far we can use the criteria which we use in science or detective work to judge the worth of theories of metaphysics. But I suggest that, in effect, most people do use these criteria.

Another inductive criterion which almost everyone accepts is what I called the Principle of Testimony: that, other things being equal, if someone tells you that  $p$ , then probably  $p$ . What other people tell us is the main source of our knowledge about the world beyond our immediate experience. Our complex beliefs about the history of the human race long before our birth; the geography of the Earth beyond our narrow experience; the structure of the heavens and of the atom come from what others have told us. The criterion only says that *other things being equal*, if someone tells you that  $p$ , probably  $p$ . But other things may not be equal. You may have other evidence which supports the contrary belief—you may have seen for yourself or some third person may have told you that not- $p$ , or you may have evidence which makes probable a theory incompatible with  $p$ . In that case, despite being told that  $p$ , you may still come to hold the belief that not- $p$ , or may ascribe equal probabilities to  $p$  and to not- $p$ .

Some of our inductive criteria are secondary criteria in that we hold them because we believe that they are made probable by our observations of the world. Thus, someone may believe that if  $n$  per cent of a sample of a population picked by a process of choosing every hundredth person in the telephone directory has a property  $P$ , then it is highly probable that  $n$  per cent of the whole population have the property  $P$ . A person's basic propositions which are his evidence for the former belief may be what he has found and what others have told him about the differences and similarities in other respects between different groups picked by such a telephone-directory sampling procedure, and between such groups and whole populations. But, although some beliefs about what are correct inductive criteria have their grounds in experience, not all inductive criteria can have their grounds in experience. For although experience  $E$  may make probable a belief  $B$  about what are correct

inductive criteria, it will do so only in virtue of some other inductive criterion  $G$ —e.g. the generalization principle which I cited earlier. Someone may infer by the generalization principle from the fact that in almost all cases studied where  $n$  per cent of a sample of 1,000 people picked by the method described have a property  $P$ , approximately  $n$  per cent of the population have that property, that very probably such a correlation (between sample and population) will hold in a future case. And if  $G$  were rendered probable by experience, it could only do so in virtue of another inductive criterion. People have, and must have in order to infer from things experienced to things not experienced, inductive criteria which are independent of experience. Such criteria I shall call a person's primary inductive criteria—to be contrasted with his secondary inductive criteria, which are criteria which, using his primary inductive criteria, he believes on the basis of experience. The four criteria for an explanatory theory being probably true which I described earlier are, I suggest, primary criteria.

It is a matter of complicated philosophical dispute whether the Principle of Testimony has to function as a primary criterion or whether it is rendered probable by the evidence of people's public behaviour in virtue of a different inductive criterion. We saw in the last chapter that our inferences to people's beliefs and purposes are inferences to the simplest explanation of their behaviour. Their behaviour includes the strings of sounds which they utter. It would be a justification of the Principle of Testimony if it turned out that the simplest explanation of many of the strings of sounds which most people utter is that they have largely true beliefs about things in their environment and about the meanings of words (that is about how other people will understand their sounds), and almost always have the purpose of not conveying false information to others. But whether or not such a justification can be provided for the Principle of Testimony,<sup>7</sup> clearly most people believe it without having such a justification. For them, it serves as a primary inductive criterion.

Either way we subsequently come to put qualifications on this principle, about which informers are to be believed on which occasions about which matters. Some of these qualifications come from experience and the application to it of the generalization principle. Thus, we

<sup>7</sup> I argue that such a justification can be provided in *Epistemic Justification*, 123–8.

may find that when Bloggs and Snoggs inform us about things which we subsequently observe for ourselves, what Bloggs tells us always coincides with what we observe, whereas what Snoggs tells us often does not. We are inclined to ascribe high prior probabilities to our own observations. Thus, we conclude that what Snoggs had told us in the past is not always true, and so (by the generalization principle) that what he tells us in future will contain a mixture of truth and falsity, and so that what he tells us on a particular occasion is not all that likely to be true; whereas what Bloggs tells us is very likely to be true. More generally, we come to find in this way that certain sorts of people or people under certain conditions (for example, people not under the influence of drink, or people who tell us something which is not to their advantage) are more reliable than others. Further, we may come to develop theories about the grounds which people need to make claims of various kinds, and hold that they are to be believed only if they have grounds of those kinds. For example, if someone makes a claim that a certain scientific theory is true, we may hold that the claim is probably true if and only if he has got his information directly or indirectly from a scientist who has tested his theory to ensure that it satisfies the criteria sketched on p. 46. So we have reason to believe him if and only if we have reason to believe that his information does derive from such a source. Or, again, if someone makes a claim about an event of past history, we may hold that the claim is probably true if and only if he has got his information through a chain (of writers or speakers) which derives ultimately from an eyewitness. Our grounds for holding such theories about the grounds which people need to make claims may be a priori—e.g. they come as basic beliefs. Or we may derive them on authority—many teachers, etc. tell us that all knowledge comes from experience in this sort of way. And authority remains the normal primary source of our beliefs that these conditions are fulfilled in any given case. How do we know that someone tested Einstein's theories, or that Caesar's *Gallic War* was not written by a nineteenth-century schoolmaster? Our teachers and books tell us so. Our immediate contacts are often the source of our beliefs about who are the authorities in a field. How does the child know that physics professors in universities rather than scientologists are the ones who are in a position to tell him about physics? Because he is told it by many people.

Most of what we believe we believe on authority. If there are conflicting claims among purported authorities—one says one thing and the other says the opposite—then, unless we have a strong belief that

one authority is more to be believed than another, the issue becomes disputed. Any given issue, disputed or not, can be investigated. However, when an issue concerns matters well beyond our immediate experience, any investigation depends on taking for granted other things which we also learn on authority. We can indeed investigate when Caesar's *Gallic War* was written, and can find a number of books which we are told were written in various centuries AD between the first and the nineteenth which show knowledge of the *Gallic War*. If we accept on authority when these books were written, we can conclude that the *Gallic War* was written no later than the first century BC. We can, in turn, investigate when these books were written, but we can only settle that issue if we are prepared to take yet other things on authority.

It is impossible to discuss anything remote in history or physics or astronomy, unless you take a lot of things for granted. What you take for granted is determined by the climate of opinion, that is by authority. This is not to deny that there is a difference between Britain in the eleventh century and Britain in the twenty-first century in respect of subservience to doctrinal authority. But the difference is not that now there is no stock of propositions, believed on authority, taught in primary schools as 'established fact'. There always has been and, I suggest, always will be such a stock of propositions. The difference is what those propositions are. In the eleventh century the roundness of the Earth was open to dispute, but the physical resurrection of Christ was not; now the converse is true.

When we believe such propositions without being able to recall when and where we learned them, they are basic propositions of a kind discussed earlier. When we believe them because we recall so-and-so telling us that they are true, the basic proposition is that so-and-so told us such-and-such. In virtue of the Principle of Testimony, that makes it probable that such-and-such.

## SYNCHRONIC INTERNALIST JUSTIFICATION

It follows that people differ in their beliefs, both because they form them on the basis of different evidence (different basic propositions, held with different degrees of confidence); and that evidence leads to different non-basic beliefs either because different people have different inductive

criteria or because they may not apply their own criteria (the ones to which they are explicitly committed) correctly. On an internalist theory of justification a belief is synchronically justified, one is rational in holding it at the time in question if and only if it is based on one's total evidence which renders it probable. But this can be spelled out in two different ways (with many intermediate variants—which I pass over): a subjective way; or an objective way. Evidence may be construed, as it has been so far, simply as the subject's evidence, his actual basic propositions, or as the subject's ideal evidence, the propositions which he is right to hold as basic; 'rendered probable' can be understood as rendered probable by the subject's own criteria, or as rendered probable by correct criteria.

A subject *S* who believes that *p* will have what I call a synchronically subjectively justified belief or rational<sub>1</sub> belief, if and only if his belief that *p* is based on and rendered probable, given his inductive criteria, by his total actual evidence.<sup>8</sup> A subject must believe that a belief of his is thus justified if he is to have that belief (see Chapter 1); but it may not, in fact, always be so. A failure in respect of subjective justification is a failure of internal coherence in a subject's system of beliefs, a failure of which the subject is unaware. Thus, on the basis of what he has heard in court and outside it, a juryman may hold strong beliefs well supported by evidence, that (1) the evidence against the prisoner is weak; (2) the police who charged him are intelligent men; (3) the police know far more about the detailed facts than he, the juryman, does; but (4) often

<sup>8</sup> I derive the terminology of synchronic/diachronic, internal/external, objective/subjective for classifying kinds of rationality or justification from my *Epistemic Justification*. I translate it into the terminology used in the first edition of *Faith and Reason* in terms of rational<sub>1</sub>, rational<sub>2</sub>, etc., which is less clumsy and avoids more changes from the first edition than are necessary. A belief can be based on another one either in the sense that the subject believes that it is caused by the latter (that that is why he holds it) or in the sense that it actually is caused by the latter. There clearly is a respect in which a subject is less than perfectly rational if, although his evidence makes that belief probable and he believes that it is because of this that he holds the belief, he is mistaken in this and the causes of his belief have nothing to do with the evidence for it. I discuss this issue in *Epistemic Justification*, ch. 5. My main concern in this book is with the importance of holding probably true beliefs; and since a belief having a certain relation to its evidence is no more likely to be true in virtue of having been caused in one way rather than another, I shall ignore this issue. I shall arbitrarily construe a belief being 'based' on another as the subject believing that it is caused by the latter in the case of rational<sub>1</sub> belief; and as the subject believing truly that it is caused by the latter in the case of rational<sub>2</sub> belief (along the lines of the similar distinctions on 157–8 of *Epistemic Justification*.)

police frame suspects. The juryman's inductive criteria may be such that (1), (2), and (3) make probable (5), the prisoner is guilty; but (1), (2), (3), and (4) do not make (5) probable. The juryman then comes to believe that (5) is probable because he forgets the relevance of his belief that (4) in reaching his conclusion. The juryman's belief that (5) is irrational in the first sense of 'rational'.

A subject's beliefs may be justified in that they are internally coherent, and yet we may feel that in holding them the subject is not responding to the world in an objectively justified rational way. To attempt to capture what extra we are looking for, I define objective internalist justification, or rationality<sub>2</sub>. A subject *S* who believes that *p* has what I shall call an objectively internally justified belief or rational<sub>2</sub> belief if and only if *p* is, in fact, rendered logically probable by his evidence, and his evidence consists of basic propositions which he is objectively justified in holding with the degree of confidence with which he does hold them, that is are really as probable as he believes them to be. This kind of rationality is a matter of conformity to objective standards, which the believer may not recognize and may, indeed, explicitly deny.

Various writers have sought to lay down when basic propositions are properly or rightly basic, that is when the way we are inclined to believe that things are makes it logically probable that they are that way. Such rightly basic propositions are where we are right to start from in our belief-forming process. Alvin Plantinga has described a view which he calls Classical Foundationalism,<sup>9</sup> an amalgam of ancient and medieval, and 'early modern' ('Descartes, Locke, Leibniz and the like') views about what are the proper starting points for belief formation. Classical Foundationalism holds that

\*A proposition *p* is properly basic for a person *S* if and only if *p* is either self-evident to *S* or incorrigible for *S* or evident to the senses for *S*.

Self-evident beliefs are those necessary propositions such as ' $2 + 2 = 4$ ' which we cannot understand without believing them to be true. Incorrigible propositions are ones about whose truth-value (whether they are

<sup>9</sup> See his 'Reason and Belief in God' in A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff (eds.), *Faith and Rationality* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 58–62. I shall assume in this book that Plantinga's 'properly basic' means the same as my preferred term 'rightly basic'. I pass over certain subtle differences which I analyse in *Epistemic Justification*, 145 n. 18. Plantinga assumes that the only starting points are beliefs, and not also inclinations to belief.

true or false) we cannot be in error, such as 'I now have a green image in my visual field'. Propositions evident to the senses are ones which report our ordinary-life perceptions such as 'here is a desk'. Classical Foundationalism claims that the only propositions rationally believed are properly basic ones or ones 'supported' (that is, made probable) by them. Plantinga claims, surely correctly, that Classical Foundationalism has too narrow an understanding of the 'properly basic'. Many of people's basic propositions which I listed in Chapter 1 are surely properly basic beliefs: for example, propositions which report apparent memories. Plantinga also claims that Classical Foundationalism is such that it is irrational by its own criteria to believe it, because proposition (\*) above does not satisfy its own criteria for proper basicity, and it does not look as if it is made probable by any propositions that do satisfy it. So we need a different doctrine of the properly basic.

I suggest that it is a primary inductive criterion which I call the Principle of Credulity and which applies to all propositions which purport to be deliverances of experience (that is, things we think we have perceived or experienced) that *every* basic proposition is rightly basic. By a proposition being rightly basic, I mean one which by correct criteria (in the absence of further reason for or against its truth) is probably true merely on the evidence that the subject, it is inclined to believe with a probability proportional to the degree of confidence with which he holds it. If it seems to you that you have seen a clock, that the clock reads 5.10, that you went to London yesterday, or that you have seen a ghost or a UFO, you ought so to believe in the absence of contrary reason. So, too, if someone seems to be telling you something—that the Earth is round, or that David is not at home—you ought to believe that they are telling you this. Contrary reason preventing your basic proposition from reaching the status of a belief may be provided by other propositions (as in the swallow example on p. 19)—e.g. that other people tell you that you were in Oxford all day yesterday; or that you have a theory well supported by the criteria of p. 46 that there are no such things as ghosts, or that some authority has told you that there are no such things as ghosts. But other such evidence does not affect the initial probability of the basic proposition. The Principle of Credulity is surely correct. If we deny that, barring any a priori qualifications, seeming to perceive something is good reason (in the absence of counter-evidence) for believing that we do perceive it, and that



seeming very evidently to perceive something is very strong reason for believing that we do perceive it, all our beliefs about the external world would be quite unjustified. The surely correct assumption that most of our very ordinary beliefs arising from experience about the existence of desks, chairs, and other people are probably true leads inevitably to the Principle of Credulity.<sup>10</sup>

Whether basic beliefs which purport to be deliverances of reason (things we 'see' to be true or false for a priori reasons) are rightly basic is unaffected by the Principle of Credulity. They have the degree of prior logical probability which mere a priori considerations ascribe to them. In particular necessary truths, such as ' $2 + 2 = 4$ ' or 'There is no greatest prime number' will have a prior probability of 1. And necessary falsehoods such as ' $2 + 2 = 5$ ' have a prior probability of 0. There will also be propositions which have intermediate degrees of probability for mere a priori reasons. For example, given that there are five and only five people who can have committed a murder on some isolated island, and nothing is known about their characters or abilities, the prior probability for each of them that he or she committed the murder is 0.2.

So a belief can fail to be justified in the internalist objectivist sense (fail to be rational<sub>2</sub>) by being based on basic beliefs to which wrong degrees of prior probability have been ascribed. A belief can also fail to be justified in this sense because the subject uses incorrect inductive criteria like those of the gambler and the Azande discussed earlier.

I claimed earlier that we do agree very largely in our views about the correct criteria of inductive inference. And we certainly almost all (in our non-philosophical moments) agree that there are correct inductive criteria. If we thought that people who used different criteria from ourselves were equally well justified, equally rational, we would have to say that it was just as rational to seek to go from a high floor to the ground by jumping out of the window as by walking down the stairs. For there could always be constructed theories which predicted all past observations with total accuracy and also predicted that from this

<sup>10</sup> There are, however, some minor a priori considerations by which it is appropriate to doctor the purported deliverances of experience. One obvious one is that the more detailed they are, the less likely they are to be true. So, if you are inclined to believe on the basis of experience that you have seen exactly five lions, you should not ascribe to this belief a higher probability than to the belief on the basis of the same experience that you have seen more than three lions. For full discussion of the principles involved in determining the probabilities of basic propositions, see *Epistemic Justification*, 144–51.

moment onwards gravity would be a far less powerful force (allowing us to glide gently to the ground), and so too would the electro-magnetic force (leading to the weakening of bonds between atoms, and so to the weakening of such structures as stairs).<sup>11</sup> But since we must judge such views not to be equally rational with our own (otherwise it would be just as sensible for us to act on them), we must judge our criteria to be the correct ones. These criteria I shall assume henceforward are the ones that I described earlier—the four criteria for when evidence makes a theory probable (set out on p. 46), together with the Principle of Testimony (which may be derivable from evidence via the four criteria, or may be self-standing).

A person must believe that his own beliefs are not merely subjectively but objectively justified (rational<sub>2</sub>). For he must believe his basic propositions to have the prior probabilities which he ascribes to them, that is believes them to have; and unless he held that his inductive criteria were correct, he could not believe that his beliefs were, in fact, rendered probable by his evidence. Nevertheless his beliefs may not, in fact, be objectively justified and we as outsiders may judge that they are not.

### SYNCHRONIC EXTERNALIST JUSTIFICATION

Both the theories of synchronic justification considered so far are internalist theories. The justification of a belief is a matter of it being rendered inductively probable by the subject's basic propositions, either by the subject's criteria of probability and right basicity or by correct a priori criteria. On a pure externalist theory of synchronic justification, in the normal reliabilist form of an externalist theory, all that matters is that the process of production of the belief belongs to a reliable type, that is one which usually produces true beliefs. If it seems to me that the clock reads 5.10, I am justified in believing this if and only if this way of acquiring a belief on this occasion—this token process, to use the philosophical term—belongs to a reliable type. The 'usually' can be spelled out in terms of statistical probability (see p. 16). The statistical probability of a token belief produced by a certain process being true just is the proportion of beliefs produced by that process which are true. If the statistical

<sup>11</sup> I develop this point in *Epistemic Justification*, 83–102.

probability is greater than 50%, the token belief is justified. The higher the statistical probability, the better justified is the belief.

A major difficulty for reliabilism—known as ‘the generality problem’—is that any token process of belief production belongs to innumerable different types, and the statistical probabilities of beliefs produced by processes of these types may be very different from each other. For any token process of belief production involves many different causal factors; it therefore belongs to very many different types, delineated in terms of different combinations of those causal factors. I have the belief that I was in Greece in 1982. The belief was produced by apparent memory. Apparent memory in all humans is, let us say, 70% reliable; and so the reliabilist should say that my belief that I was in Greece in 1982 is 70% justified. But I am not just any human, I have all sorts of particular features which affect whether my memories of different kinds are true. I am an aged professor and maybe the memories of aged professors are a lot less accurate than are those of most other people. And my memory concerns an event twenty-three years ago and maybe we should measure the justification of my belief by the proportion of true beliefs among beliefs about events twenty-three years ago held by aged professors, and maybe that brings my justification down to the 55% level. Maybe too I have taken LSD recently, and maybe the proportion of true beliefs produced by apparent memory in LSD-takers of a kind considered so far is low—say 30%. Once the statistical probability falls below 50%, the belief in question is no longer justified. We could take into account more and more causal factors, until we individuate the process of belief production so narrowly that the given belief is the only one actually produced by it. And then if we measure its justification by the proportion of true beliefs actually produced by that process, it will be 1 if the belief is true and 0 if the belief is false. Justification has collapsed into truth. An alternative is to measure justification by the proportion of true beliefs which would be produced by this process if we were to repeat the exact same circumstances again and again. But the proportions would still be 1 or 0 in deterministic universes, and close thereto in many other universes. Clearly, we have to refer the token process to a type of process described less narrowly—but there seems no principled way of choosing one such type rather than another and so for supposing that any one kind of reliabilist justification is more worth having than any other.

I regard this problem as insuperable within a pure reliabilist theory. It is true that any given believer will have only a limited amount of information of the above kind, and we could assess reliability by this limited amount of information available to the believer. But if we are to assess the justification of his belief by the believer's evidence about the relative reliability of types of belief production, that yields only an internalist justification (subjective or objective) for the belief; and if the justification is going to depend on the believer's evidence, there are no grounds for confining the evidence by which the probability of a given belief is assessed to evidence about the reliability of the process which produced it. Someone may tell me that they saw me in Greece in 1982; that too is relevant evidence. And the evidence about the reliability of belief-forming processes will come, like other evidence, ultimately in the form of basic propositions. But unless reliabilism is allowed in this way to collapse into internalism, there seems no principled way of resolving the generality problem.

I shall call any externalist theory of synchronic justification a rationality<sub>6</sub> theory, and a belief justified by whatever are the criteria of the best such theory (if there is one) as a rational<sub>6</sub> belief.<sup>12</sup> Not every pure externalist theory is a straight reliabilist theory; and one theory which is not a straight reliabilist theory is Alvin Plantinga's theory of 'warrant', which deserves our special attention in view of the wide influence exercised by his application of this theory to the rationality of religious belief.<sup>13</sup> (This later externalist theory contrasts with (what seems to me) the basically internalist theory of 'rationality' implicit in his earlier article in the book co-edited by Plantinga *Faith and Rationality*.) Plantinga's later theory contains a reliabilist element, but is centred on quite a different notion. Plantinga's theory is a theory of 'warrant', warrant

<sup>12</sup> I apologize to readers for introducing 'rationality<sub>6</sub>' before discussing 'rationality<sub>3</sub>', 'rationality<sub>4</sub>', and 'rationality<sub>5</sub>'. The reason for this is that, needing to take account of externalist theories of justification or rationality, I have had to introduce two new kinds of rationality beyond those discussed in the first edition of this book. To avoid confusion, I have preserved the same senses of 'rationality' for 'rationality<sub>1</sub>', up to 'rationality<sub>5</sub>' as in the first edition and so am calling the two new kinds 'rationality<sub>6</sub>' and 'rationality<sub>7</sub>'. But I needed to discuss 'rationality<sub>6</sub>' at this stage.

<sup>13</sup> For Plantinga's rejection of all rival theories of warrant, see his *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford University Press, 1993). For his exposition and defence of his own theory of warrant, see his *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford University Press, 1993). For the application of the theory to the warrant of religious belief, see his *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

being defined as that characteristic enough of which turns a true belief into knowledge. Although people used to think that knowledge was just (strongly) justified (strong) true belief, most writers now think that for someone to know so-and-so, something more (or something a bit different) is required than mere (strongly) justified (strong) true belief. However, clearly warrant and justification are very similar concepts, and Plantinga considers that when people are worried about whether Christian belief is rational, their worry concerns whether it has enough warrant in his sense. So it is appropriate to consider it as an externalist theory of justification.

Plantinga claims that a belief has warrant (prima facie warrant in the absence of 'defeaters'—see later) if and only if: (1) it is produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly; (2) in a cognitive environment sufficiently similar to that for which the faculties were designed; (3) according to a design plan aimed at the production of true beliefs; when (4) there is a high statistical probability of such beliefs being true.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, my belief that there is a table in front of me has warrant if, first, in producing it my cognitive faculties were functioning properly, the way they were meant to function (that is in accord with their 'design plan'). Plantinga holds that just as our heart or liver may function properly or not, so may our cognitive faculties. And he also holds that, if God made us, our faculties function properly if they function in the way God designed them to function; whereas if evolution (uncaused by God) made us (the main alternative to God creating us, which Plantinga considers), then our faculties function properly if they function in the way that (in some sense) evolution designed them to function.

God or evolution designed us to function only in a particular environment (e.g. in a particular ecological niche, or in a society where people often tell the truth). Plausibly, whether God or evolution made us, they meant most of our cognitive faculties to work in such a way that they yield true beliefs, e.g. so that when we look at a desk, we acquire the belief that there is a desk in front of us—in a typical Earth environment. However, some of our cognitive faculties may be designed to produce beliefs having characteristics other than, or additional to, truth—e.g. comforting or inspiring beliefs; and warrant only arises when the

<sup>14</sup> *Warrant and Proper Function*, 194.

cognitive faculty operating is the one designed to produce true beliefs. But some designers may be bad designers, and so the faculty has to produce true beliefs most of the time, for a particular belief which it produces to have warrant. Given that my belief that there is a desk in front of me was produced by a perceptual faculty designed to produce true beliefs on Earth, and that that sort of perceptual process normally produces true beliefs on Earth, then—on Plantinga's later theory—my particular belief has warrant. A belief can have different degrees of warrant—it has the right degree if it is as strong as its design plan indicates that it should be. Thus, if the process which produces it was designed only to produce true beliefs 60% of the time, then it will only have a moderate degree of warrant. But if it has enough warrant and is true, then it amounts to knowledge—I know that there is a desk in front of me.

The fourth requirement is, of course, a reliabilist requirement, but it is not immediately open to the normal reliabilist problem of how the type is to be specified. For the type is that of 'the design plan aimed at the production of true beliefs', that is the type by which the creator intended our true beliefs to be produced. So long as the creator has intentions, then the type is uniquely specified. God is an agent who has intentions, and so there is clear meaning to clause (1) given the way Plantinga understands 'proper functioning'; and so to clauses (2) and (3), given that God does design some faculties aimed at the production of true beliefs. The type of cognitive faculty is uniquely specified by God's plan about how we should acquire true beliefs of various kinds. But if God (or any other intentional agent) did not create us (and Plantinga is seeking an account of warrant which does not presuppose this), then there is a big problem about how (1) is to be understood. For evolution (or any other inanimate cause) is not an agent who has intentions (despite the incautious talk by some biologists about our organs having 'design plans'). The only sense which I can give to evolution 'intending' anything is that it causes it. Cognitive faculties function properly if they function the way evolution causes them to function; their design plan is 'aimed' at the production of true beliefs only in so far as it does produce true beliefs in that environment; and an environment is 'sufficiently similar' to that for which the faculties were 'designed' only in so far as they produce true beliefs just as well in that new environment. And so the whole edifice collapses on to (4), which is

simple reliabilism. If 'evolution' made us, then if the cognitive faculties which it produced produce largely true beliefs, then those beliefs are warranted. But since the type by which the reliability of a token process is to be assessed cannot now be determined by the intentions of a creator, we are back with the 'generality problem' of how it is to be determined. And if it is to be determined by the evidence we have about which types are reliable, the theory of proper functioning becomes an internalist theory and there is no longer any principled reason for not taking into account kinds of evidence other than evidence about the reliability of types of belief-production, and seeing how probable all our evidence makes our beliefs by internalist criteria. Even if on Plantinga's theory there is a clear sense to a believer having warranted beliefs if there is a God, God's intentions for how we should acquire our beliefs are not things to which many of us have ready access, and we shall see later that that leads to an enormous further problem for Plantinga's theory.

Interestingly Plantinga's theory and also most reliabilist theories are not pure externalist theories. They are externalist theories only of *prima facie* justification. For many of them are the form 'A belief B is justified if and only if it is produced by a reliable process [or satisfies some other externalist criterion] so long as the believer does not have a defeater', and 'having' a defeater tends to mean having accessible evidence which renders the belief logically improbable! It is very difficult to be a pure externalist.

All the theories of synchronic justification which I have discussed are theories of epistemic justification in that a belief being justified is a matter of it arising in a way which makes it (in some sense) probably true; and since true belief is a good thing to have it is a good thing to have a belief synchronically justified in most of the ways which I have discussed. It is good to have an objectively justified belief (= rational<sub>2</sub> belief) because such a belief will be probably true, by correct criteria. Whether it is good to have a subjectively justified belief (= rational<sub>1</sub> belief) depends on how close the subject's inductive criteria are to correct criteria. If they are wildly in error, it will often not be good to have a subjectively justified belief because the subject will be judging beliefs to be probably true which are not (by correct criteria of probability) probably true. It will also be good as such to have beliefs which are justified in any reliabilist sense (including whichever one is the best, and yields a rational<sub>6</sub> belief) because the very fact that a belief is

produced by a process of a type which usually produces true beliefs makes it probably true—that is, on the evidence that it is produced by such a process (which may not be accessible to us) it has a logical probability of more than  $\frac{1}{2}$  (see p. 16). But any such belief is likely also to be produced by a process of a type which usually produces false beliefs; and, so—as we have seen—we need some principled way of selecting the type to which a token process of belief production should be referred, before we can have a satisfactory theory of this kind.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWLEDGE

I referred earlier to the view that what we need to acquire, use, and propagate is not so much ‘true beliefs’ as ‘knowledge’. Having investigated the notion of synchronically justified belief, we are now in a position—before proceeding further with the main argument—to consider this view. What is knowledge? Knowledge certainly involves true belief, and I suggest also that for a belief to amount to knowledge it must be a strong belief. You only know that Caesar invaded Britain in 55 BC if you believe this strongly and if what you believe is true. But something else as well as strong true belief is necessary for knowledge, and there are different philosophical theories of what this ‘something’ is, a ‘something’ which I shall follow Plantinga in calling ‘warrant’.<sup>15</sup> These theories of warrant vary from being largely internalist to being fully externalist. A largely internalist theory holds that knowledge is (synchronically) strongly justified (strong) true belief, justified, that is, by objective criteria in my sense of rational<sub>2</sub>, where the justification does not rely on any false belief. Suppose you believe that Caesar invaded Britain in 55 BC, because you read in one encyclopaedia that Caesar invaded Britain for the second time in 45 BC, and you read in another encyclopaedia that Caesar’s second invasion occurred ten years after his first invasion, and you infer that he invaded Britain in 55 BC. Your belief is true, but you have reached it by means of false beliefs—Caesar did not invade Britain in 45 BC, and his second invasion occurred only one year

<sup>15</sup> More precisely (see pp. 59–60), Plantinga defined ‘warrant’ as that characteristic enough of which turns true belief into knowledge. I ignore here the ‘enough of’ qualification.



after his first invasion—in 54 BC. Yet (by the Principle of Testimony) you were (strongly) justified in believing what you read in the two encyclopaedias, and so what you deduced from that—that he invaded in 55 BC. You have a strongly justified true belief (that he invaded in 55 BC). Yet, plausibly, this does not amount to knowledge because you have come to hold it because of the lucky accident that two justifiably acquired false beliefs entail a true consequence. This theory is largely internalist, because it involves justification in an internalist sense. (The theory is only ‘largely’ internalist because its being true that Caesar invaded Britain in 55 BC is something to which the believer has no privileged access by introspection.) Externalist theories of warrant are of the same pattern as externalist theories of justification. On such a theory warrant is a matter of the belief being produced by the right sort of process, e.g. one which reliably produces true beliefs or one which satisfies somewhat more complicated criteria—such as Plantinga’s theory discussed on pp. 59–62. Whether the belief that Caesar invaded Britain in 55 BC is warranted and so amounts to knowledge depends on the particular externalist theory of warrant involved. But because the difficulties of any externalist theory of warrant parallel those of any externalist theory of rationality (or justification), both those difficulties already explored and those to be explored later in this chapter, I shall assume that a satisfactory theory of knowledge must be internalist.

Now clearly, for reasons given earlier, strong true belief is better than weak true belief, because although I would achieve some goal by relying on the latter belief, I cannot be sure of that and it would often be better not to rely on it; and so I shall not achieve the goal. If my true belief that the last train to London leaves at midnight is weak, I may rightly not take the trouble to go to the station at midnight because I would prefer to sleep unless I can get to London. Yet I would prefer to go to London, and so fail to do so. But if my belief about the last train had been strong, I would have relied on it and so got to London. And when a true belief is good to have for intrinsic reasons, it is also surely good that it be strong. For the intrinsic goodness of having true beliefs consists in the intrinsic goodness of seeing how things are; and if the believer’s belief is strong, his view of the world is clearer, unclouded by doubt.

I suggest that it is also good thing that a strong true belief should be synchronically justified in an internalist objectivist sense, that is be rational<sub>2</sub>. To see that having such justification is valuable for its own

sake, compare the person who believes, let us suppose truly, that earthly life originated in outer space because he dreamed it one night and has a primary inductive criterion that dreams are probably true, with the great scientist who has the same true belief because he assesses much evidence in the right way, and sees that the evidence supports that belief. We value the scientist for having a belief that is not merely true but results from consciously responding to all the evidence of which he is currently aware in the right way. We value our scientist because he shows a grasp of those correct inductive criteria that I described on pp. 45–6 and is consciously guided by them in his belief-formation; he does not believe things just because he dreams that they are true. And for a strong belief to be justified requires strong justification. Does it matter if the strongly justified strong true belief is produced via one or more false beliefs? Certainly, this is a bad thing because it is a bad thing to have any false belief, but I suggest that it does not diminish significantly the worth of the original strongly justified strong true belief. For if the believer believes that the intermediate belief or beliefs are false, he will not believe them, and so not base other beliefs on them; and if his resultant belief is strongly justified, the believer will not be relying on any intermediate beliefs which on his evidence have any significant probability of being false. He will be responding to the evidence just as rationally as if all his intermediate beliefs were true. So I shall ignore this minor point, and recognizing (though not always repeating) that a true belief is the better for being strong, and that the best we can do towards getting a true belief is to get a strong rational<sub>2</sub> belief, it follows that the one and only way to acquire and propagate knowledge is to acquire and propagate strong rational<sub>2</sub> beliefs, for they are the beliefs which with high probability amount to knowledge. Knowledge may be different from, and more valuable than, mere strong rational<sub>2</sub> true belief, but the way to get the former is the way to get the latter. So I shall normally revert to talking about how to get the latter, although sometimes I shall talk about how to get knowledge—treating the latter as equivalent to the former.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> For fuller discussion of the nature and importance of knowledge, in contrast to mere true belief, see *Epistemic Justification*, ch. 8.

## DIACHRONIC JUSTIFICATION

The rationality or justification of synchronically justified beliefs is a matter of the believer's response to his basic beliefs or a matter of the belief being produced in a proper way at the time in question. At any given moment, however, a person cannot help having the beliefs he does, and—given that he applies his own criteria properly—he will be at least subjectively justified in having these beliefs. But people can take steps which may lead to a change of belief.

One way in which they can do this, as we saw in Chapter 1, is to seek deliberately to inculcate into themselves beliefs chosen in advance; we can try to get ourselves to believe certain things. This is always a bad thing to do, given that our only goal is to have true beliefs, except under the unusual circumstances where coming to acquire the belief makes it true. In so far as it is probable that if I make myself believe that I shall succeed in jumping over the crevasse then I shall succeed, it is no bad thing to try to make myself have the belief—even from the point of view of seeking to have true beliefs; and clearly it may be a good thing to do also for other reasons. But I pass over this unusual kind of case as having no further relevance for the main concerns of this book, and shall concern myself solely in future with the normal case where whether or not I believe some proposition has no effect on whether it is true or false. Then it will always be bad, in so far as we seek to have true beliefs, to try to inculcate into ourselves beliefs chosen in advance. For if the evidence on our criteria indicates that some belief is false, to get ourselves to forget certain evidence or to inculcate into ourselves new inductive criteria would be trying to inculcate a belief which on our evidence and the criteria which now seem to us correct is probably false.

Alternatively, we can take steps to get a belief which is better justified synchronically, that is more probably true, than our original belief—which may be the original belief with a higher degree of justification or its negation (the belief that the original belief was not true). Taking such steps must consist in investigating the truth of the belief, and doing this will involve both seeking more evidence (more relevant basic propositions) and reassessing the force of the evidence we already have. A belief which is both synchronically justified and adequately investigated in this way, I shall call a diachronically justified belief.

Seeking more evidence will consist of looking for evidence which it is probable will occur if the theory is true, and not otherwise; and evidence which it is probable will occur if the theory is false and not otherwise. Investigating the force of the evidence we already have will involve both checking the calculations we have used, given our inductive criteria; and investigating whether our inductive criteria are the correct ones.

The starting-point of the latter investigation is a large set of particular judgements which seem to the investigator to be indisputably correct; that  $e_1$  makes  $h_1$  probable, but does not make  $h_2$  probable; that  $e_2$  makes  $h_2$  probable, and more probable than  $h_1$ ; and so on and so forth. As with all investigation, we start from what seems obvious to us, although allowing for the possibility of later correction. We then seek the simplest extrapolation from those judgements to a general account of the inductive criteria involved in them, an extrapolation which could allow that we have made a few mistakes in our initial particular judgements. Having reached an account of the criteria of induction, we then see whether any necessary corrections to our initial particular judgements are ones which seem plausible. In so far as the general account which we reach fails to license judgements which seem, intuitively, to be obviously correct, we must look for another and perhaps more complicated account of the correct criteria of induction. But it may be that having formulated general criteria, these seem so obviously correct to us that we change some particular judgements in the light of them. This method is again the method of 'reflective equilibrium' (see pp. 38–9) which Rawls commended for use in reaching the correct principles of morality on the basis of our initial intuitive judgements of when particular actions are right or wrong. Reflection of this kind may, for example, lead the gambler to believe that the generalization principle has universal applicability; and that, in turn, may lead him to conclude that as some peculiar criterion of his has seldom yielded true predictions in the past, it is unlikely that it will in the future—despite it seeming to him initially that certain judgements which involved his peculiar criterion were very plausible. So he will abandon his peculiar criterion. But if the correctness of the latter judgements still seems to him more obvious than the universal applicability of the generalization principle, he will not be moved.

Since it is good to have beliefs with as high a degree of probability as we can get them, it is good for a believer to investigate a belief of his

further in so far as (1) it is probably important to have a true belief on the issue; (2) it is probable that more investigation will yield a more probably true belief; and (3) the probable 'cost' of investigation is not too high, given the other claims on our time, and money, and energy.

I have already considered why true belief matters, and which kinds of true beliefs it is very important to have. But I may have false beliefs about which beliefs matter. So I must do my best to think this through and so to try to get probably true beliefs about which beliefs matter. To the extent to which it is important to have a true belief on some issue, we need to investigate our present belief in order to try to acquire a more probably true belief.

The second factor determining whether and how much we need to investigate is how probable it is that more investigation will yield a more probably true belief. A major determinant of how probable it is that more investigation will yield a more probably true belief is how probable is the subject's initial belief on the issue. In so far as investigation consists in looking for more evidence, then investigation becomes far less worth while in so far as the initial probability of the belief is close to 1, since it is then very probable that that further evidence will be as the theory predicts. (If the theory is almost certainly true, it is almost certain that what it predicts will be true). But if a belief is only marginally more probable than not at an initial stage, then new evidence may well show it to be more probably false than true, or alternatively significantly increase its probability.<sup>17</sup> There is only some point in investigating my belief that my house is not about to fall down if there is some significant non-zero probability that it is about to fall down. If it is virtually certain that it is not about to fall down (none of the available evidence counts in favour of this supposition, and all counts against it), there is no point in investigating the matter; and the same holds if it is certain that it is about to fall down. I do not have to telephone the police to inquire if my daughter has been involved in a road accident if I have no reason to suspect that she has; and so on.

<sup>17</sup> There is a theorem of the probability calculus that it is always (as such, that is in the absence of other evidence about the effect of acquiring more evidence) more probable than not that acquiring more evidence will lead to a more probably true belief (either by making the original belief more probable, or by making its negation more probable than the initial probability of the original belief). See my *Epistemic Justification*, 171–2.

Apart from this general point, there may also be empirical evidence relevant to how probable it is that investigation of a belief of some particular kind will produce more relevant evidence. Suppose that my only source of information about the overseas world is one local library; and that I wish to investigate my belief that Taoism has no belief in life after death. I have previously spent much time in that library trying to find books which would give me information about Buddhism and Hinduism—without any success. This latter is evidence that makes it improbable that I shall find in that library any book which gives me information about Taoism, a less well-known eastern religion. So it is improbable that any investigation will yield evidence relevant to my belief; and, hence, unless it is of overwhelming importance that I should have a true belief on this matter or I have considerable time to spare, I remain diachronically justified in my belief even though I have not investigated it.

The third factor determining whether and how much we need to investigate is the probable cost (in time, money, and energy) of investigation, given the other claims on our time, money, and energy.<sup>18</sup> My empirical evidence is that it takes a long time to check the claims of a tax inspector that I owe him money. Hence, it is not worth investigating whether my belief that his claim that I owe him £10 is false; I can afford to lose that amount of money. But it is worth investigating whether my belief that his claim that I owe him £10,000 is false, because I cannot readily afford to lose that amount of money. Only if there were no other claims at all on my time, money, and energy would it (normally) be worth while checking whether my belief that the distance from Edinburgh to London is 400 miles—for having a true belief on this issue has very little intrinsic value and (normally) is not relevant to my purposes. I have other, more worthwhile, things to do. But if I believe that my daughter has had an accident while on an overseas safari, I certainly ought to spend quite a lot of time checking up on what is happening—phoning travel agents, hotels, embassies, friends—because if it is true, I ought to spend much further time, money, and energy doing something about it. Sometimes, however, my belief itself makes it more

<sup>18</sup> By the 'probable cost' of an investigation, I mean its 'expected cost', that is the sum of the possible costs each weighted by the probability that that will be the actual cost, when costs are measured in terms of the values of different expenditures of time, energy, and money.

important to act on it than to check on it. Important though it is to check whether my house is about to fall down, it is even more important to get my family out of it if my present belief is that a collapse is imminent; to check would take too much time. Here the probable cost of any investigation would be too high.

So I have been arguing it is good to investigate a belief further in so far as (1) it is probably important to have a true belief on the issue; (2) it is probable that more investigation will yield a more probably true belief; and (3) the probable 'cost' of investigation is not too high, given the other claims on our time, energy, and money. A belief which is not merely synchronically justified but has been investigated adequately in the light of these considerations, I call a diachronically justified belief.

However, the 'probabilities' involved in these three factors may be interpreted either as subjective probabilities on actual basic beliefs, as logical probabilities on rightly basic beliefs, or as statistical probabilities; and in many intermediate and slightly different ways. And the synchronic justification which investigation seeks to improve may also be interpreted in any of the ways discussed earlier in the chapter. Among the many kinds of resulting diachronic justification, I distinguish three internalist kinds. First, there is the subject's belief being based on what he regarded as adequate investigation (by his own criteria, and so—in his view—by correct criteria.) A belief so based I shall term a rational<sub>3</sub> belief. Then there is the subject's belief, in fact, being probable given his inductive criteria, and based on adequate investigation by his own criteria of adequacy. A belief thus based, I shall term a diachronically subjectively justified belief or rational<sub>4</sub> belief. A belief is rational<sub>4</sub> if it is rational<sub>1</sub> and the subject has devoted the appropriate amount of time and money to investigating it, given the probability (on his criteria and basic beliefs) that investigation would significantly affect its probability, and the probable importance (on his criteria) of investigating, given the probable time, money, and energy involved and the other claims on the latter. And then there is the subject having a rational<sub>2</sub> belief which is based on adequate investigation by correct criteria of adequacy (e.g. correct views of the probable importance of true belief on the issue, the probability that investigation would significantly affect its probability, and the probable cost of investigation); the probability involved in what

makes investigation adequate is logical probability on rightly basic beliefs. Such a belief is objectively diachronically justified; I shall term such a belief rational<sub>5</sub>. And, finally, there could in theory be at least as many varieties of externalist diachronic justification, as there are of externalist synchronic justification; and I shall come to these shortly.

These three kinds of internalist diachronic justification yield three different ways in which a subject can fail to have a rational belief, as a result of a failure to investigate the belief adequately. There can be a failure by the subject's own criteria of which he was aware; a failure by the subject's own criteria of which he was not aware; or a failure by correct criteria. The subdivision of failure by the subject's own criteria into failure of which he was aware and failure of which he was unaware arises when we are concerned with failure to pursue an investigation, because pursuing investigation is something which someone can choose to do or choose not to do. Whereas the only failure by the subject's own criteria with which I was concerned when considering synchronic justification was failure to respond to evidence in the right way at a time; and here there is no category of failure of which the subject is aware, since, as I argued in Chapter 1, a person cannot but respond in the way in which the evidence seems to him to point; necessarily a person believes what he believes to be probable on the evidence. Hence, the only failure of the type with which I was concerned previously was failure of which the subject was unaware. Here we have both types.

If someone believes that it is not merely good to investigate but that he has a moral obligation to investigate and fails to investigate, he is morally culpable. If, though believing that he had no moral obligation to investigate, he believes that the best action for him to do is to investigate and he fails to do so, he has reacted in a way less than morally perfect, and so he is in my suggested terminology (p. 38) quasi-culpable.

Here are some examples of different ways in which someone can fail to have a diachronically justified belief of these types. I begin with examples of beliefs which are irrational<sub>3</sub> as a result of culpably (or quasi-culpably) inadequate investigation. First, there may be a culpable failure of which the subject is aware to collect enough true, representative, relevant evidence of good quality. Thus, a detective may have a good case against a suspect, whom, on the evidence available at the time



of the trial, he justifiably believes to be guilty of murder; but the detective believes that murder is a serious matter and that it is his duty as a detective to devote much time to following up leads, checking alibis thoroughly, etc. So, although it is rational for the detective to hold the belief at the time of the trial that the subject is guilty, his belief is in this way ill-justified because he did not try to get enough relevant evidence. A second source of culpability for failure to investigate arises when the subject has formed his belief by using inductive criteria which he recognizes that he ought to have checked. Thus, the gambler referred to earlier who commits the Monte Carlo fallacy may be aware of criticisms from friends who claim that his procedures are inconsistent with his and their normal use of a generalization principle—that what has happened for the most part will continue to happen. But the gambler may just not bother to think this criticism through. And, finally, someone may be culpable for not checking whether he has applied his inductive criteria correctly. A scientist building a bridge or erecting a crane may realize that he ought to check and get someone else to check his calculations which have the consequence that the bridge or crane will not collapse. Failure to do so makes his belief, although perhaps rational<sub>2</sub>, nevertheless irrational<sub>3</sub>.

Even if someone believes that he has investigated the truth of his beliefs adequately by his own criteria, he may not have done so. The detective may believe strongly in the importance of the police holding a true view about the guilt of a suspect, but fail to recognize the consequence of this general belief for his own current investigation. He believes that he has lived up to his strong belief, but he has not. In that case, his belief that the suspect is guilty is irrational<sub>4</sub>. A belief may also fail to be rational<sub>3</sub> or rational<sub>4</sub> not merely because (in the subject's view or by his own criteria) it has been inadequately investigated but because it is not rational<sub>1</sub> at all—it is not probable on the subject's basic propositions by the subject's own criteria.

But the detective may not have a rational<sub>2</sub> belief about whether the suspect is guilty or he may not have a rational<sub>2</sub> belief about whether he has investigated the former belief adequately. Under either of these circumstances his belief that the suspect is guilty is irrational<sub>5</sub>. Thus, he may have a false view about how important it is to investigate a belief that someone committed a murder. He may think that so long as he has devoted an hour or two to investigation, that is enough. But, I suggest,

whether he believes it or not, there is a necessary moral truth that it is very important that anyone whose testimony can determine whether or not someone spends their life in prison should be in a position to give true testimony. Necessary truths have a probability of 1 on any evidence, and so—objectively—it is certainly important to have a true belief on the matter. Or the detective may believe that suspects are always guilty and so believe that there is no point in investigating for long since investigating never makes any difference. Yet the detective may simply not have assessed his evidence about whether suspects are always guilty correctly.

Now, in theory, there could be at least as many kinds of externalist diachronic justification as there are of externalist synchronic justification. (I write 'could be' because writers on epistemology do not normally distinguish sharply between synchronic and diachronic justification.) But a very simple reliabilist account of diachronic justification will need to look something like this. A belief is diachronically justified if (and only if) it is synchronically justified (on reliabilist criteria) and has been adequately investigated. It has been adequately investigated if it has been investigated for as long as have most beliefs of its type of similar importance which cost as much to investigate, where investigation has made a significant difference to what evidence shows about the probability of the belief. For the reliabilist, the probability of a certain belief being true is statistical probability, a matter of the proportion of beliefs of that kind which are true; and so cannot be affected by investigation. All that investigation can do is to get evidence about what the probability of the belief is; and that evidence certainly could at an early stage point to a belief having one probability, and at a later stage having a different probability. But it could only point to these things if there are correct inductive criteria for what evidence shows, that is for how much such-and-such evidence makes it logically probable that some reliabilist claim is true. We could, at first, have evidence obtained from a small sample about the proportion of beliefs produced by a certain process which are true; and then later have evidence from a large sample about this proportion. But in order for the evidence to show anything—e.g. about the proportion of such beliefs in the total population, and so about the probable truth of the next belief thus produced—we need inductive criteria for assessing what the evidence shows. And so it follows that without using inductive criteria we cannot

determine which investigative processes make any difference to what evidence shows about the probability of a belief being true. To be of any use reliabilism must depend on internalist criteria. A pure reliabilist theory of diachronic justification, one which made no use of non-reliabilist criteria of probability, would have no content because the very notion of evidence supporting a proposition requires the notion of logical probability. And even if it did have content a pure reliabilist theory would be of no use because we could determine neither what the probability of a proposition on evidence is at any stage nor whether its truth had been adequately investigated. As with synchronic justification, so with diachronic justification, reliabilism needs the help of internalist criteria of logical probability if it is to be of the slightest use to anyone.

This—to my mind insuperable—problem is a problem for any pure externalist theory of rationality or warrant, not just a reliabilist theory. Take Plantinga's theory of warrant, which as we saw (p. 61), unlike a pure reliabilist theory, has clear content if we suppose that there is a God. Yet if we already believe that there is a God, there is still no way in which we can improve the quality of our belief (i.e. reach a belief with greater probability of truth) without invoking internalist criteria for assessing whatever relevant evidence we get. And if we do not already believe that there is a God, we must judge that Plantinga's theory collapses into pure reliabilism; and there is still no way in which we can set about trying to get a true belief (about whether or not there is a God, or anything else) except by applying internalist criteria to evidence. And even if we could apply internalist criteria to evidence, in order to discover whether our belief was 'warranted', we would have first to discover how God intended our cognitive faculties to function—a hard question (!) but one to my mind satisfactorily answered in the course of Plantinga's 500-page *Warranted Christian Belief*, where he works up to the conclusion that 'if Christian belief is true, it very likely does have warrant'.<sup>19</sup> Given Plantinga's understanding of 'warrant', his conclusion is surely true—given that the 'likely' is the 'likely' of logical probability, and indeed internally justified by the arguments of that book. But this conditional is of little use to anyone without some information about the truth of the antecedent (whether Christian belief is true); and on that, Plantinga explicitly acknowledges in his final

<sup>19</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 498.

paragraph, he cannot help us. For he writes there that on the really important question of ‘is Christian belief true’, ‘we pass beyond the competence of philosophy’.<sup>20</sup> An internalist, of course, need not bother with the question of whether a belief that there is a God is ‘warranted’ on Plantinga’s theory of warrant. He can content himself with having a belief, probably true and adequately investigated—in objective (internalist) senses.

Any pure externalist theory of warrant or justification makes the rationality of our beliefs something to which we have no access, and so something which we cannot take into account in seeking to improve our lives. But since we obviously can do something about getting better justified beliefs, and only a theory with an internalist component can do any justice at all to our intuitive understanding of epistemic justification in this respect (and other respects discussed earlier), we should prefer such a theory. As I commented earlier, most externalist theories contain an internalist element; they allow ‘defeaters’ to beliefs which have prima facie justification in virtue of externalist criteria. But ‘having a defeater’ tends to mean having accessible evidence which renders the belief logically improbable. Once that is allowed, there seems no principled reason for denying that any evidence can render beliefs logically probable or improbable, and so every reason for dispensing with the externalist component which assesses their justification solely in terms of the occurrence of processes, that can only be used as evidence given internalist criteria. Externalism in epistemology has no future, and so I shall confine myself in future to internalist accounts of rationality.<sup>21</sup>

As we have seen, true belief often matters a lot; and since the best we can do towards getting it is to get a rational<sub>5</sub> belief, it often matters a lot that we try to get one. But we have to start from where we are—our views about which beliefs are important, and how much we can learn by investigation. We have to start by living up to our own standards, that is by ensuring that our beliefs are rational<sub>3</sub>; that we can do. But the very

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 499.

<sup>21</sup> For full discussion of most of the distinctions of this chapter between different theories of synchronic and diachronic justification, see my *Epistemic Justification, passim*. In that work, however, I did not make a sharp distinction between rationality<sub>3</sub> and rationality<sub>4</sub> because I made the simplifying assumption that people realize the consequences of their own criteria for when a belief has been adequately investigated. In this book it is important for me to highlight this distinction.

process of checking our own standards may lead us to improve them and to see a need to get more evidence. We may come across new evidence by chance, or others may give it to us or may point out to us what is shown by our present evidence when properly assessed. And the whole process may lead to a rational<sub>5</sub> belief, and so to one which is very probably true.

## NON-RATIONAL REASONS FOR BELIEF

I have been assuming so far in this chapter that the only reason for holding a belief is that it is probably true, and I have considered how we can get probably true beliefs. It has, however, often been suggested that there are reasons for holding beliefs other than their probable truth, what I shall call non-rational reasons.<sup>22</sup> I shall list here the different kinds of non-rational reason which have been suggested, and then consider in Chapter 3 whether it is ever good that anyone should seek to hold a religious belief for any such reason, any reason that is apart from its probable truth.

First, there is the suggestion that certain beliefs are such that it is good in itself and indeed perhaps a duty for people to hold these beliefs. They are basically beliefs which involve thinking well of other people. If people, especially people close to you, behave in ways that look foolish or morally discreditable, you ought, it is often said, to give them the benefit of the doubt, to think them sensible and to believe that their motives are good. If one's parent or child or spouse is accused of shoplifting, one ought, it is said, to believe them innocent unless the evidence against them is overwhelming. The duty is not merely to treat them as innocent but to believe it of them. 'You ought not to believe him capable of that', we may be told. One shows respect for persons by thinking well of them, and we have a duty to respect persons, especially those close to us, such as parents and children. It follows from a duty to think well of others that we have a duty to believe people when they tell us what they have done or experienced, even if we are initially inclined not to do so. For otherwise we would be judging them liars, or at any rate fools who do not realize how much in error their memory is, or how liable they are to deception. Someone who takes a sceptical attitude

<sup>22</sup> I apologize for the awkwardness of this expression.

towards the claims of others shows a lack of trust; and respect for persons involves trust. So if someone assures us that they did not steal the money or break the confidence, then even if we are inclined to believe that they did, we could have a duty to rein in our uncharitable thoughts and to believe them.

Then it is suggested that sometimes the holding of certain beliefs is necessary or at any rate very useful for attaining certain further good ends, which would not otherwise be attainable. The ends may be either good states of mind of the subject, or his avoiding doing certain bad actions, or his doing certain good actions. An example of the first is the mother who has to believe that her son is alive unless she is to go to pieces psychologically. An example of the second is the husband who has to believe that his wife is faithful if he is to avoid maltreating her. An example of the third is the lawyer who has to believe that his client is innocent if he is to make a good speech in his defence.

One interesting case of a belief which is needed both for the subject's mental well-being and to enable him to perform good actions is the philosopher's belief in the truth of such claims of common sense, as that there is an external world, that there are other people, that our normal criteria of induction probably work, etc. In a well-known passage Hume described the sad condition of the philosophical sceptic who found himself temporarily losing such beliefs. He wrote:

*The intense view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? . . . I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environ'd with the deepest darkness and utterly depriv'd of the use of every member and faculty.*<sup>23</sup>

Now, although Hume believed that he was not rational<sub>2</sub> in holding common-sense beliefs, he also believed (truly) that the lack of them was causing great mental distress, and also inaction. Having no beliefs about what would lead to what, he would have no reason for doing this rather than that to achieve some end, or indeed for doing anything rather than nothing—and hence paralysis. Now it is a good thing that people

<sup>23</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, I. 4.7.

should attempt to change the world, rather than just wait upon events. Beliefs about which bodily movements will produce which effects on the world will encourage someone at least to try to change the world. So there are grounds for Hume to induce in himself common-sense beliefs, even though he does not at the beginning believe that they would be true beliefs. Hume reports that he soon recovered on these occasions by dining, playing backgammon, conversing and being merry with his friends. It is not clear whether he did these things *in order* to recover, but my argument suggests that, if he did, he would have been acting to secure a good goal (his recovery) in the light of a belief (no doubt a rational<sub>2</sub> belief) that it was at least as probable that he would attain his goal by his chosen method as by most other methods, and more probable that he would attain the goal by his method than by doing nothing.

Now, if someone accepts that there are non-rational reasons for his believing some proposition  $p$ , he has got to set himself to believe  $p$ . We saw in Chapter 1 that you cannot just decide to believe that  $p$ . You have got to get yourself to believe that your evidence makes  $p$  probable, and that takes time. You may do that by getting yourself to acquire inductive criteria which at the beginning you believe to be incorrect, or by getting yourself to forget about some of the unfavourable evidence, or by getting yourself to acquire new favourable evidence through looking only where favourable evidence is to be found and then forgetting the selective character of your investigation. If you attempt to change your inductive criteria to ones which you now believe to be incorrect, or to ignore in your calculations relevant evidence of whose force you are now conscious, you are seeking to induce an irrational<sub>2</sub> belief. There are various ways of doing this. There is Pascal's programme for inducing religious belief cited on p. 33. Another way might be to concentrate on certain kinds of evidence. Or, perhaps a person might lull himself to sleep with the words 'It's really true'.

In seeking to induce an irrational<sub>2</sub> belief, a person would thereby also be seeking to induce an irrational<sub>5</sub> belief (since to be rational<sub>5</sub> a belief has also to be rational<sub>2</sub>). All other methods of getting yourself to believe things specified in advance of investigation are also methods of seeking to induce irrational<sub>5</sub> beliefs (but not necessarily irrational<sub>2</sub> beliefs). If you seek to forget certain unfavourable evidence or the selective character of your investigation—which you might do by taking drugs of

certain kinds—you are not seeking to induce an irrational<sub>2</sub> belief, for the belief which you are seeking to have will be a belief probable on your future evidence, even if that evidence is a specially selected set of evidence. Nevertheless, you are seeking to have a belief not backed up by much true representative relevant evidence of good quality. Indeed, by attempting to suppress unfavourable evidence, you are attempting to ensure that your evidence is biased (because unrepresentative of the larger sample of evidence which you now have and which you have reason to believe points in the direction of the truth). All these methods of seeking to induce beliefs specified in advance of investigation are methods of seeking to induce irrational<sub>5</sub> beliefs. The resulting irrationality in these cases, unlike that of such cases as the culpably idle detective (see pp. 71–2), is deliberately sought by methods seen (at the beginning though not at the end of the process) to be biased against truth.

So much for the various kinds of reason having nothing to do with the truth of those beliefs which have been put forward for why it is good for people to try to induce in themselves certain beliefs. I shall consider in the next chapter whether reasons of these kinds can ever make it on balance good, or even an obligation, to try to hold a religious belief, despite the goodness and (I shall urge) frequently the obligation to hold a religious belief as probably true as we can get, that is a rational<sub>5</sub> religious belief.

## RATIONAL ACTION

It will be useful to introduce at this stage, for use in later chapters of the book, an account of the different ways in which action can be rational, paralleling the ways in which beliefs can be rational.

We saw in Chapter 1 that if an agent has only one purpose (seeks to achieve only one goal) and believes that one action is more likely to attain that goal than is any other available alternative action, he will do that action. If he believes that one of several actions is equally likely to attain that goal, he will do one of those actions. But if an agent has more than one purpose, the relation between belief and action becomes more complicated. If his purpose to attain one goal  $G_1$  is stronger than his purpose to attain any other goals, and he believes that it is more probable that one action  $A_1$  will attain  $G_1$  than that any other action will



attain any of the other goals which he has the purpose of achieving, he will do  $A_1$ . But if he believes it more probable that some action  $A_2$  will attain some lesser goal  $G_2$  (one which his purpose to achieve is less strong) than that any action will attain his preferred goal  $G_1$ , then what he will do depends on how he balances the (believed) relative probabilities of success against the strengths of his different purposes (his preferences for the different goals). He will always do the action most likely (he believes) to attain the goal he chooses to seek; and he is more likely to do an action, the stronger his purpose to attain the goal which it is more likely to attain than are alternative actions, and the greater the probability that it will attain that goal. He may seek the goal which he has the strongest purpose to achieve despite the (believed) improbability that he will attain that goal; or seek a lesser goal with greater (believed) probability of success. Goals, I emphasize, include goals of avoiding certain states of affairs. And so, although one action may have a great gain (e.g. buying a lottery ticket for 100 dollars may lead to the great gain of winning the lottery and winning 1 million dollars), it may also have a significant loss (100 dollars); whereas the alternative action (of not buying a ticket) will have no gain and no loss. The agent then has two purposes—winning the lottery and not losing 100 dollars. The agent's strongest purpose may be to win the lottery; but in view of the great improbability that he will win, he may seek to fulfil his less strong purpose—to avoid loss.

An agent's action in such a situation can be assessed for its rationality in the same kinds of ways as can his beliefs. Loosely—an action is rational to the extent to which it will most probably attain the best goal. Less loosely—it is rational if it is the action which results from weighing the probable goodness of attaining different goals against the probability of achieving them, in the right way. I have already drawn attention to the need to weigh these factors against each other in the right way in the account which I gave of adequate investigation. An investigation is adequate to the extent to which the probable goodness of the goal (the importance of a true belief on some issue, despite the cost of investigation) is weighed against the probability of achieving it, in the right way. The five kinds of (internalist) rationality of belief naturally suggest five kinds of (internalist) rationality of action, according to the kind of rationality of the beliefs involved in the action.

I define an action as rational<sub>1</sub> if it is the one (among available alternatives) which, given the probabilities (by the agent's own criteria) on his evidence of different actions attaining different goals, is (by the agent's own criteria of the value of attaining the different goals) the best (or an equal best) action to do in the circumstances. (By an action being 'equal best' I mean that no alternative action is better than it, although some alternative actions are equally good and some actions are worse.) Thus, if on some agent's criteria of which risks are worth taking, despite the improbability of his winning the lottery and so getting 1 million dollars, it would be the best action for him, despite the probable loss of his 100 dollar stake which he can ill afford, to buy a 100 dollar lottery ticket, then to do that is the rational<sub>1</sub> action. He is doing the act which on his understanding of the relative values of gaining 1 million dollars or losing 100 dollars, is the best action to do; it would be better than the alternative action of not buying the lottery ticket. The beliefs involved here—about the probability of success and the relative worth of actions given that probability—are rational<sub>1</sub> beliefs. If he acts on them, his action is rational<sub>1</sub>.

But an agent may have false beliefs about which risks are good to take and which are not in various circumstances. Even though this does not follow from the agent's own criteria, it may be good (or morally indifferent) to risk losing 100 dollars with a slim possibility of winning 1 million dollars if you have a lot of money in the bank, but not if you will not be able to feed your family if you lose the 100 dollars. And so we may define a rational<sub>2</sub> action as one which, given the agent's evidence about what his circumstances are and the correct probabilities (the logical probabilities) on the agent's evidence of the different actions attaining different goals, is, in fact, the best action to do. I argued earlier in this chapter that truths about the moral quality (goodness, badness, etc.) of actions fully specified in non-moral terms are necessary truths. When we are assessing the goodness of actions in a situation of uncertainty, the full specification must be confined to the description of the agent's evidence, which alone is relevant to assessing the rationality of his action in an internally accessible sense. If the agent acts on rational<sub>2</sub> beliefs about the probable effects of his actions, and the goodness of different actions in (what his evidence makes probable are) his circumstances (e.g. that he has a lot of money in the bank) given those probabilities, his action will be rational<sub>2</sub>.

There is, however, in the case of rational action, an important third kind of synchronic rationality, to which there is no parallel in the case of belief. We saw that a person cannot help having the beliefs which, he believes, are rendered probable by his evidence. But someone can fail to do the action which he believes to be the best (or an equal best), given his beliefs about the probabilities of different actions attaining different goals. He may buy the lottery ticket despite his belief that this is not the best thing to do. In such a case he will be culpable or quasi-culpable (see p. 38). I define the action which the subject believes to be the best as the rational<sub>0</sub> action.

Then there are three kinds of diachronic rationality of action. An action is rational<sub>3</sub> if it is rational<sub>0</sub> and the agent's beliefs are based on what he regards as an adequate amount of investigation (into the probability of different actions attaining different goals, and the relative goodness of those actions, given those probabilities). An agent may fail to do the rational<sub>3</sub> action either because he fails to do the rational<sub>0</sub> action or because, in his view, his investigation has been inadequate; and in either case he will be culpable or quasi-culpable. An action is rational<sub>4</sub> if it is rational<sub>1</sub> and the agent's beliefs are based on what is by the subject's own criteria an adequate amount of investigation. An action is rational<sub>5</sub> if it is rational<sub>2</sub> and the agent's beliefs are based on what is by correct criteria an adequate amount of investigation (into the probability of different actions attaining different goals and the relative goodness of alternative actions given his evidence about his circumstances.)<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> The notion of an action being rational to the extent to which it will probably attain a good goal is often elucidated in a formal way by what is known as 'Bayesian decision theory'. The values of the possible outcomes of different actions are allocated numbers—positive numbers for good effects and negative numbers for bad ones—proportional to the goodness or badness of those outcomes. The expected utility of some action is then often said to be the sum of (the probability that the action will have a given outcome multiplied by the value of that outcome) for each possible outcome. The rational action is then the action which has the largest expected utility. Different kinds of rationality can then be analysed in terms of which criteria of probability or whose standards of value are used. However, this apparatus is often not very useful because it is often more obvious what is the rational action (on any of my definitions) than how values should be allocated to outcomes. This is the case with the actions with which I am concerned in this book. There is no obvious scale on which to give numerical values to the different kinds of salvation offered by different religions, but it is sometimes fairly clear (after some reflection) that it is better to pursue one kind of salvation than another even if you are slightly less likely to attain it. Hence, it will not be helpful to use Bayesian decision theory in this book. For a fuller account of Bayesian decision theory, see *Epistemic Justification*, Additional Note B.

# 3

## The Value of Rational Religious Belief

### THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUE RELIGIOUS BELIEF

I now proceed to apply the results of the previous chapter to the issue of religious belief. By religious beliefs I understand, very roughly, beliefs about transcendent reality, including beliefs about whether or not there is a God or an after-life, beliefs about what properties God has (what God is like), and what actions He has performed. These include beliefs specific to any particular theistic religion (one which claims that there is a God), e.g. Christianity, and to any particular non-theistic religion, such as Buddhism. (I shall give a more precise definition of a 'religion' in Chapter 5.)

It is very important to have true beliefs about which great obligations we have and which actions would be very good to do; and so it is important to investigate adequately which great obligations we have and which actions are very good to do, in order that we may have beliefs on these matters as probably true as we can get. Moral reflection on mundane examples, as I shall argue more fully in Chapter 5, quickly leads to the view that it is a necessary truth that if there is a God who has made us and kept us in being, we owe him much gratitude; and if He is God, the all-good source of all things, we owe him worship. As the source of our lives, He is entitled (perhaps within limits) to tell us how we ought to live, and we have a duty to obey His instructions. If we have failed to use our lives in the right way, we should seek God's forgiveness. Hence, it is very important to have a true belief about whether there is a God, in order that if there is a God we may fulfil these all-important obligations. Hence, there is a duty on each of us adequately to investigate this matter in order to have a belief as probably true as we can get it.

Most religions offer us the possibility of obtaining a deep well-being (in this life, and normally forever) which I shall call salvation. Human

well-being is, tautologically, a good; and so salvation is a great good. Hence, it is very good for each of us to acquire a true belief about what kind and length of life would provide that deep well-being. Humans are confronted from their own experience with the fact that mundane pleasures, though temporarily satisfying, are not permanently and deeply so. We find from experience—and poets, novelists, and dramatists convince us—that not merely do food and drink, leisure and drugs fail to satisfy at the deepest level; but so do family life, careers in public service, belonging to a local community, having an absorbing hobby, and so on. Also, to all appearances, these pleasures last only the span of a human life—at most some eighty years. And although some mundane occupations—such as helping others to cope with the world and enjoy it—do seem deeply worth while, they can be on their own frustrating. The only pleasures which we can bring to others often seem themselves not to be such as will satisfy permanently and deeply, and a person is often beset by bad desires or desires for lesser goods when he seeks to achieve a greater good.

In this situation people hear the proclamation of different religions which offer to those who follow their way a deep well-being. Even if this well-being lasts only as long as an earthly life and there is no life after death, still following a religious way could give a deep point to that earthly life (as it did to the ancient Jews, who did not believe in a life after death until the last two centuries BC). This may be (as it was for the Jews) because following the way involves having a right relation to God. Most theistic religions, however, such as the Christian religion, claim that God will give to people a life after death in which those who have been following a certain religious way in this life will have the Beatific Vision of God which alone will provide a truly deep and permanent well-being. Yet, even if there is no God, there may still be a deep and permanent well-being to be had, as Buddhism claims with its account of nirvana. It is, therefore, very important first to have a true belief about how good are the various kinds of salvation offered by different religions; and then to have a true belief about whether we can acquire salvation of these kinds by following the ways commended by the different religions. It is important to have a true belief about whether there is a God and whether salvation can be achieved, not merely because a positive conclusion will show us how to fulfil our obligations and how to try to obtain salvation; but because a negative conclusion

would prevent us wasting our time in prayer and worship and vain pursuit of everlasting life.

In considering the general issue of the importance of true belief, I drew attention to the importance of true belief in itself, especially when it concerns the origin, nature, and purpose of our human community and of the universe as a whole. If history and physics are of importance for this reason, true religious belief is obviously of far greater importance. For what more central piece of information could there be about the origin, nature, and purpose of human beings and the universe than whether they depend for their being on a God who made and sustains them; or whether the universe, and all that is in it, and the laws of its operation, just are, dependent upon nothing? A true belief here, whether theistic or atheistic, is of enormous importance for our whole world-view. And not merely is true belief about whether or not there is a God of great value in itself, but, if there is a God, being omniscient, He will know all there is to be known about the origin, nature, and purpose of humans and the universe; and, being perfectly good, God may well help us to acquire much of this knowledge.

Further, given the importance of fulfilling any obligation to God and of seeking salvation, it is clearly good that we should have a true belief about whether or not there is a God or a way to salvation, not merely for our own sake but in order to help others. Someone with such a belief can give others information which will help them to fulfil their obligations to God or gods if there are such, and help them to find salvation. I suggest that anyone who has a responsibility for the upbringing of others has a duty, if she can, to ensure that those others know their obligations to God or gods and know the way to their salvation. This means primarily parents (and to a lesser extent teachers of religiously sensitive subjects); and that, of course, means most of us. Similarly, of course, if religion is false, the activity of prayer and worship is pointless and certain moral practices are also pointless, and so a parent's obligations to ensure the well-being of his children will lead him to deter them from such activities. And, even if we do not have a duty to help others apart from our own children towards their salvation (or to deter them from seeking the unobtainable), it is clearly good (for them, and for us) that we should do so. Some people have special talents which enable them to discover evidence relevant to these issues and to help to assess what it shows—philosophers, theologians, historians, and poets and

artists with religious sensitivities all have a share of such talents. And so, plausibly, they have a duty to investigate these matters adequately in order to make their results available to others. To use my earlier example: when people are short of food, the person trained in agricultural biochemistry has some obligation to apply his talents to finding out how they can get more food out of the land. A similar argument applies when people are short of spiritual food. And some people have a special talent for evangelizing, making the results of such inquiries generally accessible.

I have argued that while many of us have an obligation to try to acquire true religious beliefs because many of us have an obligation to others, especially our children, to teach them the truth about religion, not everyone has an obligation to acquire true religious beliefs for this reason. So I find W. K. Clifford's claim in his well-known essay 'The Ethics of Belief',<sup>1</sup> that since all our beliefs and the ways in which we acquire them influence others, for that reason we have a duty to complete rationality in all matters, an exaggerated one. He writes that 'no man's belief . . . is a private matter which concerns himself alone' and that those who believe 'unproved and unquestioned statements' for their own 'solace and private pleasure' are a perverse influence. Where someone's influence is very obvious and the responsibility is clear, as with a parent towards his children, or a teacher towards his students, or a priest towards his parishioners, or where they have special investigative talents, this is fair enough. But surely there is a sphere of private morality in which a person may choose what to do even if some others for whom he bears no responsibility who saw what he was doing *might* possibly be led astray thereby. And, of course, outside the parent-child context, where rational adults are viewing a person's behaviour, the influence of his bad actions on them *may* only be to lead them to avoid such actions in future. Clifford seems to have exaggerated a fundamentally good point.

A further and final source of obligation to pursue religious inquiry arises in so far as our intellectual abilities have been given to us by someone. There is an obligation to use well a good gift given to us for our benefit by a benefactor; and I claimed earlier that if the gift is given before we are old enough to refuse it, it does not need to have been

<sup>1</sup> In his *Essays and Lectures* (Macmillan, 1879).

accepted voluntarily for there to be this obligation. In so far as our parents (given that they are nurturing and not mere biological parents) have developed our intellectual abilities, including the ability to pursue the all-important search for religious truth, we owe it to them to do some investigation. And if, in fact, there is a God, then the ability of our parents to develop our intellectual abilities (or any other route by which we acquired these abilities) is due eventually to God, and so we owe it to God to investigate religious truth. Of course, we cannot believe that we have this duty for this reason unless we already believe that there is a God. But if we do already believe this, I think that there is still a duty (owed to God) to investigate. For, as we saw earlier (p. 68), it is always probable that investigation will lead to a stronger rational<sub>2</sub> belief. If in fact there is a God, it is probable that that stronger belief will be the original belief—that there is a God—for if there is a God, it is probable that new evidence will confirm this, and so increase the probability. For reasons discussed earlier stronger beliefs are more likely to lead to right action than weaker beliefs; and in this case to lead to better service of God.

It is more important to believe that there is a God if, in fact, there is a God than to believe that there is no God if, in fact, there is no God. For while believing that there is a God when there is no God, or believing that there is no God when there is a God, can both lead to our failing in our duties to provide important true information to our children, believing that there is no God when there is a God could lead to us (and our children) failing to worship a God to whom worship is due. It could also lead to us failing to make a repentant apology which we would owe to a God for misusing the life which he gave us; whereas, if through a false belief that there is a God, we worship and repent before a God who does not exist, no one is thereby wronged. Further, failure to hold a true belief that there is a God could lead to the loss (for the believer and those influenced by him) of a very good everlasting life, for if this belief is conjoined with a true belief that, if there is a God, he will give such an everlasting life after death to those who live a certain kind of life on Earth, a person who has these beliefs is in a position to gain that life. And even if the other true religious belief is only that if there is a God he will give a very good everlasting life after death to any who try to live a good life on Earth, this belief, together with the belief that there is a God, could encourage a person to persevere with a good life on



Earth and so gain that very good everlasting life (on this see p. 214), whereas failure to hold a true atheistic belief could involve at most the waste of a short finite life.

I conclude that, for the various reasons outlined, it matters greatly that people should have true religious beliefs, and for some of these reasons there is an obligation on people to seek such beliefs. It will readily be seen that what goes for the simple belief that there is a God goes also for beliefs that God has certain properties and that He has done certain actions. Indeed, the belief that there is a God only carries very much in the way of consequences for action about how to seek deep and lasting well-being, or how to worship, or whatever, given further beliefs—e.g. that if there is a God, He wishes to be worshipped in such-and-such a way, or is to be worshipped for having done such-and-such actions. My conclusions about the importance of having a true religious belief, if true, are necessarily true; their truth does not depend on any contingent non-moral truth.

## PEOPLE'S EVIDENCE FOR THEIR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Since having true religious beliefs is so important, we need to take steps to acquire beliefs as probably true, that is as rationally well supported as we can get them. I considered in Chapters 1 and 2 the different kinds of evidence which people have and the different inductive criteria which they use to get their beliefs, and the kinds of rationality which are involved therein. I can now apply these general considerations to their religious beliefs and ask when are those beliefs rational.

I begin by considering the various basic propositions on which people's religious beliefs, primarily the belief that there is a God and the belief that there is not a God, are based, noting that most of the former propositions are rightly basic, and indeed constitute rightly basic beliefs. To start with, there is no doubt that some people have a basic proposition that there is a God, produced by an apparent awareness of His presence. This may often come to them through participation in church worship. Given my Principle of Credulity, they are right to hold this basic proposition (unless it is the case that 'there is a God' contains some internal contradiction and is in

consequence necessarily false),<sup>2</sup> and to believe it in the absence of counter-evidence. 'There is a God' may, indeed, be a rightly basic belief—for those people, especially if the experience is a very strong one. It would also be a rightly basic belief for people who live in a culture where they are taught from birth by many people that there is a God and everyone takes this for granted.

Reformed epistemology Phase One (that is the reformed epistemology exemplified by Plantinga's contribution to *Faith and Rationality*<sup>3</sup>), taught that 'There is a God' is often a properly basic belief for the former group, and that they can know that it is when it occurs, 'in the right circumstances'.<sup>4</sup> Reformed epistemology notoriously had difficulty in justifying the claim that 'The Great Pumpkin returns every Halloween' could not also be—for some people—a properly basic belief. My principles suggest that it could be, though I do not think that it ever is; and anyway there is a lot of counter-evidence to this claim. Further, I do not think that very many people, either today or in earlier times, have been in the fortunate position of having 'There is a God' as a very strong properly basic belief resulting from overwhelming apparent awareness of God's presence. Certainly many people have had experiences of the apparent presence of God which are not overwhelming

<sup>2</sup> My book *The Coherence of Theism* (Clarendon Press, rev. edn., 1993) is a sustained argument for the internal coherence of theism.

<sup>3</sup> Alvin Plantinga, 'Reason and Belief in God', in A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff (eds.), *Faith and Rationality* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Plantinga claims there (74–82) that when we find ourselves forming the belief that there is a God under certain conditions (e.g. when reading the Bible and feeling guilty for what we have done), that belief is properly basic. We can be rational in believing that it is properly basic without having or having justified a theory of proper basicity. But the way to form and justify such a theory is, he claims (76), to 'assemble examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously properly basic in the latter, and examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously *not* properly basic in the latter. We must then frame hypotheses as to the necessary and sufficient conditions of proper basicity and test these hypotheses by reference to those examples.' Plantinga describes this method as 'inductive'; but this seems a misleading description for it is typical of an inductive argument that it argues from contingent premisses to a contingent conclusion. But it is irrelevant to Plantinga's method whether the examples are examples of actually held beliefs and actual conditions; they are examples of basic beliefs which would be proper to hold under certain conditions if those conditions occurred, and that this is so would, therefore, be an a priori discovery of a necessary truth. The method is the method of 'reflective equilibrium' (see pp. 38–9 and p. 67), by which we also reach principles of morality and the criteria of induction by reflecting on what people should and should not do in various actual or imaginary circumstances—an a priori method.

experiences. But these people will often be aware of evidence which counts against the existence of God (e.g. the non-theistic religious experiences of Buddhists and others, which I discuss in Chapter 7), and so their basic proposition that there is a God needs backing up by argument. And many people, including theists, have had no experiences of the apparent presence of God. I may be mistaken about proportions here, but certainly there are theists in all three categories. Some theists of past ages have belonged to cultures where the existence of God is treated as an obvious truth. But most theists as well, of course, as atheists and agnostics, I suggest, need arguments at least to back up the deliverances of experience.

For some theists, the events of their own lives about whose occurrence they have strong basic beliefs seem to provide strong argument for the existence of God. Many of their prayers may seem to have been answered in ways which, on the evidence available to them, would be most unlikely to occur but for the actions of God. But for most events (not all events—see Chapter 7), and especially the healings from disease, for which people pray more than they pray for most other things, it is difficult to know whether they have occurred in accord with natural laws or not. We would need to know far more than we do about how disease works (the laws of biochemistry) and the previous state of a sufferer's body in order to know that the normal operation of natural processes would not have produced a particular healing.

A class of argument which was, I suspect, very influential in the Middle Ages and has had some influence at all periods has been the argument from authority. Many a medieval villager believed that there was a God because his parents or the village priest or some visiting friar told him that there is a God, because—they said—they had experienced God, or it was well authenticated that miracles (which could be performed only by God) occurred, or simply that wise men had established that there is a God. In virtue of the Principle of Testimony, the villager was right so to believe (on his evidence it was probably true)—in the absence of counter-evidence (which may be simply counter-testimony; other people telling our villager differently). One strong piece of evidence that others are telling you what they believe strongly and so believe to be very probable is that this belief manifestly makes a great difference to the way they live, that relying on this belief they have come to live in a way otherwise quite unnatural. Even if we do not have their

experiences and cannot appreciate their arguments, the fact that people have come to live sacrificial lives in consequence of those experiences and arguments is evidence that they had powerful experiences or were strongly convinced by the arguments, and that provides us with some evidence of the truth of what those experiences and arguments seemed to them to show. But people differ in respect of whether they have much of this kind of evidence on authority, and whether it is nullified by the existence of people, apparently at least as learned and as good, who tell them that there is no God. Into this category of argument from authority comes the argument of popular medieval apologetic that 'the conversion of the western world' without force of arms is strong evidence for Christianity. It is an argument of some worth, but inevitably not as strong for us who know that rival movements have also had considerable success in converting without force of arms—Buddhism, for example.

Some philosophers have produced arguments for 'there is a God' from premisses reporting some alleged logically necessary truth (in the sense of one whose negation would entail a self-contradiction)—for example, the premisses of the traditional version of ontological argument,<sup>5</sup> 'God is a most perfect being' and 'any being which exists is more perfect than one which does not exist.' If, indeed, these propositions were necessary truths, they would be rightly basic. But it is, to say the least, highly doubtful whether these are necessary truths.

In an age of religious scepticism when there are good arguments against theism known to most people, and there are so often authoritative atheists as well as authoritative theists, most theists need arguments for the existence of God which start from rightly basic beliefs held very strongly by theist and atheist alike, and proceed thence by criteria shared between theist and atheist. To produce such arguments is the aim of natural theology. It starts from the most general natural

<sup>5</sup> The traditional version of the ontological argument was put forward by Descartes, and originally by St Anselm. It runs roughly as follows: '(By definition) God is a most perfect being. Any being which exists is more perfect than one which does not. Therefore, God, being most perfect, exists.' For ancient and modern versions of the argument and criticisms of it, see, e.g., the collection edited by A. Plantinga, *The Ontological Argument* (Doubleday & Co., 1965). For a very careful analysis leading to a rejection of the argument, see Jonathan Barnes, *The Ontological Argument* (Macmillan, 1972). For one new version of the argument, see A. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (George Allen and Unwin, 1975), 108–12.

phenomena—the existence of the world, its conformity to natural laws, the laws and initial conditions of the universe being such as to produce human organisms, and so on; and attempts to argue thence to the existence of God either by deductive arguments, or by criteria of inductive reasoning used in other areas of inquiry. And the historical truths of the Christian religion need to be backed up by inductive arguments beginning, in part, from historical data recognized by theist and atheist alike. I stress ‘in part’ because the important events of the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus are events far more likely to have occurred if there is a God than if there is not, and hence the evidence of natural theology is also evidence relevant to these events; and, conversely, detailed historical evidence about these events is relevant to arguments about whether or not there is a God. Detailed historical arguments have not normally been thought as part of ‘natural theology’, but they clearly belong to the same genre of objective reasoning from public data.

Atheists, too, need their beliefs to be based on rightly basic beliefs. I do not think that the belief that there is no God based on apparent experience of the absence of God can function as a rightly basic belief. The Principle of Credulity claims only that how things seem positively to be is evidence of how they are; but how things seem *not* to be is not such evidence. If it seems to me that there is present a table in the room, or statue in the garden, then probably there is. But if it seems to me that there is no table in the room, then that is only reason for supposing that there is not, if there are good grounds for supposing that I have looked everywhere in the room and (having eyes in working order, being able to recognize a table when I see one, etc.) would have seen one if there was one there. An atheist’s claim to have had an experience of its seeming to him that there is no God could only be evidence that there was no God if similar restrictions were satisfied, that if there is a God, the atheist would have experienced him; and I see no reason to believe that.<sup>6</sup>

There have, however, certainly been cultures in which the non-existence of God has been treated as an obvious truth and so given rise to a rightly basic belief that there is no God in many people in that

<sup>6</sup> See my *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, pp. 203–12 for argument against the powerful argument of John Schellenberg (*Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, Cornell University Press, 1993) to the effect that if there is a God, He would make his presence known to all humans.

culture. This was surely the case in some places in Soviet Russia and modern China at the height of Marxist influence. And many in contemporary western culture have come to believe, on the authority of apparently wise men, that there is no God. Atheists have positive arguments against the existence of God starting from obviously true rightly basic beliefs about the existence of moral and physical evil. And they have arguments against the historical claims of a religion such as Christianity starting from basic beliefs about ancient history believed on authority, as 'beyond dispute'. But, as I noted in Chapter 2, according to the society in which we are brought up, so we are given different pieces of information as indisputable by reasonable people. In one society children may be told as beyond dispute that Jesus was raised physically from the dead; that Jesus was born of a virgin; or that archaeology has discovered the site of the Garden of Eden. In a second society children may be told that all the books of the New Testament were written a hundred years after the events which they purport to record and that Christianity was a religion invented by St Paul; or that the letters allegedly written by him were really written in the second century; and that these facts are recognized by 'all reputable historians'. But in each society new 'reputable' authorities may emerge to cast doubt on what was previously 'beyond dispute'.

### RATIONALITY<sub>1</sub> AND RATIONALITY<sub>2</sub> OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

A person's beliefs are rational<sub>1</sub> if and only if, given his evidence, they are rendered probable on his own inductive criteria. A person's belief that *p* is irrational<sub>1</sub> when he has failed to draw the conclusion, using his own inductive criteria, that his rightly basic beliefs do not make *p* probable. So when we see what someone's evidence and inductive criteria (including criteria of right basicity) are, we can conclude with respect to his religious beliefs that they do or do not follow from his evidence, in accordance with those criteria.

Sometimes people may state explicitly what their inductive criteria are, but—far more usually—we need to infer this from the way they argue and behave. Now, suppose that a study of someone's inductive behaviour leads us to conclude that he is using in all his judgements

about religion different criteria from those which he uses elsewhere. What, then, are we to conclude from this about his rationality<sub>1</sub>? We could say *either* that none of his judgements about religion is rational<sub>1</sub> *or* that he has one set of inductive criteria for arguing about mundane matters and another set for arguing about religious matters, and that there is nothing irrational<sub>1</sub> in this. I think that there are cases where it would be right to say the former, and cases where it would be right to say the latter. It would be right to say the latter, for example, if he was consistent in his use of different criteria in religion, and his arguments about religion were never infected by normal criteria. He might, for example, claim that the only test of religious truth was what was written in the Bible, never attempt to justify this claim in ways which used other inductive criteria (e.g. never claim that archaeology or prophecy *showed* that the Bible was true), and never use other criteria in religious argument. Then it would seem right to say that he just did have one set of criteria for arguing about religion, and another set for arguing about mundane matters; and so it would be wrong to accuse him of being irrational<sub>1</sub>. For there would be a coherence about his way of arguing, even if we did not like that way of arguing. On the other hand, if some person makes no explicit claim about what are his inductive criteria but argues in accord with one set of criteria about all matters other than religion, yet seems to argue in a different way about religion, only not consistently so, then it seems right to say that his beliefs about religion are not rational<sub>1</sub>. For the simplest account of his behaviour will be that he has one set of criteria which he sometimes fails to follow.

A person's belief is rational<sub>2</sub> if and only if it is, in fact, rendered probable by his evidence, and his evidence consists of rightly basic propositions which he is justified in holding with the degree of confidence with which he holds them. I considered earlier how we might establish what are the correct criteria of inductive inference. I gave my own account of what these are, and suggested that, in outline, almost everyone accepts these.

I think that almost everyone who reflects seriously about the issue must conclude that the same inductive criteria apply to argument about religion as to argument about anything else. These criteria do, however, have to be stated in a very general form which can be applied to different areas of inquiry. If we derived our inductive criteria simply by reflecting on the judgements made in some narrow area of inquiry, they are likely

to be stated in terms of the concepts used only in that area, e.g. a codification of the criteria used in judgements about the purposes and beliefs of humans is obviously going to involve reference to purposes and beliefs. Yet there will be no mention of purposes and beliefs in any attempt to codify the criteria which are used in physics. Nevertheless, in a crucial sense, the same criteria are used in both areas, because there are more general criteria from which the particular criteria in each area, with particular application to the relevant subject-matter, can be derived. The more general criteria which have application to both areas are, I believe, those which I have set out earlier, such as that a hypothesis is more likely to be true in so far as it predicts accurately many varied data.

Now, clearly, the subject-matter of religion, including the possible existence of an extra-mundane being (or beings) with remarkable properties, is very different in various ways from the subject-matter of more mundane sciences. But that does not mean that the same criteria, stated in a sufficiently general form, are not applicable in religion as those which are applicable in physics. And surely they are. We derive our criteria of what is evidence for what from mundane fields; the very notion of one proposition making another one probable could not be understood unless we could illustrate by mundane examples what is meant by this. And, further, the concepts used for talk in religion, and in particular for talk about God, are concepts which have application in other fields. God, like humans, is said to be 'wise', 'good', 'powerful', etc., even if only analogically so; and so one would expect *somewhat* the same kinds of evidence for judging that some being is good, wise, or powerful in the two fields. And certainly any attempt to persuade others by rational means that religious claims are true or that they are false must involve inductive criteria which the others share; and that means criteria which they apply in other fields, for those are the fields in which the inductive judgements of theists coincide with those of atheists. And, as I shall show later, Christians have very often used such criteria to persuade others of the truth of their creed. I suspect that a major reason why people have wanted to deny that the same inductive criteria apply to religion as apply to other fields of inquiry has been that they have understood the criteria which apply to other fields as being statable only in ways which presuppose that the subject-matter is something physical, or something concerned with human or animal psychology. I have



argued that they can be stated in ways sufficiently general to apply to subject-matters of all kinds.

As I wrote in Chapter 2, the main difficulty in reaching agreement about inductive criteria arises from the details—when is one theory simpler than another, and how far can one extrapolate from a set of data to reach a probable conclusion. In argument about whether public evidence renders probable the existence of God, much of the disagreement is likely to turn on how simple is the hypothesis of theism, and whether the scope of theism (a big theory telling us about the ultimate explanation of almost everything at all times) is so large as to make it improbable on the kind of evidence available. Reflection on clear examples from history or science of what makes what probable can, I believe, lead us to see one more detailed account of inductive criteria as the one which best elucidates the criteria implicit in our particular judgements about these examples. But disagreement about these more detailed matters occurs far more naturally and is less easy to resolve than disagreement about what the criteria are, when stated in fairly general terms. Given criteria for when a proposition is rightly basic, and how the criteria for what renders what probable are to be spelled out in detail, it will follow which beliefs about the existence of God are rational<sub>2</sub>, that is synchronically objectively justified, and which are not.

Because different people have different evidence available to them (some people have a rightly basic belief that there is a God, and some do not), some person's belief that there is a God may be rational<sub>2</sub> and another person's may not be. But the natural theologian will claim that the public evidence available to everyone (the existence and orderliness of the universe etc., even when joined to the existence of moral and physical evil) makes it probable that there is a God; and that if someone based their belief on that evidence alone it would always be rational<sub>2</sub>. And if the atheist were not aware of data which, in fact, make probable the existence of God, he would be rational<sub>2</sub> in concluding, on the basis of the data of which he is aware, that there is no God. For it is always simpler not to postulate an entity to explain data than to postulate it—and you should not do so unless postulating that entity makes it probable that you would observe what you find (in the way delineated in the previous chapter). It was for that reason that Laplace claimed to be an atheist—'je n'ai pas besoin de cette hypothèse' ('I do not need that hypothesis', the hypothesis of theism). But, of course, the theist who

believes in natural theology will claim that the data of which the atheist is aware (the existence of the universe, its orderliness, etc.) do make probable the existence of God, even though the atheist falsely thinks that they do not; and that unless the atheist has additional evidence (e.g. a rightly basic belief that it is regarded as obvious that there is no God), his belief will be irrational<sub>2</sub>.

Since theism, like any other explanatory theory, is made probable (in part) by the extent to which it makes correct predictions (criterion (1) on p. 45), it is crucial for assessing the probability of theism (the probability that there is a God) that we should have some idea of what kind of world a God would bring about; and, since God is supposed to be perfectly good (morally good, that is, in my sense of 'morally good'—see pp. 34–5), as well as omnipotent, we need some idea of which world-states are such that it is probable that a perfectly good God will bring them about and which are such that it is improbable that a perfectly good God will bring them about. If we do not have any idea of this, we cannot assess whether our world being as it is is evidence for or against the existence of God. I argued in Chapter 2 that (except perhaps in the case of trivial obligations) it is always better to fulfil an obligation than to do any good action which is not obligatory. God will have a very limited set of obligations, all of which he can fulfil. For until he creates other rational agents, God will have no obligations at all; and since it is obligatory not to put yourself under an obligation (even a trivial obligation) which you may not be able to fulfil, God, being perfectly good, will take care not to create rational agents or do anything to them or for them which will put him in a position where he may not be able to fulfil all his obligations. Hence, being perfectly good, God will fulfil all his obligations. That is, there is a (logical) probability of 1 that if there is a God and some action is obligatory for God to do, he will do it. So if the production of some particular state of affairs is obligatory for God, there is a probability of 1, that if there is a God, our world will contain that state. God, being perfectly good, will also do many good acts beyond any that are obligatory, and no bad ones. Doing good acts would include bringing about good states of affairs; and doing bad acts would include bringing about bad states of affairs, bringing about which is not necessary in order to bring about some good state of affairs. Hence, if we have some idea of which world-states are good and which are bad, we can begin to calculate the probability that if there is a

God, our world will be this way rather than that way.<sup>7</sup> So we need a correct moral outlook in order to assess arguments for and against the existence of God,<sup>8</sup> and I suggested in Chapter 2 the steps we can take to improve our moral outlook. One obvious example of moral truths which we need in order to assess the worth of theistic arguments is which good states that of logical necessity entail the occurrence of bad states, unprevented by God, are so good that a good God might well allow them to occur despite the bad which they involve. If someone believes—in my view erroneously—that a good God would never allow anyone to suffer, whatever kinds of good state that makes possible (e.g. the good state of someone else having a choice between curing their suffering or not bothering to cure the suffering), then they will consider the occurrence of suffering as conclusive evidence against the existence of God.

### RATIONALITY<sub>3-5</sub> OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Rationality<sub>3</sub>, rationality<sub>4</sub>, and rationality<sub>5</sub> are a matter of belief being backed by adequate earlier investigation. A belief that some proposition  $p$  is true is rational<sub>3</sub>, the reader will recall, if it is based on evidence acquired by investigation which was, in the subject's view, adequate and the subject has subjected his inductive criteria to criticism which was, in his view, adequate, and checked in his view adequately that by those criteria  $p$  was rendered probable by his evidence. We saw earlier that what constitutes adequate investigation depends on the subject's other beliefs at earlier times—his belief about the importance of holding a true belief about the issue; his belief about the probability that investigation would affect the probability of  $p$  (which would depend in part on his initial belief about the probability of  $p$ ); and his belief about the probable cost of investigation, given the importance of other actions which he could be doing. So if until now a person was absolutely certain about the truth of his religious beliefs, then there would have been no need for him to investigate their truth; and those beliefs would auto-

<sup>7</sup> For an account of which worlds God is likely to create, see my *The Existence of God*, 2nd edn. (Clarendon Press, 2004), 112–23.

<sup>8</sup> This is the theme of W. J. Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart* (Cornell University Press, 1995).

matically be rational<sub>3</sub>. If, however, he regarded them in the past as dubious or only fairly probable, then, if his beliefs are to be rational<sub>3</sub>, in so far as he believed the issue important, he should have investigated them further—given that he did not believe that it was more important to do something else or that investigation would achieve nothing. For only if he investigated further would there be any chance of his acquiring beliefs which were very probable.

There are fields and cultures where a person has no idea how to set about investigating further the answer to some question; and my definition of rationality<sub>3</sub> has the consequence that in that case her belief, even though she does not believe that it has a probability close to 1 and even though she has done no investigating, is still rational<sub>3</sub>. It may sometimes be like that with religion; someone may believe on balance that there is a God but have no idea how to pursue further inquiries. In that case her belief is rational<sub>3</sub>. Yet it will occur to most people that the obvious first step in pursuing further inquiries, both by way of securing more evidence, and to see the force of existing evidence, in this, as in all fields, is to consult someone who, they have heard, is an expert. An investigator may well pursue his inquiries by asking the local priest for the answers and taking them on authority. But in so far as he learns that the subject is a disputed one, it will normally occur to the investigator that he ought to cross-check what the priest says by consulting others. Then he will talk to atheists and gradually assemble arguments which are supposed to be relevant in the field and begin to see how well they stand up to objections.

Guided by the priest and others, the investigator will try to acquire new evidence, e.g. discover new historical facts about the New Testament in order to check the historical claims which he received on authority and now learns to be disputed. The believer who was told that St John's Gospel was written by the apostle John should look at some of the arguments (put forward by writers regarded as competent in his culture) for and against this. Or the believer who accepts everything written in the Bible as literally true should consider the arguments of those who hold that it is not to be believed on scientific matters. As I have stressed, any investigation of such matters can only take place if we assume other things which we have been told on authority, e.g. that the Hebrew Text of the Bible is correctly translated in such-and-such a way, or that Papias wrote in the second century AD. These other things,

however, may be the subject of less dispute than the belief being investigated, at least in respected circles. The believer may also investigate whether other people have had religious experiences like his own; or whether reports of miracles are well supported.

The believer, the agnostic, and the atheist should also investigate what are the correct inductive criteria; we have seen the procedure for doing this. And, finally, given those criteria which the investigator considers to be correct, he needs to apply them honestly to all the evidence at his disposal, to check what is the evidential force by those criteria of his evidence. He needs to take into account the existence of evil, other people's religious experiences, and so on, and not omit anything. How someone will investigate depends on what he already knows. Hence, the inquiries that people pursue will be pursued at very different levels of sophistication. The same amount of time devoted by two inquirers to investigating religious truth will be spent in different ways. Those who cannot read books, or who do not know which books to read, will do their investigation by talking to people of different views. The educated may do their investigating by reading some modern anthology of the philosophy of religion, containing articles for and against different religious positions. Although it might initially seem useful to investigate, a small amount of investigation might convince someone that one position is almost certainly the correct one, or that it is virtually certain that further investigation will achieve nothing. In that case, that person will have a rational<sub>3</sub> belief and need investigate no further.

It is hard for those of us who look down from philosophical heights not to deem some of the inquiries which ordinary people make about religion to be so crude as barely to deserve the name of rational. Is the person who talks only to the priest really pursuing rational inquiry? Yes, if he does not realize that the matter is the subject of very much dispute among experts. But even if he does realize this, so long as he asked the priest for reasons for his belief, the inquirer has conducted some sort of investigation; he has made some check on the priest's claims. The resulting belief may well be rational<sub>3</sub> in that the investigation has been in the subject's view adequate. However, if there is any looking down from heights on to the inquiries of others and casting doubts on their rationality, we may perhaps have a dim idea of what superior beings might think of our own rationality in the matter of religious belief. I myself am certainly conscious, after years of professional writing and

study of the matter, of the paucity of my evidence—of all that I do not know about the religious experiences of the mystics or about Hinduism, for example; and of how an enormous amount of further philosophical investigation needs to be done with respect to every point which I make about inductive logic and every point which I make about the inductive worth of arguments for and against the existence of God. To any celestial philosopher who may have spent 2,000 years investigating these issues our inquiries must seem so primitive that he feels very reluctant to call them rational.

The scope for investigation is endless: one can always go on looking for more evidence and check and recheck the process of utilizing it to form beliefs. All we can do is pursue such inquiries as seem to us adequate given the time, money, and energy at our disposal, and given our other obligations and the goodness of doing other things. In so far as someone has devoted to such investigations the amount of time which he thought to be adequate, and has pursued them honestly, his resulting beliefs will be rational<sub>3</sub>. If a person's belief that there is a God or that there is no God is rational<sub>3</sub>, it is established on the basis of as much inquiry as the believer judged it adequate to give to it.

It is noteworthy that the more people seek to have rational<sub>3</sub> beliefs about religion (or anything else) and so the more investigation they undertake, the more likely their beliefs are to converge. For the process of investigation will involve the investigator in learning about the evidence accessible to others and becoming aware of the inductive criteria of others and the criticisms which they make of his own criteria and the way he applies them. Clearly, the greater the sharing of evidence, the closer people will come to having a common basis of evidence from which to make their inferences to religious truths. Exposure to each other's inductive criteria and the way they apply them is far more likely to bring people closer together than further apart in their application of criteria. A person must be guided by the truth as he sees it, but the more people investigate, the more likely it is that they will see things in the same way.

The rationality<sub>3</sub> of a belief is a matter of a person having devoted such time to investigating it as he himself thought adequate. But although a person may think that he has devoted enough time to such investigation, even by his own criteria he may not have done. He may have devoted far less time to it than the importance which he believed the

matter to have, as warranted by his normal criteria of how much time you ought to devote to investigating things. While believing that religion was a very important matter, he may have devoted far more time to studying football. His resulting belief would then fail to be rational<sub>4</sub>. For a rational<sub>4</sub> belief is one where the believer has, by his own criteria, adequately investigated the evidence, his inductive criteria, and the force by them of his evidence.

But whether or not someone has followed his own criteria, he may not have followed correct criteria. He may not have devoted the time to religious investigation which the (objectively) probable importance of the subject demands, the probability that investigation will make a difference to his initial belief, and the probable cost of investigation—given the other demands on the person's time, money, and energy. (The probabilities referred to here are probabilities on the subject's rightly basic beliefs by correct inductive criteria.) In that case the subject's beliefs will not be rational<sub>5</sub>. Nor will they be rational<sub>5</sub> if they are not rational<sub>2</sub>, that is if they are not themselves probable on the subject's rightly basic beliefs by correct inductive criteria.

It follows—given the necessary truth of the importance of true religious belief—that if a person's beliefs in this field are to be rational<sub>5</sub>, they will need to be backed up by a significant amount of investigation—unless it is virtually certain (that is, there is a very high probability on that person's evidence) that investigation will achieve nothing (that is, not alter significantly the probability of the original belief) or he has more important things to do. It will be virtually certain that investigation will achieve nothing if, on the subject's evidence, it is virtually certain that his original belief is true. For, as we have seen, in that case it is virtually certain that new evidence will be as his belief predicts, and so that belief would become even more certain. We have already considered the criteria by which the probability of a religious belief should be assessed. But there are other reasons which may make it probable (even, virtually certain) that investigation will achieve nothing. One reason might be if that person cannot get access to relevant books or other sources of information which he needs to consult in order to pursue the investigation. In past centuries there have been many people in closed societies who simply had no access to arguments against their own beliefs or even to arguments supporting those beliefs with any subtlety. Simple people cannot develop sophisticated arguments for themselves;

and so if they are situated in such a closed society, having asked the local priest or political commissar for reasons for the accepted belief about religion, there is nothing more they can do. However, there are more general arguments purporting to show that, however much access someone may have to sources of information, human inquiry into religious truth will achieve nothing. To the extent that these arguments work, investigation is not necessary in order that a person's beliefs about religion be rational<sub>5</sub>.

### GENERAL REASONS FOR BELIEVING THAT RELIGIOUS INQUIRY IS POINTLESS

Thinkers have adduced various reasons for believing that religious inquiry will not lead to us acquiring those true religious beliefs which we need to guide our lives. First, there are general theories put forward by philosophers about the limits within which humans can acquire knowledge. An obvious example is Kant's thesis that we can have knowledge only of particular phenomena which we can observe or experience, and of the kinds of possible observable or experientiable phenomena and connections between them which there can be.<sup>9</sup> Thus, he claimed, we can know about distant stars and their properties, stars being the sort of things that one can observe; and we can know that there must be a cause in some previous (in principle) observable state of affairs of there being those stars and their having the masses, volumes, etc. which they do. But what we cannot know are things beyond possible observation: whether the universe had a beginning or is spatially finite, or whether matter is infinitely divisible. Hence, he claimed, we cannot know whether the universe depends for its existence on a creator God.<sup>10</sup>

There is no space here to discuss Kant's arguments in detail, but suffice it to point out that Kant's claim, derived from Hume, that the only causes of things which we can know are precedent observable phenomena, is quite implausible. It would rule out in advance most

<sup>9</sup> I summarize here what is, in effect, the conclusion of the whole of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

<sup>10</sup> See the chapter in *The Critique of Pure Reason* entitled 'The Ideal of Pure Reason', esp. section 7.



of the great achievements of science since his day. For science has been able to explain observable phenomena (e.g. lines on photographs of cloud chambers) in terms of unobservable causes (the movements of such fundamental particles as electrons, protons, and positrons). The science of the last two centuries has told us of fields and forces and strange entities such as quarks and gluons underlying and causing observable phenomena. The grounds for believing the claims of science here are that science postulates entities in some respects simple, whose interactions lead us to expect the observable phenomena, where these are not otherwise to be expected (that is that the relevant scientific theory satisfies the criteria described at p. 45). Granted that the scientist has given good reason for believing in the existence of the entities which he postulates, there is no reason in principle to suppose that knowledge cannot advance further so as to explain the whole physical world, observable and unobservable, e.g. in terms of the action of a creator God.

Then there is a very similar argument, very much in the tradition of Kant, to be found in a number of places, among them John Hick's book *Faith and Knowledge*,<sup>11</sup> that rational arguments are of no use to support (or oppose) our most fundamental beliefs. Examples of such beliefs are the belief that there is an external world, or that things will continue to behave as they have been observed to behave in the past (what I called in the last chapter the generalization principle), or that there are certain objective moral truths (e.g. that torture and murder are wicked). Less fundamental beliefs—whether there is a table in the next room or it will rain tomorrow—are possible subjects for arguments, but such arguments utilize the fundamental beliefs about which we cannot argue with profit. Thus, argument about whether there is a table in the next room already presupposes fundamental beliefs that there is an external world of tables and chairs, and that things continue to behave as they have been observed to behave in the past (e.g. tables stay where they are put), and that in general what we think we remember happened (e.g. that if I think I remember having put a table in the next room, then probably I did). The fundamental beliefs form a framework within which we can argue about the less fundamental beliefs. But the fundamental beliefs are not things about which we can argue in a rational way. We just do

<sup>11</sup> John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, 2nd edn. (Macmillan, 1967), chs. 5, 6, and 7.

believe these fundamental beliefs, although we have a certain freedom, claims Hick, not to believe.

Now, Hick claims, whether the world is created and controlled by God is equally fundamental, and therefore not the proper subject of argument.<sup>12</sup> It must be granted that if someone really did not believe in the external world or the generalization principle or that there are objective moral truths, it would be hard to devise a worthwhile argument to convince him. But, in fact, all people do have the first two of these beliefs, and almost all people have the third belief. They have common beliefs about the world, and similar inductive criteria, which enable them to advance from their present beliefs to new beliefs. However, the existence of God seems to me to be in a different category from the previous very fundamental beliefs. It is a disputed matter; and also a matter on which some people have certainly come to change their mind after a process of argument, e.g. they have ceased to believe that there is a God, after someone has brought home to them the force of the argument from evil. There is, therefore, no reason to suppose that in its closeness to rational inquiry the existence of God is as fundamental as the existence of the external world. There is no a priori reason to suppose that with common beliefs about the world and common inductive criteria investigation cannot advance to a rational belief about the existence of God.

Finally, there is an argument which seems to me more powerful than those discussed above, that if there were a proof of the existence of God which became known, those who heard and understood it would have no option but to believe, and in that case it would be so obviously to their selfish advantage to follow a religious way that there would be no merit in doing so, as there is normally supposed to be. John Hick has argued in many places that humans need 'cognitive freedom' in which to choose a religious way; if God were too evident, they would have no choice of whether to follow the way of a theistic religion. But, even given the need for cognitive freedom, this can at most be regarded as an argument showing that a God would not allow us to see, without the

<sup>12</sup> An earlier writer who puts forward a similar argument is Clement of Alexandria: 'Should one say that knowledge is founded on demonstration by a process of reasoning, let him hear that the first principles are incapable of demonstration... Hence it is thought that the first cause of the universe can be apprehended by faith alone', *Stromateis* 2.4 (Writings of Clement of Alexandria, Vol. 2, trans. W. Wilson (Edinburgh, 1869)).

effort of investigation, an evident and conclusive proof of his existence. It does not show that God would not provide grounds for belief which we could acquire by investigation, for then the voluntariness and so the merit of belief would lie in the investigation. So this argument provides no reason for supposing that investigation will not show that it is significantly more probable than not or even that it is certain that there is a God. And anyway it seems to me that some few people do have such an overwhelming apparent awareness of God that if there is a God, He does give some people the certainty which would result from an evident and conclusive proof of his existence. There is, therefore, no reason to suppose that God might not allow many more people to become much more confident of his existence.<sup>13</sup> And this argument has no force to show that investigation will not lead to a rational conclusion that probably or certainly God does not exist.

### CHRISTIAN REASONS FOR BELIEVING THAT RELIGIOUS INQUIRY IS POINTLESS

The arguments considered so far purporting to show that arguments to the existence of God, and more generally arguments about fundamental religious matters, will not work all proceed from general philosophical considerations. There are also arguments which are internal to the Christian religion in the sense that they argue that if the Christian religion is true, it cannot be shown to be true by rational argument from premisses reporting data available to atheist and Christian alike; or that, even if this can be shown, someone who comes to believe as a result of such argument will not have the kind of belief required for religious faith. People should come to Christian belief on this view by hearing the preaching of the Christian Gospel or reading the Bible and coming to feel 'Yes that's true'; by an inward religious experience of the presence of God making the subject aware of Christian truths.

<sup>13</sup> However, Hick is right in a crucial respect. I have argued elsewhere that if we acquire a fairly convinced belief that there is a God, this does make it easier to do good, and so gives us less choice of the sort of person we are to be. See my *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Clarendon Press, 1998), 203–12. Still, God might allow this to happen to many people for the sake of the resulting good—that we are more likely to become good people, despite the disadvantage—that what sort of person we are to be depends less on us.

Argument from publicly available data to the existence of God is normally called natural theology. I shall sometimes call it bare natural theology, and contrast it with arguments to particular Christian doctrines from publicly available data which I shall call ramified natural theology. The publicly available data in the former case will include such general phenomena as the existence of the universe, its being governed by scientific laws, and the existence of human bodies and their connections with consciousness. The publicly available data in the latter case will include also historical data concerning the life of Jesus, such as the New Testament books treated as ordinary historical documents. We might call arguments of these kinds against the existence of God or against particular Christian doctrines natural atheology; but, since it is more appropriate to have a name for a kind of argument independently of the conclusion which it reaches, I shall regard all such arguments as belonging to natural theology.

Opposition within Christianity to natural theology, bare or ramified, has been confined largely to fairly conservative Protestants, beginning with Calvin. Calvin taught that the 'inward testimony of spirit' that is God's grace (whether miraculous or not) suffices to show us the truth of the Bible, and so the truth of doctrines contained in it including the existence of God. 'Scripture is . . . self-authenticated', wrote Calvin, 'It is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning'.<sup>14</sup> But why believe the Bible? If you have the 'inward testimony of the spirit' both to the truths of the Bible and to how it is to be interpreted, and this is overwhelming, then there is no more to be said. But the truth and meaning of the Bible can both be questioned, and there are arguments for and against its truth, themselves depending on arguments about how it is to be interpreted. For many Christians, as, of course, for all non-Christians, the truth of the Bible is in no way self-evident. By the fourth century AD, there had developed a common understanding, formalized by Popes and

<sup>14</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutes*, trans. by F. L. Battles (Westminster Press, 1960), 1.7.5. Despite the quoted assertion, Calvin did, nevertheless, go on to give a number of other reasons, similar to some of those of Scotus (see later), which he regarded as 'useful aids' to back up the self-authentication of Scripture (*Institutes* 1.8.1). He also acknowledged that the orderliness of the world and the existence of human beings provided strong reason for belief in God. But he held that this 'manifestation of God is choked by human superstition' (1.5.12) and, hence, the need that 'another and better help', that is Scripture, 'be added to direct us aright to the very Creator of the universe' (1.6.1).

Church Councils,<sup>15</sup> of which books of Old and New Testament constituted sacred scripture and thus in some sense a foundation for Christian doctrine. I shall mention shortly arguments used before and after the fourth century for the authority of the Church in this and other matters. Christian apologetic before Calvin included much argument (both via the authority of the Church and independently of it) for the truth of the Bible. And also, before Calvin, since so much of the Bible has been interpreted in very different ways (e.g. so often the same passage has been interpreted by some theologians as historical and by other theologians as metaphorical), it was normal to appeal to the Church's tradition of interpretation both for the general criteria for Biblical interpretation and for how particular passages should be interpreted. Anyone who claims 'the inward testimony of the spirit' for his own interpretation of the Bible should reflect on the enormous diversity of interpretations of the Bible, many of them by people who have also claimed 'the inward testimony of the spirit' for interpretations incompatible with his own. That should lead anyone to see that argument on these issues is difficult to avoid. And most Christians, apart from classical Protestants, have recognized this.

In the twentieth century the opposition to natural theology and especially to bare natural theology was exemplified paradigmatically in the work of Karl Barth. Barth claims that the God in whom Christians believe is so totally different from things in the world that argument from things in the world by the world's criteria will not get anywhere in showing that God exists or that he does not.<sup>16</sup> But God cannot be totally different if he is describable with words which we use to describe mundane things—e.g. 'wise', 'good', 'powerful'. If these words do have, however analogical, an application to him, God must be something like wise, good, and powerful things on Earth; and in that case kinds of arguments which are appropriate to prove the existence or non-existence of wise, good, and powerful things will, in principle, have application to proving God's existence or non-existence. But if such words did not

<sup>15</sup> See the official declarations in H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (Herder, 1963), articles 179, 186, 198, and 202.

<sup>16</sup> See K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II (1) § 26, ed. by G. W. Bromley and T. F. Torrance (T. and T. Clark, 1957). For example (76): 'If we know about God as the Lord, it is not because we also know about other lords and lordships. It is not even partly because of this previous knowledge and partly because of God's revelation. It is in virtue of God's revelation alone.'

have at least an analogical application to God, we would have no idea what we are saying when we say that there is a God. And so the claim of theism would be not merely unarguable but meaningless. But, of course, the religious believer does not want to say that about his religion, and so he must allow that the God whose existence he wishes to assert is not completely improperly described as 'wise', 'good', etc.

Barth claims that while there is no *analogia entis*, no similarity of nature between God and man, there is an *analogia fidei*. By this he means that we learn through revelation (the Bible, that is) to apply such words as 'wise' and 'good' to God; and that revelation teaches us in what the goodness or wisdom of God consists. But, if that were so, how could anyone understand this 'revelation'? While they might understand that God had caused the universe to exist (so long as 'cause' was being used in a non-revealed sense),<sup>17</sup> how could they understand what was claimed when it was said that God was 'good' or 'wise' in causing it? If there was no real analogy between human goodness and divine goodness, it would be just as informative to say that God was 'splodge' or 'fudge' in causing it. Revelation has something more exciting to tell us, that is that God has goodness and wisdom similar to, but far greater than, human goodness and wisdom.

Opposition to ramified natural theology, historical arguments for the truth of Biblical claims, was central to the work of Søren Kierkegaard. By such historical work, he wrote 'one would never arrive at anything more than an approximation, and there is an essential misrelation between that and a personal, infinite interestedness in one's own eternal happiness'.<sup>18</sup> An 'approximation' is a belief that is only probably true and what is required for faith, claims Kierkegaard, is certainty: merely probable belief would inhibit the ability of the investigator to use his belief in order to worship God and fulfil His commands. The answer to this is first, that religious belief may be hesitant whether or not we depend on arguments for its truth, and that there is no reason to suppose that investigation will weaken rather than strengthen that

<sup>17</sup> Barth also denies this. Thus (ibid., 76): 'We have no analogy on the basis of which the nature and being of God as Creator can be accessible to us.'

<sup>18</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Vol. 1, trans H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1992), 24. For philosophical commentary on Kierkegaard's attitude to the belief involved in faith, see Robert M. Adams, *The Virtue of Faith* (Oxford University Press, 1987), chs. 2 and 3.

belief. And, secondly, as we shall see in due course, faith in God is not the same as belief that there is a God; and faith may involve total commitment while belief is far from completely confident. For faith involves how we act on our beliefs; which purposes, given that belief, we seek to achieve and with how much commitment.

## THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION OF RELIGIOUS INQUIRY

This opposition within Christianity to natural theology of any kind is often defended by claiming that the Bible contains no arguments for the existence of God, and so Christians whose faith is based on the Bible should not have anything to do with bare natural theology. In my view, however, both the Bible and Church tradition give strong support to exactly the opposite view—that arguments are relevant in support both of the existence of God and of particular Christian doctrines.

Early in the third century AD the pagan critic Celsus complained that Christian evangelists said to their potential converts, ‘Do not examine, but believe’ and ‘Your faith will save you’. In response, Origen acknowledged:

If it were possible for all to leave the business of life, and devote themselves to philosophy, no other method ought to be adopted by any one, but this alone [‘following reason and a rational guide’]. For in the Christian system also it will be found that there is, not to speak at all arrogantly, at least as much of investigation into articles of belief, . . . [as is the case with other systems]. . . . We admit that we teach these men to believe without reasons, who are unable to abandon all other employments, and give themselves to an examination of arguments; and our opponents, although they do not acknowledge it, yet practically do the same.<sup>19</sup>

And he goes on to claim that if, through hearing some Gospel, you find yourself believing it and have no time to inquire further, it is sensible to go on believing. I, too, claimed that we ought to believe what we are told in the absence of counter-evidence; and if one has no time to investigate further, one’s belief will be diachronically objectively justified, that is

<sup>19</sup> Origen, *Against Celsus* 1, 9–10. (*The Writings of Origen*, Vol. 1, trans. F. Crombie (T. and T. Clark, 1869), 405–7.)

rational<sub>5</sub>. Origen certainly thought that those who did have the time ought to consider arguments. In my terminology that is necessary if their beliefs are to be rational<sub>5</sub>. And in *Against Celsus* he provides arguments at considerable length in favour of, and against objections to, particular Christian doctrines. And many of the Fathers did the same, both for theism and for particular Christian doctrines.

Gregory of Nyssa emphasized that arguments must take off from the things already believed by both Christian and non-Christian:

It is necessary to regard the opinions which the persons have taken up, and to frame your argument in accordance with the error into which each has fallen, by advancing in each discussion certain principles and reasonable propositions, that thus, through what is agreed upon on both sides, the truth may conclusively be brought to light . . . Should [someone] say there is no God, then, from the consideration of the skilful and wise economy of the Universe he will be brought to acknowledge that there is a certain overmastering power manifested through these channels. If, on the other hand, he should have no doubts as to the existence of Deity, but should be inclined to entertain the presumption of a plurality of gods, then we will adopt [other arguments].<sup>20</sup>

And if the non-Christian is Jewish, then again different arguments are needed. In my terminology new beliefs need to be supported by basic beliefs already held; and so arguments to the existence of God will take off from evidence available to theist and atheist alike. It is by such means, according to Gregory, that a Christian may seek to bring a non-Christian to belief that there is a God, and belief that Christian doctrines about him are true.

That there were available good arguments of natural theology for the existence of God was stated or taken for granted by the majority of Christian theologians before Kant. It is sometimes not immediately obvious that some Biblical or patristic argument is a piece of natural theology, because it takes the existence of a 'god' of some sort for granted and argues to his goodness or his wisdom. But it is natural theology if it argues that the power in charge of the universe is not just any 'god' but God—omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. Given that, there are also various short passages of the canonical (non-apocryphal) Old and New Testaments which are pieces of natural theology, as James Barr

<sup>20</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism*, Prologue (trans. W. Moore and H. A. Wilson, *Selected Writings of Gregory of Nyssa* (Parker and Co., 1893).



has argued.<sup>21</sup> Certainly St Paul believed in natural theology. Consider, to begin with, his speech on the Areopagus in Athens, arguing that a God whose ‘offspring’ we are cannot be like ‘gold, or silver, or stone’. Paul claims that God intended that pagans of earlier times ‘would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him’,<sup>22</sup> which presupposes that they were in a position to do so. In a speech to pagans at Lystra, he explains why they were in that position: God ‘has not left himself without a witness in doing good, giving you rains from heaven and fruitful reasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy’.<sup>23</sup> And in the Letter to the Romans, Paul claimed that ‘Ever since the creation of the world, [God’s] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.’<sup>24</sup> Or for an Old Testament example which Barr does not discuss, consider Jeremiah. He argued to the power of the creator from the extent of the creation—‘the host of heaven cannot be numbered, neither the sand of the sea measured’. And he argued to the reliability of the creator from the regular behaviour of the creation—‘the covenant of night and day’ whereby night and day follow each other regularly, and ‘the ordinances of heaven and earth’.<sup>25</sup>

It is true that the only Biblical book which develops a natural theology at any great length is *The Wisdom of Solomon*; and Barr points out that, since it belongs to the Old Testament Apocrypha, this book has canonical and so authoritative status only for Catholics and Orthodox but not for Protestants. Hence, Protestants of the last two centuries, and above all Barth, could deny that there was much natural theology in the Bible. However, it is there in various other Biblical passages, in the Jewish tradition, and in so many of the Christian Fathers of the first millennium AD who have a few paragraphs of natural theology, arguing especially that the regular behaviour of the natural world points to an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God as its creator.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Clarendon Press, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> Acts 17: 22–31. All quotations from the Bible are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>23</sup> Acts 14: 17.

<sup>24</sup> Romans 1: 20.

<sup>25</sup> Jeremiah 33: 20–2 and 25–6.

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, II. 1–9; Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, ch. 1; Augustine, *On Free Will*, 2. 12.33; Maximus the Confessor, *Difficulties*, 10.35; and John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith*, 1.3.

The brief paragraphs of the theologians of the first millennium became the long treatises of the medieval west; and Anselm, Bonaventure, Aquinas, and Scotus developed natural theology at great length. And the tradition continued with Leibniz and Clarke, Butler and Paley. The first Vatican Council (1870) declared that ‘God, the origin and goal of all things, can be discerned with certainty on the evidence of created things by the natural light of human reason’.<sup>27</sup> The recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church* declared that these ways of getting to know God ‘are also called proofs for the existence of God, not in the sense of proofs in the natural sciences, but rather in the sense of “converging and convincing arguments” which allow us to attain certainty about the truth’.<sup>28</sup> However, despite the Vatican Council, but rather as a result of what I can only regard as rather bad arguments by Hume, Kant, and followers of Darwin, natural theology went out of favour for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Not that any of the natural theologians of earlier centuries ever thought that people had to believe as a result of considering their arguments. The existence of God might be accepted on authority or as a result of religious experience. But, the claim was, evidence for the existence of God is publicly available, and so atheists and pagans were not (objectively) justified (rational<sub>2</sub>) in their disbelief. And natural theology could show that they were not justified.

But what about the more specifically Christian doctrines? How much was argument involved here? Much of patristic theology of the first five centuries consisted of argument in support of some view about the matters on which the Christian creeds finally pronounced. Some of this argument tried to show the prior probability of these doctrines, that is, to show the probability that if there is a God, He would be triune, become incarnate, and provide atonement for the human race. To take but one famous example of this kind of argument, I cite Athanasius. He argued that it would have been wrong of God to leave man whom he had created to perish through sin. But only God the Word ‘was both

<sup>27</sup> H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (Herder, 1963), article 3004. See also article 3026.

<sup>28</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), article 31. In my view this article fails to recognize that ‘proofs’ of scientific theories also depend on ‘converging and convincing arguments’. The main point without the questionable comment about scientific theories is repeated in three further separate articles: 36, 47, and 286.

able to recreate the Universe and be worthy to suffer for all and to be an advocate on behalf of all before the Father. For this reason the incorporeal and incorruptible and immaterial Word of God came to our realm.’<sup>29</sup> But showing the prior probability of God doing something at some time or other is not sufficient to show that He has done it on a particular occasion; theologians needed to show that all this happened through Jesus Christ. Much of their argument to show what God has done in Christ consisted of attempts to derive Christian doctrines from the New Testament texts. It depended, therefore, on an assumption that the New Testament gave a basically correct account of the life, teaching, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. How far was that assumption defended by argument?

The New Testament itself set the standard here, for it, and especially the first Christian sermons cited in *Acts of the Apostles*, contain a lot of ‘we saw’, ‘we are witnesses of’, the historical events on which the Christian creeds are based, above all the death and Resurrection of Jesus. St Luke tells us that, in writing his Gospel, he was one of many who were putting into writing what they had been told by those who ‘from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word’, and he was doing so in order that the recipient of his Gospel, Theophilus, ‘may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed’.<sup>30</sup> And the editor of the final chapter of St John’s Gospel tells us that the source of the Gospel is ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’, who ‘reclined next to Jesus at the Supper’: ‘This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true’.<sup>31</sup> My point here is not that we should believe what the New Testament says because of such claims within it,<sup>32</sup> but rather simply that the earliest Christian writings sought to persuade people to believe in the central Christian events on the grounds that their writers had seen these events or had learned of them from those who had seen them. They also sought to persuade people to believe in certain things, on the ground that Jesus had taught them. For Jesus had a

<sup>29</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. R. W. Thomson (Clarendon Press, 1971), 7–8.

<sup>30</sup> Luke 1: 1–4.

<sup>31</sup> John 21: 20–4.

<sup>32</sup> I argue in *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Clarendon Press, 2003) that the Gospels provide generally true accounts of the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus.

unique authority. This, the New Testament writers assume or explicitly claim, is shown by his doing miracles and rising from the dead. He was 'declared to be the Son of God . . . by resurrection from the dead'.<sup>33</sup> The earliest writings of the next century appealed to the New Testament not as authoritative scripture but as historical evidence. Clement tells us that the apostles' doubts were 'set at rest by the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead'.<sup>34</sup> Ignatius<sup>35</sup> and Justin<sup>36</sup> (or the author of *On the Resurrection* attributed to him) both emphasize that the disciples touched the risen Christ; and Justin writes that they were 'by every kind of proof persuaded that it was Himself'. Irenaeus appeals for the truth of his teaching to its being taught in churches in which there was a succession of bishops directly from the apostles. As I read Irenaeus, the main point of this appeal is that it appeals to the best historical evidence—we should 'have recourse to the most ancient churches with which the apostles held constant intercourse'.<sup>37</sup> He appeals to Polycarp who was 'instructed by apostles, and conversed with many who had seen Christ'.<sup>38</sup>

With the third century different strains of apologetic (never completely absent) became far more prevalent. The very success of the Church (through the blood of the martyrs, and not force of arms) and miracles of more obvious kinds associated therewith were put forward as evidence that the Church founded by Christ had a divine guarantee of its authority.<sup>39</sup> Aquinas,<sup>40</sup> among others in the Middle Ages, stressed the value of miracles as evidence for the truth of Christianity. The point was made that virtually no miracles were associated with Muhammad, founder of Islam, the main rival religion to Christianity in the Mediterranean world after the seventh century.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Romans: 1: 4.

<sup>34</sup> Clement, *First Epistle to the Corinthians Early Christian Writings*, trans. by M. Stainforth (Penguin, 1968), 42.

<sup>35</sup> *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, 3.

<sup>36</sup> *On the Resurrection*, 9 (*The Writings of the Fathers*, Vol. 2. Justin Martyr and Athenagoras, trans. M. Dodds, G. Reith, and B. P. Pratten (T. and T. Clark, 1868)).

<sup>37</sup> *Against Heresies* 3. 41 (*The Writings of the Fathers*, Vol. 5, Irenaeus, Vol. I, trans. A. Roberts and W. H. Rambault (T. and T. Clark, 1868)).

<sup>38</sup> *Against Heresies* 3.3.4.

<sup>39</sup> See Origen, *On First Principles*, 4.1.5.

<sup>40</sup> *Summa Theologiae* 3a. 43.4.

<sup>41</sup> See J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, Vol. 2, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) 238.

These arguments were developed to include the argument that the fact the Church had divine authority meant that we should believe the details of its teaching, not merely for the historical reason that its testimony had been handed down from Christ but because Christ had endowed it with a spiritual gift. Thus, already Irenaeus: 'It is incumbent to obey the presbyters who are in the Church—those who, as I have shown, possess the succession from the apostles; those who, together with the succession of the episcopate, have received the certain gift [charisma] of truth, according to the good pleasure of the Father.'<sup>42</sup> This kind of argument, crystallized later in the form that Church Councils or the Pope were infallible,<sup>43</sup> of course only works if it can be shown that the later Church has divine authority, and so needs to be backed up by arguments of the earlier kinds. Still, it can lead to the authentication of particular doctrines when the historical evidence that Jesus taught them is thin.

The systematic listing of a catalogue of kinds of evidence in favour of the truth of Christian doctrine by Duns Scotus at the beginning of his systematic theology, the *Ordinatio*, may have been untypical of medieval thinkers, but all the kinds of evidence he mentions were known to, and cited in an unsystematic way by, other writers, and Scotus himself quotes other writers, normally Augustine, who cite these kinds of evidence. He lists ten separate reasons for the credibility of Holy Scripture, and thus of the doctrines which can be derived from it: (1) *Praenuntiatio prophetica* (the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy in the New); (2) *Scripturarum concordia* (scriptures have a common message, and that includes the common witness of the New Testament writers to the teaching and deeds of Jesus); (3) *Auctoritas Scribentium* (the human authors' conviction that they spoke with God's authority); (4) *Diligentia recipientium* (the careful way in which the Church formed the canon of scripture); (5) *Rationabilitas contentarum* (the intrinsic probability of its doctrines); (6) *Irrationabilitas errorum* (the inadequacy of objections); (7), *Ecclesiae stabilitas* (the long and constant witness of the Church); (8) *Miraculorum limpiditas* (Biblical and later miracles, including the great miracle of the conversion of the western world); (9) *Testimonia non fidelium* (alleged prophecies of pagan writers), and (10)

<sup>42</sup> *Against Heresies*, 4.26.2.

<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a. 2ae. 1.10.

*Promissorum efficacia* (the sanctifying power of the Church's teaching in the lives of the faithful).<sup>44</sup> (1), (2), (3), (4), and (8) are all aspects of historical evidence for the miraculous foundation events of Christianity; (7), (8), and (10) involve the Church's fidelity to the teaching entrusted to it, confirmed by miracles; and its sanctifying efficacy; (5), (6), and (9) involve the prior probability of what was taught.

The reason why, despite the example of Scotus, detailed historical arguments for the general correctness of the Gospel accounts of the life, teaching, death, and Resurrection of Jesus became much less prevalent in apologetic after the third century was, I suggest, because as time went by, the chain of witnesses required to authenticate the historical events became longer and longer and so it became more and more difficult to show by a detailed historical argument that there was, or was not, at some stage misreporting. The Renaissance and the Enlightenment, however, developed an awareness of how to assess historical evidence, and put Christian apologists and their opponents in a much better position than the medieval world to detect (by comparing texts) where scribes have miscopied, and to trace common sources of events reported by more than one author.<sup>45</sup> This led to a renewed emphasis on the historical evidence for miracles recorded in the New Testament and above all the Resurrection (as opposed to miracles of the later Church). The crucial need for miracles to confirm a purported revelation was central to the apologetics of eighteenth-century British liberal Protestants such as Locke,<sup>46</sup> Butler,<sup>47</sup> and Paley.<sup>48</sup> All three writers gave careful arguments, far more rigorous than those of their predecessors, for why revelation was needed and required confirmation from miracles; and

<sup>44</sup> *Ordinatio*, Prologue, 100–19.

<sup>45</sup> The considerable controversy in eighteenth-century Britain about the historicity of the Resurrection was made much more sophisticated by the application to it of the new mathematics of probability, the first application of this mathematics to a historical claim. On how Hume's discussion of miracles was considerably less sophisticated than that of his more mathematically minded contemporaries, see John Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>46</sup> See John Locke, *A Discourse on Miracles* (1702) and some of *A Third Letter Concerning Toleration* (1692), both contained in I. T. Ramsey, (ed.), *John Locke's The Reasonableness of Christianity* (A. and C. Black Ltd., 1958). Locke's view on the matter may represent a change from his position in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) 4.18.4, as Ramsey comments on p. 99, n. 1.

<sup>47</sup> See Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion* (1736) Part 2, esp. ch. 7.

<sup>48</sup> William Paley, *The Evidences of Christianity* (1794), esp. the 'Preparatory Considerations', in which he writes 'In what way can a revelation be made, but by miracles?'

they claimed that no religion other than Christianity (understood as including ancient Judaism) is backed by well-authenticated miracles. Thus, Paley claims that ‘the only event in the history of the human species, which admits of comparison with the propagation of Christianity’ is Islam. And he repeated the medieval claim that ‘Mahomet did not found his pretensions . . . upon proofs of supernatural agency, capable of being known and attested by others’.<sup>49</sup> The First Vatican Council affirmed that the content of divine revelation, that is the content of particular Christian doctrines, can be made credible by ‘external signs’, and it seems to have had in mind mainly Biblical miracles.<sup>50</sup> I conclude that, in some form or other (whether detailed historical arguments about the New Testament claims, or appeal to contemporary miracles and the conversion of the western world), ramified natural theology belongs centrally to Christian tradition and is most prominent in the New Testament.

With the exception of some fifth-century followers of Pelagius, all Christian writers recognized that God’s help (the ‘grace of God’) was necessary if we are to do good things and good things are to happen to us. And so our acquisition of Christian belief would require that grace. But that doctrine gives no ground for supposing that the ‘grace of God’ does not operate by leading us to appreciate the force of arguments. If there is a God, he gives us, and sustains in us, our rational nature and may help us in many other ways to understand the force of arguments—which is not to deny that God may sometimes supernaturally reveal to some of us by an overwhelming religious experience both his own existence and specifically Christian doctrines.

## THEOLOGICAL THESES ON THE LIMITS TO HUMAN REASON

While only a minority of theologians, and those mainly of recent centuries, have denied the relevance of inquiry and argument to reli-

<sup>49</sup> *A View of the Evidences of Christianity*, part II, section 3.

<sup>50</sup> Denzinger 3009, 3033, and 3034. Subsequent Catholic tradition has been divided about the extent to which what it has come to call ‘the motives of credibility’, that is, reasoning from publicly observable phenomena, can play a role in the acquisition of true Christian faith—see Avery Dulles, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For* (Oxford University Press, 1994), ch. 10.

gious belief, somewhat weaker theses than the thesis that it is wrong to consider any arguments for or against any religious claim have been put forward by a greater number of theologians. One thesis is the thesis that the grace which we need to appreciate the force of arguments must be supernatural in the sense of God intervening in our mental processes in a miraculous way. Aquinas held that such intervention will alone explain the fact that ‘some believe and some do not, when both groups have seen the same miracle and heard the same preaching’.<sup>51</sup> He is not sensitive to the fact that different people may have different background evidence—for example, some may have heard more testimony than others to the effect that ‘all knowledgeable people admit that there is a God’; and also that as a result of our genes and upbringing or even our own bad past choices (to try to inculcate in ourselves certain criteria), we may have different inductive criteria from each other. One does not need a hypothesis of miraculous grace to explain why ‘some believe and some do not’. That is not to deny that miraculous grace has enabled some people to see some religious truths, especially specifically Christian ones, which they would not otherwise have acquired. Those who claimed that miraculous grace was necessary in this connection quoted the words of Jesus to Peter (cited in St Matthew’s Gospel) after Peter had recognized Jesus as Messiah: ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in Heaven’.<sup>52</sup> But this saying of Jesus gives no ground for supposing that other people who come to learn a lot more about what happened after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as Messiah (including Jesus’s words of response to Peter) need to acquire their beliefs about Jesus in the same way.

Then there is the view that supernatural grace is necessary for the right sort of convinced belief. Duns Scotus, for example, understanding faith as belief, emphasized the later influential distinction between ‘acquired faith’ (faith acquired by natural reasoning) and ‘infused faith’. One could, he held, obtain a purely acquired faith in credal truths by normal methods of human reasoning<sup>53</sup> without the help of grace (which Aquinas denies), but it needs to be completed by divine

<sup>51</sup> *Summa Theologiae* 2a. 2ae. 6.1. See my pp. 240–53 for how the notion of ‘miracle’ is to be understood, and for what would constitute evidence of the occurrence of a miracle.

<sup>52</sup> Matthew 16: 17.

<sup>53</sup> *In Lib 3 sent dist* 23 q1.



grace to turn it into infused faith. The infusion of grace will render the assent to the credal truths a convinced one, and will move the believer to love, and that will give the believer the right sort of faith. Although, Scotus held, no one (even with convinced belief) could know that they had infused faith, everyone with convinced faith should believe that they did have it. As we shall see in Chapter 4, Aquinas did not require the kind of belief needed for 'formed faith' (faith formed by love, the sort of faith needed for our salvation) to be a totally convinced belief. I shall be arguing in Chapter 4 on general philosophical grounds that the kind of belief needed for such 'formed faith' is a much weaker belief than Aquinas, let alone Scotus, required. And I shall be arguing that early Church practice implicitly demanded only that weaker belief.

I read in the decrees of the first Vatican Council a statement of the need for grace in order to have any Christian faith (in the sense of 'belief') at all (and so no distinction between acquired and infused faith),<sup>54</sup> but no statement of the way in which grace acts, and I find no agreed view on the latter in earlier Christian writings. In default of this, and in view of the strong Christian tradition of natural theology, bare and ramified, I suggest that there is no reason from Christian tradition to insist that the grace of God necessary for the acquisition of Christian belief must operate supernaturally on the individual believer at the time of his belief-acquisition.

Finally, we need to consider the yet more moderate view of Alvin Plantinga, expressed in connection with his account of the 'warrant' of Christian belief which I discussed in Chapter 2 that, if there is a God, the proper functioning of our cognitive processes will 'normally' lead us to acquire Christian beliefs in a basic way. He claims, following Calvin, that all humans have a cognitive faculty, the *sensus divinitatis* which makes us all aware of the presence of God, or would do so but for the debilitating effect of sin. For some of us, the Holy Spirit operates as a further cognitive mechanism which leads us to believe the central claims of Christian creeds. 'In the typical case . . . Christian belief is *immediate*; it is formed in the basic way',<sup>55</sup> although rational arguments can function to 'rebut defeaters', that is, to show that counter-evidence does not show the basic belief to be false. The belief being basic is a

<sup>54</sup> Denzinger 3010.

<sup>55</sup> *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 259.

matter of it simply arising, for example, when a person looks at a beautiful landscape or reads the Bible; it then simply seems to that person that, for example, 'Yes there is a God' or 'Yes, Christ was the Son of God'.

While it might be the case that some, or even most, people acquire their religious belief in a basic way, I argued in Chapter 2 that Plantinga's account of what constitutes those beliefs being 'warranted' is highly unsatisfactory; and that if people do acquire their religious beliefs in a basic way, the Principle of Credulity provides a better justification than Plantinga's theory of warrant for their doing so. Plantinga sees his model as the model of both Aquinas and Calvin. But that seems to me dubious. Both of these authors may have thought that most of us do acquire religious beliefs in this way, and that the beliefs so acquired are rational. But I see no evidence in the text at any rate of Aquinas for supposing that he thought that their being warranted consists in their being acquired in this way. What happens according to Aquinas is that God operates (supernaturally—see above) on us so as to produce in us a warranted belief that He exists; but Aquinas does not say that the warrant of the belief consists in its being produced by God. As far as anything Aquinas says, its warrant may consist in the belief seeming evidently true or being seen to follow from evidently true premisses, even though God causes us to have a belief with those features which give it warrant.

I conclude this section by making the obvious point that cultures are very different from each other, and so are people from the same culture. In some cultures there is so much testimony to the existence or non-existence of God that argument is irrelevant. Some people have overwhelming experiences of the presence of God, some do not. But, in my view, in most places at the present time the existence of God is a disputed matter, and relatively few people have overwhelming experiences of His presence. Hence, if Christian theism is true, the need for argument is, I suggest, greater than at any time in the past fifteen hundred years, both to render the existence of God and particular Christian doctrines probable and to rebut objections to them. And argument of any sophistication means natural theology—bare or ramified. Objectively, it is important to investigate our religious beliefs, and there is no reason to suppose that it will not be profitable to do so.

## RIVAL CLAIMS ON TIME

Whether someone's investigation of their religious beliefs has been adequate depends (as well as on the other factors which I have considered) on the time (money and energy)<sup>56</sup> at their disposal and on the rival claims on that time. In a matter as important as religion, perhaps no amount of investigation would be adequate if we had no other greatly worthwhile things to do. However, the rationality<sub>5</sub> of our religious beliefs depends on whether we have done enough investigation, given the rival claims on the very limited amount of time which we humans have on Earth. If I have duties to provide for my relatives, to save my children from death or degradation, or to feed the starving, then clearly it matters less that I should pursue religious inquiry for any great time. It certainly does not follow, however, that there is no duty at all to pursue religious inquiry or that this does not matter at all in these circumstances; the factors which I outlined earlier as to why it matters to acquire true religious beliefs are weighty ones. Locke claimed that almost everyone even in his day had time enough for religious investigation and had a duty to pursue it:

Besides his particular calling for the support of this life, everyone has a concern in a future life, which he is bound to look after. This engages his thoughts in religion; and here it mightily lies upon him to understand and reason right. Men, therefore, cannot be excused from understanding the words, and framing the general notions relating to religion, right. The one day of seven, besides other days of rest, allows in the Christian world time enough for this (had they no other idle hours) if they would but make use of these vacancies from their daily labour, and apply themselves to an improvement of knowledge with as much diligence as they often do to a great many other things that are useless.<sup>57</sup>

However, since the major reason why true religious beliefs matter is that thereby we can conduct our lives aright (e.g. seek deep and lasting well-being, serve our neighbours in the right way, and worship whatever God there may be), clearly we must not devote so much time to religious inquiry that we have little time left for acting on the resulting beliefs.

<sup>56</sup> I do not always bother to repeat the phrase 'money and energy' for the rest of this section, but take it as read.

<sup>57</sup> John Locke, *Conduct of the Understanding*, § 8.

Religious traditions such as Christianity have always stressed that, though having true beliefs about religion is important, it is equally important to do the right thing with them, act on them with the right purposes.

It is important that the process of investigation should not prevent worthwhile action, and it can do this, not merely by taking time which could be devoted to the action. There is the possibility that investigation will hamper someone's ability to act when the time comes for that, by producing such confusion of mind that he is unable to act decisively, and in that case it is appropriate to give very little time to investigation. Newman drew our attention to this danger in *the Grammar of Assent*.<sup>58</sup> It is clearly a very real one. There are many people of strong religious faith who come to have doubts about the truth of their religious beliefs and then investigate them at length. After investigation their theoretical conviction remains but the process of investigation has led to such self-questioning that action has become difficult. Clearly, someone who is likely to react to long investigation in this way should devote only a very small amount of time to religious investigation. For, if investigating the way to get to a place is going to damage a person's ability to travel on whatever road investigation suggests is the right one, there is no point in investigating for long. Such a person should set out on whatever road a brief investigation suggests to be the right one.

So then, the amount of investigation needed to obtain a rational, belief about religion will depend on the importance of true religious belief, the probability that investigation will achieve something, and the rival claims on our time (money and energy). The probability that investigation will achieve something depends largely on the initial probability on our evidence of whatever religious belief we have. If, on our evidence, it is virtually certain that there is a God, or virtually certain that there is no God, investigation becomes less worthwhile.

## NON-RATIONAL REASONS FOR RELIGIOUS BELIEF

I have argued that it is very important to have a true religious belief, and that the best we can do towards getting one is to investigate. Some

<sup>58</sup> See J. H. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 177 ff

investigation is obligatory and it is very good to investigate more than duty requires. A belief probably true (on objective criteria) which has been adequately investigated is a rational<sub>5</sub> belief. We saw, however, at the end of the last chapter that there are reasons for cultivating some belief other than its probable truth, and we must now consider whether there is any other reason for getting oneself to believe that there is a God (or that there is no God), or to believe other credal propositions apart from the reason that rational inquiry shows them to be true.<sup>59</sup> There have been many writers in the history of Christian thought who have suggested that there are reasons for belief in the Christian Creed other than the likelihood of its truth; not that they wished to say that it was not true, but only that there were reasons for believing it to be true other than that it was likely to be true. Some of these reasons, it is suggested, give rise to obligations to cultivate a belief; some merely make it good for someone to do so. These various reasons prove to be examples of the kinds of general non-rational reasons for belief which I outlined at the end of Chapter 2.

First, one might claim that the duty to believe the Gospel when one hears it follows from the general duty to believe people when they tell us what they have done or experienced. Those who preach the Christian Gospel belong to a community which purports to have had a revelation. They may claim our belief partly in virtue of religious experiences which the unbeliever has not shared. Those who deny that there is a God do so on the basis of evidence which all can see and assess; they do not claim our unbelief because of what they, unlike we, have seen and experienced. So there is no corresponding duty to believe them. Maybe the duty to believe informants does not exist when what they tell us is very improbable, but if it is not very improbable there is perhaps that obligation. A major difficulty here is that most of us are aware of a number of rival claims to have received a religious revelation, of which the Christian Gospel is only one. Sometimes these revelations are incompatible, and so if you believe one you cannot believe the others. (God's purported revelation to Muhammad, the Koran, contains propositions which explicitly deny central Christian doctrines—see p. 242.) Since, however,

<sup>59</sup> Although the discussion in this section is concerned solely with reasons for holding the belief that there is a God (and beliefs about His properties and actions), or the belief that there is no God, the application of the general principles put forward here to the case of non-theistic religions should be apparent.

it is, as I have suggested, plausible to suppose that the probability of the belief has something to do with the duty to believe it (there being no duty to believe anything *too* improbable), the obvious thing to say is that the duty in such a case is the duty to believe the most probable claim to revelation, so long as that is not too improbable.

I consider next various suggestions that the holding of a religious belief is necessary or at any rate very useful for the attainment of further good ends, which would not otherwise be attainable. A number of different suggestions of this kind have been made, and I shall consider the most important of them. First, there is the suggestion that belief that there is a God (and perhaps other religious beliefs as well) is a necessary condition of attaining Heaven; only by believing shall we attain the most worthwhile thing in the universe. (Of course, every advocate of this suggestion admits that a believer has in some way to act on, or to be ready to act on, his belief in order to get to Heaven.<sup>60</sup> But the point claimed is that belief is necessary.) One should distinguish here different views on why belief is necessary for attaining Heaven. A crude view is that belief is necessary for getting to Heaven because God rewards belief with Heaven (and unbelief with Hell). A less crude view would maintain that you can only get to Heaven if you do certain actions and it is impossible, in practice, to do those actions unless you believe. I shall consider the less crude view shortly when I come to consider whether such belief can be necessary for the performance of worthwhile actions; but, meanwhile, the crude view. It is not altogether clear to me whether Pascal was advocating the crude view or the less crude view, but I shall take him as an example of the crude view (though I may be being grossly unfair to him). He wrote:

Let us then examine the point and say 'God is', or 'He is not'. But to which side shall we incline? Reason can decide nothing here . . . A game is being played . . . heads or tails will turn up. What will you wager?<sup>61</sup>

If you bet on God and win, you win 'an infinity of infinitely happy life'; whereas if you bet on God and lose, you lose at most a mere finite amount. If you bet on no God, or, what amounts to the same thing, refuse to bet, then, if you win, you gain at most a mere finite amount,

<sup>60</sup> See Chs. 4 and 5 for what such action might amount to.

<sup>61</sup> B. Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (Penguin Books, 1966), No. 418.

mere temporary happiness; whereas if you lose, you obtain ‘an eternity of miseries’.<sup>62</sup> Hence, you should bet on God, and the context reveals that the bet, the wager, involves believing that there is a God (as well as some specifically Christian beliefs); and in some way acting upon these beliefs. I shall assume that the Pascalian believer acts on his beliefs in the right way, for otherwise—Pascal would hold—there is no point in having them. Betting on God thus involves becoming Christian; and not betting on God involves not acquiring the necessary belief and so not becoming Christian. You ought to bet on God because the possible gain if you are right is so great and the possible loss, if you are wrong, is so small.

A well-known difficulty with Pascal’s Wager is that his presentation of the alternative world states is confused. If the alternatives are meant to be ‘there is a Christian God’ (that is, a God who has (roughly) the properties and has done (roughly) the actions affirmed in Christian creeds), and ‘there is no after-life’, then Pascal has ignored other possible states of affairs—e.g. ‘There is a God who consigns Christians to eternal Hell and non-Christians to eternal Heaven’. Alternatively, Pascal may have intended his alternative states to be simply ‘There is a Christian God’ and ‘There is not a Christian God’. But, in that case, it is unclear what are the outcomes and so the gains and losses of the two policies on the second alternative—Heaven remains a possible outcome for the non-Christian on this alternative.

Now, clearly, we can represent the alternative states as two or many or infinite. Yet perhaps the most useful way to represent them is threefold:

- (A) There is a Christian God (and so an after-life).
- (B) There is no after-life.
- (C) There is an after-life but no Christian God.

The outcomes of the two alternative policies, becoming or not becoming Christian, are then, we may suppose for the moment, as Pascal stated them for alternatives (A) and (B); but there is a variety of possible outcomes under the third alternative. The outcomes under the alternative policies will therefore be as follows:

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 429. The rationality of betting on God is often analysed in terms of Bayesian decision theory, see Ch. 2, n. 24.

	(A)	(B)	(C)
(1) Becoming Christian	Christian life of worship and service followed by eternal Heaven	Christian life of worship and service	Christian life of worship and service followed by?
(2) Not becoming Christian	Worldly life followed by eternal Hell	Worldly life	Worldly life followed by?

So, even granted that (A<sub>1</sub>) is infinitely worth having and (A<sub>2</sub>) is to be avoided at all costs, whether policy (1) is to be preferred to policy (2) clearly depends on how probable it is that under state (C) Christian belief rather than unbelief will get a large reward; and how probable it is that state (C) is the true one. If there is very little chance of the latter, Pascal's argument is unaffected. But if there is quite a chance of the latter, everything turns on whether it is probable that Christian belief as such, however acquired, is rewarded or penalized in that state. On some possibilities, under (C) Christian belief would be punished or at any rate not rewarded; whereas some incompatible belief might be much better rewarded, e.g. if there is a God hostile to Christians. Pascal needs to show that such possibilities are remote if his argument is to work. As Pascal presented the Wager, nothing seemed to turn on exact probabilities (e.g. just how probable it is that there is a God); we have now seen that the probability of the Christian religious Creed being the true one in contrast to the probability of some other creed being the true one crucially affects rational conduct. Roughly, we may say that belief in the Christian God will be the rational policy (that is, roughly, the policy which will most probably have the best pay-off) only if the Christian religious Creed (with its rewards and penalties as understood by Pascal) is more probable than any other creed which postulates an after-life with rewards and penalties distributed in a significantly different way.

A further difficulty is whether Pascal has stated the gains and losses under the Christian Creed correctly. It may be that rewards are offered to those who trust God, and that in order to trust God you do not have to believe that He exists. Is the threat of punishment the threat of a punishment which literally lasts for ever? And is the reward offered to those who force themselves to believe things which their reason tells them to be false and then in some way act on those beliefs? Or is the



reward offered only to those who do not try to force themselves to adopt irrational<sub>5</sub> beliefs? Contemporary religious opinion, both Catholic and Protestant, does not in general accept Pascal's account of the gains and losses. In Chapter 6 I shall give moral reasons and reasons of New Testament exposition for supposing that Pascal has misstated the gains and losses.

Finally, there is the difficulty that, quite apart from moral considerations and Biblical evidence, Pascal is claiming that God has made a world in which a supremely worthwhile goal is to be attained by cultivating an irrational belief (by setting yourself to believe that something is probable when, in fact, you believe now that it is not). I find it implausible to suppose that God would have made a world of this character, for the following reason. You can only come to see that arguments such as that of Pascal work by the careful exercise of reason, and that means not merely by following the steps which Pascal set out but also, as we have seen, by following steps to show, for example, that the Christian religion is more probable than many other religious systems. If someone just abandoned his rationality, he might draw some very different conclusions from Pascal's Wager from the ones which Pascal wishes him to draw. So if God values our making Pascalian moves, He values our exercise of reason. It would be odd in the extreme if He then valued our making the final move of acquiring the belief that He exists by our denying our reason. I conclude that it is rather unlikely that God has set up a world in which there is a very large reward for forcing oneself to acquire a belief which seems initially to the believer probably false.

There are, however, other desirable ends (other than the direct reward of Heaven) which might be forwarded if a person has a religious belief. It may be a good thing—for reasons to be discussed in Chapter 5—that we should act on, live by, the assumption that there is a God, and such action may be rewarded with Heaven. I made the contrast at the end of Chapter 1 between acting on a proposition and believing the proposition (and I shall discuss in Chapter 5 something of what this 'acting on' the assumption that there is a God, amounts to). You can, in theory, act on propositions which you believe to be very improbable. However, in practice, it may be that many of us can only act on, live by, the assumption that there is a God if we actually believe that there is a God. We cannot live the Christian life without having the belief to back

it. In that case, for those of us for whom this is so there is another argument providing a non-rational reason for belief—believe in order that you may act-as-if. (Note the contrast between this view that believing will help you to act-as-if with Pascal's suggestion which I discussed in Chapter 1 that acting-as-if will help you to believe.)

Next, it may be suggested that, for many of us, religious belief is a necessary condition or much moral action, the desirability of which, unlike that of the action or acting as if there is a God, is in no way connected with the truth or falsity of religion. A person may believe that he ought to pursue an honest and upright course of life, and believe that he cannot do this without a religious belief (including, perhaps, the belief that honesty is rewarded in a life after death). So, in order to live an honest life, he may try to persuade himself that religion is true. Or it may be that there is some one heroic moral action which someone believes that he ought to perform but cannot perform without religious belief; and to secure the performance of which he tries to persuade himself into religious belief. Clearly, this argument, like the last one, has force only for people of a certain psychological make-up. There are those who can do heroic moral actions without religious belief, but I would think that there are also those who need religious belief if they are to do heroic moral actions.

Next, we have suggestions put forward by a number of writers that some belief in some propositions of religion is a necessary condition for the acquisition of further religious knowledge or of really coming to know that the original propositions are true, or even of understanding the original propositions.

Basil Mitchell has urged that a high degree of commitment to an ideology is needed in fields such as politics or education if we are to pursue the consequences of our ideology far enough to feel its force or criticize it adequately. 'A man who is prepared to change his mind about any of his beliefs whenever it appears to him that the evidence tells against them will not be able to hold on to them long enough to work them out and test them properly.'<sup>63</sup> The same point applies with greater force, Mitchell urges, to religion. The difficulty with Mitchell's suggestion is that it runs up against my earlier claim that belief is involuntary; that you can only believe something if you believe that the evidence

<sup>63</sup> Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (Macmillan, 1973), 130.

supports it. If that is right, the only way in which you can save your belief in the face of negative evidence is by disguising from yourself the negative force of the evidence. But I do not think that Mitchell really wishes to recommend this, because he recommends that if there is too much negative evidence over a long period, people should give up their belief. But if people systematically disguise from themselves the existence of negative evidence when it first appears, they will never know when there has been much negative evidence over a long period. I suggest that we understand Mitchell's recommendation in the light of my argument about the involuntary character of belief as a recommendation that people who are, most of the time, believers should hang on to the practice of religion, should act as if it were true (*not*, should believe it), on their off-days (when on balance the evidence seems to be against it). The latter seems an eminently sensible recommendation. One should not give up something which has seemed to one of supreme value and which has dominated one's way of life without considerable serious thought—this from respect to one's former intuitions, spiritual wrestlings, and allegiance; and, as I shall argue later, it may sometimes be sensible for other reasons to act on an assumption which one does not believe.

Anselm makes a claim apparently somewhat similar to that of Mitchell. Anselm commends belief in order to deepen our understanding of spiritual reality: 'I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe,—that unless I believed, I should not understand.'<sup>64</sup> But Anselm is, I think, of a less rationalist spirit than Mitchell. If Anselm were to agree that, to believe something, you have to believe that the evidence supports it, he might still commend belief despite the evidence (which would involve getting yourself to believe that the evidence, in fact, supports your belief). Anselm's ground for belief in the passage which I quoted is that belief is a necessary condition for understanding the content of Christian doctrine. We cannot take this quite literally, for clearly you cannot believe something unless you understand what you believe. But what I think he is saying is that some initial belief in the propositions of religion is necessary in order to acquire a deep understanding of what is involved in those propositions. In this Anselm could well be right, but

<sup>64</sup> St Anselm, *Prosologion* I, trans. S. N. Deane (Open Court Publishing Co., 1903).

presumably having the original belief does not guarantee subsequent deep understanding. And it may be that if the belief is acquired in a way which involves self-deceit, that irrational act hampers the progress of the soul towards any subsequent depth of understanding. There is, after all, some plausibility in supposing that resistance to truth in a certain field will not help in the process of subsequent acquisition of truth. Anselm needs to provide us with some sort of argument to show that, *however* the belief is acquired, it will help in the process of understanding. Further, and crucially, the good of understanding the consequences of a false proposition would be acquired at too high a cost if that cost is having a totally false world-view. Yet making oneself acquire a religious belief which evidence suggests to be false is likely to get one to hold a totally false world-view, and so to be avoided.

Finally, we have the view that to have a religious belief gives people happiness and should be cultivated for that reason. A variant on this is the view that to have any sort of *Weltanschauung* is conducive to happiness, and if evidence does not favour theism against atheism or conversely, people can take their choice. Just as for Hume it was a good thing to avoid general scepticism on non-rational grounds, because beliefs conduce to happiness, so, more specifically, the suggestion here is that it is a good thing to avoid scepticism about religion, because beliefs in this area conduce to happiness. Given empirical evidence that theistic (or, as the case may be, atheistic) belief would conduce to happiness for a given individual, that seems in itself a good reason for him to cultivate it. It could not, however, plausibly be regarded as giving rise to an *obligation* to cultivate theistic (or atheistic) belief.

So much for various non-rational reasons for holding a belief that there is a God. Note that these reasons fall into two groups. Some of them commend goals which would be forwarded by religious belief, the desirability of attaining which is quite independent of whether or not there is a God. Happiness is a good thing, whether or not there is a God. And even if the way to get the happiness is to believe that there is a God, it is the belief that there is a God and not directly God that produces that peace of mind. Whereas believing that there is a God in order to act as if there is a God is presumably only a good thing if there is a God although, of course, we may think it worthwhile to act as if there is a God, even if the probabilities seem against it. And the Heaven which Pascal (on my interpretation) claims that God gives to the

believer is clearly only attainable by the believer if there is a God—even if it is a good thing for someone to believe that there is a God, when the evidence is against it.

### IS THE LIKELIHOOD OF ITS TRUTH THE SOLE REASON FOR CULTIVATING RELIGIOUS BELIEF?

Should anyone cultivate religious belief for any of these non-rational reasons? I argued earlier that, for various reasons, people have a moral obligation to cultivate rational belief about religion, and also that people have various good non-obligatory reasons for doing so. If there is a God, there is an obligation to worship and in other ways to please Him. If there is a God, there is a moral obligation to cultivate a true theistic belief in order to have a right influence on those dependent on us – children and pupils (and if someone is especially qualified to pursue inquiries in this field, to have a right influence on the unlearned). If there is no God, there is a moral obligation to cultivate a true atheistic belief for the latter reasons. There is a moral obligation to find out what our moral obligations are and so to cultivate rational belief about religion in order to know whether to worship and to perform other acts which would be good only if there is a God who wanted us to perform them; and to know how to teach those dependent on us.

Not all the non-rational reasons for cultivating religious beliefs give rise to obligations. We saw, however, that there is some plausibility in supposing that there is a duty to believe the most probable claim to revelation, so long as that was not too improbable; and, perhaps, some obligation to induce in oneself belief that there is a God if this is necessary in order to do moral actions, when one would not otherwise be able to do them and there was an obligation to do them. Against this, there is the clear obligation, described above, to pursue some religious inquiry in order to ascertain whether we have a duty to worship and how to influence those dependent on us. If such an inquiry concludes that it is likely that there is a God, then the non-rational reasons for cultivating belief that there is a God are irrelevant, for we would already believe. If the inquiry concludes that it is unlikely that there is a God, then there will be an obligation on the inquirer to influence in an atheistic

direction any who are dependent on him. He will not be able to do that if he induces in himself a religious belief. In such a situation of conflicting obligation, the inquirer will always fail to fulfil one obligation, whatever he does; but (see pp. 37–8) he will be blameworthy or culpable only if he fails to act on the obligation which he believes to be the stronger obligation. How are such obligations as I have discussed to be weighed against each other? I have no quick knock-down argument here, but I think that reflection on what is involved in such situations should lead to the view that the obligation to teach the truth to those for whom we are responsible, and especially our children, whether that truth be atheistic or religious, is very considerable and very little could override it. If religion is false, it matters greatly that children should not waste their lives in prayer, worship, and evangelism, and in conforming to moral codes which derive their point from religion. If religion is true, it matters desperately that children should learn to practise it in order to worship God and attain deep and permanent well-being. Very little could, I suggest, override the obligation to ascertain the truth about religion and to hand it on to those for whom we are responsible, and especially our children. But not all of us are in positions of parental responsibility. If one has no obligation to influence others aright, then any obligations to induce religious belief will arise only from an obligation to believe what others tell us on the basis of their religious experience (to trust them beyond what the Principle of Testimony commends); or an obligation to do some moral act which the agent would otherwise be unable to do. I would not myself give very much weight to the former obligation; and the latter could operate only in very special circumstances.

In the absence of any weighty obligation of these kinds to influence others aright, there seems nothing wrong in the atheist inducing in himself religious belief (for any of the reasons which we have considered), for he would owe it to no-one not to do so. If, however, religious inquiry leads anyone to the belief that there is a God, they would be morally highly culpable (for reasons quite apart from those which relate to their position as parents and teachers) if they try to persuade themselves out of this belief or even allow themselves, through negligence, to slide into unbelief—given that they recognize that if there is a God to whom their existence is due they have a duty to worship and obey Him. For they are only likely to fulfil their duties to Him if they

continue to hold what appears to them to be the true belief that He exists. Hence, they have a duty to ensure that they do not, on this crucial matter, mutilate their rational nature, which, they believe, God has given to them. The only possible obligation to hold an atheistic belief parallel to those which we considered for theistic belief would arise if someone could only do certain moral acts if he believed that there was no God; and, hence, in order to do those acts, he might have an obligation to cultivate atheistic belief. But it is impossible to think of a plausible case where atheistic belief alone would make a moral act possible, let alone a case when an obligation to cultivate that belief in order to do the moral act would outweigh the duty to worship and in other ways to please God. There is a very strong obligation not to cultivate a belief that there is no God where the evidence suggests that there is a God; and it is not plausible to suppose that that obligation could be overridden. People have, no doubt, down the centuries cultivated unbelief or allowed themselves to slide into atheism for various bad non-rational reasons—e.g. in order to be able to commit other sins without a bad conscience. But this is surely one kind of unbelief which the Christian religion has rightly stigmatized as a great sin. Any obligations to hold theistic belief and to hold atheistic belief are not symmetrical.

I believe that my conclusion is very much in the spirit of Aquinas, although in the process of expounding his view he makes what I have argued earlier is a philosophical error. He seems to assume, as I shall show in my discussion of his account of faith in the next chapter, that if it seems to one that the evidence in favour of a proposition is not overwhelming, one can choose there and then whether or not to believe it.<sup>65</sup> This, I argued in Chapter 1, is a mistaken view. One's beliefs about whether the evidence favours a proposition determine one's beliefs about that proposition. All one can do about one's beliefs is to pursue investigation over a period, which may lead to a change of belief; or to set oneself to change one's beliefs by less rational means.

Given his assumption, Aquinas claims that one's duty is to believe what one believes to be supported by evidence. The duty to believe in God and Christ and so (on his view of faith—see Chapter 4) to have

<sup>65</sup> That faith in the sense of believing the Christian revelation is a free act of the believer (even though it requires the co-operation of divine grace) was also the view of the First Vatican Council—see Denzinger 3010 and 3035.

faith, arises, according to Aquinas, from the fact that people (normally) see that the evidence points in that direction—when they hear the Gospel preached to them (possibly after hearing the arguments of philosophers).

One must not, according to Aquinas, seek to avoid the pointing of reason, and if, for example, one's reason suggests that Christ is not God, it would be culpable to believe that He is, and conversely. Aquinas is quite explicit about this. He wrote that 'a mistaken conscience binds':

To believe in Christ is good in itself and necessary for salvation: all the same the will does not acquire a belief unless it is presented to it by reason. If the reason presents it as bad, then the will reaches to it in that light, not that it really is bad in itself, but because it appears so because of a condition that happens to be attached by the reason apprehending it... We should state quite simply that every act of will against reason, whether in the right or in the wrong, is always bad.<sup>66</sup>

Given that one cannot choose one's beliefs at the time, the natural amendment to Aquinas is to read him merely as holding that one should seek to have beliefs which are based on adequate investigation. And, indeed, Aquinas does also claim this in addition to the earlier claim, when he makes the point that there are truths which people ought to seek to discover and if their failure to discover them arises from negligence, they are culpable for not knowing those truths. He wrote that, if someone follows an erring conscience when the conscience is 'mistaken as a result of a voluntary error, whether directly or from negligence',<sup>67</sup> and the matter is one about which that person 'ought to know', he is culpable. 'If, however, it be an error arising from ignorance of some circumstances without any negligence that makes the act involuntary [i.e. it is an error which makes it the case that the agent does not do wrong voluntarily], then it excuses, so that the corresponding act of will is not bad.' If, as Aquinas held (see the next chapter), faith consists in believing that certain propositions are true, then, given this amendment, the obligation to have faith is, in effect, an obligation to pursue honest religious investigation and to hold whatever beliefs result from it. Aquinas expected that the resultant beliefs would normally be Christian

<sup>66</sup> St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a. 2ae. 19.5.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 1a. 2ae. 19.6.



beliefs but if, unfortunately, they were not, there would be no blame attached to not holding Christian beliefs; indeed, one would be culpable for holding them. Subject to the various qualifications which I have made in the course of this chapter, this seems basically correct. Thomist faith is only to be had for Thomist reasons.

## 4

# The Nature of Faith

So far in this book I have been concerned with propositional belief. I have analysed what it is to have a belief that so-and-so is the case, when it matters what we believe, and what we can do to improve our beliefs; and so I have analysed when belief is 'rational' in various senses of 'rational'. I claimed that it matters greatly that one should have a true belief about whether there is a God, what He is like and what He has done; and about whether and how we can attain a deep and permanent well-being which I am calling salvation. However, the virtue which the Christian religion commends is not propositional belief but the virtue called in English 'faith'. What is faith, and what is its relation to belief? The faith which the Christian religion commends is basically faith in a person or persons, God (or Christ) characterized as possessing certain properties and having done certain actions; and secondarily in some of the deeds which He has done, and the good things which He has provided and promised. Thus, in the Nicene Creed, the person who pledges his allegiance before being baptized or in the course of worship affirms (in Greek) πιστεύω εἰς ('I believe in' or 'I have faith in') '... one God, Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth...; and in one Lord Jesus Christ... and in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life...; one Holy Catholic and apostolic Church... the resurrection of the dead...'. But there have been different views in the Christian tradition as to what this 'belief in' or 'faith in' amounts to. In this chapter I shall spell these views out and show their relation to each other. We shall find that, despite appearances, advocates of the different views are not necessarily commending very different conduct or affirming very different doctrines from each other.

## THE THOMIST VIEW OF FAITH

First, then, there is what I shall call the Thomist view of faith. It is a view which is found in St Thomas Aquinas and has been held by many Protestants and many outside Christianity, and by many Christians long before Aquinas. Indeed, it is by far the most widespread and natural view of the nature of religious faith. This is the view that, with one addition and two qualifications, to have faith in God is simply to have a belief-that, to believe that God exists. Although to speak strictly, the object of faith is the ‘first truth’, God himself, to have that faith it is alone necessary that you believe a proposition, that God exists.<sup>1</sup> The person of religious faith is the person who has the theoretical conviction that there is a God.<sup>2</sup>

The addition which Aquinas adds to this simple doctrine is that to have faith in God, you have to believe not merely that there is a God, but certain other propositions as well. The existence of God could be demonstrated by natural theology, and so made known (*nota*); but—to speak strictly—it was a preamble of faith. More central to faith were the other propositions about what God is like and what acts He has done, and you have to believe these latter propositions on the ground that God has revealed them. The belief which is affirmed in the Nicene Creed in God as having done certain things (e.g. as ‘maker of Heaven and Earth’) is the belief that God did these things (e.g. ‘made Heaven and Earth’); the belief in the good things which God has promised and provided (e.g. ‘the resurrection of the dead’) is the belief that they are or will be (e.g. ‘there will be a resurrection of the dead’). Aquinas writes that ‘the things of faith surpass human understanding, and so man becomes aware of them only because God reveals them. To some, the prophets and apostles, for example, this revelation comes from God immediately; to others, the things of faith are announced by God’s

<sup>1</sup> Aquinas adds that ‘the only reason for formulating propositions is that through them we may have knowledge of things’, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a. 2ae. 1.2. ad.2.

<sup>2</sup> This equation of faith and belief was encouraged by the fact that, while one could make a distinction in Greek and Latin between ‘believing that’ so-and-so is the case and ‘believing in’ or having ‘faith in’ some person, it was made by what followed the one available verb (πιστεύω, *credo*). There was only one noun available in each language to denote the two states (πίστις, *fides*).

sending preachers of the faith.<sup>3</sup> The First Vatican Council also taught that this revelation is to be believed ‘on the authority of God himself who reveals it.’<sup>4</sup> We shall see the need for this clause in Chapter 7.

The first qualification on this view that faith is belief is that the belief that is involved is a belief which does not amount to scientific knowledge (*scientia*). Aquinas, like others, quotes the definition given by Hugh of St Victor that ‘faith (*fides*) is a form of mental certitude about absent realities that is greater than opinion (*opinio*) and less than scientific knowledge (*scientia*).’<sup>5</sup> Indeed, every Christian writer who has written about faith has said something similar. But this agreement on words conceals a very significant disagreement, of which some of the various writers seem not fully aware and which was not the subject of very much discussion. For Aquinas, the difference between faith and scientific knowledge (*scientia*) was that *scientia* involved not merely strong belief that something true was indeed true, but also understanding of what made it true. You had scientific knowledge that if you drop a ball it will fall to the ground, or that  $2 + 2 = 4$  if you understood the principles of physics or mathematics, which principles Aquinas thought to be in some sense necessary. But you had no scientific knowledge of isolated contingent matters of fact—this was the realm of *opinio*, though sometimes very well justified *opinio*—for example, that it is a sunny day or that I am now in Oxford. Now, Aquinas generally holds that faith is as strong a belief as the belief involved in scientific knowledge, differing from such knowledge only in that we do not understand what makes its object true: ‘The act of believing is firmly attached to one alternative [that the belief is true rather than not] and in this respect the believer is in the same state of mind as one who has scientific knowledge and understanding.’<sup>6</sup> Even the existence of God, he normally<sup>7</sup> holds, cannot be an object of *scientia*,<sup>8</sup> since only God can understand why there has to be a God.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 2a. 2ae. 6.1.

<sup>4</sup> H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (Herder, 1963), 3008.

<sup>5</sup> De Sacramentis 1.10.2.

<sup>6</sup> *Summa Theologiae* 2a. 2ae. 2.1.

<sup>7</sup> Aquinas is not totally consistent on this point. In *Summa Theologiae* 2a. 2ae. 1.5. ad.3 he seems to allow the claim of the objector that the existence of God can be an object of *scientia*. He is thus operating here with a wider understanding of *scientia*, according to which we can have *scientia* of anything demonstrable from evident non-revealed truths.

<sup>8</sup> Aquinas allows that theology can be a science (*scientia*) in a derivative sense that it develops the consequences of first principles revealed by God; see *Summa Theologiae* 1a. 1.2.

Despite his more usual insistence that the belief of faith has to be as strong as the belief involved in scientific knowledge, Aquinas does, at times, also allow that faith can be a matter of degree, so that for some who have faith there is still doubt.<sup>9</sup> And he allows that there can be greater faith in one person than in another, even in respect of being 'more certain' in one person than another. 'Greatness or smallness in faith is a fact'.<sup>10</sup>

The Thomist view of faith as a matter of having certain beliefs looks an odd view, because the Christian religion (like some other religions) normally regards faith as a virtue, something for having which the person of faith deserves praise and/or will be rewarded with salvation. Yet the Thomist person of faith may be a complete scoundrel, one who does his best to defy God. That leads to the second qualification on the Thomist view of faith as belief. For Aquinas, faith is not, as such, meritorious. Indeed, he explicitly allows that devils (who have enough true beliefs about God) have faith. In support of his view, he quotes the Letter of St James: 'You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.'<sup>11</sup> and he interprets the claim about their belief as a claim about their faith. However, although the devils have faith, there are, on the Thomist view, two things lacking to them, which they would need to have if their faith was to be meritorious. The first thing which the faith of the devils lack, in Aquinas's view, is that it does not come into being in the right way. It is not meritorious faith, because it is not a voluntary faith. Aquinas writes that 'the devils' faith is, so to speak, forced from them by the evidence of signs. That they believe, then, is in no way to the credit of their wills.' For the devils 'the signs of faith are so evident that they are forced to believe'.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, Aquinas holds that humans can choose whether or not to have faith—the signs are not for us so evident that we have to believe; and so, if we do believe, it is to our credit that we do. However, I argued in Chapter 1 that all belief, as such, is an involuntary matter. We cannot help having the beliefs that we do at the time at which we have them. All that we can do is to set ourselves to submit them to impartial investi-

<sup>9</sup> *Summa Theologiae* 2a. 2ae. 4.8. ad 1 accepts the claim of the objector that faith may at times admit of doubt.

<sup>10</sup> *Summa Theologiae* 2a. 2ae. 5.4.

<sup>11</sup> James: 2: 19.

<sup>12</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, 2a. 2ae. 5. 2 ad.3.

gation or change them in less reputable ways over a period. I argued in Chapter 3 that only in very unusual cases can it be good to try to acquire a belief specified in advance of investigation; but that, for those of us for whom it is neither overwhelmingly obvious that there is a God or overwhelmingly obvious that there is no God, it is normally obligatory to investigate the issue. Hence, if we are to maintain that Thomist faith is a voluntary matter, we must maintain that the voluntariness of it is a matter of its resulting from adequate investigation. (Those few to whom the existence of God is overwhelmingly obvious will be in the same position as the devils, and for them Thomist faith will not be meritorious in this respect.) Aquinas does, however, seem to write as though, at any rate normally, the merit of faith resulted from one's choosing there and then to follow the dictates of reason; yet this, I have argued, cannot be. He is, however, aware elsewhere, as I pointed out in the last chapter, that a mistaken conscience can be the result of negligence; and so he must allow that lack of faith can result from negligence, and, hence, that there is merit in faith resulting from adequate investigation.

The second and more substantial reason why, in Aquinas's view, the faith of devils is not meritorious is that it is not 'formed by love';<sup>13</sup> that is, it not joined to the firm purpose of doing those actions which love for God (properly understood) involves—worship of God, feeding the starving, visiting the sick, and converting the irreligious. The Council of Trent put the point in similar terms.<sup>14</sup> It was not, I think, insisting that actual good works were needed for the meritorious faith which conduces to salvation, for someone might acquire perfect love and then die before he had any opportunity to do any, but only complete readiness to do good works.

So, although Thomist faith by itself is a very intellectual thing, a faith of the head and not the heart, a faith which may be held without any natural fruit in Christian living, the meritorious faith which the Thomist commends, the saving faith which puts the person of faith on the way to salvation, involves the whole person. It remains to be seen just how different is this view of faith from other Christian views of faith.

<sup>13</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, 2a. 2ae. 4.3, 4, and 5. I translate *caritas* as 'love'. Aquinas writes elsewhere (2a. 2ae. 23.1) that 'love is a sort of friendship of man towards God'. Thinking of faith as involving a voluntary element. Aquinas writes that 'in the case of a voluntary act the form is in some way that end to which the action is directed'. (2a. 2ae. 4.3).

<sup>14</sup> Denzinger 1559 and 1561.

## THE LUTHERAN VIEW OF FAITH

The second view of faith which I shall consider is the view that faith involves *both* theoretical beliefs-that (Thomist faith) *and* a trust in the Living God. The person of faith, on this view, does not merely believe that there is a God (and believe certain propositions about him), he trusts Him and commits himself to Him. The 'believe in' of the Creed is to be read as affirming a belief that there is a God who has the properties stated, and has provided the good things stated (e.g. 'the resurrection of the dead') and also a trust in God who has these properties and has provided these good things.

I shall call this second view of faith the Lutheran view of faith; for Luther stressed this aspect of faith as trust<sup>15</sup> to such an extent that the Council of Trent was moved to declare: 'If anyone shall say that justifying faith is nothing else but trust in the divine mercy, which pardons our sins for Christ's sake, or that it is by such trust alone that we are justified, let him be anathema.'<sup>16</sup> Later Lutheran theologians distinguished three parts of faith (*fides*): knowledge (*notitia*), assent (*assensus*), and trust (*fiducia*), and declared that the first two were subordinate to the trust. Trust is, on this view, the central element in faith.<sup>17</sup> The *notitia* is, presumably, roughly the Thomist belief-that; and the *assensus* is public confession of faith which Aquinas thought as a normal, and sometimes necessary, expression of a faith formed by love.<sup>18</sup> A similar threefold division of the parts of faith occurs in the opening chapters of Barth's *Dogmatics in Outline* where, after an intro-

<sup>15</sup> See his 'The Freedom of a Christian', § 11, in *Reformation Writings of Martin Luther*, trans. B. L. Woolf, Vol. 1 (Lutterworth Press, 1952). The Lutheran view is found in the *Book of Homilies*, commended in the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England (1562): 'A quick and living faith is not only the common belief of the articles of our faith, but it is also a true trust and confidence of the mercy of God through our Lord Jesus Christ, and a steadfast hope of good things to be received at God's hands.' (Sermon of Faith, Part I)

<sup>16</sup> Denzinger 1562.

<sup>17</sup> In his *Faith and Belief* (Princeton University Press, 1979), ch. 6, and *Belief and History* (University of Virginia Press, 1977), ch. 2, W. Cantwell-Smith argues that, until the seventeenth century, the English word 'believe' meant 'trust'. The quotation from the *Book of Homilies* in n. 15 casts some doubt on this, but Cantwell-Smith has accumulated many quotations to illustrate his view.

<sup>18</sup> *Summa Theologiae* 2a. 2ae. 3.

ductory chapter, there are three chapters on faith entitled 'Faith as Trust', 'Faith as Knowledge', and 'Faith as Confession'.<sup>19</sup>

However, this notion of trust in God needs careful examination. To start with, what is it to put one's trust in an ordinary person? To trust someone is to act on the assumption that she will do for you what she knows that you want or need, when the evidence gives some reason for supposing that she may not and where there will be bad consequences if the assumption is false. Thus, I may trust a friend by lending a valuable to her when she has previously proved careless with valuables. I act on the assumption that she will do what she knows that I want (namely, treat the valuable with care), where the evidence gives some reason for supposing that she will not, and where there are bad consequences (namely, the valuable gets damaged) if she does not. An escaping British prisoner of war may have trusted some German by telling him of his identity and asking for help to get out of Germany. Here again, he acts on the assumption that the German will do for him what he knows that he wants (namely, provide help), when many Germans are ill-disposed towards escaping British prisoners and likely to surrender them to the police. Or, again, a patient who trusts a doctor to cure him acts on the assumption that the doctor will do for the patient what he knows that he needs him to do, where there is some possibility that he may not (because attempts to cure are not always successful), and where things will get worse unless the doctor is successful. We saw in Chapter 1 that to act on the assumption that  $p$  is to do those actions which you would do if you believed that  $p$ . To act on the assumption that  $p$  is to use  $p$  as a premiss in your practical inferences, whether or not you believe  $p$ .

But why *should* you act on the assumption that  $p$  if, in fact, you do not believe  $p$ ? Because you have the purpose to achieve  $X$  (e.g. get out of Germany, or be cured of disease); and you are more likely to achieve  $X$  by doing action  $A$  than by doing any alternative action, and action  $A$  will achieve  $X$  only if  $p$  is true. If your purpose to achieve  $X$  is strong enough (is far stronger than your other purposes) then you will still do  $A$  even if you believe that  $p$  is not very probable. As we saw in Chapter 1, the belief that in fact guides you is the belief that there is at least a small, but not negligible, probability that  $p$ . But we can describe you as acting on the assumption that  $p$ , because you would do the same action if you

<sup>19</sup> Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (SCM Press, 1949).



believed strongly that  $p$ . Within limits, the degree of  $p$ 's probability does not make any difference to your action. So a simplified description of what you are doing is 'acting on the assumption' that  $p$ . We saw that to trust someone is to act on the assumption that he will do for you what he knows that you want or need, where the evidence gives some reason for supposing that he may not, and there are bad consequences if the assumption proves false. This, it now follows, is to do those actions which you would do if you believed the stated assumption strongly, where, in fact, the evidence gives some reason for doubting the assumption (and there are bad consequences if it is false). The prisoner of war may not, on balance, believe that the German will help him; but he believes that there is some probability that the German will help, and he does the action which he would do if he believed that the German would help.

So much for trusting an ordinary person. What about trusting God? We have seen that, on the Lutheran view, trusting God is something additional to believing that He exists and to believing propositions about Him. It is presumably to act on the assumption that He will do for us what He knows that we want or need, when the evidence gives some reason for supposing that He may not and where there will be bad consequences if the assumption is false. Yet one who believes that God exists and believes the propositions of the Christian creeds about Him already believes that God will do for us what He knows that we want or need; that follows immediately from the goodness of God, and so the person of Thomist faith will also believe this. Luther wrote: 'Let no one be content with believing that God is able, or has power to do great things: we must also believe that he will do them and that he delights to do them. Nor indeed is it enough to think that God will do great things with other people, but not with you.'<sup>20</sup> Belief in such things as 'One Holy Catholic and apostolic Church' and 'The life of the world to come', which the Nicene Creed affirms, is, then, presumably to be construed as believing that God has provided one Holy Catholic and apostolic Church and a life for humans in a future world; and acting on the assumption that God will do for the believer by means of these things what he wants or needs when there is some reason for supposing that He will not, in which case bad consequences would follow.

<sup>20</sup> M. Luther, *Magnificat*, in *Reformation Writings of Martin Luther*, Vol. 2 (Lutterworth Press, 1956), 199.

The trouble with the Lutheran account of faith, as I have expounded it so far, is that it has in common with the Thomist account the feature that the perfect scoundrel may yet be a person of faith. For what you do when you act on an assumption depends on what your purposes are. One who acts on the assumption that there is money in a till and who has the purpose of stealing will break open the till; one who acts on the same assumption and who has the purpose of protecting the money will lock the room carefully. A person may act on the assumption that God will do for him what he wants or needs, with purposes good or evil. Acting on that assumption, he may try to conquer the world, believing that God will help him in his task. Shall we call such a person a person of faith? Does he not trust God? Or the antinomian whom St Paul attacks for suggesting that people should 'continue in sin in order that grace may abound'?<sup>21</sup> Does he not trust God, to care for him abundantly well?

The Lutheran, like Aquinas, may be prepared to allow that the scoundrel can be a person of faith. But historically Lutherans have wanted to claim, against Aquinas and with Luther, that faith alone suffices for salvation (although, for them, there is no merit involved in having this faith). If the Lutheran also claims this, he might seem committed to the view that the would-be world conqueror and the antinomian are exhibiting the sort of trust which alone a person has to exhibit in order to obtain from God (unmerited) salvation. If he wishes, as he surely does, to deny that they exhibit such trust, he will have to put some further restriction on the concept of faith. He will have to say that those who act on the assumption that God will do for them what they need or want, have faith only if their purposes are good ones.<sup>22</sup> The good purposes will derive for the Lutheran as for the Thomist from the basic purpose of doing those actions which the believer would do if he was moved by the love of God. Many of these purposes will be good ones, I would hold (though Luther might not have held), whether or not there is a God. For example, it is good to feed the starving or educate

<sup>21</sup> Letter to the Romans 6: 1.

<sup>22</sup> Calvin claimed that faith can 'in no way be separated from a devout disposition' and he attacked 'the Schools' for distinguishing between 'formed' and 'unformed' faith and supposing that 'people who are touched by no fear of God, no sense of piety, nevertheless believe what is necessary to know for salvation' (J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III. 2; trans. F. L. Battles (Westminster Press, 1960, Vol. 1, 553 and 551).

one's children whether or not there is a God. But these purposes are also purposes which the love of God ought properly to bring about. But some of the other purposes on which, the Lutheran will hold, the person of faith should act (purposes which the love of God would lead him to have) will be ones which will only have a point if there is a God (who will provide for us what we want or need). There is no point in worshipping God if there is no God, or asking His forgiveness if He is too hard-hearted to give it. There is no point in seeking an after-life in Heaven for ourselves or for others whom we seek to convert if God will not provide it. So, unless it is absolutely certain that there is a God who will provide for us what we want or need, pursuing these good purposes inevitably involves trusting God, acting on the assumption that He will provide for us what we want or need. Hence—so long as the Thomist is prepared to allow some doubt about whether there is a God who will provide for us, and the Lutheran is prepared to say that that is not ruled out by his further view of faith as knowledge (*notitia*)—Thomist faith with the right purposes (that is faith formed by love) will entail and be entailed by Lutheran faith.

It is beginning to look as if the Reformation controversy about whether faith alone would secure salvation would seem no real controversy about matters of substance, only a dispute resulting from a confusion about the meaning of words. The Lutheran and Catholic could agree that love is needed on top of Thomist faith, while admitting that Lutheran faith (since it included love) was sufficient for salvation. The parties only quarrelled, on this view, because they misunderstood each other's use of the word 'faith'. In so far as one thinks that the Reformation controversy was not merely a result of verbal confusion, one must think of the Reformers as insisting on points implicit in the Catholic position, but not always made explicit—as denying that one's works need to be successful (i.e. that one's attempts to bring about good should succeed), or that one needs to have been trying to do many or even any good works (one might die before one had the opportunity). What is needed for salvation (in addition to beliefs) is a basically good character, that is, a mind full of good purposes arising from the love of God set to bring about good results as opportunity arises, to guide the beliefs on which one acts. Failure to attempt to do good works in appropriate circumstances shows, however, the lack of such good purposes. Luther himself was conscious of the close tie between faith and

good works. In one passage, he writes as though the tie were a logical one. In the preface to his commentary on the Letter to the Romans, he writes that faith 'cannot do other than good at all times. It never waits to ask whether there is some good to do. Rather, before the question is raised, it has done the deed and keeps on doing it. A man not active in this way is a man without faith.'<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere, however, he seems to write as though the tie were less strict, perhaps merely contingent. 'Faith without good works does not last', he wrote in his 'Sermon on Three Sides of the Good Life',<sup>24</sup> implying that, for a time, one could exist without the other.

### THE PRAGMATIST VIEW OF FAITH

While Lutheran faith involves both belief-that and trust, Luther stresses that the trust is the important thing. Is a third form of faith possible, where one can have the trust without the belief-that? I think that it is and that many recent writers who stress the irrelevance to faith of 'belief-that' have been feeling their way towards such a form of faith. I shall call this view of faith the Pragmatist view.

As we have seen, one can act on assumptions which one does not believe. To do this is to do those actions which you would do if you did believe. In particular, you can act on the assumption not merely that God, whom you believe to exist, will do for you what you need or want, but also on the assumption that there is such a God (and that He has the properties which Christians or others have ascribed to Him). One can do this by doing those actions which one would do if one believed these things. In Chapter 1 I quoted Pascal, who responded to someone who said 'But I can't believe' by giving him a recipe for how to acquire belief. The recipe was that the person should act as if he believed, do the actions which believers do, 'taking holy water, having masses said', etc. and that would produce belief. Although Pascal did not hold that acting-as-if was the essence of faith, he saw it as a step on the road to acquiring it. But it is natural to develop this third view of faith according to which the belief-that is irrelevant, the acting-as-if is what matters.

<sup>23</sup> *Reformation Writings of Martin Luther*, Vol. 2, 288–9.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 124.

After all, belief is an involuntary state. Plausibly, if someone does those actions which a believer would do and for which he is to be esteemed, then that person should be esteemed whether or not he has the belief.

I suggested above that trusting God should be regarded not just as acting on assumptions; but doing so where one has good purposes. Those who have wanted to define faith in terms of trust alone would, I think, also wish such a restriction to be included in the understanding of trust. So, on the Pragmatist view, a person has Christian faith if he acts on the assumption that there is a God who has the properties which Christians ascribe to him and seeks to do those good actions which the love of God (if there is a God) would lead him to do. He will, therefore, worship God; do those actions which are such that he believes that if there is a God, God has commanded them; and seek to live in a way and to get others to live in a way which would lead God, if there is a God, to give them eternal life with the Beatific Vision of Himself. He does these actions because he believes it so worthwhile to attain the goals which they will attain if there is a God, much more worthwhile than to attain more mundane goals, that it is worth doing them in the hope that they will attain those goals. The person of Pragmatist faith will thus do the same things as the person with Lutheran faith will do. He will, for example, worship and pray and live a good life partly in the hope to find a better life in the world to come. He prays for his brethren, not necessarily because he believes that there is a God who hears his prayers, but because there is a chance that there is a God who will hear those prayers and help his brethren. He worships not necessarily because he believes that there is a God who deserves worship, but because it is very important to express gratitude for existence if there is a God to whom to be grateful, and there is some chance that there is.

I have called this view of faith the 'Pragmatist view', because in 'The Will to Believe' William James<sup>25</sup> commends a faith which is a matter of acting-as-if some hypothesis were true. This, he claims, is a rational thing to do when faced with some 'momentous' option, if only by so doing can we gain some good which would otherwise be unattainable.

<sup>25</sup> 'The Will to Believe', in William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, first publ. 1897 (Dover Publications, 1956). See esp. 25–6, 30–1 and 29, n. 1. I read James's assertion that religion says that 'the best things are the more eternal things' when coupled with his long quotation from Fitz James Stephen at the end of his essay as affirming the doctrine that the religious person will attain a life after death.

Religion offers a 'vital good' now, and an eternal well-being hereafter. But to gain these goods we must decide to act as if the religious hypothesis were true. To delay 'is as if a man should hesitate indefinitely to ask a certain woman to marry him because he was not perfectly sure that she would prove an angel after he brought her home. Would he not cut himself off from that particular angel-possibility as decisively as if he went and married some one else?' Unfortunately, James confuses things by calling this 'acting-as-if' 'believing' and so sees himself as endorsing Pascal. That he was not doing, because Pascal had the more normal understanding of belief, which I have analysed in Chapter 1. Though Kierkegaard is in most ways a very different sort of philosopher from James, the Pragmatist view is also that of Kierkegaard; and Kierkegaard bears much of the responsibility for the many traces of this view in modern theology. 'The leap of faith' which Kierkegaard commends is a matter of acting-as-if with 'the passion of the infinite'.<sup>26</sup> He commends Socrates for having the right sort of faith in immortality because 'he stakes his whole life' on this. 'When Socrates believed that God is, he held fast the objective uncertainty with the entire passion of inwardness, and faith is precisely in this contradiction, in this risk.' 'Without risk, no faith. Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty.'

The person of Pragmatist Christian faith need not believe that there is a God (in the sense of believing that it is more probable than not that there is a God), but he does need another belief of a kind which I called in Chapter 1 a weak belief, in the efficacy of his actions to obtain his goal—a belief that it is at least as probable that he will attain the goals he seeks by doing certain actions (e.g. those which the love of God, if there is a God, would lead him to do) as by doing any other actions, and more probable that he will attain these goals by doing these actions than by doing some other actions (e.g. nothing at all). He will need, therefore, to have such beliefs as that he is more likely to honour God by participating in Christian worship than by doing nothing; and more likely to get to Heaven by feeding the starving than by taking heroin. He may believe that there is more than one way which he can pursue equally likely to attain his goals, but he will need to believe that some ways are less likely

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Vol. 1, trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1992), see 201, 210, 204.

to attain those goals. But no-one is going to hold such means–ends beliefs except in virtue of holding theoretical beliefs from which they follow—e.g. that it is at least as probable that any God is as the Christian Creed depicts him as that he is as any other creed depicts him. For if the believer believes that the Islamic Creed is more likely to be true than the Christian Creed, he will have the means–end belief that he is more likely to honour God by participating in Islamic worship. And the believer needs the theoretical belief that there is some probability that there is a God and so that he will obtain his goal; otherwise he cannot be doing certain actions in order to obtain his goal of honouring God. Hence, Pragmatist faith does not differ from Lutheran faith by Pragmatist faith not involving any belief-that, but (it might seem) simply in that it involves less in the way of belief-that than does Lutheran faith. To express the apparent difference in terms of the common ultimate goal of doing those actions which the love of God would lead you to do—on the Pragmatist view, you do not need believe that there is a God and that, in consequence, you will show love for Him if you do certain actions, only that there may be a God and that you are more likely to show love for Him if you do certain actions rather than others. That Pragmatist faith involves a belief about the relative probability of credal beliefs was recognized, in effect, by James when he wrote that we have to choose between living options (that is, between the different ways to achieve our goals commended by what we believe to be the more probable world-views): and he commented that for his audience belief ‘in the Mahdi . . . refuses to scintillate with any credibility at all’.<sup>27</sup> But I am not aware that Kierkegaard recognized the need for such beliefs.

So it looks at this stage as if the Thomist and Lutheran views of the faith which conduces to salvation (that is Thomist ‘formed faith’ and Lutheran ‘faith’) are essentially the same, while the Pragmatist view differs from these in that it does not require belief that there is a God and that He has certain properties and has done certain things, only a weaker belief. On all these views, the person who has the virtue of faith (that is, ‘formed faith’ in the Thomist sense) seeks to do those actions which the love of God would lead him to do. Whether, however, there is

<sup>27</sup> *The Will to Believe*, 2. The Mahdi was a would-be Islamic Messiah, powerfully influential in the Sudan in the 1880s, who led a revolt against British rule.

this ultimate difference between the three views depends on how the Thomist and Lutheran understandings of belief are spelled out, as we shall see shortly.

## DIFFERENCES WITHIN THE THOMIST AND LUTHERAN VIEWS

There are two important differences between ways in which the Thomist and Lutheran views can be spelled out. The first difference which is seldom—if ever—noticed by those who write on this subject concerns what is the contrast which is being made when the person of faith affirms a belief that some creed is true. Is the creed as a whole being contrasted with its negation, or with more specific alternatives; or are merely the individual items of the creed being contrasted with their negations or various more specific alternatives?

I argued in Chapter 1 that to believe a proposition is to believe it more probable than any alternative. So what the belief amounts to depends on what are the alternatives. The normal alternative to a proposition is its negation. To believe that  $p$  is to believe that  $p$  is more probable than not- $p$ . But the alternatives to a proposition may be narrower than the negation. In that case to believe that  $p$  is to believe that  $p$  is more probable than each of these alternatives  $q$ ,  $r$ ,  $s$ , etc., but not necessarily more probable than their disjunction. It follows from this that there are different things which believing a creed such as the Nicene Creed might amount to. First, it might be a matter of believing each item of the Creed to be more probable than its negation. Thus, understanding 'I believe *in* one God, Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth and of all things visible and invisible' as 'I believe that there is one God who is Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth and of all things visible and invisible', we may, in turn, understand this as 'I believe that it is more probable that there is a God who is Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and of all things visible and invisible, than that there is not'. And so on, for each item of the Creed. This interpretation makes it crucial just how one divides up the Creed into items. For, as we saw in Chapter 1, it does not follow from  $p$  being more probable than not- $p$ , and  $q$  being more probable than not- $q$ , that  $(p$  and  $q)$  is more probable than not- $(p$  and  $q)$ . Although it is to some extent clear how the



Nicene Creed is to be divided up into items (for example, belief in 'God, Father Almighty' is belief in a different item from belief in 'One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church'), it is by no means always obvious exactly where the line is to be drawn between different items. Is belief in 'one God, Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth' belief in one item or belief in two or three separate items?

Secondly, believing a creed such as the Nicene Creed might be a matter of believing each item of the Creed to be more probable than each of a number of specific heretical or non-Christian alternatives. Someone affirming his belief in 'the resurrection of the body' may be claiming that it is more probable that humans rise embodied than that (as some other religions claimed) they have an everlasting new life in a disembodied state. In affirming his belief that Christ was 'begotten, not made', someone may only be affirming a belief that it is more probable that the pre-Incarnate Christ was brought into being out of nothing than that he was made from pre-existent matter. And so on. This view has the difficulty of the previous view about how the Creed is to be cut up into items, and the further difficulty of how we are to know what are the alternatives to each item. The historical circumstances of the formulation of the Creed provide guidance on the latter issue, and indeed on the former one, too. By studying the reasons which led a Church Council to put a certain clause in the Creed, we can see what it was designed to deny. But it remains the case that, on either of these views, there is very considerable uncertainty as to what believing a creed amounts to.

The third and fourth interpretations of what believing a creed amounts to avoid the problem of how the creed is to be cut up into items, by supposing that to believe a creed is to believe the whole creed (the conjunction of all its items, however individuated) to be more probable than any alternative. On the third interpretation, the only alternative with which a creed is being contrasted is its negation. To believe the creed is to believe that the conjunction of propositions which form it is more probable than the negation of that conjunction. This is a very high demand indeed. Most of us who believe each of many complex historical or scientific claims also believe that we have made some error somewhere, although we do not know where. On the fourth interpretation, a creed is being contrasted with each of a number of specific heretical or non-Christian alternatives. Some of these will differ from the creed in question in only one item (on some way of cutting up

the creed into items); one who believes the creed ( $p$ ,  $q$ , and  $r$ ) may believe it to be more probable than ( $p$ ,  $q$ , and not- $r$ ). Of these four interpretations of what believing a creed amounts to, clearly the third is the strongest, and the second and fourth are the weakest. (Which of these is weaker than the other will depend on the creed in question, and what are the alternatives to it.)<sup>28</sup>

The second difference within the Thomist and Lutheran views concerns how strong the contrast between alternatives has to be. The belief may be the minimum belief that the probability of one proposition (or the whole creed) is greater than that of another, or the stronger belief that the probability of one proposition (or the whole creed) is quite a lot greater than that of the other. We have already noted a certain ambivalence within Aquinas's own thought about how deep this conviction involved in faith needs to be.

Now, if we interpret the belief required on the Thomist and Lutheran accounts in the fourth way as a belief that the creed as a whole is more probable than various alternatives, and insist on no more than the minimum belief that the probability of the creed exceed that of its rivals, there is then, in principle, virtually no difference from Pragmatist faith, which—as we have seen—amounts to a belief that one creed is more probable than others. (I write 'virtually', because the Pragmatist may believe that his creed—the Christian Creed—is as probable as some other creed—e.g. the Judaic Creed—so long as he believes that it is more probable than some other creed—e.g. the Islamic Creed. This difference is, however, too small to deserve further attention.) I write 'in principle' because everything depends on how the alternatives to a creed are picked out.

## FAITH IN EARLIER CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

The response required to the preaching of the Gospel by St Peter at Pentecost was simply that his hearers should 'repent, and be baptised'.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> My account in the first edition of this book of the different ways in which believing a creed could be construed was loose in not making a sharp distinction between the second and fourth interpretations. I am grateful to Stephen Maitzen for pointing this out—see section 2 of his article 'Swinburne on Credal belief', *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 1991, 29, 143–57.

<sup>29</sup> Acts 2: 38.

But very soon the response required before baptism was described as ‘believe in the Lord Jesus’<sup>30</sup> (πίστευσον) and Christians were described as ‘believers’<sup>31</sup> (πεπιστευκότες). What sort of belief is involved here is unclear; it may be either credal belief of some kind or trust in God involving acting on assumptions, or maybe both. The long sermon on faith in the *Letter to the Hebrews* 11 seems to contain an understanding of faith both as belief-that and as action on-the-assumption-that. On the one hand, ‘whoever would approach [God] must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him’. But, on the other hand, ‘faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen’;<sup>32</sup> and more generally as I read that chapter, the faith of many heroes of the Old Testament is seen by the writer as a matter of their doing actions in hope rather than belief. In the *Letter to the Romans* Paul describes Abraham, his paradigm of a person of faith, as ‘hoping against hope’ that God’s promise to him that he would become ‘the father of many nations’ would be fulfilled.<sup>33</sup> And there are other New Testament passages which imply that faith may be accompanied by a certain amount of uncertainty or hesitation. There is the remark of the father who, having asked Jesus to cure his epileptic son, responded to Jesus’s comment ‘All things can be done for the one who believes’, with the words ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’.<sup>34</sup> His limited faith was rewarded. And there is Paul’s remark, ‘we walk by faith, not by sight’.<sup>35</sup>

The same ambiguity seems to arise when we come to the early Christian theologians. Two major writers who wrote at a little length about faith were Clement of Alexandria and Cyril of Jerusalem.<sup>36</sup> For Clement, faith is firm conviction: ‘He who believes the divine scriptures with sure judgement, receives in the voice of God who bestowed the scripture an incorrigible demonstration.’ And so ‘who is so impious as to disbelieve God and to demand proofs from God as from humans?’<sup>37</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, on the other hand, after making the point that all human institutions (such as marriage) require faith,

<sup>30</sup> Acts 16: 31.

<sup>31</sup> Acts 15: 5, 18; 27, 19: 18.

<sup>32</sup> Hebrews 11: 1 and 11: 6.

<sup>33</sup> Romans 4: 18.

<sup>34</sup> Mark 9: 24.

<sup>35</sup> II Corinthians 5: 7.

<sup>36</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, Bk 2; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* Book 5.

<sup>37</sup> *Stromateis* 2.2 and 5.1.

illustrates the notion of faith by the faith of seafarers ‘who commit themselves to hopes that are not certainties (ἀδηλους).<sup>38</sup> Faith is a matter of putting one’s trust in things that are not certain.

I do not think that the early Church had any clear doctrine of the kind of belief required in the faith expected of Christians—what kind of contrast with which other propositions was involved in that belief, and how strong the belief needed to be. It had not needed to face these issues as a doctrinal problem. However, although it would need much historical research to substantiate my conjecture, I suggest that implicitly in earlier centuries people tended to assume that Christianity was being contrasted with various other religions and philosophical systems; and that, in expressing belief in Christianity, you were expressing a belief that the Christian system as a whole was more probable than each of those other systems. Those, like Augustine, who agonized over religious allegiance in the first centuries AD, were concerned with a choice between Christianity, Judaism, Mithraism, Manichaeism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, etc. Their concern in making a choice was with which was most likely to be true; and so, among religions which offered salvation, which was most likely to provide it. There was not in those days a vast pool of ‘agnostics’ who owed allegiance to no system. Yet if in order to believe a system you had to believe each item of its creed to be more probable than its negation—let alone believe the whole creed to be more probable than its negation, then since you might expect most people to think that no system had all its items each more probable than its negation (although they would think that systems differed among each other in probability), you might expect most people to believe no one system and to belong to a vast agnostic pool. I am also inclined to think that, in earlier days, all that was (implicitly) required of the candidate for baptism was a belief that the Christian system was marginally more probable than each of its alternatives, not very much more probable than them—so long, of course, as the belief was joined to a total commitment to action. The ever-present inveighing against Christians who are hesitant is to be read more often as inveighing against lack of commitment rather than lack of conviction.

<sup>38</sup> *Catechetical Lectures* 5.3. In ch. 5 of his *Faith and Belief*, W. Cantwell-Smith argues at length that in this book Cyril holds that the commitment (expressed by the word πιστεύω) involved in the creeds used at baptisms involves doing an action (putting trust) rather than expressing a passive conviction.

In the early Middle Ages Abelard seems to have noted the uncertainty involved in faith. He described faith as an ‘estimate’ (*aestimatio*) of things not apparent; and regarded hope as a species of faith, differing from other kinds of faith by being concerned with good things and with the future.<sup>39</sup> Bernard inveighed against Abelard’s account of faith—it was no ‘estimate’ but a certainty—‘if faith were something that fluctuates, our hope would be empty’.<sup>40</sup> I do not find in the discussion in Hugh of S. Victor, which contains the definition cited by Aquinas, the same understanding as in Aquinas of what being ‘greater than opinion, and less than scientific knowledge’ amounts to. Hugh writes that faith concerns what we ‘hope for’ and so it does not involve ‘sight’. He describes ‘believers’ as those who ‘approve’ one view as opposed to the alternative view ‘so far as to assume it in what they assert’.<sup>41</sup> That seems nothing like Aquinas’s account, and is a further reason for holding that the belief-element in the faith required of Christians in patristic and early medieval times need not involve total conviction.

In later centuries there seems to be a change. The post-Renaissance centuries saw the emergence and steady growth, among intellectuals to start with and then more widely, of a vast pool of ‘agnostics’. Of course, there was more than one reason for the growth of agnosticism, but many of these agnostics must have felt that one religion was more probable than others, and yet they still felt themselves unqualified for entry to it. We hear the great cry of ‘I would like to believe, but unfortunately I cannot’. Clearly, people supposed that there were stronger conditions for belief than those which, I have claimed, existed in early centuries. It was, I suspect, partly as a reaction to this situation that the Pragmatist view of faith was developed. But, as we have seen, all three views of faith can be spelled out in very different ways according to how the belief involved in them is understood, and on some understandings the Thomist and Lutheran views collapse into the Pragmatist view. However, although the historian may read an implicit understanding of what faith is assumed to involve in various centuries, to my knowledge

<sup>39</sup> *Epitome Theologiae Christianae*, 1.1 (PL 178, 1695).

<sup>40</sup> *Contra Quaedam Capitula Errorum Abelardi*, ch. 4. (PL 182, 1061).

<sup>41</sup> Hugh distinguishes five attitudes towards a view or proposition. One may deny it, doubt it, ‘opine’ it, believe it, or know it. Opining is a matter of thinking the view more probable (*magis probabile*) than the alternative; believing goes beyond that and actually involves asserting it. Believers ‘sic alteram partem approbant, ut eius approbationem etiam in assertionem assumant’.

neither the Catholic Church, nor the Orthodox Church, nor—I suspect—any large mainstream Protestant Church has ever made any dogmatic pronouncements about the kind of belief which is involved in faith. In due course, I shall consider on more aprioristic grounds what kind of belief is needed in order to pursue the goals of religion, and what kind of belief a Church ought to demand of its adherents.

Before ending this chapter, I must mention one minor matter. All the kinds of faith which I have discussed involve attitudes towards, behaviour in the light of, *propositions*. They are not necessarily always so phrased, but my claim is that talk about believing in God or trusting God can, without loss of meaning, be analysed in one of these ways. However, a view of faith developed within twentieth-century Protestant theology which Hick calls ‘non-propositional’. On this view, faith ‘conceived in this way as a voluntary recognition of God’s activity in human history, consists in seeing, apperceiving, or interpreting events in a special way’.<sup>42</sup> The person of faith ‘sees’ the world as God’s creation, sees not merely the defeat of Nazi Germany in the Second World War but the hand of God in guiding the Allied forces to victory. But this view of faith seems easily expressible in propositional terms. Is not to experience *X* as *Y* in this kind of case simply to experience *X* and in so doing automatically and naturally to *believe* that *X* is *Y*? The person of faith is one who sees the world and so doing automatically and naturally *believes that* the world is God’s creation; does not merely see the defeat of Nazi Germany but in so doing automatically and naturally *believes that* God has brought it about. The ‘non-propositional’ aspect of this Protestant view of faith is simply a matter of the way in which it is expressed.<sup>43</sup> There is nothing essentially non-propositional about it.

The three views which I have described in this chapter are all views about the kind of faith required of a Christian; but there can be a similar range of views about the kind of faith required for the practice of some other religion. Is it just a matter of believing that certain things are true, or merely acting on the assumption that certain things are true—with good purposes (perhaps ones somewhat different from the Christian

<sup>42</sup> John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 3rd edn. (Prentice Hall, 1983), 69.

<sup>43</sup> The same may be said about Cantwell-Smith’s attacks on propositional accounts of belief. See his bold claim: ‘No one . . . has ever believed a proposition’—*Faith and Belief*, 146. For Aquinas’s reply to an objection that faith is not concerned with propositions (*Summa Theologiae* 2a. 2ae. 1.2 obj. 2), see my n. 1 above.

good purpose of doing the actions which love of God would lead one to do)?<sup>44</sup> We shall be in a better position to answer that when we have considered more fully what is the purpose of pursuing a religion; what are the goals which it is good that someone should try to achieve by pursuing a religious way. This is the issue to be discussed in the next chapter.

<sup>44</sup> In his *The Concept of Faith* (Cornell University Press, 1994), 200–41, W. L. Sessions analysed a Hindu conception and two different Buddhist conceptions of notions which have been translated into English as 'faith'. All of these notions seem to involve some belief (though on the Son Buddhist account, it is belief in one's own power and nature) and at least two of them seem to involve commitment to a way of life.

# 5

## The Purpose of Religion

On all the views of faith considered in the last chapter, saving faith, the faith which is required for the practice of the Christian religion involves both having a good purpose and having certain beliefs, but on different views of faith different kinds of belief are needed. In this chapter I shall investigate with respect to religions generally, and in particular with respect to the Christian religion, the purpose of following a religion. Then we shall be in a position to discuss in Chapter 6 the kind of belief which is required for that pursuit, and, in particular, the kind of belief which is required for pursuit of the Christian religion.

### RELIGION, SALVATION, WAY, AND CREED DEFINED

What is a religion? This concept may be understood in ways varying from a very narrow understanding to a very broad understanding. One may understand a religion as a pursuit which involves worship of a God and an attempt to conform to His will. But such an understanding would rule out some forms of Buddhism, in which worship of a God has no importance. Or one can understand a religion as any pursuit which dominates the life of many people and cements them together in common dedication to an aim. On this understanding, not merely Christianity and Buddhism but Marxism would also count as a religion. I shall adopt an understanding of religion which includes Buddhism as a religion but excludes Marxism. I believe that such an understanding conforms best to ordinary usage. It sounds odd to call Marxism a 'religion'; religion is supposed to have some concern with extra-mundane entities and goals. It will be useful to me to conform to normal usage because the point of pursuing a Christian way and the



point of pursuing a Buddhist way have certain similarities, whereas the point of pursuing a Marxist way is rather different.

I propose to understand by a religion a system which offers what I call salvation, a term which I defined in Chapter 3 simply as 'deep well-being'. Well-being belongs to someone, I suggest, in so far as he performs good actions in a situation where it is good to be and he knows that he is in that situation and wants to be doing those actions. The well-being is deep in so far as the good actions are of great significance for the subject and for others: and the good situation includes a right relation to whatever is the ultimate source of being, as well as to all other humans; and the well-being is everlasting. Hence, salvation must include worship of whatever supernatural being deserves worship, and forgiveness from, and reconciliation with, any such beings whom we have wronged, as well as helping other humans to attain their well-being. Our situation may involve any source of our existence as well as other humans helping us towards well-being. The interaction with other humans in helping each other towards well-being will have a natural expression in a community, a Church bound together by ritual. And we shall need to know the nature of the universe and the purpose of our existence and so which actions are greatly good. And we shall need to want to be doing those actions. I shall call a system a religion if it offers a package containing most of these elements.

Christianity is one of a number of rival religions which offers such a package. It tells us that the world is dependent for its existence on God, and that He is dependent on nothing; and it tells us something about God's nature. And it assures us that if we pursue the Christian way with diligence in this life and after this life, we shall grow into a very full understanding of these things. Like Islam and much modern Judaism, it offers forgiveness from God and reconciliation with Him, and guidance on how to live an abundantly worthwhile life and the opportunity to live such a life of worship and service; and a continuation and deepening of this well-being in the joy of Heaven where the Blessed shall 'see God'. The religion of the people of Israel for all the centuries except the last two before Christ also offered a package containing all these elements, except the last one—the religion of the Old Testament did not offer a worthwhile life after death. Hinduism and Buddhism, however, also offer salvation, but of a different kind from that offered by Christianity. Buddhism and some forms of Hinduism do not offer forgiveness from,

and reconciliation with, divine beings, but most forms of these religions offer many of the other elements of salvation. They offer humans an understanding of the world (often a very different one from that of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) and show them a worthwhile way to live; and they assure them that if they follow that way, then, by a series of reincarnations in this world, they will eventually escape pointlessness and attain a deeply worthwhile state (e.g. nirvana). All of these systems provide a community (bound together by ritual) of people who seek to live in the way commended—a Church of some sort. Marxism, by contrast, offers relatively little of the package. True, it offers an understanding of the world. But it offers no forgiveness and reconciliation, no guidance as to the most worthwhile way to live (for a typical Marxist, values are subjective), and no long-term well-being (since the Marxist holds that one life on this Earth is all that a person has). I conclude that my understanding of a religion includes those systems which we most naturally include as religions, and excludes those which we most naturally exclude.

A religion involves two elements—a way and a creed. By a ‘way’ I understand a life style, a collection of kinds of action. In *The Acts of the Apostles* the Christian religion is often called ‘the way’;<sup>1</sup> and living the Buddhist life is often called following the ‘noble eight-fold way’. A creed is a doctrinal system. Each religion teaches that one reason for pursuing its religious way, though not necessarily the primary reason, is to obtain salvation for oneself. The creed of a religion explains why the pursuit of its way will lead to salvation for oneself, and the fulfilment of the other reasons for pursuing its way. I shall now illustrate the concept of a religious way by spelling out what constitutes following the Christian way and what constitutes following the Buddhist way.

## THE CHRISTIAN WAY

To follow the Christian way, a person must do the actions of the kind commanded or commended by, and refrain from actions of the kind forbidden or discouraged by, the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and St Paul’s Letters. To do the actions commanded and to

<sup>1</sup> e.g. Acts 9: 2.

refrain from the actions forbidden is obligatory. If there are actions commended but not commanded, and actions which we are discouraged from doing though not forbidden to do, then it is good, but not obligatory, to do the former and not to do the latter. And following the Christian way includes doing what is good as well as what is obligatory. Or, rather, in order to follow the Christian way a person must have the firm purpose to do what is commanded and commended—I shall take for granted throughout this chapter that while it matters that the Christian's good purposes (e.g. to feed the starving) should succeed (e.g. that the starving be fed), what makes the Christian a person of faith is simply that he tries to make them succeed. The way of life which constitutes the Christian way is often given more detailed form in the teaching of different Christian denominations, and especially in the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.

Some of the actions commanded—it is highly plausible to suppose—are morally obligatory anyway, and some of the actions forbidden are morally wrong (that is, obligatory not to do) whether or not there is a God. It is obligatory to pay one's debts, and to feed one's children; wrong to lie and steal—whether or not there is a God. Many of the actions commended are good (even when not obligatory) anyway whether or not there is a God. It is good to devote one's life to helping many people (including oneself) to lead a deeply happy life, which will include understanding the world and beautifying it, and developing friendships. Some such actions are (at any rate if there is no God) supererogatorily good, for example devoting one's life to feeding and educating the poor in distant lands, or throwing oneself on a grenade to save the life of a comrade. And some actions are bad (even if not wrong) whether or not there is a God, for example slouching in front of the television for long hours and watching third-rate sitcoms, while eating far more than one needs.

The moral quality (goodness, badness, or whatever) of some of these actions may be fairly evident to honest reflection. There are I suggest, however, some actions which would be good or bad or neither as the case may be whether or not there is a God, but ones for which Christianity is right to claim that many of us are not able to detect their moral quality without help from God. Honest and morally thoughtful people disagree about whether euthanasia is always wrong or only sometimes wrong; whether sexual relations between people of

the same sex are good or bad; whether abortion is sometimes justified, and so on. Roman Catholics and many other Christians claim, however, that God has revealed to his Church or in the Bible the answers to these moral dilemmas—and those answers give further content to what the pursuit of the Christian way consists in. Following the religious way will include trying to discover in more detail which actions are obligatory and which are good, in order that we may do these.

But pursuing the Christian way also involves doing many actions which would have no point (would be neither obligatory or supererogatory or otherwise good) if there were no God. It involves worship of God; and, more particularly, it involves being baptized, joining in the eucharistic and other worship of the Christian Church, and private prayer. The prayer will include seeking forgiveness from God for the wrongs we have done to him (our sins), petitionary prayer for the well-being of oneself and others, attempting to persuade others to pursue the Christian way in order to secure their salvation, and much else. Spending quite a lot of one's time doing such actions is obligatory—on a Christian view. We owe such worship and service to God, who made and sustains us. And all actions which would be obligatory anyway (if there were no God) become doubly obligatory if there is a God—we owe it both to God who made us and them and to our children to feed our children. And some actions which would be good but not obligatory, e.g. supererogatory, if there were no God, become obligatory. Giving more of one's money to feed the poor than would otherwise be obligatory perhaps comes into this category.

It has been a matter of dispute within Christianity whether—given that there is a God—there are any supererogatory acts (or acts otherwise good, but not obligatory). For the classical Protestant there are no 'works of supererogation'; such is the extent of our obligations to God that there is no time left for us to do supererogatory (or other good) acts. The normal Catholic view is that there is scope for doing more than one is obliged to do; one is obliged to fulfil the Ten Commandments and various precepts laid down by the Church (for example, to attend Mass on Sundays), but total dedication to the good is not obligatory. Christians also hold that God has particular plans for particular people, often whole patterns of life (vocations) to which He calls them; and it is an obligation to fulfil one's vocation. Some Christians perhaps have a vocation to the monastic life, and so to take and fulfil vows of poverty,

chastity, and obedience; but that is not obligatory for all Christians. All of these actions are obligatory or supererogatory, as the case may be, either because of their intrinsic nature or because God has commanded them (and so are obligatory) or commended them (and so are supererogatory).<sup>2</sup> It is a matter of dispute within Christianity how far someone has an obligation to seek his own salvation—the normal medieval and post-medieval Catholic view was that, although there is no obligation to do those acts which most directly forward one's salvation, there is an obligation to do acts which make some progress in that direction, and that means at least fulfilling the Ten Commandments and various precepts laid down by the Church. Thereby we would take some small steps towards forming our character for good.<sup>3</sup> But, of course, there would be no guarantee that God will provide salvation, at any rate immediately after death, to those whose dedication to achieving it is thus limited. If there are supererogatory acts, following the Christian way fully will involve doing more than merely fulfilling one's obligations to God and others.

Other religions commend other 'ways', other life styles. The ways of many religions overlap to a significant extent with each other and with the Christian way. For most other religions, as for Christianity, it is good to feed the starving and obligatory to pay one's debts; but they give different teaching about whether, and how, God or gods are to be worshipped, and also about how far it is good, or obligatory, to convert others to that religion.

## THE BUDDHIST WAY

As an example of a religious way which overlaps significantly with, but also diverges significantly from, the Christian way, I take the Buddhist way. This way, I note to begin with, does not seem to have quite as sharp a division between the obligatory and the supererogatory, or the wrong

<sup>2</sup> For full discussion of the extent and grounds of obligation and supererogation, given the existence of a Christian God, see *Responsibility and Atonement* (Clarendon Press, 1989), ch. 8.

<sup>3</sup> 'Since a precept can be fulfilled in different ways, a person does not transgress the precept if he does not fulfil it in the best way; it is enough that he should fulfil it in some way or other', Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a. 2ae. 184.3 ad. 2.

and the merely bad, as there is at any rate in Catholic Christianity. I delineate the Buddhist way in terms of the three trainings: in ethics, meditation, and wisdom. On the negative side, the Buddhist way of ethics has a list of ten bad actions from which people are enjoined to refrain. Three are physical: killing, stealing, sexual misconduct. Four are verbal: lying, divisive speech, harsh speech, and senseless speech. Three are mental: covetousness, harmful intent, wrong view.<sup>4</sup> While followers of most religions, including Christianity, would agree that actions of each of these kinds understood in their way are bad, differences emerge in the detailed spelling out. While for Christians, as for Buddhists, it is good not to kill humans (barring special circumstances—e.g. killing enemy combatants in the course of a just war), Buddhists normally consider it a further good not to kill (or eat) animals, and to liberate them from captivity. It has not normally been thought by Christians to be bad to kill or eat animals, but, of course, some Christians have thought so and Christians have often confined themselves to vegetarian diets for certain periods (e.g. during Lent). For the Buddhist, as for the Christian, ‘sexual misconduct’ includes incest, adultery, and rape. But while Christianity (at least has until recently) firmly prohibited all homosexual relations, premarital intercourse, and divorce (except that divorce is permitted in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, but only on the ground of adultery), Buddhism has had a more relaxed attitude to such conduct, tending to judge particular cases differently in terms of the happiness or absence of suffering produced by particular actions. It is especially good to refrain from bad deeds as the result of a vow, though worse if you do them despite having vowed not to do so. On the positive side, the Buddhist ethic emphasizes giving, and especially giving to the *sangha*, the monastic communities. It is good to seek to benefit the living in various ways, but also to benefit the dead, and giving to the *sangha* can be a means of benefiting the dead, as can participation in funeral and other memorial rituals. It is also good to go on pilgrimage to Buddhist sites, and to show devotion to *stupas*, relics of the Buddha or other lesser holy persons; and to images of the Buddha. The goodness of some of latter actions is, of course, peculiar to Buddhism, and—unlike the ones listed earlier—derive their point from Buddhist doctrine.

<sup>4</sup> Donald S. Lopez, *Buddhism* (Penguin Books, 2002) 47.

Controlling the body by refraining from bad actions and performing good actions makes it possible to control the mind; and the direct way to do this is by meditation, concentrating on certain objects for long periods. Thus controlled, the mind can seek wisdom; and, in particular, understanding and accepting the doctrine of no-self (that there is no soul, no essential part of a person which continues unchanged from moment to moment, but only a continuing stream of consciousness.) Various semi-ascetic practices, prescribed especially for monks, will help this process—fasting, wearing old clothes, and sleeping rough. It is especially good to seek to become a *bodhisattra*, one committed to achieve Buddhahood for the sake of others, and this involves spreading Buddhist doctrine. A Buddha is one who is perfectly enlightened. Although there is clearly some overlap here with the Christian way, the overlap is small: Christian meditation is God-directed, and while there may be some similarity in the techniques practised in the two religions for getting the right direction of mind, the end sought thereby by Buddhists (including meditation on what Christians regard as a false doctrine—the doctrine of no-self) is very different.

## RELIGIOUS REASONS TO PURSUE A RELIGIOUS WAY

As I noted earlier, some of the actions which any religious way includes are ones which are good to pursue anyway for non-religious reasons. But many of the actions of a religious way would have no point unless the creed of that religion or some similar religion is true. So what religious reasons, in the sense of reasons to attain goals which are attainable only if the creed of that religion (or that of some similar religion) is true, are there for pursuing a religious way? I know only of reasons of three kinds which have been given by major religions for pursuing their religious way. These reasons are the same reasons as those which I outlined in Chapter 3 for investigating which if any religious creed is true. It is because it is good to attain certain goals that it is good to investigate which, if any, creed is true, because it follows from the creed of a religion how you should act in order to attain those goals. Then it is good to

pursue the way of a religion is so far as investigation shows that the creed of that religion is probably true. It is good to follow a religious way in order to render proper worship and obedience to any God or gods there may be, to attain one's own salvation and to help others to attain theirs. In the previous chapter, following Aquinas, I described the purpose of the Christian religion as doing those actions which love for God would lead one to do; in due course I shall point out that, if the Christian Creed is true, pursuing these three goals would be doing those actions which the love of God would lead one to do. The first reason is, of course, only a reason for following the way of one of the religions which affirm there is a God or gods. Different religions give in their creeds different accounts of whether and whom and how it is obligatory (or anyway good) to worship and obey. And they give different accounts of what salvation consists in, and so of why its pursuit is good or obligatory. Hence, when we are considering whether to pursue a religious way, and which one to pursue, two different factors are relevant. First, how good are the goals which the religion puts before us—how important are the obligations which it affirms (given that its creed is true and so that there are these obligations), and how valuable is the salvation and other goals which it offers? And secondly, how probable is it that the creed of the religion is true and so that following its way (rather than some other way) will enable us to fulfil those obligations and enable us to attain those goals? For example, some religion might offer so limited a salvation (it might not offer life after death), that it might seem not to be worthwhile (if we have no obligation to do so) to pursue its way in order to attain the salvation which it offers. On the other hand, if the salvation offered to those who pursue a certain religious way is a good state which people can see would fulfil their deepest needs, then it may well be good to follow that religious way in order to attain that salvation, even if it is not very probable that we shall succeed.

I shall now spell out in more detail what the three reasons (and primarily the second reason) for following a religious way amount to in the Christian case, and contrast them with what they amount to in other religions and—in order to take the same main contrasting example as before—especially in Buddhism.



## FIRST RELIGIOUS REASON: TO RENDER PROPER WORSHIP AND OBEDIENCE TO GOD OR GODS

The first religious reason for following a religious way is to render proper worship and obedience to whatever God or gods there are. Theistic religions, including Christianity, normally claim that we have an obligation to do this, although they may also allow that it is supererogatorily good to do more than obligation requires.

People ought to acknowledge other persons with whom they come into contact, not just ignore them—and this surely becomes a duty when those persons are our benefactors. We acknowledge people in various ways when we meet them, e.g. by shaking hands or smiling at them, and the way in which we acknowledge their presence reflects our recognition of the sort of individual they are and the kind of relation they have to us. We should reverence the beautiful and the holy. Worship is the only response appropriate to a God, the perfectly good source of all being. And if God has given us our whole life and all the good things it involves, much thankful worship becomes our duty. If God has some further greatly good feature, or done some further great heroic act for us, then there will be a corresponding greater duty of thankful worship and obedient service. As we shall note more fully in the next chapter, Christianity claims that God is a Trinity, a community of divine persons, so good that their very nature involves sharing that nature with each other; and that goodness gives us a further special reason for worship. If God came to earth as a human, Jesus Christ, to live a life and suffer a death by which he identified with our suffering and made available to us atonement for our sins, such a heroic act of supererogatory goodness must merit great devotion and service. If God has given us our instructions as to how to use our life and behave towards our fellows, then we have a duty to follow these instructions. A system of morality which recognized no duty of grateful recognition and conformity to the wishes of our benefactors is a pretty poor system of morality. Certainly, there may be limits to such obligations in two respects. First, there surely are actions which would be obligatory or wrong (as the case may be) whatever God commanded; but if there are such actions, if, for example, rape is always wrong and so a command by God to me to rape someone would impose upon me no obligation to

rape, then God being perfectly good would not issue such a command, for it would involve claiming a right which he did not possess. Secondly, it may be that God is not entitled to our service every moment of our lives; maybe free rational agents, however created, have a moral right to some control over their lives; and again, if so, God would not issue commands that cover every moment of our lives (and maybe, in consequence, he does not command us to seek our salvation). Even if there are limits to our obligations to please God, it is surely super-erogatorily good that we should do more to please God than we are obliged to do if He has been very good to us in giving us life and so many good things. Further, if God is the source of my being and I have failed to use aright the life which He has given me by rendering to Him proper worship and obedience, I ought to seek forgiveness from God for having failed to fulfil my obligations.

If, however, some other religion is right in claiming that the god who made us is less powerful and knowledgeable than the Christian God is supposed to be, and not the ultimate source of everything, then such a god would still deserve much gratitude but less by way of awe-dominated worship. And if the religion does not claim that there is a God or gods worthy of worship or deserving significant gratitude for having made us, as is the case with Buddhism, then this first reason is not a significant reason for following its religious way.

## SECOND RELIGIOUS REASON: TO ATTAIN ONE'S OWN SALVATION

The second religious reason for pursuing a religious way, according to most religions, is to attain one's own salvation, that is deep well-being. Well-being belongs to someone, I suggest, in so far as he performs good actions in a situation where it is good to be and he knows that he is in that situation and wants (that is, desires) to be there doing those actions. This world is a good place to inhabit. Such is the teaching of the first chapter of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, and it is clearly true. The world is a beautiful place, many of us are often happy through the satisfaction of good desires, and so many of our good actions make important differences to things. And, if there is a God as described in the Christian Creed, pursuing the Christian way on Earth provides a

depth to our well-being here which constitutes a limited salvation, even for those for whom life does not provide much by way of very ordinary well-being. It is good for me now (not just good for God, and an obligation upon me) to live a life of worship and service to God, because it is good for me that I should fulfil my obligations and seek further to please my creator and sustainer. And it is good for me to help other people by fulfilling my obligations to them and being of use to them in various ways beyond obligation. It is, of course, good for me to do these latter things for non-religious reasons, but a theistic religion provides a further reason why it is good. If I am of use to others, that pleases God who made both me and those others. If, however, there is a God and I fail in my obligations to him, then clearly it is good for me that I should seek forgiveness from God and reconciliation to Him. All of us have, to some extent, spent so much of our lives in trivial and unworthy pursuits. And so, it is good that we should seek and obtain from our creator who has given us our lives for worthier purposes, forgiveness for wasting it. On the Christian view, God answers our petitionary prayers, sometimes by bringing about what we request and sometimes by meeting the need which led to our prayer in a different way. To many Christians it seems to them that they are aware of God's presence in their prayer, and if there is a God, they are indeed thus aware. Pursuing the Christian way gives us in its Creed an understanding of the nature of the universe and our place in it. And there is a community, the Christian Church with a ritual cementing together ourselves and others so that we can help each other and in which we can be helped by God in pursuit of the good. So, on the Christian view, we are on earth in interaction with God. And this interaction constitutes friendship with God in pursuit of the good. According to St John's Gospel, which unequivocally acknowledged his divinity, Jesus called his disciples his 'friends'.<sup>5</sup> This second reason for following the Christian way thus claims that doing so provides for a human being limited salvation now.

Almost everyone will acknowledge that, for most of us, our life on earth contains many good things, whether or not God made us; and so, given that there is a God and so it is God who provides these good things, it is good to offer him grateful worship, and to seek his forgiveness. But someone may think that the fact that if there is a God there is

<sup>5</sup> John 15: 5.

someone whom we can worship and who will forgive us our wrongdoing is not something which would make it good that there is a God—for if there were no God, there would be no one to whom we would owe such worship, or such substantial repentance for not having led a worthwhile life. We would of course, still owe a limited gratitude to our parents for having brought into the world children who turned out to be me and you, and for nurturing and educating us. And we would still owe repentance to particular humans whom we have wronged in particular ways (including a limited repentance to our parents for not having led a worthwhile life). But my parents did not choose to give me life, only at most to give someone life; that someone then turned out to be me. And their ability to give someone life and to nurture and educate me was caused by causes beyond themselves (blind causes unless there is a God or gods). Hence, the need for gratitude and repentance would be so much less in a Godless universe. If, however, there is a God, my dependence on him for my existence is total, and so the need for gratitude and repentance for the misuse of my life is so much greater.

Reflection should suggest that the availability of worship and full forgiveness for the abuse of our lives is a reason why it would be good for us if there is a God. While it is good for us to have some good thing, it is always better if the good thing is given in an act of love for us. So it is good for us if our life does not come to us by chance but by the act of a loving creator who deserves gratitude, and is so great that the gratitude should take the form of grateful worship. And, while it is bad for me if my life is wasted, it is worse if I am the cause of the waste; but not so bad if the waste of the life or my wasting it can be compensated for. If there is no God, neither the waste of my life nor my wasting it can be adequately compensated for. Now, forgiving someone who has wronged you involves treating them as though they had not wronged you,<sup>6</sup> and so the badness of the action (though not its consequences) is thereby compensated for. If my life is a gift from God, I have wasted it. Then I owe God repentance for having done so and he can forgive me and so treat me as though I had not wasted my life. My wasted life was not mine to waste—I owed it to God to lead a good life, and by my wasting it is God, not I, who has lost something. By forgiving me, God can

<sup>6</sup> For full discussion of the nature of repentance and forgiveness, see *Responsibility and Atonement*, esp. ch. 5.

cancel my resulting debt and that will remove the badness of my wasting my life; and, according to the Christian Creed (see the next chapter), if I approach him with repentance in the right way, he will forgive me. (I cannot literally ‘forgive myself’, since forgiveness is the remission of a debt incurred by a failure to do what we owe it to someone to do; and I cannot incur a debt to myself.) And God can also compensate for the consequences of my action, the wasted life, by giving me a new life in the world to come; and, according to the Christian Creed (see next chapter) He will do this. Only a religion with a creator God offers the possibility of the badness of my wasting my life and the waste of my life being compensated for.

A crucial part of salvation is having a good character, that is desires to do good actions and be in good situations, and true beliefs about which actions and situations are good (or bad); and doing good actions helps us to form a good character. Christianity holds that having a good character involves desiring to do those actions and be in situations which Christianity holds to be good; and will be promoted by doing those actions and by certain practices of prayer. And Christianity has normally held that not merely is it good to desire to do the actions but it is good to desire that these actions should be successful. It is good to desire to feed the hungry, not just because such an action is good but also because it is good that the hungry be fed and so we should desire that they be fed. Yet there have been Christian mystics who have denied this. Thus Madame Guyon: ‘We must renounce all particular inclinations even the noblest, the moment they betray themselves. Only so can we reach that indifference towards all goods whether of body or soul, whether temporal or eternal, which is the Christian’s aim.’ That is not to deny that we may have a duty to promote certain goods, but ‘we must be indifferent to success or failure in the effort’.<sup>7</sup> But this view is, I like to think, untypical of Christianity.

Christianity derives from Judaism the idea that many (but not all) mundane desires with which we find ourselves are such that it is good to do the actions which aim to fulfil them—in appropriate circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See the quotation from Bossuet’s discussion of Madame Guyon, cited in K. E. Kirk, *The Vision of God* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1931), 454.

<sup>8</sup> ‘The passions incline us to sin insofar as they are uncontrolled by reason; insofar as they are controlled by reason, they are part of the virtuous life’, Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a. 2ae. 24.2 ad. 3.

A good character will, therefore, include having such desires. I believe that, on the whole, Christianity has held that it is good to desire to (that is to feel a longing to) eat, drink, sleep, have sexual intercourse with a spouse,<sup>9</sup> have the company of other humans, and be liked by other humans; to desire to live in a nice house, walk in beautiful country, listen to good music, etc. And it is good to desire to rebuke the wrongdoer, and to grieve at the loss of loved ones. In the case of many of these desires, it is bad to indulge them and so bad to have them, beyond certain limits—to desire to eat so much that you become obese, or drink so much alcohol that you become drunk. And it may be good sometimes (or for some people always) not to indulge and so not to have these desires at all for the sake of higher goods (e.g. not to eat food at all on Good Friday in order to identify with Christ's suffering; or to avoid seeking to be liked in order to tell people an unpopular truth; or—for some people—always to avoid sexual intercourse). But the view is that there is normally something bad about you if you do not have such desires at all. Love is the best of desires; it is above all good that we shall love others (including on the Christian view, desiring their company and their deep well-being) in ways appropriate to their relation to ourselves. Desiring the company and well-being of children involves desiring a different kind of involvement with them and different kind of state of them from what desiring the company of one's spouse involves. And the love of God, which Christianity claims to be the greatest of loves, is an extension of ordinary human love of friends; it is the desire for the company and well-being of our supreme benefactor as well as our greatest friend. In this respect, as in many other respects, the worth of the kind of life which Christianity offers for this world depends on the truth of its Creed—that interaction with God is what our worship amounts to, and that the character which it promotes is a good one because it consists in considerable part of a desire for God (which would not be so good a desire to have if there were no God to satisfy it).

<sup>9</sup> As even Augustine, with his deep concern about the evil of lust, recognized when he wrote with approval of the 'mutual affection' which Adam and Eve had for each other as that of 'faithful and sincere marriage', which would include procreation. 'They always enjoyed what was loved.' What went wrong subsequently, claimed Augustine, was that 'mutual affection' got out of rational control, so as to become inordinate lust. See Augustine, *City of God* 14.10., trans. M. Dods (T. and T. Clark, 1871).

Unfortunately in this world some of our desires are intrinsically bad desires—we desire to humiliate or insult others; or desires which move us to action where it is bad to indulge them—we desire to have a good reputation when we do not deserve this, to exercise power for its own sake, to drink more alcohol than is good for us, and so on. And because we yield so often to the bad desires, we hurt others and they hurt us (that is, we give each other sensations which we desire not to have, and put each other in situations where we desire not to be). Although following the Christian way should help us to resist our bad desires, and to improve our character so that we have only good desires, to achieve this is work which needs effort and persistence. Natural processes make our situation bad and unhappy—we suffer from diseases and lose our friends. So often God's presence is not too evident to us; and too often the Christian Church fails to help us on our journey. The salvation available on earth is indeed a limited one.

Other religions also see the pursuit of their own way on earth as offering a limited kind of salvation here, and for other theistic religions the salvation is similar to that offered by Christianity—for all theistic religions commend worship of God and service of one's fellows. But the salvation offered is only similar, not the same. For Islam does not worship God for His Trinitarian nature or his Incarnation and atoning death. It claims that God whom it worships did not ever and could not ever share our human life. I suggest that if the God whom we worship and with whom we are in contact in our prayer is a Trinity, one of whose members (God the Son) shared our human nature and thus identified with us in the suffering involved in our earthly lives, and thereby provided atonement for our sins (in a way which I shall fill out more fully in the next chapter), that would be a great good for us. We would have more for which to praise God and be in more intimate contact with a more loving God than Islam claims to be possible. (But, of course, the goal of rightly praising God for all this will be unattainable, unless He did become incarnate. Hence, the importance (see Chapter 6) of just how likely it is that pursuit of the Christian way will attain the goal of the salvation offered, even on Earth; for example, how probable it is that worshipping God for his Incarnation will attain the goal of rightly worshipping God for his Incarnation). Also, because Islam has a slightly different set from Christianity of purportedly revealed commandments about how humans ought to serve their fellows (e.g. about

what one should eat, which wars are just, the role of women in society, and so on), it has a slightly different view from the Christian view of what the life of the saved on Earth amounts to. And, again, we may think that it is better for us if God has commanded us to live in one way rather than in another.

The Buddhist tends to have a more pessimistic view of this world than does the Christian. He tends to hold that the disordered desires of humans and their consequent suffering makes this world, on balance, a place where it is not good for us to be. For the Buddhist, as for the Christian, we can attain a limited salvation in this life by following the religious way. As we have seen, the Buddhist way is, in part, different from the Christian way, partly because the point of doing some of the actions of that way derives from the Buddhist Creed. And any limited well-being here depends on having true beliefs about what are worthwhile actions and which situations are relatively good ones. Note that among the ten standard bad actions listed by Buddhism is 'wrong view'. In particular, for Buddhism having a 'wrong view' involves rejecting the law of karma, that good acts have good effects and bad acts have bad effects, a law which is no part of Christian doctrine. (Given my earlier arguments, we cannot help our beliefs, and so the Buddhist doctrine that this is a bad act ought to be reconstrued as the doctrine that disbelieving the law of karma is a bad state of one's self, and that it is a bad act to allow one's self to get into this state as a result of self-deception or insufficient inquiry into the matter.) And a further crucial aspect of well-being is to believe the no-self doctrine: that there is no self continuing from moment to moment but only a stream of consciousness, the earlier parts of which causally affect the later parts. If we believe this, claims the Buddhist, then we shall cease to be so absorbed in our own future well-being; for no future person can be fully myself.

For the Buddhist, as for the Christian, a good character—having good desires—is part of our limited earthly salvation. A *bodhisattva*, an aspirant Buddha, requires a feeling of pity or compassion and an active wish to free all beings from suffering.<sup>10</sup> But Buddhism seems to advocate a life free from mundane desires for our own well-being, free that is from the eight worldly concerns for 'gain and loss, fame and disgrace,

<sup>10</sup> Lopez, *Buddhism*, 27.



praise and blame, happiness and sorrow'.<sup>11</sup> For the Buddhist, becoming 'enlightened' involves 'dispassion', the abolition of mundane desires as illustrated by the mother who does not weep for the death of her son, saying 'Why should I grieve? He fares the way he had to tread.'<sup>12</sup> And very occasionally in this life someone can attain complete enlightenment (and thus become a Buddha). He will have an earthly nirvana which at death will lead to the final nirvana (see later). But I suggest that all this represents a highly unsatisfactory conception of salvation. We ought to mind about being liked or disliked, gaining or losing a friend. 'Dispassion' of the kind exhibited by the mother who does not weep would not be a good thing to have.

So even as regards salvation in this life, Christianity and Buddhism have significantly different conceptions of what salvation consists in. The difference is far more acute when we consider that, for both religions, the primary constituent of salvation lies outside this life. For both religions (except for the very rare person who becomes a Buddha) this life is a far from perfect mode of existence. We are so made that it is often difficult and demanding to do good actions and some of our good actions are unsuccessful (our friends may suffer despite our best efforts to help them). We are in situations where we do not desire to be—we have sensations which we desire not to have (pains), and things happen to us which we desire not to happen (we lose our friends). And both religions hold that many of us suffer from false beliefs (or ones true but weak) about crucial matters. But the two religions have different accounts of how eventually an after-life can remove the imperfections of this life. For both religions we (or—strictly speaking—for Buddhism later parts of our streams of consciousness) need strong true beliefs about crucial matters (and, of course, the different religions hold different views about what are the true beliefs.) For Christianity many of our desires need to be improved (some removed, others better directed) and many of us need some good new desires; and, importantly, many of the obstacles to the fulfilment of our best desires need also to be removed. But for Buddhism, as I have noted, much of the trouble with this world is that we have mundane desires and the final solution is to remove them.

<sup>11</sup> Lopez, *Buddhism*, 265.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 218–19.

The Christian doctrine, like that of various other religions, is that salvation after this life is to be found in Heaven; 'the good' will go to Heaven where they will have a life which will last forever. (I shall consider more fully in Chapter 6 who are 'the good'.)

I shall now attempt to show that the life of Heaven which the Christian religion offers is a well-being greatly worth pursuing and one which will bring great happiness to him who has it. Well-being belongs to someone, I have claimed, in so far as he performs good actions in a situation where it is good to be and who knows that he is in such a situation doing such actions and who wants to be in that situation doing those actions. I commented earlier that good actions include reverencing beauty and holiness, developing our understanding of the world and beautifying it, developing our friendship with others, and helping others towards a deeply happy life. Good situations are ones which have the feature, among other features, that the goals of such actions are achieved (both by oneself and others); where the good triumphs. Such situations will include having pleasurable sensations (for pleasurable sensations are just the ones we want to have happen to us) but they are the better for coming from the doing of worthwhile actions and being in worthwhile situations. It is better to get the sensations of sexual pleasure through the development of a personal relationship, not by themselves. It is better to drink alcohol in company than alone. And so on.

If all this is correct, the occupations of the inhabitants of the Heaven, the saints, as depicted in the New Testament and by traditional Christian theologians would be supremely worthwhile, and so would their situation be. If the world depends for its being on God, a personal ground of being, holy, other, and beautiful, He is the proper object of unending worship. The fullest development of understanding will be growth in the understanding of the nature and actions of God himself. God, being perfectly good, omnipotent and omniscient, will ever be able to hold the interest of the saints by showing them new facets of reality, and, above all, His own nature. Becoming aware of God will be a central occupation of Heaven, traditionally called the 'Beatific Vision' of God.<sup>13</sup> Knowledge in Heaven will be sure. On Earth humans depend

<sup>13</sup> 'By a single, uninterrupted and everlasting act the mind of a human being will be united with God in that state of beatitude', *Summa Theologiae*, 1a. 2ae. 3. 2 ad.4.

on their sense organs and nerve system which may mislead them or fail to work. Christian theology assures the saints of a more direct grasp on reality in the hereafter. God will be present to the inhabitant of Heaven as intimately as his own thoughts. God will be ultimately victorious over all evil, and we shall fully realize this.<sup>14</sup> This contemplation of God, the source of all things, will lead to the saints responding in grateful adoration in what is another central occupation of Heaven-worship.<sup>15</sup> The saints reign with Christ in glory,<sup>16</sup> and so have other work to do—interceding before God for humans on Earth or elsewhere, and executing God's purposes in other ways; and thus bringing others into the sphere of God's love. These others may be, like many on Earth, half-developed beings ignorant of their capacities for the work of Heaven, with wounds of body and soul to be healed. So the relation of the saints to God will be one of loving interaction, that is friendship—God showing Himself and the saints responding in worship and service—but a friendship in which their mutual access and response are, unlike our friendship on Earth, total and unclouded.<sup>17</sup> The last book of the Bible, the only one to describe Heaven at any length, speaks to God making His home among humans, and declaring 'I will be their God and they will be my children'.<sup>18</sup> Since God is a being of infinite wonder,

<sup>14</sup> This is a theme of Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. E. Spearing (Penguin Books, 1998), e.g. The Long Text, section 32. She is much concerned that 'one point of our faith is that many shall be damned', and so it seems 'impossible that all manner of things shall be well'. And yet 'there is a deed which the Holy Trinity shall do on the last day' which is to make all well that is not well' and God tells her that 'You shall see for yourself that all manner of things shall be well' 'at the end of time'.

<sup>15</sup> 'This will be the life of the saints, the activity of those at rest: we shall praise without ceasing', Augustine, *City of God* 22.30, cited in B. E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church* (Cambridge University Press, 1991). I am indebted to Daley for his very full description of the understanding of the after-life by the Christian theologians of the first five hundred years of Christianity. He brings out how there is virtually total agreement among these theologians about the nature of Heaven, although there is much less agreement about whether there is a purgatorial stage through which some have to pass on the way to Heaven, and about the fate of those (if any) who do not get to Heaven.

<sup>16</sup> See Christ's words to his disciples: 'Truly, I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.' (Matthew 19: 28.) 'Judging' may mean here 'ruling over'.

<sup>17</sup> Thus Paul: 'Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face' (I Corinthians 13: 12).

<sup>18</sup> Revelation 21: 7.

it can take beings of finite power an eternity to comprehend Him. Those who 'follow the way of God's wisdom', wrote Origen, should think of themselves as living in tents, 'with which they always walk and always move on, and the further they go, so much more does the road still to walk grow long and stretch out endlessly. . . [the mind] is always called to move on, from the good to the better and from the better to still higher things'.<sup>19</sup>

All this led some of the early theologians to describe Heaven as involving or leading to 'union with God'; but those who so describe it usually make it clear that God's presence in the saints is 'by his good pleasure'<sup>20</sup> and by conformity to his will—our individuality remains. A similar point applies to talk of Heaven as involving deification (*θεοποίησις*), an expression made popular and given permanent currency in the Orthodox tradition by St Maximus the Confessor. This does not mean literally becoming God, for to be God is to be eternally and necessarily God; rather it is 'enjoying the divine relation of Son to Father, sharing the divine life'.<sup>21</sup>

Heaven will also involve friendship with good finite beings, including those who have been the companions of the saints on Earth. The task of comprehending and worshipping God will be a co-operative one, one in co-operation with those who have shared their work on Earth. Augustine wrote that the description of Heaven as 'the city of God' would have no meaning 'if the life of the saints were not social'.<sup>22</sup> Christian theology has always stressed both that Heaven will involve a renewal of earthly acquaintance, and that the enjoyment of such acquaintance will not be its main point. And, of course, one always enjoys acquaintance the better if it serves some further point—if one and one's fellows are working together in a task. Traditionally, too, people will get bodily pleasure out of life in Heaven. Aquinas<sup>23</sup> quotes Augustine<sup>24</sup> as saying that blessedness involves 'joy in the truth' and that the blessedness of

<sup>19</sup> Origen, *Homily 17 on Numbers*, cited in Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*, 50.

<sup>20</sup> Theodoret of Cyprus, *Commentary on I Corinthians* (15: 28), cited in Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*, 116.

<sup>21</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 2nd edn. (Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1990), 51, expounding the understanding of this term in 'Origen, Athanasius, and their successors'.

<sup>22</sup> *City of God* 19.5, cited in Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*, 147.

<sup>23</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, 1a. 2ae. 4.1.

<sup>24</sup> *Confessions*, 10. 23.

Heaven will involve the body.<sup>25</sup> So, in the Heaven depicted by Christian theology, a person will be performing actions of supreme worth and be in a situation of supreme worth. Also, he will know that he is doing such actions and is in such a situation.

Would the life of Heaven give him who lives it a deep happiness? Happiness is not basically a matter of having pleasant sensations. Certainly, it involves the absence of unpleasant sensations and may be found in having pleasant sensations, but all this is not its essence. There are no pleasant sensations had by the person who is happy in reading a good book, or playing a round of golf with a friend; nor by a man who is happy because his son is making a success of the business which the father founded. A person's happiness consists in his (believing that he is) doing what he wants (that is, desires) to be doing and having happen what he wants to have happen. The man who is happy playing golf is happy because—he believes—he is doing what he wants to be doing. A person who is having pleasant sensations may, indeed, be happy for that reason; but he will not be happy if he does not want to have these sensations, e.g. if he wants to try and do without such things for a period.

Unfortunately, on Earth people so often have conflicting wants, e.g. a person may want to have the pleasurable sensations caused by heroin, and want to avoid heroin addiction. Sometimes these conflicts are explicitly acknowledged; sometimes they are ones of which we are only half conscious, and sometimes they are suppressed from consciousness altogether. A person will only be fully happy if he has no conflicting wants; if he is doing what he wants and wants in no way to be doing anything else.

However, although a person may be fully happy when he believes that he is doing some action or having something happen, his happiness may arise from a false factual belief or from doing an action or being in a situation which, objectively, is not really a very good one. Happiness is surely more to be prized according to whether the happy person has true beliefs about what is happening and according to whether what is happening is, in fact, of great value, or only of little value, or really evil. A person who is happy because he believes that his son is making a success of the business, when, in fact, he is not, has a happiness which is

<sup>25</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, 1a. 2ae. 4. 5.

not nearly as worth having as the happiness of the person who has a true belief that his son is making a success of the business. We can see this by asking ourselves which we should choose if faced with a choice of much happiness with a false belief that something marvellous was so, or small happiness with a true belief that some small good thing was so. Further, someone who is happy because he is watching a pornographic film by himself has a happiness which is less valuable than the happiness of a person enjoying a drink in company or watching the performance of a great work of art.<sup>26</sup> And the happiness of the person who has made someone sneer at a companion is a happiness which is intrinsically evil. That this is so can be seen by most of us who reflect for a while on what is involved in getting enjoyment in these various ways. In so far as happiness is to be prized, I shall call it deep.

It follows that a person's deepest happiness is to be found in pursuing successfully a task of supreme value and being in a situation of supreme value, when that person has true beliefs about this and wants to be only in that situation pursuing that task. Hence, the life of the Christian Heaven would provide deep happiness for the person who wants to be there and wants nothing else, but not for those who have other wants.

I suggest that only that sort of life would be worth having for ever. Only a task which made continued progress valuable for its own sake but which would take infinite time to finish would be worth doing for ever; only a situation which was ever more worth having would be worth living in for ever. The growing development of a friendship with a God who, if he is the sort of God pictured by Christian theology, has ever new aspects of Himself to reveal, and the bringing of others into an ever-developing relationship with God, would provide a life worth living for ever; and a person who desired only to do the good would want that sort

<sup>26</sup> Even Utilitarians have had to make the distinction between lower and higher pleasures, although it seems to be somewhat against Utilitarian principles to do so—for there is little reason to suppose that those who rejoice in lower pleasures are less happy (have less quantity of pleasure) than those who rejoice in higher pleasures, although their pleasure is less valuable, less deep. See J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* (first publ. 1863; George Routledge and Sons, 1895): 'some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others' (15), and 'it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other part to the comparison knows both sides.' (18–19.)

of life for ever. Most earthly occupations indeed pall after a time, but the reason why they pall is that there are no new facets to them which are greatly worthwhile having. A person who desires only the good and its continuation would not, given the Christian doctrine of God, be bored in eternity.<sup>27</sup>

It follows that someone will want to be in Heaven only if they have the character which I described earlier. A person's character consists of his desires, that is his wants (which actions he naturally and spontaneously seeks to do and in which situations he naturally and spontaneously seeks to be) and his beliefs about which actions and situations are good (or bad). The person who wants to be applauded for what he has not done, who believes that it is good to see people humiliated, and who wants to get pleasure out of the company of similarly malevolent persons, would not want to be in Heaven. The person who has the wrong character, for whom the life of Heaven is not natural, would clearly, even if he got to Heaven, not have the well-being possessed by those who want to be there.

And not merely is happiness in the work of Heaven unavailable to those who have the wrong character, but much of the work may not even be able to be done by those of the wrong character. To understand the nature of God and worship Him because He has that nature, one needs certain concepts such as 'just', 'loving', 'compassionate', and 'generous'. These are all concepts which apply to actions or persons in virtue of their having a certain kind of goodness. But to recognize an action as good to do involves having some inclination to do it.<sup>28</sup> One may recognize something as brown or square, fattening or inflationary, while liking or disliking things that are brown or square, actions that are fattening or inflationary; but to recognize something as good involves having some minimal inclination to do it or bring it about. So a person who had made himself entirely insensitive to the good could not recognize justice, love, compassion, or generosity; he could only recognize that actions which other people called 'just', 'loving',

<sup>27</sup> Bernard Williams affirms the necessary undesirability of eternal life in 'The Makropoulos Case' (in his *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge University Press, 1973), ch. 6)). But those whom he pictures as necessarily bored in eternity seem to me persons of limited idealism.

<sup>28</sup> For fuller argument in defence of this point, see, e.g., my *The Christian God* (Clarendon Press, 1994), 65–8.

‘compassionate’, or ‘generous’ had certain other features, for example that they often involved making people happy or giving them things. That the impure cannot perceive the pure, and so that purity of life was needed for spiritual discernment, was a theme of Clement of Alexandria.<sup>29</sup>

Christian theology emphasizes that the life of Heaven is something which begins on Earth for the person who pursues the Christian way. This is because the pursuit of that way on Earth involves starting to do the tasks of Heaven—for a short time with limited access to God, limited tools and understanding, hostility from other people, and desires for other things. The Christian on Earth has begun to understand the divine nature (by Bible reading, receiving religious instruction, etc.), to worship (in the eucharist with music, poetry, art, etc.) and to show the divine love to others. But his tools are poor—his mind and his instructors provide weak understanding of the divine nature; his organs and choirs are poor things; and so often neither in worship nor private prayer does he feel in contact with God; other humans are hostile to his religion; his attempts to help others fail; and he has many desires to do other things. These obstacles to the full pursuit and enjoyment of the Christian way would be removed in Heaven. In all the ways which I have been describing salvation (both its beginning on Earth and its completion in Heaven), as depicted by Christianity, is an intrinsically very good thing for the person being saved, but it is also very good for the additional and very important reason that God wants us to be saved, and He will be made happy by our pursuit and achievement of salvation.

Aquinas taught that man’s ultimate goal is *beatitudo*, literally ‘blessedness’ but often translated as ‘happiness’. The latter translation is a bad one. The English word ‘happiness’ denotes a subjective state, a person doing and having done to her what she wants—even if what she is doing is not of great worth and she has false beliefs about what is happening. I argued that happiness is most worth having when the agent has true beliefs about her condition and gets her happiness from doing what is

<sup>29</sup> See the discussion in E. F. Osborn, *The Philosophy of Clement of Alexandria* (Cambridge University Press, 1957), 128–31. H. H. Price has also argued that one may need to be to some extent just loving etc. in order to understand what these characteristics amount to in others. See his *Belief* (George Allen and Unwin, 1969), 471–2.



worthwhile. It is the deep well-being which provides such worthwhile happiness which is *beatitudo*.<sup>30</sup>

Other theistic religions have depicted a Heaven as a wonderful, enjoyable place, with no occasion for sorrow and sadness. The descriptions of Heaven, normally translated 'Paradise', in the Koran tend to be in terms of wonderful food, drink and dress, and the company of wonderful women;<sup>31</sup> but this can be regarded as metaphorical. Islamic theologians have emphasized that Heaven involves centrally the vision of God;<sup>32</sup> and it is not implausible to regard Christianity as offering a somewhat similar kind of salvation to that offered by Islam, in Heaven as on Earth. But the salvation offered in Heaven by Islam is only somewhat similar to that offered by Christianity for the same reason as the reason why the salvation offered by Islam on Earth is only somewhat similar. For the God with whom we would be in contact in an Islamic Heaven would not be one worshipped as a Trinitarian community of loving beings, one of whose members shared the suffering of our earthly life and thereby made available atonement for our sins, and helping others on Earth to their salvation. A Christian God is one for these reasons more lovable by humans. And for the same reasons as before that leads me to suggest that Christianity offers a slightly better kind of salvation than does Islam. It is, indeed, difficult to conceive how any religion could offer a better kind of salvation.

<sup>30</sup> See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a. 2ae. 1–5. Aquinas argues that full *beatitudo* consists in the 'activity' (3.2) of laying hold of our 'ultimate end' (2.8 ad.2), which is, he claims, God, the supreme good. He has arguments to show that the supreme good does not consist in riches, honour, fame, power, bodily well-being, etc. (though he does not wish to deny that these things have instrumental or limited value). It is necessary for *beatitudo* that one should seek to get the right thing—God—although the attainment of that thing depends on God Himself giving it to us. Aquinas holds (1.7) that all humans desire *beatitudo* but that some have false ideas about where it is to be found. In 'Two Conceptions of Happiness' (*Philosophical Review*, 1979, 88, 167–97) Richard Kraut brings out how Aristotle similarly had an objective understanding of εὐδαιμονία, which differs from our modern subjective understanding of happiness. See also Robert W. Simpson, 'Happiness', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1975, 12, 169–76; and Elizabeth Telfer, *Happiness* (Macmillan, 1980), for this contrast and for the connections between εὐδαιμονία and happiness.

<sup>31</sup> See, among many similar passages, Sura 44: 51.

<sup>32</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife*, trans. T. J. Winter (Islamic Texts Society, 1989), 250–1, wrote that compared to meeting the Lord, all the other delights of Paradise were as 'those of a beast let loose in a pasture' (cited in D. Waines, *An Introduction to Islam*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 132).

But, however nirvana is interpreted, Buddhism offers a very different kind of salvation in the after-life from that offered by Christianity. For the Buddhist, the point of following the less demanding parts of the Buddhist way is to secure rebirth either in this world of humans or in a better world of demigods. But the point of following the more demanding parts of the way is to attain the final nirvana. The final nirvana supposedly involves the end of the cycle of death and rebirth, and an end of suffering and mundane desires and of ignorance; but just what else is involved is unclear. There seems to be within Buddhism a range of very different understandings of the final nirvana.<sup>33</sup> On one extreme view it is, as etymology suggests, literally ‘nothingness’, the end of existence. On another view it is unconceptualizable—nothing can be said about it. On other views it is infinite peace and joy. But no positive reason seems to be given as to what makes nirvana a joyful state; there is only the negative reason of the absence of mundane desires. One thing that seems fairly clear, however, is that nirvana does not involve friendship with an all-good creator God, or even with humans whom we have known on Earth. The issue is complicated by the Buddhist doctrine of no-self. Strictly speaking, from one moment to another there is no continuing unchanging soul which gives the person his identity, only a stream of consciousness. So what survives into another world, let alone into nirvana (if anything survives into nirvana), is only somewhat the same person as existed on Earth. So, strictly speaking, Buddhism offers no hope to *me* of a blessed heavenly life, let alone one involving God. And there is to my mind considerable plausibility in maintaining that an after-life without God would not be as happy as life in the theistic Heaven. For friendship is with persons. If there is no God, the only friendship to be attained could be with persons with limited ability to satisfy our needs, limited natures to reveal to us, limited abilities to do things for us and satisfy our curiosity. But anyway continued friendship with other humans, let alone those who have shared our earthly pilgrimage, seems no part of nirvana. All told, the salvation offered by Buddhism seems to me definitely inferior to the salvation offered by Christianity or Islam.

Like Buddhism, Hinduism offers to the very holy eventual liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth, but seems to give more positive

<sup>33</sup> For an outline of the whole range of such views, see Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation* (Clarendon Press, 1994), 161–73.

content to the resulting state, either as a separate individual in interaction with God in a Heaven or losing one's identity through being merged with God. The former state is clearly similar to that offered by Christianity and Islam, but seems to me (like the Islamic Heaven) to lack that extra good offered in the Christian Creed, that the God with whom we would interact is a Trinitarian community, one of whose members shared our suffering as a separate individual on Earth and died to make available atonement for our sins. The latter state of merging with the divine (if it is a coherent supposition) is one in which—strictly speaking—I would no longer exist; and also the great good of a community of separate interacting created individuals would be lost. For those reasons it seems (like the Buddhist nirvana) a considerably less desirable form of after-life at which to aim than the Christian one.

Another kind of after-life much less worth having for an unending time is the rather trivial one described by many spiritualist mediums in which our departed relatives seem to be doing much the same kind of thing as they used to do on Earth; no great spiritual progress seems to be involved. And there are theistic religions, such as the religion of Israel until the last two centuries BC (the religion of almost all of the Old Testament), which offer no hope of any after-life. The salvation which such religions offer must inevitably be much less worth seeking than the salvation offered by Christianity or Islam.

### THIRD RELIGIOUS REASON: TO HELP OTHERS TO ATTAIN THEIR SALVATION

The first religious reason for pursuing a religious way is, we saw, to render proper worship and obedience to God or gods. The second religious reason is to secure one's own salvation. The third religious reason is to help others to attain their salvation.<sup>34</sup> Since our own salvation is good, so too is that of other humans. It is good that we should help them to have such a life. And so, in so far as any religion offers a worthwhile salvation, it is good for us to help others to achieve

<sup>34</sup> My only reason for discussing the salvation of others after discussing one's own salvation is an expository one; when I have considered what securing one's own salvation involves, it is easier to explain what helping to secure someone else's salvation involves. I do not imply that the third reason is less important than the second.

it. I argued earlier that not merely is it good but there is an obligation on those who have a responsibility for the upbringing of others, and that means most of us, to help those others to find their way to their own salvation. On the Christian view, it would be good for others to have on Earth a choice of whether to lead the fuller life of worship and obedience to God, which together with the service of others would lead God to take them to Heaven. It would be an enormous good for them if they lead a life of worship and service of others on Earth, and so thereafter God takes them to Heaven—for all the reasons described in the previous section why it is good for someone to be in Heaven. So it would be good that we should help to put them in a position where the choice of whether to pursue the Christian way is a serious option for them. It is also good that we should encourage them to take the right choice. But it would not be good for any human to force anyone else to make the right choice—even if any human had that power, which we do not. In this all-important matter of what sort of person one is to be, a free moral agent must exercise his right to make his own choice.

### THE THREE REASONS ARE NOT IN COMPETITION

The three reasons for pursuing the Christian way will not normally be in competition. Rendering due worship and obedience to God will involve helping other people to secure their salvation, mundane and eternal; for God loves all people, and wants others to be saved through our actions. By rendering due worship and obedience to God and thus helping others to secure their salvation, a person attains his own salvation. For he does the actions and thereby (since—as we shall see more fully in the next chapter—doing actions of a certain kind one time makes it easier to do them the next time) forms the character needed for this purpose. By doing actions of worship and service when it is difficult, we gradually make ourselves naturally inclined to do such actions, and thereby make ourselves the sort of people who would be naturally happy in Heaven and so persons whom a loving God would take to Heaven; and the only way to make ourselves this kind of person is by doing actions of those kinds. The only possible clash between the three goals would arise if someone gave so much attention to trying to save others that he forgot about worshipping God. This could happen; but clearly it ought not to

happen, since some duty of worship of our creator is a paramount obligation. And, anyway, such concentration on converting others would probably be counter-productive; you are unlikely to persuade others to become worshipping people unless you are a worshipping person yourself.

If the Christian Creed is true, the pursuit of all these goals (kept in the right balance so that they do not ever conflict) follows from the overall goal described by Aquinas of doing the actions which the love of God would lead one to do. Love of God will lead one properly to worship and obey Him, and to seek our own salvation and that of His other human creatures more than mere obedience demands. It might, however, be thought that in commending total devotion to God, Christianity recommends that we should love ourselves and other people only because we and they are God's creatures and He wants us to love us and them; and so it does not commend loving ourselves or others for our own or their own sake. Augustine taught that man is to be loved for the sake of something else, that is God.<sup>35</sup> But in a powerful and persuasive paper, 'The Problem of Total Devotion', Robert Adams has argued that to love someone involves sharing their love for others. God loves our neighbour for his sake, and so we can only love God if we share His love of our neighbour for our neighbour's sake. Just as 'a lack of love for the children of one's marriage . . . is rightly apt to be seen as a deficiency in one's love for one's spouse', so the love of God is one of those desires whose 'fulfilment involves having a motivation that is not based on the desire. Such desires have in some measure to let go if they are to enjoy full satisfaction.'<sup>36</sup>

It is sometimes suggested that pursuing a religious way in order to secure one's own salvation is selfish. A religion of generous love such as Christianity would surely not encourage its pursuit for this motive? According, for example, to D. Z. Phillips, a person who pursued a religious way in order to gain salvation for himself would have missed the point of religion:

Construing belief in the immortality of the soul as the final state which gives men good reasons for acting in certain ways now falsifies the character of moral regard. It certainly allows no room for anything that might be meant by the

<sup>35</sup> See Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* 1.22.20.

<sup>36</sup> R. M. Adams, 'The Problem of Total Devotion' in R. Audi and W. J. Wainwright (eds.), *Rationality, Religious Belief and Moral Commitment* (Cornell University Press, 1986), 190 and 189.

spirituality of the soul. It seems to me that if people lead a certain kind of life simply because of the final set of consequences to which it leads, they are indifferent to that way of life.<sup>37</sup>

It seems to me that Phillips is wrong here; although there are other good reasons (religious and non-religious) for pursuit of a religious way, its pursuit to gain one's own salvation is also a good reason. In pursuing salvation, I am seeking to make the best of myself. If it is good that I should improve my capacities (my knowledge of history or my ability to run)—as surely it is; and if it is good that I should seek to prolong them (to keep mentally and physically active when I am old, instead of letting myself sink into an armchair)—as surely it is; *a fortiori* it must be good that I should seek to make myself a saintly and generous person and to preserve such a being for eternity.<sup>38</sup> As we have seen, salvation is not a goal of a different kind from the way of life which leads to it; on the contrary, it consists in continuing to lead that way with the obstacles to success removed. No one could lead the Christian life in order to achieve a 'final set of consequences' while being 'indifferent to that way of life'. But, Phillips might say, my main goal ought not to be my own well-being—just as the mother ought not to seek to improve her own health before her child's. Yet that parallel does not hold, for the reason that, as I argued above, my salvation is not in competition with the salvation of others. Part of securing my salvation is helping others to secure their salvation; and by helping others to secure their salvation, I make myself the sort of person to whom God will give salvation.

There are, of course, other reasons, some of which we came across in another connection in Chapter 3, for which people follow some parts of a religious way. People go to church to get more business for their trade, join a religion in order to marry a believer or have immediate peace of mind, worship God in the hope that He will answer their prayers for wealth, and so on. These are purposes of limited goodness. Religion seeks greater goods than these for people. In general, someone who

<sup>37</sup> D. Z. Phillips, *Death and Immortality* (Macmillan, 1970), 30.

<sup>38</sup> The Council of Trent declared that it was not wrong for a man to hope for, and seek to gain, his eternal salvation (Denzinger 1576.) In the seventeenth century there was some opposition to the official Catholic position from the Quietists (such as Madame Guyon, see p.172). On the history of disputes about whether the pursuit of the Christian way must be disinterested, see K. E. Kirk, *The Vision of God* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1931), 441–72.

pursued a religion seriously in order to achieve the former goals would soon find that it involved pursuing greater goals, and seeking the lesser ones only if they were compatible with the greater ones. Someone who pursued a religion only to attain lesser goals would find that he was paying a high price for a small gain; and that that was not the best way to attain the lesser goals.

Thus, someone who followed the Christian way, with all its serious demands, in order to get more business for his trade might find himself having to give generously of his time and money, so that, on balance, he lost money. It might seem sensible to perform some of the public acts involved in the Christian way, such as going to church on Sundays in order to get business for one's trade. But if one did only this, one would not be following the Christian way to any significant extent. Marrying a believer or getting immediate peace of mind might seem more worthy purposes for following a religious way. But serious pursuit of the way will mean that other purposes must become dominant in the pursuer; and these involve a high price. They, too, could lead to a person losing that for which he joined the religion. He might lose his spouse through having to die for his faith; or find that taking his religion seriously led to greater moral sensitivity—and so (at least on Earth, while he was working out his salvation), led to more agonies of conscience. To pursue a religion for such lesser reasons would seem foolish in view of the seriousness of the commitment involved.

### JOHN HICK ON THE EQUAL SALVIFIC WORTH OF RELIGIONS

John Hick has claimed that while, as I have also claimed, each of the major religions has its own understanding of salvation, 'if we stand back from these different conceptions to compare them, we can very naturally and properly see them as different forms of the more fundamental conception of a radical change from a profoundly unsatisfactory state to one that is limitlessly better, because rightly related to the Real'.<sup>39</sup> 'The

<sup>39</sup> John Hick, 'Religious Pluralism and Salvation', in P. L. Quinn and K. Meeker (eds.), *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 55.

Real' is Hick's word for what he regards as the transcendent 'divine reality',<sup>40</sup> conceptualized in different traditions as personal or as impersonal. This 'transformation of human existence which is called salvation or liberation shows itself in its spiritual and moral fruits.'<sup>41</sup> It begins in this life, but—not being completed here—it continues in a further life or lives. The spiritual fruits are basically a matter of openness to the transcendent, manifesting itself in prayer (or spiritual meditation) and serenity; while the ethical or moral fruits are 'the unselfish regard for others that we call love or compassion. This is commonly expressed in the principle of valuing others as we value ourselves, and treating them accordingly'.<sup>42</sup>

Hick is surely correct in claiming the major religions all seek to develop these characteristics in humans; and probably correct in his claim that many people who follow the way of any of the major religions centred on seeking a right relation to the Real will develop these characteristics.<sup>43</sup> But, if my earlier claims are correct, he is mistaken in his assumption that the salvation (of oneself and others) is the only important goal of all the major religions; and mistaken in his claim that they all have the same fundamental understanding of salvation. If God has done for all His creatures what the theistic religions and above all the Christian religion affirms, then, indeed, He deserves worship; and the first aim of religion is to promote grateful worship and obedience—not for our sake (not as an aspect of our salvation) but for God's sake. If 'the Real' is not personal, if it has not created the world and its inhabitants as a voluntary act, then obedience is not possible and grateful worship is not appropriate; you cannot be grateful to an object for creating you if the object never had you or anything else in mind in what it did. Non-theistic religions do not have a goal of this kind.

All religions promote salvation. But my earlier arguments suggest that they differ from each other in their views of what salvation consists in, even in respect of that part of salvation which concerns our earthly life. The point just made that a major goal of theistic religions is the

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>41</sup> John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (Macmillan, 1989), 301.

<sup>42</sup> 'Religious Pluralism and Salvation', 56.

<sup>43</sup> Whether following a religious way does produce these ethical and spiritual fruits is then, as Hick acknowledges, an 'empirical' matter ('Religious Pluralism and Salvation', 56); but he produces examples of 'saints' in different religions—see *The Interpretation of Religion*, 301–2.



worship of God has an immediate consequence for what the spiritual fruits of 'openness to the transcendent' involved in a human's own salvation amounts to. Does it involve worship of God, or meditation on the law of karma or what? For Christianity, above all repentance before 'the Real', that is God, for our wrongdoing and seeking his forgiveness, and God actually forgiving us, is an all-important constituent in what it is for us to be saved. Not so for the Buddhist—firstly, because you can only wrong a personal being and Buddhism has no personal God; and secondly, because for Buddhism wrongdoing does not seem to involve the acquisition of guilt, which can be removed simply by forgiveness given to a penitent wrongdoer by the person wronged. Certainly, regretting a bad past and resolving to live a good life in future is very important for Buddhism, and confession is a useful aid towards redirecting your life, but the law of karma still has to be worked out—the effects of wrongdoing cannot simply be cancelled by someone else (the person wronged, whether God or human).<sup>44</sup>

When we come to the 'ethical dimension' (by which Hick means how one should behave towards other humans), no doubt all religions hold that one's own salvation involves 'having love or compassion for others'. This involves promoting their well-being, and so will amount to something very different in so far as one has a very different idea of what their well-being consists in. Theistic religions hold that the well-being of others includes their worshipping and seeking forgiveness from God; non-theistic religions deny that. Hence, loving other humans will involve, according to the two kinds of religion, developing in them different characteristics. And I noted earlier that religions differ about whether mundane desires should be developed in the right way, or alternatively repressed in oneself and others. Hick acknowledges that different cultures may have different views about what produces well-being, and so about what those who are on the way to salvation should seek to promote in others. He gives the example of the false belief in

<sup>44</sup> See M. D. Eckel, 'A Buddhist Approach to Repentance', in A. Etzioni and D. E. Carney (eds.), *Repentance: A Comparative Perspective* (Rowan and Littlefield, 1997). Eckel mentions (132) the practice of monks of Theravada Buddhism to confess at twice-a-month ceremonies the occasions on which they have broken the monastic code. He quotes a recent account of this code which 'makes it clear that the purpose of confession is not to wipe away guilt or to eliminate the effects of bad action . . . confession is useful, however, 'to strengthen one's resolve to refrain from such behaviour in the future, and to reassure other bhikkhus that one is still serious about the training'.

some cultures that 'a life sacrificed at the foundation of a new building, especially a temple or palace, would ensure its durability'<sup>45</sup> and so promote the well-being of the society to which it belongs. But the differences are often much deeper than this, concerning what human well-being itself consists in (not merely concerning which actions will cause some state which—we all agree—will constitute an aspect of well-being).

And it is of very great importance to whether it is worthwhile to pursue some religious way for oneself, let alone commend it to others, whether it offers the prospect of a gloriously worthwhile and happy after-life or not. Whatever the value of a holy life of seventy years on Earth, I doubt if I have the right, let alone the duty, to persuade others to live a life of total self-sacrifice on Earth unless (as well as having its own great value) it is the means to an even more worthwhile and happy after-life. As I have illustrated, different religions give us different accounts of that after-life; and some of these, I have argued, describe states of affairs much more worth seeking than do others. Hick claims that 'the basic expectation of a limitlessly good fulfilment could be correct without any of our present ways of picturing it proving adequate.'<sup>46</sup> True. But in assessing whether some goal is worth pursuing, we must depend on our 'present way of picturing it'—we have no other. And if what one religion offers you does not look at all like 'a limitlessly good fulfilment', there is no reason to suppose that really it is, and so there is less reason for seeking it rather than some other goal. In theory, Hick acknowledges that these differences are important, but he claims that 'it is not necessary for salvation to hold a correct opinion'<sup>47</sup> about such matters. Maybe we can all be 'saved' in the end without having now a correct opinion of which forms the after-life can take. Maybe. But all of the great religions (even in their more liberal forms) claim that how we live in this world makes a difference at any rate in the short term to what will happen to us in the next world. And if we do not even try to discover which is the best kind of after-life which there is some probability of our attaining and then try to attain it and help others to attain it, we may well risk letting ourselves become the sort of person who is quite unsuited for it. We cannot presume that all will be 'saved' in the end

<sup>45</sup> *An Interpretation of Religion*, 311.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 361, n. 8.

<sup>47</sup> 'Religious Pluralism and Salvation', 62.

in the absence of any positive reason for believing that to be so; and I shall give in the next chapter some reason for supposing that it is not inevitable that all will be saved.<sup>48</sup>

Contrary to Hick—different religions have different goals. Some of them seek non-human goals (the glory of God). And different religions seek to make humans (somewhat) different kinds of people in this life (with different relations to the transcendent), and they offer us different prospects at which to aim for the future. I have argued that some of these goals are better than others, and some of these futures are much more worth seeking than others. And these differences provide part of the reason for following one religious way rather than another.

## THE FAITH INVOLVED IN THE CHRISTIAN WAY

Pursuing a religious way for religious reasons involves seeking goals which can only be attained if some assumption is true about the world beyond the world of sense. That assumption is the creed of the religion in question. Pursuing the Buddhist way involves seeking rebirth in a good next life, being reborn in a higher state as a result of having lived a good life in a slightly lower state; and eventually attaining nirvana (however exactly that is understood). The Buddhist thus acts on the assumption that every person who dies is reborn in a new body (except anyone who leads a very good life in a very high state, who then escapes the cycle of birth and rebirth). The Jew who observed the law in the centuries before Christ may not have believed in an after-life, but he offered his ritual sacrifices in order to obey God who had commanded their offering. He thus acted on the assumption that there is a God who

<sup>48</sup> That different religions have different understandings of salvation is a theme of S. Mark Heim, *Salvations* (Orbis Books, 1995). But he suggests that maybe all the different 'salvations' of different religions are attainable. The Buddhist can attain nirvana, and the Christian can attain Heaven; and perhaps the Buddhist who attains nirvana can thereafter attain Heaven. Maybe, but no-one has any good reason to suppose that. We should aim directly at the best goal (subject to the qualifications of the next chapter); otherwise we may lose it by forming a character unsuited for it. I shall be arguing in the next chapter that the Buddhist who has succeeded in eliminating mundane desires has made himself unfitted for Heaven; and he would need to pass through Purgatory rather than nirvana in order to get there.

issues commands. To pursue the Christian way for religious reasons involves acting on the assumption that there is a God who ought to be worshipped properly and obeyed, and will take 'the good' to Heaven after this life. These goals of the Christian religion, the religious reasons for which one pursues it are ones which one wants or should want, that is ones which one needs. They can only be achieved if there is a God who will provide them. Hence, pursuit of the Christian way involves faith in the sense of trust analysed in Chapter 4 of acting on the assumption that God will provide for one what one wants or needs. If there is a God, the aim of rendering proper worship and obedience to God, if He exists, will be achieved by following the Christian way; He will provide for those who follow the way the fullness of salvation in the after-life, and He will ensure that our actions forward the salvation of others.

I have claimed in this chapter that one factor in the choice of which (if any) religious way to pursue must be how good are the goals which the religion offers. Their goodness will consist in their enabling one to fulfil obligations (e.g. worship God if He exists) and to achieve good goals which it may not be obligatory to achieve (e.g. one's own salvation). I have given reasons why the goals offered by the Christian religion are good ones, and why goals offered by Buddhism or early Judaism are not as good. Some religions, however, offer somewhat similar goals to each other. Plausibly, what Islam offers is similar to what Christianity offers—rendering proper worship and obedience to God, and salvation for oneself and others (construed in a somewhat similar way to the way in which Christianity construes it). But, as I have noted, there are differences between Islam and Christianity in respect of the features for which we worship God, and I have suggested that, for example, it would be a great good for us to be able to worship God for sharing our human life (if He did so), and so the salvation offered by Christianity is a little better than that offered by Islam; here and hereafter we would be in contact with a God to whom we can relate more intimately.

The other factor in the choice of which religion to pursue must be how probable is it that by pursuing the way of that religion we shall attain the goals which it offers us, more probably than by pursuing the way of some other religion or no religion. I shall consider in the next

chapter in detail just how that depends on how probable is the assumption involved in the practice of the religion, the creed of that religion, is true. That will enable me to reach a conclusion about the kind of belief, and so the kind of faith, that is required for the practice of a religion (that is, for following the way of that religion) and, in particular, for the practice of the Christian religion.

## 6

# The Role of Creeds

I claimed in the last chapter that, while there are at most three different kinds of goal for which different religions advocate the pursuit of their different religious ways, different religions sometimes have very different conceptions of these goals. Hence, it is relevant to the choice of which (if any) religious way to pursue whether the goals which the religion offers are (if its creed is true) obligatory or good to pursue, and better to pursue than the goals of other religions. But there is only point in pursuing a certain religious way if there is some chance that pursuit of the way will achieve the goals.

To pursue a way in order to achieve the goals of religion, someone needs to believe that it is at least as probable that pursuit of that way will attain those goals as that pursuit of any other way will; and more probable that it will attain them than that will pursuing some other way (e.g. doing nothing). It would not merely be foolish or irrational but logically impossible to pursue a religious way *in order to* obtain a certain goal, if you believed that pursuing that way would make you less likely to obtain the goal than you would be otherwise. I may not believe that pursuit of the Christian way is very likely to obtain my salvation, but I can still pursue it in order to obtain my salvation, if I believe that pursuit of no other way, e.g. the Muslim way, is more likely to obtain my salvation (understood in a similar way). Faced with a choice of six roads, I may not think it very likely that any particular one leads to London; but I may still take one in order to get to London unless I think it more likely that a different road leads to London. In future, for the sake of simplicity of exposition, I shall normally assume that a person believes that one religious way is more likely to obtain the goals of religion (understood in a similar way) than is any other, and ignore the possibility that he believes that each of a number of ways is equally likely to obtain those goals. Hence, I shall normally phrase the belief which

someone needs in order to pursue a religious way as the belief that pursuit of his way is more likely to attain his goals than is pursuit of any other way. It will be obvious how to amend my account to deal with the case of someone who believes that each of two or more ways is equally likely to attain his goals, and more likely than any other way.

The belief, then, which a person needs for his pursuit of the religious way is a means–end belief, a belief about a certain means (more probably than any other means) leading to the attainment of a certain end. But, as we saw in Chapter 1, means–end beliefs seldom stand on their own. They normally derive from more theoretical beliefs about what the world is like. I can believe that putting 50 p in a certain slot will lead to my getting a bar of chocolate without having any belief about how this goal is achieved (i.e. how the machine works). The former belief could be based solely on past experiences of doing a similar thing. But a belief that pursuing a certain way will (more probably than pursuing any other way) attain salvation for the pursuer (or either of the other goals of religion) is not going to be based on past experience of how often following different ways has led to salvation (or either of the other goals) in the past—there are no available statistics on the proportion of those following some religious way in the past who have attained their salvation (or either of the other goals of religion). Since there are no such statistics, a person's means–end belief about the consequences of pursuing a religious way needs a more theoretical justification, in terms of a creed from which it follows that pursuing the way will attain its goals, and pursuing other ways (or no way) is less likely to attain these goals. The belief that one needs in the creed is that it is more probable that that creed is true than any rival alternative creed is true; an alternative creed is one from which it follows that pursuing a rival religious way will attain similar goals, and pursuing other ways is less likely to do so.

I understand by a creed a theological system in a wide and vague sense, in which there are some central claims agreed by followers of the religion and other disputed less central claims. I am not using the term creed in the narrower sense of a collection of propositions to which a church member is required in some sense to assent. I later illustrate, however, how the Nicene Creed, to which the assent of Christians is often required, encapsulates an explanation of this sort. I am not now attempting to show that the Christian Creed (in the wide sense) is true;

but only that, if it is true, it has the resources to explain why pursuit of the Christian way will lead to the rendering of proper worship and obedience to God or gods, and to the attainment of salvation for the follower herself, and how it will help others to attain their salvation.

## THE CHRISTIAN EXPLANATION OF HOW PURSUIT OF THE CHRISTIAN WAY LEADS TO PROPER WORSHIP AND OBEDIENCE TO GOD OR GODS

The Christian Creed (like that of Judaism and Islam) tells us that there is one God, omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good, the ultimate source of all things, who made us and the world in which we live and keeps us and it in being; hence, the duty to worship and to obey any commands He has issued—for the reasons given in the previous chapter. But the more detailed Christian Creed gives us much further reason why we should worship and obey God; and tells us how we should worship and which commands or commendations God has issued, and so why it is good to follow the Christian way which consists in following those commands or commendations.

God, the Christian Creed tells us, is a Trinity, three divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, totally unified in action and mutually sustaining each other in love. The Father, in virtue of his divine nature, necessarily and eternally brings about the Son and (with the Son or perhaps through the Son) also brings about the Spirit; God, therefore, is properly worshipped not merely as the awesome source of all being but as the manifestation of perfect love. The need for gratitude and obedience is greatly increased by God the Son having become a human, as Jesus Christ, to provide a means of atonement for our sins, to identify with our suffering, and to teach us how to live.

According to the Christian Creed, the problem of sin is a very weighty one. (To sin is to fail in one's obligations to God, to wrong God.) Humans suffer from an inherited proneness to do evil, desires for what is wrong (as well, of course, as desires for what is, on balance, good). All religions and most non-religious thinkers have recognized this proneness. Given that there is a God, it is a proneness of humans to fail to render to God their creator due worship and obedience, to show love to their fellows, God's children, and to use the created world in the



way which its owner, God, has laid down. And we have some responsibility for dealing with the consequences of the sins of our ancestors (paradigmatically, our first ancestor 'Adam'), though—in my view—no guilt arising from those sins. All of this forms our inheritance of original sin. All humans have yielded to this proneness and sinned to varying degrees, and have influenced each other for bad so that a proneness to sin has been transmitted socially as well as genetically. We need to be forgiven by God.

The Christian Creed holds that God provides this forgiveness as a result of the life and death of Jesus Christ. But there are in Christian tradition several different accounts of how the forgiveness is ours through that life and death. Different theologians have produced various theories of why humans need atonement; how they are unable to provide it for themselves; how God provided it by becoming incarnate as Jesus Christ and suffering and dying; how thereby he made atonement available to all who accepted God's action on their behalf; and how thereby he forgives everyone who asks for his forgiveness in virtue of the life and death of Jesus. There is the theory that the life and death of Jesus was a ransom which God the Father paid to the Devil to free us from his clutches; or the theory that that life and death was a punishment for our sins suffered vicariously by Jesus on our behalf; or the theory that it constituted the payment of compensation; or the theory that it constituted a sacrifice to God the Father on our behalf. The theory which I regard as the most plausible (basically, I believe, that of Aquinas developed from Anselm) is as follows. Atonement for wrongdoing requires repentance, apology, reparation, and penance. If you have wronged me, you need to atone for your wrongdoing by making a genuine apology (that is, both repent and apologize), and making reparation (e.g. render the service you ought to have rendered earlier), and doing a bit more ('penance') as a token of your repentance. And when you have made atonement, it is good that I should forgive you. I could do so without insisting on reparation or penance, but you need to repent and apologize before I can forgive you. Otherwise, I would not be taking you seriously as one who meant to do what you did, and I would be implying that wrongdoing does not matter. To forgive you is not just to treat you as one who has not wronged me—I can do that simply by ignoring your wrongdoing—but to treat you thus, in response to your recognition of your wrongdoing and seeking

reconciliation with me in the way described. Only thus is wrongdoing taken seriously and dealt with fully. God could forgive us our sins once we make some gesture at repentance and apology. But it is good that He should help us to take our serious wrongdoing more seriously than that, and, according to the Christian Creed, he did so by Himself providing the means of reparation for us—just as if my child has broken your window, I may provide him with the money to pay for its repair. He did this by being born as Jesus Christ, a human (but one who owed nothing to God) and living that perfect human life. We are now in a position to offer that life back to God, together with our half-hearted repentance and apology, as our reparation (and penance) for our sins. To ask God to take such a life as our reparation does, indeed, involve our sin seriously.<sup>1</sup>

That God has thus provided a means of atonement for us gives us abundant further reason for grateful worship. In providing reparation for us, God showed us how to seek His forgiveness, by asking for it in virtue of the life and death of Christ. The Christian Creed tells us (at least according to Catholic, Orthodox, and some Protestant teaching) that Christ instituted baptism and the eucharist as the means by which we should seek God's forgiveness in virtue of the life and death of Christ. In seeking baptism (paradigmatically as adults) we seek, with repentance and apology, forgiveness for our sins; and the benefits of the sacrifice of the life and death of Christ are provided for us by our incorporation into the body of Christ, the Church. These benefits are reinforced in the eucharist each week (or whenever) as we re-present to God as our act of thankful worship the sacrifice of the life and death of Christ, and ask God for forgiveness in virtue thereof. The Creed thus explains not merely why we should worship and seek God's forgiveness, but how we should do these things. Thereby it explains why seeking God's forgiveness in the way prescribed by the Christian way will attain some parts of the goals of religion.

God allows us to suffer in many ways—both as a result of the deliberate actions or negligence of other humans and as a result of natural processes producing disease and deformity which we cannot yet cure. The Christian Creed claims that God, being perfectly good,

<sup>1</sup> For fuller development of this account of how God atones for our sins and comparison with alternative accounts, see *my Responsibility and Atonement* (Clarendon Press, 1989), esp. ch. 10.

does this to secure some good ends which could not be achieved in any other way. Church councils and theologians do not always claim to know what those good ends are, but they claim that there are such. We humans sometimes rightly subject our own children to suffering for the sake of some greater good (to themselves or others)—for instance, make them eat a plain diet or take some special exercise for the sake of their health, or make them attend a ‘difficult’ neighbourhood school for the sake of good community relations. Under these circumstances, we judge it a good thing to manifest solidarity with our children by putting ourselves in somewhat the same situation—share their diet or their exercise, or become involved in the parent/teacher organization of the neighbourhood school. The Christian Creed claims that in the life of Jesus God has identified with our suffering. That he did so provides yet further reason for grateful worship.

Finally, the Creed tells us that through Jesus God taught us how to live—both by giving much oral teaching and by providing an example of a very good human life lived under hard circumstances. Jesus confirmed and filled out some Old Testament teaching about how we should behave towards God and each other; and God inspired the New Testament writers to put this oral teaching in writing into the Gospels and New Testament letters. It is because, the Creed tells us, Jesus was God, that in following the Christian way we would be obeying the commands of God (and perhaps doing also supererogatory acts) and so forwarding the first goal (and indirectly the other goals) of religion. The Bible, Old and New, is for Christians a sacred book containing a record of God’s dealings with the old Israel, and an account of the work and teaching of Jesus Christ and its consequences for the world. The Bible, however, requires interpreting. We need to know which parts of the Bible are to be interpreted as parables, and which as literal history; which of its assumptions about history and science are irrelevant to its message; which parts of its moral teaching report commands given by God to a particular community (e.g. Israelites before Christ, or a particular community to whom St Paul was writing a letter), and which parts are of universal application, and so on.<sup>2</sup> It is disputed

<sup>2</sup> For my account of the correct way of interpreting the Bible, see my *Revelation* (Clarendon Press, 1992), esp. ch. 10. The first edition of *Faith and Reason* contained some comments on the correct way of interpreting the Bible in its ch. 7, which I have now removed, in view of my fuller treatment of this issue in *Revelation*.

who is the best qualified interpreter of the Bible—the individual prayerful believer, the Pope or Church Councils, or a widespread Christian consensus over many centuries. But, on the whole, Christians agree that the first four of the Ten Commandments form a framework for how humans should behave towards God (The ‘Sabbath’, of the fourth commandment, being understood as the new Sabbath—Sunday), and they agree that the last six of the Ten Commandments form a framework for the obligations of humans to each other. There are largely agreed ways of understanding most of the Commandments so that, for example, the fifth Commandment is construed as forbidding killing (except perhaps in war or capital punishment), and the sixth Commandment is understood as requiring people to confine sexual intercourse to partners in a lifelong marriage. And there is considerable agreement that virtually all of the Sermon on the Mount and some central parts of St Paul’s teaching are to be understood as intended by God to be of universal application. Jesus Christ showed us by example what the service of God and other humans should be like, in a life which ended with him allowing himself to be executed unjustly rather than resist with violence. The Creed thus tells us what God has commanded and commended, and so why following the Christian way will help to achieve the first goal of religion. And the Creed also provides a further reason why we should live a life of service to other humans, beside the intrinsic goodness of doing so, and the fact that God our creator has commanded or commended it—the reason that those other humans are also created by God; and gratitude to God should lead us to help others whom he has created.

Since other theistic creeds give different accounts of God’s nature (and, in particular, deny the doctrine of the Incarnation), they do not tell us to worship God for all those features for which—according to the Christian Creed—He deserves worship, and they tell us that He has commanded different actions from those which the Christian Creed tells us that He commanded. Hence, the Christian Creed explains not merely why following the Christian way will achieve this first goal of rendering proper worship and obedience to God, but why following other religious ways is less likely to do so, and indeed certainly will not do so.

## THE CHRISTIAN EXPLANATION OF HOW PURSUIT OF THE CHRISTIAN WAY LEADS TO OUR OWN SALVATION

Our salvation consists firstly in doing the right things on Earth; and these include the actions of worship and service to God just described. It is good for *us* to do good actions, as well as for others who are the objects of our good actions (God, other humans, and animals). Our salvation also requires that we seek and obtain forgiveness from God for our wrongdoing; and I described earlier the Christian view of how this can be obtained by doing those actions which are part of the Christian way of repentance and apology, asking God to forgive us in virtue of the life and death of Christ; seeking baptism with penitence and renewing in our worship penitence for post-baptismal sins. Salvation also involves coming to have a deep understanding of the nature of the world and of our place in it. We acquire the beginnings of this deep understanding because it is provided in the Creed of the Christian Church, which we learn by joining the Church and receiving instruction there. The Creed also claims that those who reflect with prayer on its doctrinal statements and try to live out their consequences in the world are quite likely to acquire a deeper understanding and an occasional awareness of the presence of God in prayer, and thus begin a friendship with God. It claims, however, that this understanding and friendship will reach far greater depths in Heaven, to which God has promised to take those who follow the Christian way with full dedication and to which He has not promised to take others. Hence, we are more likely to achieve our salvation by following the Christian way than by following some other way.

For this answer to be convincing, we need some explanation of why God is thus biased. Would not a generous God reward good and bad alike with Heaven? One might answer that humans have no right to Heaven, but God has offered it to those who pursue the Christian way, and He will fulfil his promise. People have the choice of whether to pursue the way or not; but they must take the consequences of rejecting the opportunity to gain Heaven. It is good that humans should pursue the way, and by his promise God encourages them to do so. Those who pursue the way in the face of uncertainty in order to attain Heaven

deserve the reward of Heaven. God is not here pictured as totally irrational. It would not be very unreasonable behaviour on the part of God, to reward worthwhile action; whereas it would, I argued in Chapter 3, seem to be very unreasonable behaviour of God to reward belief, irrespective of the methods by which it was obtained.

However, this answer does seem a rather shallow answer, giving rise to further problems. Not all humans have heard the Gospel, and so know the offer and the conditions on which it is made (let alone have reasonable grounds for believing that the offer announced by the Church comes from God). Why, through ignorance, should they be deprived of the reward? It seems to me that the Christian tradition has the resources to answer these problems in the shallow answer, in its view that Heaven is not primarily a reward for good actions but a home for good people. What determines whether a person gets to Heaven is not what he has done but what sort of person he is. This follows from both the Catholic and Protestant accounts of who will be saved, to which I referred in Chapter 4. What is needed is the right character, the readiness to perform the right sort of actions (including the action of seeking forgiveness for one's sins in the right way), not actually having done them.<sup>3</sup> It follows also from the Christian doctrine of Heaven given in the last chapter that such a character is necessary in order to enjoy the life of Heaven. For the inhabitants of a Christian Heaven will be performing actions of supreme worth and be in a situation of supreme worth; and they will know that they are doing such actions and in such a situation. Hence, they will have the deep happiness which it provides if and only if they want to be in that situation, doing those actions, and do not want in any way to be anywhere else or doing anything else. That is, they need a certain character.

The life of Heaven which is so desirable is, as we saw earlier (p. 183), the same sort of life as the pursuit of the Christian way on Earth—though with the difficulties and obstacles to success, and desires for lesser goods, removed. Hence, someone can begin to live the life of

<sup>3</sup> This view receives abundant Biblical support in the parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20: 1–16). Entry to the Kingdom of Heaven is compared to a situation where the same reward is given to those who have worked the whole day and to those who have worked only one hour. What determines whether they get their reward is their status as workers, that they are developing the vineyard (having accepted the challenge to work when it came), not how many hours' work they have done.

Heaven on Earth. And a person who sees the goodness of that life can get himself to want to pursue it, and so obtain the happiness which Heaven provides, by living that life (following the Christian way) in the unfavourable conditions of Earth. God takes to Heaven those who choose for themselves by deliberate choice that sort of life.

A human being is so made that by the actions which he does over a lifetime he forms his character. A human starts life with opportunities to pursue various paths; by choosing to do certain sorts of action and allowing himself to respond to situations in certain ways, he gradually becomes the sort of person for whom a certain sort of action and response is natural. In the circumstances of a person's life, there are always opportunities to pursue good ways. He may not do good actions naturally to start with; but if he pushes himself to do the good actions and reflects on their goodness, pursuing them will tend to become natural. Aristotle remarked that 'we become just by doing just acts, prudent by doing prudent acts, brave by doing brave acts'.<sup>4</sup> That is, by doing acts of a certain kind, we make doing such acts come naturally. And a person will then want to do what he both does naturally and also judges to be good. Just as someone can, through effort, make a certain sort of action natural, so he can make a certain sort of reaction natural. If he judges a certain kind of situation (e.g. the situation of worship) a good one, so, by dwelling on its merits and reflecting on the demerits of other situations, seeking the good situation and avoiding the bad, he can make himself want to be in that sort of situation. The process of character-formation normally takes many years. It is good that it should do so. For a continuing choice over a period of time guarantees the serious intention of the agent. There may, however, be those who can change themselves (or allow themselves to be changed through a conversion) in a very short space of time. All they have to do subsequently is to remain the same. In the process of character-formation a person is, of course, helped by the society in which he moves; and (while it may often fail) the Church (which those who seek God's forgiveness join through baptism) is designed as an organization which, through its life of worship and instruction, helps people to do the right actions and have the right attitudes. Hence, pursuing the Christian way involves Church membership. It is, however, the case that sometimes someone is so beset

<sup>4</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103b.

by bad desires that all the effort in the world may not enable him finally to eliminate them and so make himself fully suited for Heaven. The Christian Creed, in assuring such a person of good will of a place in Heaven, in effect assures him that in the next life, if not in this, God will eliminate the bad desires.

However, not all humans who seek on Earth to do what is good pursue the Christian way; for, on the Christian view, they have a false idea of what the good life consists in. It may not ever have occurred to such a person that he has any duty to pursue religious investigation; or if he does pursue it, through acquiring misleading evidence or incorrect inductive criteria, he may come to think that some other way, e.g. the Muslim one, is that which most probably will achieve the goals of religion. Since, like the Christian, the Muslim believes that (if there is a God) God is perfectly good, by the way he worships God by the properties and actions for which he praises God he shows a slightly different belief from the Christian about what perfect goodness consists in. And, by his practice of worship, he makes that worship come naturally to him and so becomes a slightly different kind of person from what he would have become, had he followed the Christian way. He learns to worship in a way which, Christians believe, does not honour God perfectly, by failing to worship him for some of his very important great-making qualities (for example, for the love between members of the Trinity) and actions (becoming incarnate and dying on the Cross). If you think that God shared our human condition and thereby made available to us an atonement for our sins, you are likely to have a different kind of reverence for him than if you think of him as a solitary creator who did not ever experience our kind of life.

Since the practice of different religions (and even, to a very small extent, sincere practice of different versions of a religion such as Christianity) involve slightly different kinds of moral belief and produce somewhat different kinds of character, it follows that the sincere Muslim will be imperfectly fitted for life in the Christian Heaven; for he will not want totally naturally to pursue the occupations of the Christian Heaven.

Let us call a person who seeks to do only what is good, whether or not he has true beliefs about what is good, a person of good conscience; and a person who yields instead to desires which he believes to be bad, a person of bad conscience. Similarly, for the rest of this section, I shall



call a desire good if it is a desire for something believed to be good, whether or not that thing is good; and a desire bad, if it is a desire for something believed to be bad; and a choice good or bad in so far as it is a choice of something believed to be good or bad. I argued in Chapter 3 that among good actions, and ones up to a point obligatory, the goodness or obligatoriness of which can be recognized by Christians and non-Christians alike, are actions of investigating the truth of religious claims. Such investigations may lead to what are (in the Christian view) a true belief about our obligation to pursue the Christian way, or at least a true belief about the goodness of doing so. Failure at that stage to pursue the Christian way will either be morally wrong (in failing to fulfil an obligation) or (at best) bad. Either way, it will lead to the development of a bad character, and so begin to make the person unfitted for Heaven.

But what of the person who did not recognize an obligation to pursue religious inquiry (or the goodness of doing so) or who did pursue such inquiry but reached what in the Christian view were false conclusions? In the history of Christian theology, there have been different views about the fate of humans of good conscience with false religious beliefs. The view which seems finally to have prevailed—and is I believe best consonant with the New Testament<sup>5</sup>—is that a person who has tried to pursue the good, but through ignorance has failed to do so, has implicit faith, *fides in voto* in Catholic terminology, which suffices for salvation.

<sup>5</sup> See the saying of Jesus in Luke 12: 48, that the servant who did not know his master's will and did things worthy of a beating 'will receive a light beating' in contrast to the servant who knew the master's will and still did not do it, who 'will receive a severe beating'. The point of the saying must lie in the contrast, not in the fact that the ignorant servant would have a small beating. The cited view seems to me the clear message of ch. 2 of St Paul's Letter to the Romans. e.g. 'When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these . . . show that what the law requires is written on their hearts . . . and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.' (Romans 2: 14–16.) Among later Christian thinkers who allowed that some good pagans could be saved were Clement of Alexandria (*Stromateis* 6.6), Augustine (*City of God* 18.47), Pseudo-Dionysius (*Celestial Hierarchy* 9. 3–4), and Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae* 2a. 2ae. 2.7 ad.3). This view, which would also be accepted by the majority of Protestants, gained final Catholic recognition in the decree of the Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, 16, *The Documents of Vatican II* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1965). This declared that all those who strive to live a good life and who through no fault of their own 'do not know the Gospel of Christ and his Church . . . can attain to everlasting salvation'. This possibility is open not only to theists but to those who, through no fault of their own, 'have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God'.

Where the Christian Gospel has not impinged on a person's conscience, such faith is enough. The slogan, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ('outside the Church there is no salvation') must be understood so as to include those of implicit faith as members of the Church. Pascal's view (see p. 125) that, if the Christian God exists, those who do not hold this belief will be condemned to an everlasting Hell, must be regarded as applying at most only to those whose false belief is due to a culpable failure to investigate religious beliefs adequately.

A loving God might indeed be expected to allow people to achieve salvation if they have sought the good but, through no fault of their own, failed to find the way which makes them best fitted for Heaven. However, it follows from earlier arguments that such persons would only enjoy Heaven when they had come to do so naturally and so to want to do the occupations of Heaven, e.g. to worship God for the right sort of qualities in the right sort of way. If they are to do this, they must first be informed of what the perfect goodness of God consists in, and so what is the right way to worship; their search for religious truth which reached the wrong answer on Earth must be allowed to reach the right answer hereafter. Since, *ex hypothesi*, such people seek the good, as they begin to acquire true information about how to worship and serve, they will seek to worship and serve in that right way; and that will include their seeking forgiveness for their sins from God by asking for it in virtue of the life and death of Christ. But changing a way of behaving is not easy. As I noted earlier, there is, and it is good that there should be, a certain stickiness about character. If someone has made himself the sort of person who does something naturally, to do anything else is going to be unnatural—to start with. Hence, if a person is to change his character, it will normally involve a continuing choice over a period of time. In this case this involves the after-death convert trying to bring about the good at which he was previously aiming in the ways in which he now realizes that it is to be achieved.<sup>6</sup> The faith which suffices for salvation requires true belief as well as right purpose. An example of a person of good conscience who had made himself unfitted for the Christian Heaven would be a conscientious Buddhist, who, as a result of pursuing the Buddhist way had succeeded in eliminating his mundane desires,

<sup>6</sup> Aquinas writes that no one can attain to the vision of God 'except by learning from God as his teacher' and that 'a person participates in this learning process not all at once but step-by-step in keeping with human nature.' *Summa Theologiae*, 2a. 2ae. 2. 3.

including the desires to look at beautiful things and have the company of good people. For he would not be happy in the activities of knowledge-acquisition and adoration of a beautiful God in the company of good people. For happiness involves being glad that you are doing what you are doing. i.e. doing what you want to be doing; and the Buddhist does not want to be doing these things. For a person to come to see that it was good that he should get himself to want things, and then to get himself to want them, might be very hard.

But, granted that people of good conscience go to Heaven, what about people of bad conscience? Why should not a generous God give at their death to people of bad conscience not merely true beliefs but good desires, so that they, too, go to Heaven? The answer to this question must be that God does not impose a final destiny on anyone. He leaves it to us to make the choice; and that it is up to us to choose our eternal destiny is a great good for us.

Although young children have often not reached this situation and (as we shall see later) the old may sometimes have passed beyond this situation, there is a stage in the life of a normal human being at which he reaches what I may call the normal situation of choice. In this situation he has moral perceptions—he sees some actions as morally good (and some of those as obligatory), other actions as morally bad (and some of those as obligatory not to do). Of course, his moral judgements may not always be the right ones; he may fail to see of some morally worthwhile acts that they are morally worth while. Nevertheless he does have moral perceptions. If a person really thinks that some action is a good thing (and does not simply think that it is good by normally accepted criteria), he will to some extent want to do it. He may, on balance, prefer to be doing something else; but he will still to some degree want to be doing the good action. For its goodness gives him reason for doing it, and in recognizing its goodness he recognizes that he has such a reason. He will, however, also want to do some actions which are, on balance, bad.

A person has to choose between what he sees as overall the best action to do and what he regards as lesser goods or, on balance, bad. In this situation, it is often said, the strongest desire wins. But if one calls a desire strongest if and only if it is the one on which the person eventually acts, that is a very uninformative tautology; and on any other criterion of 'strongest desire', it is often false. On a natural way of measuring strength of desire a desire is strong in so far as it needs

much effort to act against it. Humans are subject to strong desires to do actions of a kind which it is sometimes good to fulfil, in circumstances when or to degrees to which it is bad to fulfil them—to eat (too much), to drink alcohol (when about to drive a car), to be idle (when they need to earn money to help themselves and others), to have sexual intercourse (with someone else's spouse), and so on; and also to strong desires which it is always bad to fulfil—to insult or torture. These desires are strong, whether or not people often act on them, because people have to struggle hard not to act on them. In this latter sense of strength of desire, a person's situation is often one in which there are desires of different strengths to do actions; and also one where he sees the actions as having different degrees of moral worth. The ordering by strength and the ordering by perceived worth may not be the same. The person has to choose whether to resist strong desires in order to do the morally good action, or to yield to them.

Now, humans come into existence with a limited range of choice, a limited set of good and bad actions which are for them live possibilities. By our choices (encouraged or frustrated by our bodily condition, mental state, environment, upbringing, friends, and enemies) we shift the range of possible choice. By good choices this time, there come within our range possibilities for greater good next time and some bad choices are no longer a possibility. Conversely, by bad choices this time there come within our range possibilities for greater bad next time and some good choices are no longer a possibility. Further, as I noted earlier, many of the strongest desires of humans are to do actions in particular circumstances where they are, on balance, bad. Without effort, humans will slide towards the bad.

So a person who chooses the good may not do the good action naturally; he may have struggled against his strongest desire in order to do it. But, as we saw earlier, we are so made that what we have to struggle to do to start with will often eventually become natural. That is, a person's desire to do it will become his strongest desire. However, a person may yield to bad desires against his better judgement. Now, those who (by yielding to such a bad desire) reject a good desire, will have such good desires again. But if they systematically resist desires of a certain kind by yielding to other stronger desires, they will gradually become the kind of person to whom such desires do not occur with any force. Those who refuse to give to charity once may have a fit of

conscience and give more next time. But those who systematically refuse to give come no longer to regard it seriously as a good thing to give. Giving passes out of the range of their possible choice. A person who never resists his desires, never tries to do the action which he perceives overall to be the best for that reason, gradually allows what he does to be determined entirely by the strength of his desires (as measured by the difficulty of resisting them). Since he ceases to be influenced by recognizing that some action is good, he has lost his moral perception. He has eliminated himself (as an agent doing the action of greatest perceived worth, or allowing himself to be overcome by strong desire to do an action of lesser worth or one, on balance, bad, or simply choosing between actions of equal perceived worth). There is no longer a 'he'; having immunized himself against the nagging of conscience, the agent has turned into a mere theatre of conflicting desires, of which the strongest automatically dictates 'his' action. And, in view of the initial strength of our bad desires, that theatre will include many strong bad desires (though ones no longer seen as bad desires, any more than any remaining good desires are seen as good desires).

Now far be it from me to say that that has happened to any human being whom I have ever met; there is a lot more latent capacity for good in most people than appears on the surface. Nevertheless, it is a possibility that a person will let himself be so mastered by his desires that he will lose all ability to resist them, and lose any belief that it would be good to do so. It is the extreme case of what we have all often seen; people increasingly mastered by desires so that they lose some of their ability to resist them, and some of their sensitivity to the goodness of doing so. The less we impose our order on our desires, the more they impose their order on us.

We may describe a person in this situation of having lost his capacity to overrule his desires as having 'lost his soul'. Such a person is a mere collection of largely bad desires. He can no longer choose to resist them by doing the action which he judges to be overall the best action to do. He has no strong natural desire to do the actions of Heaven and he cannot choose to do them, despite his contrary desires, because he no longer sees any value in them. There is no 'he' left to make that choice. Perhaps God could make the choice for him, give him a strong desire to do the good, and annihilate all other desires in him. But that would be imposing on an agent something which, while he was still capable of

choosing between actions in virtue of their worth, he had in effect chosen not to do—by yielding so continually to temptation. Free will is a good thing; and for God to override it, for whatever cause, is to all appearances a bad thing.

It might be urged that no one would ever be allowed by God to reach such a state of depravity that he was no longer capable of choosing to do an action because of its overall worth. But in that case God would have prevented humans from opting for a certain alternative; however hard a person tried to damn himself, God would stop him. It is good that God should not let a person damn himself without much urging and giving him many opportunities to change his mind, but it is bad that a person should not in the all-important matter of the destiny of his soul be allowed finally to destroy it. Otherwise the situation would be like that of a society which always successfully prevented people who would otherwise live for ever from committing suicide. A society certainly has no right to do that; and plausibly even God has no analogous right to prevent people destroying their own souls.

It may be said that God should not allow a person to damn himself without showing him clearly what he was doing. But a person who simply ignored considerations of worth and gave in continually to his strongest desire could hardly fail to realize that he was becoming merely a theatre of conflicting desires. He might not know the depth of the happiness which he was losing, nor that it would be prolonged for ever in Heaven; he would, however, know that he was choosing not to be a worthwhile kind of person.

Strangely, it would not necessarily help someone to attain the happiness of Heaven if God did make it crystal-clear to him that Heaven existed and provided happiness for the good. For, as we saw earlier, in the Christian view the life of Heaven is a way of life which begins on Earth for someone who follows the Christian way (although its pursuit here is made difficult by many obstacles). Now, if a person did not in any way seek such a life on Earth, why should he seek it if he comes to learn that it can go on for ever and provide deep happiness? Either because he wants to live forever or because he wants the happiness. But while a person is seeking to live the good life for those reasons, he will not find the happiness of Heaven. For the happiness of Heaven is not just happiness. It is, as we have seen, a special kind of happiness. It is a happiness which comes from doing actions which you know to be

supremely good because you want to be doing those supremely good actions. A person who sought the happiness of Heaven for *its* own sake could not find it, while that was his goal; for it is the happiness which comes from doing certain actions for *their* own sake. The happiness of Heaven is a happiness which comes to those who are seeking not it<sup>7</sup> but the well-being of the life and situation on which it is based. This, I suggest, is the truth at which those Christian mystics were getting who claimed that it was wrong for a person to seek his own salvation (see p. 189 n). There is nothing bad in seeking one's own salvation; what is bad, is trying to get the happiness apart from the pursuits of Heaven. So there is a risk that, by preaching the happiness of Heaven (and/or the horrors of Hell), a preacher might encourage people to pursue that happiness for the wrong reason, and so make themselves so devoted to their own happiness as such that they would not enjoy being in Heaven doing the actions of Heaven, and so the preacher would have helped to make them unsuited for Heaven.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the news of the happiness of Heaven would provide an initial incentive for a person of weak will, who sometimes tried to do good for its own sake, to try harder to pursue the good way. It would provide encouragement for those who, to some extent, sought to live the good life anyway, to know that they could go on doing so forever under circumstances where the obstacles to living that life had been removed, and in a situation where it was supremely worth while to be. The news of Heaven would also show us that God was good and so provide further reason for giving particular content to the good life—that is, for worshipping God. It would also provide good reason for people to encourage other people to pursue the way that leads to Heaven. So there is reason for God to let people know that there is a significant probability of their going to Heaven if they lead a good life (and of 'losing their soul' if they lead a bad life), but reason also for God not to make it completely obvious that there is a Heaven for the good—so as to

<sup>7</sup> See Christ's saying: 'Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.' Matthew 10: 39.

<sup>8</sup> Recall the concluding verses of Christ's parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16: 19–31). The rich man in Hell asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers to change their lifestyle lest they go to Hell. He says to Abraham: 'If someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' But Abraham replies: 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'

avoid to some extent the danger of people pursuing Heaven for the wrong reason and so losing it. Yet, I have suggested earlier, God would deprive no one of Heaven who seeks to do the good for its own sake. Some whose idea of the good is inadequate and whose dedication to it is imperfect will need better information and perhaps more encouragement in an after-life before they can reach Heaven. But God wrongs no one if he allows them to 'lose their soul' in the course of an earthly life—as a result of a long series of free choices to do what they know to be bad,<sup>9</sup> until they cease to be a moral agent.<sup>10</sup>

What will a loving God do with those who have 'lost their souls' (if there is in the end anyone like this)? If he keeps them alive in some distant world with the desires which now form their character, they will inevitably be unhappy. For they desire to hurt and dominate others. There is point in allowing them to do the actions involved in yielding to these desires—that is to hurt and dominate others—for a short period of earthly life before their character is formed beyond the possibility of change. For God wants them to have the choice of doing good despite bad desires. But when their character is formed unalterably, there is no point in allowing them to hurt and dominate others. The resultant suffering of the others would serve no greater good. (Previously their availability to be hurt by the former gave the former the opportunity of making significant choices. That would no longer be the case.) So the character of those who have 'lost their souls' would

<sup>9</sup> There are different kinds of free will according to how easy it is for someone to choose the good. There are advantages in God making it easy for us to choose the good, since making such a choice is a good thing. There are also advantages in God making it somewhat more difficult for us to choose the good, since we then have the opportunity to make a more heroic and so a more committed choice of the good. So long as God makes it possible for us to choose the good, God does not wrong us. And so He does not wrong us if for their sake He puts in the hands of others (such as Christian evangelists who tell us about God and Heaven) whether they make it more or less easy for us to choose the good. (Of course, those others are not our creators, and so do not have the right to choose whether or not to help us choose the good—if God commands them to help us.) On the value of the different kinds of free will, see my *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 84–9; on the limits to God's rights to allow some to suffer for the benefit of others, see *ibid.*, ch. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Many Christians in this century have advocated the universalist view that, in the end, all human beings necessarily go to Heaven. See, among many who have advocated this view, John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (Collins, 1976), ch. 13. This view has been held in other centuries too, e.g. by Origen in the third century AD. The universalist view, however, seems to me to be unsatisfactory for the reason given on pp. 212–13, as well as being well out of line with Christian tradition.



consist of desires which they cannot fulfil, and that constitutes unhappiness. If they still desire to go on living, it will be with that burden; and that distant world would be Hell. But maybe some of them do not wish to go on living, and so maybe God in mercy will annihilate them.<sup>11</sup>

So much for a Christian account of how pursuit of the Christian way will lead to salvation for the pursuer, and failure to pursue it (except through non-culpable ignorance) may lose it.<sup>12</sup>

### THE CHRISTIAN EXPLANATION OF HOW PURSUIT OF THE CHRISTIAN WAY HELPS OTHERS TO ATTAIN THEIR SALVATION

How will pursuit of the Christian way attain the third goal of religion: helping others to attain their salvation? Part of pursuing the Christian way will involve a human being ministering to the earthly needs of others—helping to give them health and company and worthwhile work. A person concerned for the well-being of others will seek these things for them, and his doing so will be helping to provide them with a temporary, very limited but nevertheless important, aspect of well-being. But someone truly concerned for the well-being of others will seek for them above all that deep and long-term well-being which is the core of salvation and which is the natural extension and deepening of

<sup>11</sup> I speculate in *Responsibility and Atonement*, 184, that the reason why early Christian theologians did not consider the possibility of God eliminating those who had 'lost their souls' (although some of them did consider the possibility that everyone, however wicked on Earth, would eventually be saved) was because they believed in the 'natural immortality' of the soul. They supposed that it would require a quite extraordinary act for God to eliminate a soul, and this did not seem a serious possibility.

<sup>12</sup> I shall not discuss the issue of those who die before they have a character formed unchangeably for good or ill, perhaps as a result of following the Christian way with imperfect dedication. The Christian tradition contains doctrines of intermediate states of Purgatory or Limbo for those in this condition. The consequences of my argument for the choices which those who have character-forming choices should make are, however, clear independently of whether they will have time enough to form an unchangeable character. In the first edition of this book I devoted a small appendix in part to discussion of these issues. Since then I have, however, discussed them at somewhat greater length elsewhere—in *Responsibility and Atonement*, ch. 12; and so there is no need to discuss them again here.

their earthly well-being. Hence, another part of a person's pursuing the Christian way will involve his preaching the Gospel to others, i.e. telling them, after study, what the universe is like, how to live a worthwhile life, how to obtain forgiveness, and how thereby to obtain salvation; and giving them, after study, reasons for believing what he tells them. Further, someone's pursuit of the way will be an example which will encourage others to follow. People sometimes begin to practise religion when they become parents, in order to set an example to their children, presumably often in the hope that their children copying them may acquire salvation.

Also, it seems to be a fairly central Christian doctrine that God hears the prayers of those who follow the way; and that He will answer them in so far as it is, on balance, good that He should.<sup>13</sup> God seeks the salvation of all; but He will not pressure any, and so He will, at most, give encouragement and opportunity for people to seek their salvation. Although He desires that all humans should seek their salvation, He will not necessarily give the maximum encouragement to some without prayer from others, for He desires to be guided by the prayers of others.<sup>14</sup> So the prayers of some humans will lead Him to provide encouragement to other humans to pursue the way. Making petitionary prayer for the salvation of others is part of pursuing the way, and maybe God is more likely to listen to our prayer if we are pursuing the way in other respects also. Some Christian doctrine explicitly affirms this, and there are independent grounds within Christianity for supposing it. God is anxious to have friendship with man. Friendship involves giving special consideration to the friend. God is likely to give special consideration to the prayers of those who, by their lives, give special consideration to His wishes. However, as I pointed out in the last chapter, there is no guarantee that a person who pursues the religious way to secure the salvation of others will finally achieve his purpose. Whether that is achieved depends in part on the free choices of those others. All that a person can do is by his teaching, life, and prayer, ensure that the goal of their salvation is presented to those others as something worthy to be sought. And, of course, since pursuit of the Christian way is—according to the Christian Creed—more likely to

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Matthew 7: 7–11.

<sup>14</sup> On the point of petitionary prayer, see Eleonore Stump, 'Petitionary Prayer', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1979, 16, 81–91.

attain our own salvation than is pursuit of any other religious way (or none), so encouraging others to pursue the Christian way is more likely to help them attain their salvation than is encouraging them to pursue some other way.

## THE NICENE CREED

So far in this chapter I have been showing that the Christian theological system, the Christian Creed in a wide sense, has the resources to explain how pursuit of the Christian way will achieve the goals of religion. My appeal has been to the tradition of Christian doctrine down the years, and where there have been conflicting strands in that doctrine, I have sometimes shown preference for one rather than another strand as providing better explanation. The creeds to which Christians have been required in some sense to ‘assent’ are clearly of narrower scope. But most of the items in many such creeds are ones which explain in embryo how it is that pursuit of the Christian way will achieve different aspects of the goals of religion. I illustrate this by reference to the most widely accepted of all Christian creeds, the ‘Nicene Creed’, the creed approved at the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451 as the faith of the earlier councils of Nicaea and Constantinople. I shall take it as affirming propositions.

It begins with affirming that God is the creator of all things—‘God the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth and of all things visible and invisible’. That explains why worship and obedience are owed to God, and so why pursuit of the Christian way involves seeking to render such worship and obedience.

It then goes on to affirm the oneness of the incarnate Jesus Christ with God—‘one Lord Jesus Christ, only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages, Light from Light, True God from True God, begotten not made, One in substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.’ That oneness shows us that God is to be worshipped as a God who shares his power, and that Jesus Christ is to be worshipped as God. The Creed then goes on to affirm that Christ became man and redeemed the world—that ‘for us humans and for our salvation he came down from Heaven, and was made flesh from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man. He was crucified

also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried.’ He thus taught us and showed us how to live, and provided a means of atonement for our sins which we can use; and is to be praised for so doing, and for identifying with our suffering. The resurrection and ascension are God’s acceptance of that redeeming act and the evidence that Christ was God and that Christ’s redeeming act has been efficacious<sup>15</sup>—‘On the third day he rose again, in accord with the Scriptures, and ascended into Heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father.’ In claiming that the Resurrection was ‘in accord with the Scriptures’ (that is, the hopes and prophecies of the Old Testament), it provides further evidence for it and what it involves. The fate of human beings will depend on their conduct—‘Christ will come again with glory to judge the living and dead.’ Hence, a person’s destiny depends on whether or not he follows the way. There will be an ultimate victory for goodness, which provides a reason for us to strive to improve things—‘of his Kingdom, there will be no end’.

The Creed develops in embryo the doctrine of the Trinity, by affirming the divinity of God the Holy Spirit—‘The Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified.’ It thus shows that God is to be worshipped not merely as one who shares his power but as one who does so in order to allow the recipient himself to share that power with another. A Trinity, unlike a society of two, is an unselfish society in which the Father shows His love by allowing the Son to love another, the Spirit.<sup>16</sup> In claiming that the Spirit ‘spoke through the prophets’, it affirms the basic reliability of the message of the Old Testament prophets in providing information about God and guidance on how to live.

It then affirms that God has provided ‘one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church’ through which we can lead the Christian way; and that the means of entry to that Church, ‘one baptism’, provides a crucial beginning to salvation, ‘the remission of sins’. It affirms that there will be an after-life—‘the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come’, and so one in which the fullness of salvation can be achieved.

<sup>15</sup> For my account of how Christ’s Resurrection and Ascension show this, see my *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Clarendon Press, 2003), esp. ch. 12.

<sup>16</sup> On how this is to be spelled out in detail, and how the love of the Father for the other members is reciprocated, see *The Christian God* (Clarendon Press, 1994), esp. ch. 8.

The Nicene Creed thus provides an embryonic justification for supposing that pursuit of the Christian way will attain the goals of religion.

#### THE BUDDHIST EXPLANATION OF HOW PURSUIT OF ITS WAY LEADS TO ATTAINING ITS GOAL

Although Christianity, Islam, and many forms of Judaism clearly have creeds in my wide sense, Buddhists and proponents of other eastern religions will often deny that their religion has a creed. But either their religion can give reasons for supposing that pursuit of its way will reach its goal, or it cannot. If it cannot, then any one would be foolish to follow its way for that purpose. In fact, Buddhists do give such reasons, and—unwilling though they may be to call those reasons a creed—they constitute a creed in my sense. The central element of the creeds of eastern religions is the law of karma—that ‘virtuous actions create pleasure in the future and non-virtuous actions create pain’.<sup>17</sup> The law of karma purports to provide ultimate explanation. Nothing (no God) explains why it operates; it then purportedly explains many other things. The law is filled out in different ways by means of a doctrine of reincarnation in different traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism and other religions. There are different kinds of animate beings; living a good life as an animate being of one kind will lead to rebirth as an animate being of a superior kind (and so, in a wide sense, to ‘greater pleasure’)—for example, a good human might be reborn as a demigod. For the Buddhist, as we have noted, such talk of ‘rebirth’ has to be understood in terms of the continuation of a somewhat similar stream of consciousness, whereas for some forms of Hinduism it involves the reembodiment of a unique substantial self. And there are different accounts of what escape from the cycle of rebirth, achieved by living a very good life (achieving ‘enlightenment’), amounts to—for the Buddhist, as I noted earlier, that means different accounts of how ‘the final nirvana’ is to be understood.

The law of karma thus explains why following the Buddhist way in terms will eventually attain salvation as understood by Buddhism for

<sup>17</sup> Lopez, *Buddhism*, 21.

something like one's self and, no doubt—in virtue of the example and perhaps teaching which one provides to others—help others towards their salvation. For the Buddhist, the rendering of proper worship and obedience to God or gods is not a goal of religion. Because the Buddhist has a somewhat different view from the Christian of what living a virtuous life consists in, it follows that following the Buddhist way will be more likely to attain the Buddhist goals than will following the Christian way. For example, we saw in Chapter 5 that following the Buddhist way involves believing that there is no substantial self, and seeking the annihilation of self-centred desire. Following the Christian way, on the other hand, includes trying to fulfil good self-centred desires (e.g. praying to meet our loved ones, the very same selves we knew on Earth, in Heaven in future). Living the Christian way will not lead us as readily to 'enlightenment' in the Buddhist sense as will living the Buddhist way.

#### THE BELIEF NEEDED FOR THE PURSUIT OF A RELIGIOUS WAY

We have seen that—in so far as religions have similar goals, in order to pursue the way of a given religion—someone needs a belief that the creed of that religion is more probable than the creed of any other religion. But since not all religions have the same goals, we need to compare the worth of the purposes of seeking the different goals. I introduced at the end of Chapter 2 definitions of six kinds of rationality which actions could have, paralleling the five kinds of (internal) rationality which beliefs can have. A rational<sub>0</sub> action is the action which the agent believes to be the best (or equal best), given his beliefs about the probabilities of different actions attaining different goals. (For the sake of simplicity of exposition, I omit the 'or equal best' clause from similar places below. Anyone properly concerned with an exact account should reinsert it.) So an action of following a religious way is rational<sub>0</sub> if the agent believes that following that way is the best thing to do, given his beliefs about the probabilities of different actions attaining different goals. But, of course, the agent must regard it as better if his beliefs on these matters are consonant with his other beliefs about value and probability and thus conform to his own criteria. Such internal

consonance, in the agent's view, makes his beliefs more likely to be true. A rational<sub>1</sub> action is the action which is probably the best on the agent's own criteria, given the probability of his criteria of the different actions attaining different goals. So the action of following some religious way is rational<sub>1</sub> if, on the agent's criteria, it is the best action, given the probabilities of different actions attaining different religious goals. But, given the need for adequate investigation (by the agent's own criteria) into the truth of religious claims, including the values of the different goals, he will need a rational<sub>3</sub> belief about these matters: and if—after such investigation—he does what is by his own criteria the best action, given the probabilities of different ways reaching different goals, his action of following a particular way will be rational<sub>3</sub>. But, of course, it is better if his action is rational<sub>5</sub>, that is the best one given correct beliefs about the worth of seeking different religious goals and the logical probabilities of attaining them on the evidence available to the subject after what is by correct criteria adequate investigation. The rational<sub>5</sub> action may be to follow a certain religious way or to follow no religious way.

For, good though they are to pursue, religious goals are not the only worthwhile goals in life. If we do not pray or worship or try to convert others, we have a lot more time to seek to attain more mundane, but very worthwhile, goals—e.g. relief of poverty, education, preservation of the environment, etc. So a crucial factor in determining whether it is good to pursue any religious way is how much better it would be to achieve the religious goals—e.g. the everlasting happiness of the worship of any God there may be by ourselves and others whom we can influence, rather than a greater increase in the very short term of a rather limited kind of well-being for ourselves and some others. (I write 'greater increase' because following any religious way will involve anyway quite a lot of promotion of the mundane well-being of others.) If the achievement of some religious goals is a lot more valuable than the achievement of any non-religious goals, it would be good to pursue a religious way to attain religious goals even if it is none too probable that pursuit of the religious way will attain the goals. But it would not be good if it is too improbable. It may be sensible in certain circumstances to pay a lot for a lottery ticket which has only a 1 in 4 chance of winning a very big prize which would make a very difference to your future life, but perhaps not sensible to pay a lot if it has only a 1 in 1,000 chance of winning.

I argued in the previous chapter that pursuit of a religious way is objectively obligatory if God exists. It is also often obligatory to help others to attain their salvation if there is an attainable salvation, even if it does not involve God; and it is most unlikely that anyone can fulfil the latter obligation satisfactorily without themselves following the requisite religious way. If there is a God and some human fails to worship Him, or a way to salvation and some human does not help his children to find it, that human is objectively guilty for this failure. He is, however, only subjectively guilty (that is, culpable) if he believes that (it is more probable than not) that there is a God (or an attainable salvation) and that he has, in consequence, such obligations but fails to perform them. Subjective guilt is far more serious than objective guilt, because it involves a knowing refusal to give others what you owe them; and if someone believes that there is a God (especially one of the Christian kind) and refuses to pay Him grateful worship (and repent before Him for the misuse of his life), it would be an act of enormous ingratitude. But even if a person does not believe, on balance, that there is a God and so that he has an obligation to worship (and repent), he may still believe that it is good to worship (and repent) because there may be a God to whom he has obligations, and that it would be so much worse to fail to worship (and repent before) a God through doubt about his existence than to worship (and repent before) a non-existing God. Someone in this situation who fails to worship (and repent) will not be subjectively guilty and so culpable; but if he believes that the best action is to worship (and repent) and fails to do, he will be quasi-culpable. His action of doing nothing will not be rational<sub>0</sub>.

I suggest that, if the probability of the existence of God on someone's evidence is not too low after adequate investigation, it would indeed be a best act to worship and repent before God. After all, if you receive a very expensive and much-desired present and it is unclear who has sent it, it would be bad not to write a very grateful letter to the person most likely to have sent it (even if it is not *very* likely that that person has sent it). You might express your gratitude in a conditional way ('I'm assuming that you sent this'), but not to express any gratitude at all would be a bad thing. And if you have damaged the present, it would be bad not to apologize. *A fortiori*, if—although it is unclear who (if anyone) gave you life but the most likely candidate is a God—it would be very bad indeed not to express a very great amount of gratitude, and very considerable



repentance. It would be a rational<sub>5</sub> act to worship and repent, and to do so in the way in which it is more probable that God wants us to worship and repent than in any other way.

Again, even if it is not obligatory, it may still be good to pursue some religious way because of the salvation which it offers to oneself and others. I described in detail in Chapter 5 the salvation offered by religions such as Christianity and Islam, and argued for their great goodness; and suggested that it would be difficult to conceive of a better kind of salvation than is offered by Christianity. It would be very good for us (and others whom we can influence) to live on Earth the life of worship and service which the Christian God (if He exists) would want us to live (a significant part of which is good to live for entirely non-religious reasons), so much better than to live the life which would be the best if there is no God, that it would—I suggest—be a rational<sub>5</sub> act to live it, so long as it is not too improbable that the Christian Creed is true (and so long as no religion offering a similar salvation has a more probable creed which entails a different way of worship and service). It would be so good for us if our earthly life had the enormous value that it would have if we followed the Christian way and there is a God (a Trinity of love who once shared our human life) whom we worship. And the life of Heaven, as depicted by the Christian Creed, is so worth having that it would be a rational<sub>5</sub> act to seek it as energetically (for ourselves and others) as possible, so long again as it is not too improbable that there is a Heaven. So long as no religious way offering a similar salvation has a more probable creed, that energetic pursuit would involve following the Christian way on Earth which would make us the sort of person who would be happy in Heaven. Christian-type salvation does seem very much more worth having than does nirvana as pictured in Buddhism, or some of the goals offered by other religions, because of the great goodness of friendship with God (partly on Earth and fully in Heaven) doing very worthwhile tasks in company with other humans. But the goodness of the goals have to be balanced against the probability of attaining them. In so far as the goals offered by Buddhism are less worthwhile goals, the Buddhist Creed would need to be more probable than those of Christianity and Islam before it would be good to follow the Buddhist way. And if no religious creed has (after adequate investigation) any significant probability, it would not be a rational<sub>5</sub> act to follow any religious way.

We must, however, add to the above that someone who believes that following a certain religious way is obligatory or just the best thing to do, and yet fails to follow it (or even to do those actions in it which are obligatory or otherwise good for non-religious reasons), risks not merely losing the goals at which the religious way aims but also 'his own soul'. For so pervasive are the claims of a religious way that if one refuses to follow it at all when one believes that it is the best thing to do, this involves refusing the claims of the good in a substantial way. So a person who believes that following some religious way would be a best act for him has an additional reason for following it—to save himself from a bad after-life.

Since the main relevance of a creed for the religious life is to guide us to follow some religious way in order to attain its goals, it follows that someone who follows the Christian way needs only to believe the Christian Creed, under what I called in Chapter 4 the fourth interpretation of what such belief amounts to. Since the total set of actions to be done to obtain one's goals is entailed by all one's beliefs taken together, it is important that the Creed as a whole be contrasted with rival creeds. It would be neither necessary nor sufficient to believe that each item of the Christian Creed (however divided up into items) was more probable than some alternative. For a creed satisfying this latter demand might contain items inconsistent with each other, or at least items very improbable given other items; and so the creed as a whole could be much less likely to be true than the alternative creed. And the belief needs to be simply that the Christian Creed is more probable than its religious alternatives (that is the creeds of any religions which offer similar or better goals—I have suggested that no other religion does offer better goals), not that it is much more probable—with the caveat that, the believer believes, there is no religion whose goals are only somewhat less good but whose creed is significantly more probable. Such a belief in the Christian Creed I shall call weak belief.

Having that weak belief and a strong purpose to attain the goals of religion involves acting on the assumption that there is a God who has certain properties and has done certain things. For the pursuer is doing those actions which he would do if he had a stronger belief. In pursuing the way in order to ensure that any God is properly worshipped and obeyed, and to attain his own salvation and to forward that of others, he is acting on the assumption that if he pursues the way God will ensure

that these purposes are achieved (that there is a God who will accept his worship, provide salvation for him, and help others to attain their salvation). He is thus exhibiting faith of all the three kinds described in Chapter 4, which, under the fourth interpretation of what belief in the Creed amounts to, amount to the same thing. He is exhibiting Thomist faith. For he believes that certain propositions are true (those of the Creed) in the sense that he believes them to be more probable than certain detailed alternatives. And his Thomist faith is 'formed faith', since, guided by his beliefs, he is pursuing those goals which the love of God requires. He is exhibiting Lutheran faith, since he believes the propositions of the Creed (in the stated sense) and trusts God in the sense of relying on God and the good things which he provides described in the Creed to provide for him what he wants or needs (that is, the goals of religion) if he cooperates with God in pursuing those goals (doing which is what the love of God dictates). And, given that the pursuer believes that there is some probability that his assumption is false, his faith will involve trust. He is also exhibiting Pragmatist faith, since he is acting on the assumptions described in the Creed (which he can do only if he believes them to be more probable than the detailed alternatives) in order to obtain the goals of religion. There is no need for a requirement that the 'more probable' should be 'much more probable', and so that the belief should amount to conviction. And for the faith to involve trust (as the Lutheran account requires), the believer must believe that there is some probability that his assumption is false. Since exhibiting faith is acting on an assumption, it may be said to be rational in any of the various senses in which actions may be said to be rational—rational<sub>0</sub> to rational<sub>5</sub>. The best kind of faith is rational<sub>5</sub> faith, in which the agent follows a religious way which is good to follow and the best one to follow given the different probabilities on the agent's evidence, obtained after adequate investigation, that the creeds of different ways are true. A faith will be rational to the extent to which it begins to approximate to that ideal rational faith.

It follows that it is not necessary in order to pursue the goals of a theistic religion to believe that there is a God (rather than no God), only to believe that it is more probable that the goals of religion will be attained by acting on the assumption that there is a God (of a certain kind) than by acting on any incompatible assumption of a rival creed. This will constitute putting one's trust in God. I give an analogy to show

how someone may put his trust in something which, on balance, he does not believe to exist. A man in prison may be told that he will be rescued by 'The Big Chief' from the outer yard of the prison, if he can get there at night. On balance, the prisoner does not believe this rumour; he does not think there is any such Big Chief. But the rumour has some plausibility; and the prisoner has no other hope of escaping. He believes that it is far more probable that he will attain his goal of escaping by acting on the assumption that the 'Big Chief' exists than by acting on any other assumption. So he steals a file, files away the bars of his cell, and squeezes through the cell window to get into the outer yard of the prison. He is liable to be punished when all this is discovered, unless by then he has succeeded in escaping. The prisoner is not inappropriately described as putting his trust in the Big Chief.

Of course, if we pursue the Christian way, while believing that it is more probable than not that there is no God, our prayer will implicitly have a tentative character. 'O God, forgive me' will implicitly be short for 'O God, if you exist, forgive me'. Some philosophers consider that kind of prayer absurd. I do not find this kind of prayer in the least absurd. It was the kind of prayer uttered by the father who asked Jesus to cure his paralytic son—'if you are able to do anything'.<sup>18</sup> Jesus indeed asked for more in the way of something like trust, but was satisfied with the father's tentative 'I believe; help my unbelief!' Surely a good God respects honesty. Weak belief, however, inevitably makes it harder to pursue the Christian way than does stronger belief. For the stronger the belief, the more probable—the believer believes—that pursuit of the Christian way will attain its goal. The stronger a person's belief in the Christian Creed, the stronger would need to be any purposes to pursue rival goals provided by temptations, in order to deter him from pursuing the Christian way. Strong belief is a great help, but weak belief plus total dedication will enable us to pursue the Christian way and develop that character which will fit us for Heaven. I find it implausible to suppose that a good God would refuse Heaven to anyone with the right character whose credal beliefs (not through his own fault) were weak. The pursuit of the way may well, even on Earth, strengthen belief; but surely God, who sees the goodness of character of the imperfect believer, would remove after death the obstacle to his salvation posed by weak belief.

<sup>18</sup> Mark 9: 22.

## THE BELIEF REQUIRED FOR CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

It follows that the community of those pursuing a way ought to ask from their members for no more than weak belief. I wrote in Chapter 4 that the Christian Church has never attempted to clarify publicly the kind of belief which is necessary for faith. My arguments suggest that it ought to be asking only for weak belief. If you insist that, to be a Christian, someone must believe that the Creed as a whole is more probable than its negation, it is as though you are telling someone who needs a fortune, and wishes to buy a lottery ticket in the hope of getting it, that he is only allowed to buy the ticket if he believes that the odds are in favour of the ticket winning. That seems unreasonable. Of course, the Church requires of its intending members something else beside weak belief—strong purpose, a commitment to the pursuit of the goals of religion. A church is a society for those who seek its high goals.

I should add that, although weak religious belief should suffice for church membership, it is doubtful if a church could survive and spread without being led by leaders of stronger belief. You often need deeper conviction to sell a product than to use it. So there may be a pragmatic case for a church to demand rather stronger belief from its officers. But that is only a matter of evangelical tactics, and will depend on circumstances.

How much in content (as opposed to strength) ought a church to ask of its members in the way of belief? When belief in a creed is a condition of church membership, how large should that creed be? Different religious beliefs mean different ways of worship and service. Within a church, however large a creed it has, there will always be some beliefs about which its members differ. Even within the highly conservative Roman Catholic Church of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there were divergent views on many large issues—for example, about whether unbaptized babies go to Hell, and also about which past declarations of the Church were infallible and so necessarily to be believed by Church members. These different beliefs clearly suggested different kinds of conduct. For example, if you believe that unbaptized babies go to Hell, it is hard to justify not briefly ‘borrowing’ as many as you can and quickly and secretly baptizing them.

Clearly it is good that a person should work out for himself which way will attain the goals of religion. But, equally clearly, in all human inquiries and pursuits, no one can achieve much by himself. He needs to build on the results of others, and to encourage and be encouraged by others. While someone may be able to work out for himself that there is a God (as natural theology claims), in practice no one is very likely to discover for himself, starting from scratch, which detailed practices will attain the goals of religion. He needs a church, a society which can tell him how to live so as to attain these goals, and encourage and help him to do so. A person can work things out for himself if there are rival societies with clearly distinguished accounts of the religious way, between which he can choose to which to belong; and he can work things out for himself within a society which proclaims basically a true way if there is scope within the general account of the way given by that society for working it out in more detail. So people need a church which points them basically in the right direction, if they are to have an effective opportunity to attain the goals of religion. If people of too diverse views are admitted to the church, there will not be enough community of agreement on how the way is to be pursued to provide a message to the world, and guidance and encouragement to members. Yet if a church insists on too much in the way of belief, it will exclude from membership many in basic sympathy with its aims who would, by following the way in church membership, come to have a very similar understanding of the world and pursue a very similar course of life to those within the church, and who, if excluded from the church, will not come to have this understanding or pursue this way. Also, it will prevent people from working so much out for themselves, which latter is, other things being equal, a good thing. It is a matter for the church to judge when the benefits of opening the church to those who do not have what the church then considers completely true beliefs outweighs the probable harm both to potential members and to existing members. Many religions, including the Christian religion, are revealed religions. They purport through Bible, or Pope, or Church leaders to have divine guidance on the essentials of the faith, and so on the limits to tolerable credal eccentricity; what these limits are may itself to some considerable extent be entailed by the religion's creed.

In the course of specifying the weak belief needed for church membership, a church needs to make clear (as it has not always made clear in

the past) the alternatives with which its creed is being contrasted. The considerations of the previous paragraph show that the alternatives should be those rival creeds by which, if a person is guided, he (or others who would be influenced by him if he were in the church) would be significantly less likely to attain the goals of religion. Clearly, true belief is always more likely to lead to attaining any goal than is false belief. But if a person is guided by some possible alternatives, his conduct (on what he meditates, how he worships, etc.) will not be *much* affected. The church ought (in view of the advantages of church membership) to specify as alternatives with which its beliefs are being contrasted, only those which are such that, the church believes, if a person is guided by them, he is likely seriously to endanger the attainment of the goals of religion by himself or others. Thus, the Nicene Creed claims that (1) Christ 'will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead' (i.e. both those who are alive when he comes and those who are, by then, already dead). The Church might make clear that a Christian needs to believe a creed containing (1) in contrast to a creed containing (2) 'Christ will not come again to judge anyone', and in contrast to a creed containing (3) 'Christ will come again, but he will judge only those who are then alive'. These were, I suspect, the alternatives to which historically (1) was introduced as a contrast. The Church might also make it clear that a Christian does not need to believe a creed containing (1) in contrast to its negation, or even in contrast to a creed containing (4) 'Christ will come again when all humans are dead. He will judge all the dead.' The Church might reasonably hold that someone who was guided by (4) would, to all intents and purposes, pursue the same religious way as a person guided by (1). Both would meditate on a similar understanding of God, see Him as the judge of all humans, and prepare to meet Him as judge of themselves. The difference which believing that some humans would be alive when Christ came as judge would make to our understanding of God, and to the way we worshipped and led our lives, might be thought to be a very small one. But a person who was guided by (2) or (3) would think that he would escape Christ's 'judgement' (at least—given (3)—if he was near to death) and so that he would have the same future however he behaved; that would deprive him of significant encouragement to good action.

# 7

## The Comparison of Creeds

We saw in Chapter 2 that someone who seeks true beliefs must seek rational<sub>5</sub> beliefs, that is beliefs which result from adequate investigation. We saw in Chapter 3 that there is, in general, a duty to pursue some religious inquiry into whether or not there is a God or gods, and whether the more detailed claims of Christianity or rival religions are true; and that it is a good thing to pursue such inquiry a lot further than duty requires. We have now seen more fully, in Chapters 5 and 6, that what we need in order to direct our lives correctly are true beliefs about the worth of the goals of different religions; and true beliefs about how probable it is that the ways of different religions would obtain their goals. In Chapter 5 I set out the worth of the goals of the Christian religion and compared them with those of some other religions. I showed in Chapter 6 how the creed of a religion provides the ground for supposing that someone is more likely to obtain the goals of that religion by pursuing its way than by pursuing some other way, and I shall now proceed in this chapter to survey the procedures by which we can establish the relative probabilities of creeds.

We must seek a rational<sub>5</sub> belief about the relative probabilities, a belief which is rendered probable by evidence after adequate investigation—ideally, of course, a belief that one religious creed is very probably true, or a belief that almost all religious creeds are almost certainly false, but otherwise a belief that the creed of one religion is not too improbable and more probable than that of others. Probability is probability on evidence. We must seek as much relevant evidence as we can get, and reflect on whether the criteria by which we assess evidence are ones which seem to give intuitively correct results in other cases, and recheck the results of applying those criteria to religious issues. The evidence will include our own personal religious experiences (e.g. apparent awareness of God or gods) and the testimony of others (to their experiences, and to



authority, that is to what is commonly agreed by human investigation). But, I have argued, since in the modern world there are authoritative atheists as well as authoritative religious believers, and good arguments against theism and religion in general known to most people, most of us need positive arguments which start from basic beliefs held very strongly by theists (and other religious believers) and atheists alike and proceed thence by criteria shared by everyone.

### ASSESSING THE PROBABILITY OF THEISM

The world's major religions divide into theistic and non-theistic religions. So the first task of an investigator is to acquire a rational belief about whether or not there is a God; and, for reasons given earlier, in the modern world this will normally involve (as well as taking into account the widespread datum of religious experience) assessing the worth of the other arguments of natural theology for and against the existence of God—the worth of ontological arguments; and of arguments from the existence of the universe, its conformity to natural laws, these laws being such as (together with the boundary conditions of the universe) to lead to the evolution of human organisms, the latter being such as to have a conscious life, various general features of that conscious life, and details of the history of the human race. It will also involve assessing the worth of arguments against the existence of God, such as the argument from evil (e.g. the existence of suffering) and the associated argument from hiddenness. I argued earlier that the existence of God is to be assessed by the normal criteria for explanatory hypotheses, which I summarized on p. 45. The existence of God is probable in so far as the supposition that there is a God has high prior probability (is simple, has small scope, and fits with background evidence) and has high explanatory power (that is, predicts the occurrence of the above evidence when that is not otherwise to be expected (that is, not probable given other simple theories). The criterion of 'fit with background evidence' has no application where, as with theism, the theory has such large scope that there are no theories of neighbouring fields with which it has to fit. The fact of large scope does, however, by the fourth criterion, count against a theory, but not, I claimed, in the case of a simple theory, very much. So, basically, to the extent to which theism is a simple theory, and makes probable all the

evidence, it is rendered probable by that evidence. If there is evidence which it is not probable that we would find given theism (e.g. human suffering), to that extent the probability of theism will not be as high as it would be otherwise. The above evidence is public evidence and (together with any evidence of the investigator's own religious experiences) is part of the content of the basic beliefs of any investigator. His resultant belief that there is or that there is not a God will be rational, if it is, in fact, rendered probable by his basic beliefs after adequate investigation. To utilize these criteria for the probability of an explanatory hypothesis to assess the arguments of natural theology does, I believe, simply give rigorous shape to some of the considerations used in the natural theology of earlier centuries.<sup>1</sup>

## COMPARING THEISTIC RELIGIONS

In so far as her investigation so far leads to the conclusion that there is a not insignificant probability that there is a God, an investigator must then proceed to compare alternative theistic religions, of which the most prominent are Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Sikhism, and forms of Hinduism. I shall consider only the three former religions (the 'Abrahamic religions'); the application of what I write to other theistic religions will be evident. (I shall understand by Judaism a fairly conservative form of contemporary Judaism.) Theistic religions normally claim that God has intervened in history to do certain things and to reveal certain truths. Although agreeing that God is omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly free and perfectly good, they differ about other aspects of His nature, and about how He has intervened in history, what He achieved thereby, and what He revealed. Christianity claims that God has a certain nature (He is 'three persons', Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, 'of one substance'), which is denied by Judaism and Islam.

<sup>1</sup> For assessment of the force of arguments of natural theology for and against the existence of God, see *The Existence of God*. I illustrate there how not merely the programme of natural theology (as I argued in Chapter 3 of the present book) but some of its detailed arguments have an ancestry in Christian tradition. And when discussing counter-objections to the argument from evil against the existence of God in my *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Clarendon Press, 1998), I bring out how some of these too have an ancestry in Christian tradition.

Christianity claims that God became Incarnate (more precisely, the second person of the Trinity acquired a human nature, and lived and suffered on Earth as Jesus of Nazareth), and thereby made atonement for our sins and revealed truth to us. Judaism and Islam both deny the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Judaism claims that God acted so as to forward the well-being of the people of ancient Israel and to reveal truths to them; and Christianity and Islam agree with that. Islam, however, claims that God's final revelation was to his last prophet, Muhammad, and is contained in the Koran.

We must assess such credal claims by the same criteria as we assess all other theories. The prior probability of a theory that some person has a certain nature and has done some act is a matter of whether this is a simple claim which fits in with what else we know about the person and has a narrow scope; but, as we are comparing theories of similar scope (all concerned with what God is like and has done), we can ignore the latter criterion. The explanatory power of the theory is a matter of whether the detailed evidence is such as to be expected if and only if the theory is true. If it is claimed that Jones is a schizophrenic and murdered Robinson, we need to consider both how likely it is, given what we know about Jones's past life (and perhaps, too, the state of his brain), that Jones is a schizophrenic and would murder someone like Robinson; and also how probable it is that if and only if Jones had murdered Robinson, would we have the witness reports and physical traces that we do.

I shall now consider how to evaluate these two probabilities in the case of the Christian Creed; and then—much more briefly—mention the factors relevant to assessing them in the case of rival theistic religions. Since we are comparing theistic religions, I assume the existence of God. The issue is given the existence of God, what are the probabilities of the different accounts of His nature and actions. I begin with the prior probability of the Christian account of the nature of God. Is a God—omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly free, and perfectly good likely to be triune; to consist of three persons (all of them divine—that is omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly free, and perfectly good), acting as one in perfect co-ordination? The first issue is to show that there is no internal contradiction in this claim—Judaism and Islam have both argued that there can only be one divine person. And since all the traditional arguments to the existence of God argue to the existence of

one divine being, it needs to be shown that there is some probability that he would 'tripersonalize' (to coin a word to mean 'become three persons'), or rather always have tripersonalized; that one divine being will always involve three divine persons. I believe that there are good a priori arguments in favour of the doctrine of the Trinity. But they were not available until that doctrine had become discussable by being part of the Christian Creed—they were, to my mind, first put forward in a satisfactory way by Richard of St Victor in the twelfth century.<sup>2</sup> But they are arguments of some subtlety, and all Christians before Richard and almost all Christians after Richard needed revelation (the evidence for which I shall consider shortly) to assure them of the truth of this doctrine.

Then we need a priori arguments in favour of the Christian account of the actions of God (past, present, and future), the primary element of which is the doctrine that God (that is, one person of the Trinity) became Incarnate, that is became human in Jesus Christ. What is the prior probability that God would become Incarnate? Both Islam and Judaism normally deny the very possibility of Incarnation, and claim that anything divine could not be human as well—the properties of being human and being divine are, they claim, incompatible; for example, because being divine entails being omnipotent and being human entails having only limited power. If Christianity is to be taken seriously, it has to be shown first that it is logically possible that God should become Incarnate.<sup>3</sup> Let us suppose that that is shown.

Then Christians have given at least three kinds of reasons why, in virtue of His perfect goodness, God could be expected to become Incarnate—to make available atonement for our sins; to identify with our suffering; and to reveal truths to us. In the last chapter I expounded the view that in Jesus God became Incarnate and had done these things. How likely is it that God would become Incarnate for these reasons? A good God would certainly want to forgive the sins of His creatures, but He would also want them to take those sins seriously by asking God to accept a serious act of reparation for those sins. Yet every human has sinned and owes so much of his life to God anyway in gratitude for God

<sup>2</sup> For a priori arguments in favour of the coherence and probable truth of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, see *The Christian God*, esp. ch. 8.

<sup>3</sup> For arguments in favour of the coherence of the Christian doctrine that God became incarnate, see *The Christian God*, chs. 9 and 10.

creating him, and is inclined not to fulfil even minimum obligations. So none of us is well situated to make a proper reparation to God for our sins, let alone the sins of others. A good God might well be expected to help us by Himself making the atonement available in one of the ways described in Chapter 6, through coming to Earth and living a perfect human life. We saw also in that chapter that it is good for someone such as a parent who makes others suffer for their own good or for the good of someone else, that they should themselves share that suffering. Indeed, if we subject our children to serious suffering for the sake of a greater good to others, there comes a point at which it is not merely good but obligatory to identify with the sufferer and show him that we have done so. We may reasonably think that, given the extent to which God (if there is a God) makes humans suffer, albeit for good reason, the point has come where it is not merely good but obligatory that He should share that suffering. If that is so, then (since a perfectly good God will always fulfil his obligations), it follows that it is not merely probable but inevitable that God will become Incarnate for this reason.

And, finally, it is at least probable that God will reveal to us truths about how we ought to live. Like any good parent bringing up children, God gives us the choice of how to live, but He also wants us to live a good life. Among the choices which humans had at the beginning of civilization was the choice of trying to find out for ourselves which actions are good and which are bad, or not to bother to try to find this out. But, clearly, whether or not humans tried to discover moral truths, we were fairly unsuccessful in this and needed help. And even if the outlines of what is right and wrong are, in principle, discoverable by humans, through experience and reflection, the details are not easy to discover—are abortion and euthanasia always wrong, or only wrong under certain circumstances; are homosexual relations sometimes permissible, or never, etc.?—and, in all these matters, humans are prone not to face the deliverances of their consciences. They need information. This further information could be provided through a revelation to some prophet without any need for Incarnation; but, ideally, moral information needs to be filled out by moral example—we need to be shown what a perfect life consists in, and that is a further reason why a good God might choose to become Incarnate. It would be good for this information to include encouraging information, e.g. that God will take us to Heaven if we trust Him and fulfil His commandments. And it

would be good if God gave us some extra help in leading the moral life—a community of encouragement, a church.

So, given that it is logically possible, there are three reasons which give a significant prior probability to God becoming Incarnate, as Christianity claims that He did. We must next consider what is the explanatory power of the hypothesis that God became Incarnate for all or most of these reasons: that is, what is the probability on this hypothesis and not otherwise that we would find the historical data which we do. If God became Incarnate as some human—let us call him a ‘prophet’—for the reasons which I have suggested, he would need to live a certain sort of life. To identify with our suffering and to provide an example for us, He would need to live a good and hard life and death. To show us that God has identified with our suffering, the prophet needs to show us that He believes Himself to be God. To enable us to use His life and death as atonement for our sins, He needs to tell us that He is leading His life for this purpose. The prophet would need to give us good and deep moral teaching on how to live. And to make all this available to generations and cultures other than that in which he lived, He needs to found a Church guaranteed to teach humans what He has done and to apply to them his atoning life. Christianity will have great explanatory power in so far as the historical evidence, primarily that contained in the books of the New Testament treated as ordinary historical documents, is such as is to be expected if God became Incarnate in Jesus for the stated reasons. That is, the explanatory power is high in so far as the evidence is such as is to be expected if Jesus led a good and hard life and death, showed that He believed Himself to be God, claimed that His life and death would avail as an atonement for our sins, gave us true deep teaching on moral and other matters, and founded a Church which continued His work. If there is also evidence that no other candidate in human history satisfied all the above requirements for being God Incarnate nearly as well as did Jesus, then that will greatly increase the probability that Jesus was God Incarnate—for it would be much more probable that that evidence would be found on that hypothesis than on any rival theistic hypothesis, that is, any hypothesis of another theistic religion which claims that God did not become Incarnate, or one which claims that God became Incarnate in some different prophet. For if God became Incarnate in some other prophet, it would be far more probable that we would find

this kind of evidence in connection with that other prophet rather than in connection with Jesus.

Historical investigation may (and, I believe does) reveal evidence of a kind to be expected if Jesus led a good and hard life ending in a good and hard death. The hardness of the life is shown by his dedication to his task as a homeless preacher, and his goodness by his friendship to the outcasts of society. The hardness of his death consisted in the fact that it was a crucifixion resulting from an unjust judicial sentence. The evidence to be expected if his death was a good death includes the evidence in St Luke's Gospel of his words from the cross about those who crucified him 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.'<sup>4</sup> There is evidence to be expected if he founded a Church and taught that his life and death provided atonement for our sins—for example his saying that his life was a 'ransom for many'.<sup>5</sup> There is some evidence of a kind to be expected if He believed Himself to be God, and some evidence of a kind to be expected if the teaching of the later Church about this and other matters was a continuation of the teaching of Jesus. And the truth of His moral teaching about how it would be good for humans to behave towards God and one another is something about which with our own limited moral intuitions we can form some judgement for ourselves. The teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is certainly not in conflict with the moral intuitions of most people, religious or non-religious; even if it makes some claims about which we do not have clear intuitions.<sup>6</sup> Of course, in all these respects, we do not know all the details of the life and teaching of Jesus, but what we do know must be such as to be expected if the Christian Creed is true and not otherwise—if that Creed is to have significant explanatory power.

But while all this is some evidence of the truth of parts of the Christian Creed, it is hardly enough to show some very central items of that Creed to be true. Even given that Jesus did teach that His life and death constituted an atonement for our sins, that is not enough to show that God accepted it as such. And even given that Jesus did show that He believed himself to be God, that is not enough (even given the

<sup>4</sup> Luke 23: 34.

<sup>5</sup> Mark 10: 45.

<sup>6</sup> For developed argument about the kind of evidence needed to make it probable that Jesus was God Incarnate, and of the extent to which the public evidence of His life and death does make this probable, see the *Resurrection of God Incarnate*, parts 1 and 2.

goodness of his life and the plausibility of his moral teaching) to show that that belief was true. And the fact that some parts of the moral teaching of Jesus coincide with our moral intuitions is not enough to show that other parts of that teaching, endorsing some Old Testament teaching and developed by the Church, are true. It needs to be shown that the evidence is unlikely to occur not merely given any rival theistic hypothesis but merely by chance. And even if (as I believe) the particular combination of features connected with Jesus which I have listed has not been found in connection with any other founder of a religion, mere chance might just for once in human history have thrown up a prophet who behaved in all of these ways and said all of these things. We need some further evidence of a kind which God alone could provide and would provide only to authenticate the life and teaching of a prophet. The later Church taught that the major reason why we should believe most of the items of the Christian Creed, and an additional reason why we should believe the items in it about which we can have some detailed historical evidence, is that they were revealed by God to Christ and his Church.

The Christian revelation, like all other purported revelations, contains items beyond human capacity to check independently; that is the point of them—we need to be told what we cannot find out for ourselves. But we need some evidence that the prophet or prophets who told us these things (Jesus Christ in the case of Christianity) are bringing us a message from God. Analogy suggests the sort of evidence for which we ought to be looking. Suppose that in the days before wireless, telephones, and fast travel, a man claims to have visited a king of a distant country and to have brought back a message from him. What would show that the message comes from the king? The messenger needs his message to be in some way authenticated by the king. Peoples of different cultures have different conventions for signing messages, whereby the message is marked by some mark which could (with high probability) only be produced by one person; and where that mark is not used in connection with any message except to authenticate that message. In our society the mark most usually used for this purpose is the person's signature (in the literal sense). People write their own names each in his own characteristic way, and it is not easy to forge another person's signature. And while people may write their names for other reasons than to authenticate a message, they put it at the end of



a message only in order to signify that that message is their message. In older days a seal on official documents had these same characteristics. It could (with high probability) only have been produced by a unique stamp or ring possessed by the person or authority in question; and it was used only to authenticate a message. That a signature or seal can only (with high probability) be produced by one person is a fact of nature; that, in virtue of this, they are then used for the purpose of authenticating messages is a matter of local convention.

We need God's authenticating mark on a prophet's message in order to have good reason to believe that it is God's message? So what would constitute God's authenticating mark? Given that there is a God, it is He who moves everything all the time in accord with natural laws; and so there is a respect in which He makes a mark on every event in the universe. So God's authenticating mark on a particular message will have to be an event which he brings about not in accord with natural laws—it will need, therefore, to be a violation (or what I shall call a quasi-violation) of natural laws and so a miracle. Only God who makes the world operate by means of laws of nature (or someone else with His permission) can set those laws aside, and he does so rarely. God may bring about violations of natural laws for reasons other than to authenticate a message (as I shall discuss more fully shortly). But if there is a God who wishes to show that the message of some prophet is his message, He will use that way of doing so which the society of the time would recognize as his way of authenticating the message. And ancient societies, and in particular the society of ancient Israel, considered that if a movement was forwarded by a divine intervention that constituted God's approval of that movement, and so of its teaching.<sup>7</sup> And although, like any convention, this conventional way for God to authenticate a revelation does require to be recognized in order to be an effective means of communication, it is a highly natural convention. If God intervened in the natural order to forward some revelation, that is very naturally interpreted as his approval of it. So if evidence suggests that a prophet's life is accompanied by events which are violations of laws of nature which forward the dissemination of the prophet's teaching, that is to be interpreted as God's authenticating signature on that

<sup>7</sup> For argument that ancient Israel thought in this way, see *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, ch. 12.

teaching. Thus Christianity claims that the Resurrection of Jesus constitutes that signature.

Before filling this out, I turn now briefly to compare Christianity with Judaism and Islam. The doctrine of the nature of God in these two religions is the same as that of Christianity minus the doctrine of the Trinity; that is, their claim is that there is only one divine person. So any arguments against the logical possibility or intrinsic probability of the doctrine of the Trinity are arguments in favour of Judaism and Islam. Both these religions deny that God became Incarnate and so, again, any evidence against the possibility or intrinsic probability of an Incarnation is evidence in favour of these religions. They do, however, make their own historical claims—that God intervened miraculously in history to bring about many of the events described in the Hebrew Bible (that is, the Christian Old Testament), or the foundation events of Islam, and thereby revealed certain truths to humans. So we can assess these religions by the criteria of the prior probability that God would intervene to bring about those latter events, and whether the historical evidence is such as would be expected if He did so (as well as bring about or allow to occur the events connected with Jesus). We have already noted that there is significant prior probability that God would reveal truths so humans (even if He does not do so by becoming Incarnate).

The Christian, like the Muslim, is happy to admit Judaism's historical claims: the Christian is willing to admit the occurrence of various events concerned with the life of Muhammad (including that he dictated much of the Koran to his disciples), but unwilling (for reasons which I shall mention below) to admit that God intervened miraculously (so as to set aside the operation of natural laws) to bring it about. For both these religions, these events are evidence of the truth of an alleged propositional revelation (of what God is like and has done, and how humans ought to behave), associated with these historical events. In Judaism, for example, the events of the escape of the people of Israel from Egypt, their preservation in the wilderness, and eventual conquest of the promised land of Canaan are regarded as evidence of the God-given character of the law (including the Ten Commandments) which Moses announced to the people of Israel on Mount Sinai. But Christianity holds (and Judaism denies) that much of the law contained in the Old Testament (apart from the Ten Commandments) was (on God's

authority) set aside by Jesus, and that Jesus gave new commandments from God; and so there is a conflict between Judaism and Christianity on the content of revelation. So Judaism must deny that God intervened miraculously in human history to bring about the Resurrection in order to authenticate Christian teaching. Islam teaches that God inspired Muhammad to dictate the Koran to his disciples. The Koran contains many items incompatible with Christian doctrine—teaching about how humans ought to behave, and such claims as Jesus did not die on the cross<sup>8</sup> and was not divine.<sup>9</sup> Hence, Christianity must deny that the Koran is a revelation from God; and so it must deny that God intervened miraculously to bring it about.

So the respective claims of these religions both about which historical events occurred and about which propositions were revealed can be compared. And for propositional revelation, as analogously for historical claims, the explanatory power of each creed is first a matter of whether its purported revelation is the kind of revelation which it is at all probable that God, if there is a God, would have given. We can to some extent, in the light of our own moral intuitions, judge the moral teaching of different religions about how humans should behave towards each other (about, for example, how civil governments should punish criminals, and when they should go to war, and about the role of women in society). But there are areas of such moral teaching about which our intuitions are cloudy; and our intuitions about the worth of their respective claims about how we should worship God will be even more cloudy.<sup>10</sup> The point of a revelation is to show us what we cannot establish for ourselves; and so, with respect to Judaism and Islam as with respect to Christianity, we need evidence of miracles which God alone can perform to give a divine signature to a claim to a revelation.

In so far as there are a priori reasons for expecting a revelation, they are reasons for expecting a revelation to the whole human race. A revelation to some needs a church or other society to propagate it to

<sup>8</sup> Sura 4: 155.

<sup>9</sup> Sura 5: 19.

<sup>10</sup> Note also that if God is our creator, He has the right (within very wide limits) to command us to do things; and doing those things then becomes our duty when it was not a duty before the command was issued. On this see my *Responsibility and Atonement*, ch. 8. Such commands might be made known to humans through a prophet. Hence, it is no objection to the prophet's teaching on morality that he tells us that it is our duty to do some action, when it would not be our duty to do that action but for a divine command.

all. So a creed which claims a revelation makes it probable not merely that the giving of the purported revelation will be accompanied by a miraculous event which forwards that revelation but also by the foundation of a church which thereafter continues to propagate that revelation, and that its message is a faithful development of the message of its founder. So the three religions can be compared in respect of whether they are evangelistic religions. Christianity was propagated worldwide by a Church which was founded by Jesus. Islam was propagated worldwide by nations, the first of which was founded by Muhammad. Judaism was propagated in, and for, the people of Israel, originally constituting one or two nations (Israel and Judah) and then a dispersed race. But, although many of the later prophets of ancient Judah seem to have envisaged a worldwide mission for their people, subsequent to the dispersion in the second century AD, Judaism does not seem to have thought of itself as a missionary community. So we must ask whether it is probable that God would have provided Judaism with a revelation, true and deep, but not have intended Judah to tell the whole human race about it. But if he did so intend it and Judaism failed to propagate the revelation, is it more probable that God would have done nothing further about it, or would instead have handed over the task of propagation to another religion whose teaching incorporated that of Judaism—e.g. Christianity or Islam? The three religions can also be compared in terms of the fidelity of the teaching of the later Church to the teaching of the founding prophet or prophets. For a God who gives a revelation via some prophet may be expected to take steps to ensure that that revelation is still available to later humans.

## MIRACLES

We have seen that the Abrahamic religions all claim that God has intervened in history to give a revelation (and Christianity claims that that intervention had also further purposes); and so it must be central to a comparison of the worth of their creeds to investigate how far the propagation of their purported revelation was forwarded by a miracle. Hence, we need to investigate more thoroughly the notion of a miracle, and how far there can be good historical evidence that one

had occurred.<sup>11</sup> The kind of miracle with which we are concerned—for reasons given earlier—is an event which is a violation or quasi-violation of a fundamental law of nature, brought about by God. Laws of nature are principles of necessity governing the behaviour of objects. Deterministic laws have the form ‘All *As* necessarily do *B*’; probabilistic laws have the form ‘All *As* have a physical probability of *p* of doing *B*’, that is all *As* have a propensity to do *B* whose strength is measured between 1 and 0. More fundamental laws of nature explain the operation of less fundamental laws in particular circumstances. Thus Newton’s laws of motion and his law of gravitational attraction explain Galileo’s law that all small bodies near the surface of the Earth and free from constraint fall towards that surface with an approximately constant acceleration. The fundamental laws, that is ones not explained by more fundamental laws, determine the behaviour of objects, in so far as their behaviour is law-like.

I understand by a ‘violation’ of a fundamental deterministic law of nature ‘all *As* necessarily do *B*’ the occurrence of an *A* which does not do *B*. If fundamental laws of nature provide full explanations of all events within their scope (e.g. the behaviour of all *As*) and nothing explains their operation (they are the ultimate determinants of what happens; nothing more ultimate determines whether or not they operate), there can be no violations of laws of nature. There can only be violations if some power from outside the system of natural laws—an inanimate power or a non-embodied person, God or some lesser deity—determines whether a law operates. (That is, the necessity involved in its operation is itself contingent on that power.)

The evidence that some event *E* is a violation is that its occurrence is incompatible with what are probably (on the evidence we have) the fundamental laws of nature. As I argued in Chapter 2, the evidence that a purported law is a true law comes from its explanatory power and its prior probability. To take a different example from the one which I used there, suppose that we have observed many positions of planets, and propose a law that ‘all planets move in ellipses’. From the proposed law

<sup>11</sup> The following discussion of the nature of miracles and the evidence for the occurrence of a miracle is extremely brief. For fuller discussion, see *The Existence of God*, 2nd edn., pp. 277–89 (which I summarize here); and see pp. 26–35 of that book for the analysis of the notion of a ‘law of nature’ which is presupposed on pp. 277–89, and which to some extent complicates the discussion.

and some of the observed positions, we can predict all the other positions, positions which we would have no other reason for expecting—which gives the proposed law high explanatory power. The proposed law is a simple one, which (given that it fits well with what we know about which laws operate in analogous fields) suffices to give it high prior probability. All of this justifies the claim that the proposed law is a law of nature and, hence, justifies the expectation that it will hold in future without exception.

Suppose, now, that one day Mars moves out of its elliptical path for a brief period and then returns to the path. There are two possibilities. This wandering of Mars may occur because of some current condition of the universe (e.g. the proximity of Jupiter drawing Mars out of its elliptical path), such that if that condition were to be repeated the event would happen again in virtue of a more fundamental law of nature than the original purported law. In this case, the phenomenon is an entirely regular phenomenon, although what might have appeared originally to be a fundamental law of nature proves now not to be one. It proves to be a consequence of a more fundamental law both that the original purported law holds in normal circumstances, and that under circumstances describable in general terms (e.g. 'when other planets are close to Mars') there are exceptions to it. Such repeatable exceptions to a purported law merely show that the purported law is not a fundamental law of nature. The other possibility is that the exception to the law was not caused by some current condition in virtue of a more fundamental law, in such a way that if the condition were to recur the event would happen again. In this case, we have a non-repeatable exception to a law of nature. We would have grounds for believing that the exception is non-repeatable in so far as any attempt to amend the purported law of nature so that it predicted the wandering of Mars as well as all the other observed positions of Mars would make it so complicated internally, and so dissonant with the rest of scientific knowledge which constitutes our background evidence, that we would have no grounds for trusting its future predictions. It is no good, for example, amending the law so that it reads 'all planets move in ellipses except in years when there is a competition for the World Chess Championship between two players both of whose surnames being with K'. Why not? Because this proposed law mentions properties which have no other place in physics (no other physical law invokes this sort of property) and it

mentions them in the form of an exceptive clause, 'so-and-so holds except under such-and-such circumstances' (and thus involves two unconnected variables, 'so-and-so' and 'such-and-such circumstances'), where the clause does not follow naturally from any theory. What we need if we are to have a more adequate law is a simple formula, of which it is a consequence that the exception to the original law occurs when it does.

In these ways we could have grounds for believing that an exception to a purported law was non-repeatable. This would show that its occurrence was incompatible with the laws of nature which operate in that field, and so is a violation of a natural law. The cause of this event must lie outside the system of natural laws. Claims of this sort are, of course, corrigible—we could be wrong; what seemed inexplicable by natural causes might be explicable after all. (Although the true natural laws appeared to be deterministic laws, they might be probabilistic laws which permitted some quite random event to occur at very rare intervals.) But then we could be wrong about most things, including claims of the opposite kind. When I drop a piece of chalk today and it falls to the ground, everyone supposes that here is an event perfectly explicable by natural laws. But we could be wrong. Maybe the laws of nature are much more complicated than we justifiably suppose, and the laws of relativity theory and quantum theory are mere approximations to the true laws of mechanics. Maybe the true laws of mechanics predict that almost always when released from the hand chalk will fall to the ground, but will rise when there is a certain abnormal distribution of distant galaxies, which, in fact, there is today. However, although the true laws of nature predict that the chalk will rise, in fact it falls. Here is a stark violation of natural laws, but one which no one detects because of their ignorance of natural laws. 'You could be wrong' is a knife which cuts both ways. What seem to be perfectly explicable events might prove, when we come to know the laws of nature much better, to be violations. But, of course, this is not very likely. The reasonable investigator goes by the available evidence here, and also in the converse case. He supposes that what is, on all the evidence, a violation of natural laws really is one. There is good reason to suppose that events such as the following if they occurred would be violations of laws of nature: resurrection from the dead of a man whose heart has not been beating for thirty-six hours and who counts as dead by other currently used criteria; water turning into

wine without the assistance of chemical apparatus or catalysts; a person growing a new arm from the stump of an old one; levitation (someone praying rising up in the air).

Suppose, now, that the fundamental laws of nature in some field are probabilistic. They will not then rule out any occurrence in the field and so the strict notion of a 'violation' of a law of nature will have no application. If a purported law says that 'All *As* have a physical probability of 0.9999 of doing *B*', then, however many *As* occur which do not do *B*, their occurrence will not be ruled out by the law; it is merely very very improbable that a large proportion of some finite class of *As* will not do *B*. Such an occurrence might be far more probable if some other law were the true law. For example if 1,000 out of 2,000 observed *As* were found to do *B*, that would be very, very improbable if the true law were that 'All *As* have a physical probability of 0.9999 of doing *B*', and far, far more probable if the true law were 'All *As* have a physical probability of 0.5 of doing *B*'. Among events compatible with some law *L* one (*E*) might occur which was so improbable, given *L*, that its occurrence counts very strongly against the claim that *L* holds without exception. Yet there may be no other simple formula which predicts more accurately what happens. Any attempt to amend or replace *L* so as to have a law which predicts more accurately might make it so complicated internally and dissonant with the rest of scientific knowledge that we would have no grounds for trusting its subsequent predictions. In such a case, it is probable that *E* has a cause which lies outside the system of natural laws, and so that *E* is what I shall call a quasi-violation of natural laws.

The evidence that some event *E* is a quasi-violation is any evidence that a probabilistic law *L* is the true fundamental law in the field, and that *E* is very, very improbable given *L*, in comparison with other events described in equal detail which could have occurred instead of *E*. It is compatible with quantum theory that all the atoms in a large block of carbon-14 should decay simultaneously in the next minute, but it is so vastly improbable (in comparison with the probability that, say, 0.00003 of them should decay in the next minute) that the occurrence of such an event would rightly be regarded as casting very grave doubt on that theory. Nevertheless, there might be so much other evidence in favour of quantum theory that to amend it solely to deal with such an apparent counter-instance would make it so complex as to make it



unlikely that its other predictions would be correct. In those circumstances it is probable that the apparent counter-instance is a quasi-violation of a probabilistic law. And so, even if all the fundamental laws include the probabilistic laws of quantum theory, levitations, and all the other events listed two paragraphs ago would still be rightly considered to be quasi-violations of natural laws—so improbable is it that the small indeterminacies allowed by quantum theory would permit their occurrence. Violations and quasi-violations of natural laws—if they occur—cannot be explained scientifically.

In the absence of any other evidence for its existence, it is very improbable that there is some unique physical object from outside the system of physical laws which upsets laws of nature from time to time. This leads us to look for a personal explanation of the occurrence of violations or quasi-violations—either by the agency of God or of some lesser spirit (ghost, poltergeist, demon, or whatever). If there is a God, natural laws can only be set aside by the action or with the permission of God, who sustains them in operation. Hence, in the absence of positive evidence for the existence of lesser spirits whose action does not depend on the permission of God, the most probable explanation of any violation or quasi-violation is that it was brought about by, or with the permission of, God. Substantial further reason to suppose that this is the case would be provided by showing that the relevant event was an event which God would have reason to bring about. I shall come shortly to consider what sorts of violations (or quasi-violations) God would have reason to bring about. I shall now follow a normal usage of the word 'miracle' and call a violation (or quasi-violation) of a natural law by the action or permission of God a miracle. (Henceforward I shall omit the 'or quasi-violation' and ask the reader to assume that what I have to say about violations applies also to quasi-violations.)

## EVIDENCE OF THE OCCURRENCE OF MIRACLES

But how can we learn that an event *E* of a kind which, if it occurred, would be a violation of natural laws and so probably a miracle, in fact occurred? For the very fact that if *E* occurred, it would have been a violation of a natural law, is in itself, of course, evidence against its

occurrence, as Hume classically argued.<sup>12</sup> This is because the past phenomena which make it probable that *L* is a fundamental law of nature make it probable that it holds almost without exception and so that, on the occasion in question, things conformed to *L*. But there may be much other evidence that the event *E*, in fact, occurred. There are four kinds of evidence about what happened on a particular past occasion. First, each person has his own apparent memory of what happened—I may seem to remember seeing John yesterday. Second, we have the testimony of others as to what they seem to remember—several people may claim to have seen John dead the day before yesterday. Third, we have traces of the past, physical remains such as footprints, fingerprints, cigarette ash, carbon-14, which allow us, given knowledge of laws of nature (other than *L*), to retrodict what happened in the past. Knowing that cigarette ash is caused by smoking (or otherwise burning) cigarettes, and very rarely in any other way, we can retrodict from the presence of the ash that previously a cigarette was smoked (or otherwise burned). Evidence of these three kinds I shall call the detailed historical evidence about what happened. For most of us, and for most purported violations, the only relevant detailed historical evidence is that of testimony. The fourth kind of evidence about what happened is our background knowledge about how things behave on other occasions—and this acts as a corrective to discount some of the claims made on the basis of the first three kinds of evidence. If I report that I met a man 10 feet tall, you will be suspicious of my report on the ground that men do not normally reach a height of 10 feet. I argued in Chapter 2 that, other things being equal, we should believe our apparent perceptions (that what we seem to see is really there), our apparent memories of them, and the testimony of others about what they claim to have seen. I analysed there what reasons we can have for not believing our apparent memories of what we perceived, and the testimony of others. Crucial among those reasons are that we have very strong other evidence that things are not as we seem to perceive them; and such reasons may include general background evidence that the sort of thing we seem to perceive does not happen.

The most weighty kind of background evidence for discounting apparent observations or testimony would be that the kind of event

<sup>12</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (first published 1748), section 10.

reported would, if it happened, be a violation of a law of nature—claimed Hume. Even given Hume's assumption that in such cases the main relevant background evidence just is our evidence about what are the laws of nature, I see no adequate reason to suppose that this evidence always counts decisively against the report. Maybe so many careful witnesses (declared to be such by the testimony of very many authorities) report very clearly what happened that their evidence can outweigh the evidence from the normal operation of laws of nature; and so the weight of evidence might show that a violation of a law of nature occurred. But Hume's main mistake was his assumption that in such cases our knowledge of what are the laws of nature is our main relevant background evidence. Yet all other evidence about whether there is or is not a God is also relevant, since if there is a God, there exists a being with the power to set aside the laws of nature which He normally sustains; whereas if there is no God, there is far less reason to suppose that violations might sometimes occur. Hume might be right in his view that if evidence about possible violations of laws of nature were the only evidence for or against the existence of God, this evidence would never be sufficient to 'make it a just foundation for any... system of religion'.<sup>13</sup> But, of course, as I noted earlier in this chapter, such evidence is not the only evidence. Any evidence that there is a God is evidence that laws of nature can be violated, and then testimony to the occurrence of *E* might be strong enough to outweigh the evidence of what, given only the laws of nature, would otherwise occur on this occasion.

This will be the case in particular if *E* is an event of a kind which a God would have reason to bring about as a violation of natural laws. What reasons could God have to bring about some event by violating the natural laws which he has made rather than by making the laws such as to bring about that event in the normal course of their operation? There are, I suggest, reasons of two kinds. The first is to respond to free human actions—either actions of praying to God for some good thing to happen, or other good or bad actions that they do. An entirely regular world in which everything (apart from human choices) occurred in accordance with natural laws would not be a world in which God had any living interaction with human beings. God has the reason of friendship to seek living interaction with people whom he has made

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 10.2.98.

who are free rational agents like Himself. Hence one would expect Him to intervene in the natural order occasionally in response to the human situation, especially in answer to request (i.e. petitionary prayer) for good things. Just as a good parent wants to give to her children the good things that they choose to request (so that it is up to the children whether or not they get these good things), so God wants it to depend on freely made petitionary prayers whether we and those for whom we pray get many good things. In such a case, while God has good reason to intervene, He has no reason to make it widely known that He has intervened. He acts out of love for a particular individual; He does not seek publicity for granting a favour.

The second kind of reason why God might intervene in the natural order is the kind of reason with which I am concerned in this chapter—just occasionally to put his signature on the work or teaching of some prophet in order to show that that work or teaching was God's work or teaching. In these cases, as we have seen, God does have reason to provide some public evidence that He has violated natural laws.

The foundation event of Christianity was the Resurrection of Jesus. If it occurred in the way traditionally described and implied in the New Testament accounts—the coming-to-life of a man dead for thirty-six hours, endowed with new superhuman powers, it is clearly a violation of natural laws. There is significant testimony of witnesses to the tomb of Jesus being empty and to Him appearing to His disciples in bodily form on several occasions thereafter. If the Resurrection occurred, it was that which caused the disciples' conviction that it occurred, and moved them to preach the Gospel of Jesus and His Resurrection throughout the world. If God intervened in history in such a way as to cause the Resurrection, He put His signature on the life and teaching of Jesus. To bring to life a prophet condemned for teaching a certain doctrine in such a way as to propagate that doctrine is paradigmatically to show approval thereof (and would be so understood in the culture of ancient Israel). And if, as He seems to have taught, Jesus was offering His life as a sacrifice for human sins, for God to bring the sacrifice to life again is to receive it and thus to accept it and show that He has accepted it for this purpose.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> I argue at book length for the contentions of this paragraph in *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*. Here I merely summarize the kind of argument which needs to be given to show the truth of the Christian revelation.

For Judaism and Islam also, their claims to have a revelation need more evidence than the fact that some of the items of their purported revelation (e.g. their claims about how humans ought morally to behave) are independently plausible. We need independent reason to suppose that the other items (e.g. the Koran's teaching about life after death) are true. Revelations need support from miracles. Judaism claims that in various events recorded in the Hebrew Bible God put His signature on prophetic teaching, for example when he ignited the sacrifice of Elijah and not that of the prophets of Baal.<sup>15</sup> Yet the testimony to Elijah's sacrifice is contained in a historical book written much later than the events recorded, by someone who had no connection with them; and which, even if it occurred as described, was not necessarily a violation of natural laws. By contrast, the New Testament contains the testimony of many contemporary witnesses to an event which, if it happened as described, would undoubtedly have been a violation of natural laws. Generally, the various 'miracles' recorded in the Old Testament may well have occurred as described and be violations of natural laws, but the evidence for this is vastly inferior to the evidence about the Resurrection (even if the latter is thought not to be strong). Islam claims that Muhammad performed no miracles except dictating the Koran, but that the production of the Koran by a virtually uneducated prophet showed God's miraculous witness to its truth. Yet it is in no way evident that, even if Muhammad was virtually uneducated and the sole human author of the Koran, the production of such a work constitutes a violation of natural laws.

Hume commented that 'every miracle . . . pretended to have been wrought in any of these religions ["of ancient Rome, of Turkey, of Siam, and of China"]', as its direct scope is to establish the particular system to which it is attributed; so has it the same force . . . to overthrow every other system.<sup>16</sup> That is, put in my terminology and using a particular example, evidence of a violation which, if it occurred, would show God's approval of an Islamic doctrine, would thereby be evidence against the occurrence of any violation which, if it occurred, would show God's approval of some Christian doctrine incompatible with the Islamic doctrine; and conversely. If the production of the Koran really was a miracle, the Resurrection cannot have happened, and conversely. But,

<sup>15</sup> As recorded in I Kings 18.

<sup>16</sup> *Enquiry* 10.2.95.

while this point is formally correct, note that very few purported miracles have this character. Most are simply answers to prayers for the needs of particular individuals; and it is compatible with both Christian and Islamic doctrines and the doctrines of most other religions that God may answer the prayers of members of all religions. And many doctrines of one religion are compatible with doctrines of another religion. Christianity incorporates most of Judaism, and is certainly happy to recognize the occurrence of its miracles. But there are cases of conflict, and for those cases Hume's point is correct. It follows that that religion (if any) which has the best authenticated miracles (of a kind which, if they occurred, would show God's approval of doctrines) has the best evidence from this source in its support. The other evidence for the truth of a particular theistic creed, as we have seen, will come from any intrinsic (i.e. a priori) probability of the doctrines which it contains (e.g. the prior probability that God would become Incarnate), any intrinsic probability that God would bring about the non-miraculous historical events which it proclaims (e.g. that Jesus would act in such a way as to get crucified), and any historical evidence that these latter events occurred.

I argued in Chapter 3 that it has been the view of many Christian theologians, and especially those of the first and second centuries that, among other historical evidence, the miracles of Jesus and his Church are of great importance in providing public evidence for the truth of the doctrines of Christianity. There was, however, much less emphasis on the reliability of the historical evidence for the Resurrection and the other New Testament miracles (rather than on later miracles, including the conversion of the western world), from the third to the fifteenth centuries. In the twenty-first century we now have the historical knowledge and expertise which puts us, unlike thinkers of the intermediate centuries, in as good a position as thinkers of the second century to assess the detailed historical evidence for the claims of Christianity. I suggest, therefore, that the ramified natural theology which has always played a role in Christian apologetic is now again in a good position to follow the example of the theologians of the first and second centuries and give significant weight to the detailed historical evidence about the Resurrection (and other New Testament miracles), which is more relevant for establishing Christian doctrine than is evidence of the miracles and success of later Christianity. In doing so it will have, like the kind of bare natural theology which it also requires, the best of ancestries in Christian tradition.

COMPARISON OF THEISTIC AND NON-THEISTIC  
RELIGIONS

The final step in showing the Christian Creed (or some other theistic creed) to be more probable than any rival religious creed would be to show that it is more probable than any non-theistic creed. How is the Christian Creed to be compared with the creed of a non-theistic religion such as Buddhism? As they are so different, each must be assessed separately for its probability as a whole. The Christian Creed containing both the existence of God and detailed Christian claims is probable to the extent to which it is probable a priori (which is a matter of the simplicity of the claim that there is a God, and how probable that makes the other doctrines—so that overall they fit together into a simple system), and has greater explanatory power than any equally simple system—that is, predicts better both the data of natural theology (the existence and orderliness of the world etc.) and the New Testament data, as well as data adduced by rival systems. So Buddhism, too, must be assessed for its overall simplicity and its ability to predict data.

The fundamental law governing all things,<sup>17</sup> according to Buddhism, is the law of karma, 'according to which virtuous actions create pleasure in the future and non-virtuous actions create pain'.<sup>18</sup> But karma cannot explain why there is a universe at all (even if there always has been a universe) rather than nothing ever, nor can it explain why the universe is governed by natural laws of a very simple kind which, together with its boundary conditions, lead to the evolution of animal and human bodies. And to suppose that all these latter are just brute facts is, I suggest, to make a very complicated and so a priori very improbable supposition. And it looks as if the law of karma cannot explain why, as appears to be the case, conscious agents came to exist when there have not always been such agents. In order to save the law of karma, given the evidence that so often on earth the virtuous suffer and the wicked prosper, we need to add the doctrine of reincarnation (which then allows the virtuous in this life to be rewarded in the next, and the

<sup>17</sup> 'The Universe has no beginning. It is the product of karma, the law of the cause and effect of actions.' (Lopez, *Buddhism*, 21).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

wicked in this life to be punished in the next). This doctrine is, of course, part of the Buddhist Creed, but I am making the point that it is a separate part of the Creed, not entailed by or entailing the law of karma. Hindus, who also believe in reincarnation, sometimes claim to have empirical evidence in the purported testimony of children who claim to have lived previous lives and can tell true incidents from those lives which they could not otherwise have known. But, even if this evidence were found strong, it would not have any tendency to show that a person who pursues the good eventually reaches nirvana. That nirvana can eventually be reached is a further part of the Buddhist Creed. So it does not look to me as if the Buddhist Creed can explain the most general mundane phenomena, or that it is an especially simple creed. And Buddhism makes no appeal to revelation; the Buddhist does not claim that some supernatural power had revealed doctrines to the Buddha. The doctrines were supposed to be such as the wise could 'see' to be true.<sup>19</sup>

Similar points to these which I have made about Buddhism are relevant to other eastern religions. I am not claiming to have shown conclusively in this book that each rival religious creed is less probable than the Christian Creed. I am merely pointing out the criteria by which it is possible to compare the probabilities of different creeds, and also pointing out the considerations which, at first sight, favour the Christian Creed over the creeds of all other religions.<sup>20</sup>

## PHILOSOPHICAL RELIGIONS

Not all religions are ones with detailed practices and creeds cemented by a Church and practised by millions of people. There are religions put

<sup>19</sup> 'The Buddha's insight is represented as being not that of the dogmatist who asserts that such and such is the case and demands men's acceptance of his assertion in faith, but rather that of the analyst. And the analysis which is offered is both logical and psychological. Its appeal is in its self-authenticating quality.' (Trevor Ling, *The Buddha* (Penguin Books, 1976), 129). 'The Buddha stressed that no teaching should ever be accepted on the strength of tradition, of being handed down in holy scripture, of being in agreement with one's own views or because of trust in an authority. It should only be accepted when one has recognized it as wholesome.' (H. W. Schumann, *Buddhism* (Rider, 1973), 24).

<sup>20</sup> My detailed assessment of the probability of the Christian Creed (as opposed to theism generally) is contained in *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* and in *Revelation*.



forward by individual thinkers with creeds having quite a few elements in common with more traditional religions, without necessarily recommending a way of life peculiar to that religion and often recommending that people follow much of the way of life of some traditional religion. Each such candidate's new 'philosophical' religion must be judged on its merits by the criteria suggested earlier. But it cannot appeal to revelation via some particular prophet for the truth of some of its doctrines, unless it also advocates other doctrines which are equally obviously part of the teaching of that prophet. For, if you teach one doctrine on the basis of the prophet's authority, you cannot in consistency refuse to teach some other doctrine which he also taught. You can, of course, still teach the former doctrine but only on grounds quite independent of revelation.

As I noted in Chapter 5, in recent years John Hick has written at considerable length in defence of a religion of this kind.<sup>21</sup> He holds that there is an Absolute, the Real, on which somehow all things depend, and 'union' with which is the greatest human good. The major traditional religions teach that there is some principle, personal or impersonal, on which all things depend—God or Brahman or the Tao. But, Hick claims, traditional religions all give content to this notion of the Real by attributing properties to it which do not really belong to it. For theistic religions the Real is personal, that is God; for non-theistic religions it is impersonal. It may be pragmatically useful to attribute properties to the Real, for example to think of the Real 'as if' it were personal, but—claims Hick—to speak strictly, the Real does not have most of the properties attributed to it by different religions, for example it is not personal. The different religions tell different stories about the Real, for example, that God became Incarnate in Christ. These stories are not historical truths. But these traditional doctrines and historical claims can often be interpreted usefully in a highly metaphorical way, to tell us, for example, about how different from us is the Real and how we ought to live in a loving way. Hick uses a Kantian model—the Real is the noumenon but we can think of it only in terms of human categories

<sup>21</sup> Hick does not intend his 'interpretation of religion' as a global phenomenon to constitute a new religion (as he made clear to me in private correspondence). But on my definition of a religion (pp. 159–61), it is one. For Hick advocates a creed distinct from that of traditional religions. (He affirms—see below—the existence of the Real, but denies the truths of all the creeds of traditional religions understood in the ways in which they are normally understood.) And he advocates a way to salvation. (It can, he holds, be attained by pursuing any one of the ways of traditional religions.)

as a phenomenon. Different religious cultures have different concepts; and so they have different phenomenal understandings of the Real.<sup>22</sup>

I discussed in Chapter 5 Hick's view that all the major religions are equally 'salvific', that is their ways are equally effective ways of reaching a common goal of one's own salvation. I argued there that some religions have further goals apart from one's own salvation (e.g. the proper worship of God) and that different religions understand salvation in different ways. Hick sees this salvation, this other-relatedness, as involving or making us open to 'the Real'; and claims that in our religious experiences (conceptualized differently in the different religious traditions) some of us do experience 'the Real'. Yet just what the 'dependence' of the world on the Real amounts to and whether there is life after death (be it reincarnation on Earth, or Heaven and Hell, or a 'transcendence of the self') are questions currently irresolvable. But, claims Hick, we do not need to know the answer to them in order to pursue the goal of 'the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to reality-centredness'.<sup>23</sup>

The first enormous problem about Hick's system concerns what Hick is claiming when he claims that the Real exists. The 'Real' seems so empty of content that one does not know what the claim that it exists amounts to. According to Hick, the only true propositions which can be asserted above the Real are 'formal propositions'. The examples of these which Hick gives tell us what the Real is not—'The Real is such that our [ordinary] concepts do not apply to it', and say that it exists—'The Real is able to be referred to'.<sup>24</sup> But we need to know more about the Real than propositions of these kinds can tell us, if the expression 'the Real' is to play the role in our conceptual system which Hick intends it to play; and Hick does, in fact, tell us a lot more about what this expression designates—it is 'an infinite transcendent divine reality' and 'an ultimate ground of all salvific transformation'; and it is 'experienced'.<sup>25</sup> And unless there is positive content to these expressions (unless they are telling us something about what the Real is and does), not just what the

<sup>22</sup> Kant claimed that we are only aware of, and can only seek to explain, phenomena (that is, loosely, things as we observe them); but underlying the phenomena are the noumena, things as they (unknowingly) really are.

<sup>23</sup> John Hick, 'Religious Pluralism and Salvation', in P. L. Quinn and K. Meeker (eds.), *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 62.

<sup>24</sup> *An Interpretation of Religion*, 239.

<sup>25</sup> 'Religious Pluralism and Salvation', 59.

Real is not, there would be no point in taking an interest in the Real—why should I bother about something about which I know nothing except that it exists? And how can it be ‘divine’ without being good or powerful, or a ‘ground’ of transformation unless it is a cause of transformation? Hick needs to spell out the positive content to his claim if I am to have any reason to seek to be ‘rightly related’ to the Real, as Hick claims that I should.

If Hick can give content to his claim that the Real exists, the next problem is why should one believe that it does, that there is such a thing with which we are in contact in our religious experience (albeit indirectly, by means of its phenomenal appearances). Hick holds that the arguments from public evidence for and against a religious view of the world, and so presumably for and against the existence of the Real, are evenly balanced—‘any realistic analysis of the rationality of religious conviction must . . . start from this situation of systematic ambiguity’.<sup>26</sup> But he then appeals to a Principle of Credulity. This principle, as stated by me in Chapter 2, claims that all basic beliefs are rightly basic; and so if it seems to some person (in his religious experience) that God is present to him, then it is, on that evidence, probable that God is present to that person. While Hick seems to deny that having this experience can provide an argument for God’s existence, it nevertheless—he claims—makes it ‘rational’ for the person who has the experience to believe that there is a God.<sup>27</sup> Hick then points out that we (in the world today) have evidence that there are experiences of supernatural reality had by followers of non-theistic religious traditions which seem to them just as forceful as experiences which seem to be of a personal God had by those in theistic traditions. ‘Those who report the advaitic experience of oneness with Brahman, or who experience the reality of the eternal Buddha-nature, or who are conscious of the “emptiness” of all things as their fullness of “wonderous being”, are entitled to base their belief-systems on those forms of experience.’<sup>28</sup> Hick claims that the best way to make sense of this diversity is to suppose that experiences had in theistic and non-theistic religions are experiences of a common object

<sup>26</sup> *An Interpretation of Religion*, 124.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 220. I pass over the question which inevitably arises here of what is the point of having a ‘rational’ belief unless its rationality provides grounds for believing that the belief is true.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

(the Real) interpreted in the light of different conceptual schemes. As I would put it, this is the simplest and most probably true explanation of the diversity of religious experiences. If there were no other evidence favouring one religious creed over another, and so favouring the existence of a personal Real as opposed to an impersonal Real (or conversely), Hick's conclusion would seem to me correct—unless perhaps my own religious experience was overwhelmingly strong. There would be too much contrary evidence (see my p. 55) to allow a basic proposition such as 'there is a God' or 'there is an impersonal Real' to reach the status of a rightly basic belief (that is, to make it probably true).

But there is, in my view, a vast amount of evidence other than that of religious experience for or against different religious creeds which I outlined earlier—evidence for the existence of a personal God from the existence of the world, its conformity to natural laws, these being such as to lead from the matter-energy of the Big Bang to human organisms, human organisms being conscious, etc.; and evidence for and against particular creeds. Different creeds have different prior probabilities (a priori an omnipotent and perfectly good God is more likely to have done this rather than that e.g. revealed this moral principle rather than that implausible one), and different explanatory powers (historical evidence such as that concerning the life, death, and purported resurrection of Jesus is more probable given one creed than given a rival one). And, I claimed earlier, vast numbers of religious believers do not have religious experiences of any great force; but believe on the basis of their assessment of arguments, or (more frequently) on the basis of the testimony of others to their assessment of arguments or to their observation of miracles. One's own religious experience, or the testimony of others to their religious experiences, has been historically, and can only be, a relatively small part of a cumulative case for the truth of a religious creed. Hick needs to show that there are no factors other than religious experience which affect the probabilities of particular religious creeds. I have argued that there are plenty of other factors.

A prime motive behind the view of Hick and many others that any differences between the creeds of the major religions are unimportant is that it avoids the need to face the question of why, if one religious creed is basically true and other religious creeds contain much falsity, the false religion still flourishes. This question becomes especially important for a theistic religion to answer, for in postulating a God who could easily

stop any false religion flourishing, the question takes the form 'what good reason did God have for allowing falsity to flourish?' For Hick that is not an acute problem, since the differences are unimportant. But, in fact, any theistic religion which has some (however partial) explanation of why God allows human suffering (some theodicy, however inadequate) will have available a similar explanation of why God allows false religion to flourish. And if a theistic religion could adduce nothing at all by way of theodicy, I suggest that the occurrence of suffering would render the existence of God very improbable. A central core of a plausible theodicy has always been the free-will defence—much human suffering is due to humans freely choosing to hurt each other (or through negligence freely choosing to allow each other to be hurt), and much suffering provides the opportunity for humans freely to choose to help each other; and it is very good that humans should have those significant choices. Similarly, the theist may claim false religion flourishes because people do not freely choose to investigate whether a religious creed is true, and do not freely choose to try to persuade others to adopt what they believe to be the more probable religious creed. Finding the truth and converting the world may take many generations of work, but there is always scope to choose or not to choose to help in this work. It must have occurred to many people in ancient societies that a God would not demand child sacrifice, but it took a bold prophet to have the courage to say so.<sup>29</sup> And it certainly occurred to many Jews in the period immediately before Christ that the people of Israel had a duty to convert the Gentiles,<sup>30</sup> but they clearly failed to do so. The existence of many religions provides an enormously significant opportunity for people to try to reach true beliefs about all-important issues and to tell others about them, or not to bother, and it is very good that humans should have these crucial choices.

## CONCLUSION

If a belief about the relative probability of creeds is to be rational, it must be the result of adequate investigation. As I brought out in

<sup>29</sup> See Jeremiah 7: 31.

<sup>30</sup> See the book of Jonah, a story affirming the need to evangelize and describing the unwillingness of one prophet (Jonah) to do so.

Chapter 3, when considering mainly investigation into the existence of God, the amount and kind of investigation which a person needs to make must depend on the opportunities open to him and the evidence initially available to him, and that, in turn, will depend on what he is told by experts. He may be brought up in a community which has only heard of one religious creed, or at any rate does not have access to information about others. In that case, he has no opportunity for further religious investigation. He must investigate the truth of the one available creed and, if there is some significant probability that pursuit of its religious way will attain its goals, pursue it if its goals are good ones.

If, on the other hand, he has been brought up in a community which has access to information about other creeds, then, in order to have a rational belief, the investigator must make some inquiries about these other creeds. How much further inquiry is needed will depend on the results of his preliminary inquiries. Thus, with respect to rival theistic religions he may find that all claims to revelation except one contain implausible moral or other factual teaching; and so, whether or not these others are backed up by good evidence of miracles is not relevant and need not be pursued. Or he may find that only one claim to revelation whose teaching is to any degree plausible is backed by strong evidence of miracles. In such cases what his preliminary inquiries have done is to render it very probable that any subsequent investigation of those other creeds will make no difference—one claim alone to revelation is significantly more probable than any other known one—and so there is no point in further investigation of other theistic creeds. But there will still be a need to investigate the preferred theistic creed to ensure that it is not too improbable—for if it is very improbable, it would not be good to pursue its way in order to attain its goals. And there will still be a need to compare the probability of the preferred theistic creed with that of non-theistic creeds.

The situation of many a person in the twenty-first century is that there are a vast number of religious creeds which he could, if he chose, investigate. On which should his effort be concentrated? I suggest that if he has access to information about them, a person should investigate the great world religions; and I suggest also that he should investigate, at any rate cursorily, the claims of religious creeds to which friends and acquaintances and other personal contacts seek to introduce him. The point of investigating the great religions arises from the fact that so

many people and among them very many serious and clever people familiar with modern knowledge owe them their allegiance, that there is some chance that there is some truth in them. The point of investigating religious creeds which are pressed upon one by personal contacts is twofold. First, it is quite easy to investigate these when some of the evidence is made so readily available to us. Second, I suggested in Chapter 2, there is perhaps some duty to believe what people tell us. And if there is not that, there is, I suggest, at least a duty to take seriously what friends or those with whom we come into personal contact tell us, certainly about matters of great importance. What someone thinks worth giving his life to serve deserves at least a passing inspection from us, if he assures us that it is of deep significance for us. The Mormon or Jehovah's Witness whose knock at our door is so unwelcome is entitled to a small initial amount of serious attention. But I suggest that, for most of us, there is not nearly so much point in investigating the credal claims of religions which have not spread throughout the globe and which are not pushed upon us, as in investigating the major religions. The failure of the former to spread among those who do come into contact with them is some evidence that they are not worth more serious attention.

It is clear that, in order to hold a rational<sub>5</sub> belief about the relative probabilities of creeds, there is need for more investigation in our century than ever there has been any other time and place in human history. This is so for two reasons. First, it is far easier than ever it was to pursue such inquiries. The peasant in twelfth century England had no means of getting information about Buddhism; the farm-worker in twenty-first century England can borrow a book from the shelves of the public library or download a lot of information from the web. Hence, any attempt today to pursue inquiry is far more likely to bear fruit, and so there needs to be more inquiry if a person's beliefs are to be rational<sub>5</sub> (see p. 69). Second, we are now all of us aware of the widespread support for creeds of the great religions which rival Christianity, which suggests that each of them has some evidence in its favour. This makes it less plausible to hold that Christianity is certainly true, and so rules out a possible argument against the need to investigate (see p. 68). In future centuries such investigation into the relative probabilities of creeds may again become less necessary, for prolonged

investigation may have convinced so many people of the falsity of all creeds except one that few people believe them. But, for us today, a rational<sup>5</sup> belief about the relative merits of rival religions needs to be backed by a certain amount of investigation. How much will depend on what a preliminary investigation shows.



## Epilogue: Faith is Voluntary

For the pursuit of a religious way, a person needs to seek certain goals with certain weak beliefs. The choice whether to seek those goals is his. A person may choose to seek his own earthly well-being, or that of his family, or of his country, or of the world—or he may seek a deeper and longer-term well-being for himself and for others, and the rendering of praise to God. The choice is his. Obviously any normal person will want earthly well-being for himself—food and drink, sex and sleep, laughter and children, spouse and parents, a worthwhile job, and so on. And one in whom natural instincts have not been repressed by bad upbringing or poor genotype will want these things for others close to him too. And he will want to show respect to those who deserve it, to express gratitude to those who have given him great gifts, and to express repentance and to make reparation to those whom he has wronged; and he will want to do these things to those who, only with some probability, are the source of gifts or people wronged by his actions. And he will want friendship with those with whom he interacts, especially with those who are good and wise.

It may require a certain other than normal environment to produce a longing for the well-being of all human beings, as also to produce a longing for specially religious goals. But these goals are natural extensions of earthly goals. They involve wanting the well-being of those whom we have not met and those unfriendly to us, as well as those whom we have met and those friendly to us; and wanting for them and for us a deep and long-term well-being as well as ordinary earthly well-being. Wanting the well-being of oneself and others will include wanting us and them to understand the world; the desire to understand the 'nature of reality' is a natural extension of that longing. The natural longing to show respect and gratitude to those who deserve it, and show repentance and try to make reparation to those whom we have wronged,

finds its natural extension in a desire to praise and thank any God or gods there may be; and to repent and to try to make reparation to them for ways in which we have misused our lives. The natural longing for human friendship with good and wise humans finds its natural extension in a longing for friendship with God. Some people may be aware only of limited goals, but others who have had contact with people of wide political and religious vision become aware of wider goals.

I have argued that objectively it is important to devote time to investigating what are the goals offered by different religions, and which ones are most worth pursuing; and I discussed the worth of the goals of the Christian religion and some other religions in Chapter 5. It is important also to investigate how probable are the different creeds and so how probable it is that, by following the way of some religion, someone will attain the goals which it offers; and I discussed the criteria for assessing these probabilities in Chapter 7. When someone has reached a rational<sub>3</sub> belief about the worth of the different goals of different religions, and the probabilities of the different creeds, she may conclude that there is one religion whose way she has an obligation to follow. This will be the case if she comes to believe that it is more probable than not that there is a God, and more probable than not that He has revealed that a certain religious creed is true. She may, however, conclude that while the probabilities are not as high as that, there is one religion whose goals are greatly worth pursuing and at least as valuable to pursue as those of any other religion, and whose creed has a probability which is not too low and greater than the probability of the creed of any other religion. In that case, she may reasonably conclude that it is good to give her life to following the way of that religion, since by doing so she is more likely to attain those goals than by doing anything else. In working out whether any religious way is worth pursuing, she may need to balance the worthwhileness of the goals of different religions against the probability of achieving them. If she concludes, for example, that the Buddhist Creed is more probable than the Christian Creed, but Christianity's goals are more worth attaining than are those of Buddhism, she will need to balance these considerations against each other in order to reach a conclusion about which way is best to pursue. Or, finally, she may conclude that the probability that any religion is true is so low that it would be foolish to waste any time in its pursuit instead of pursuing mundane good things (for herself and others) all the time.

Which is objectively the best thing to do depends on the relative goodness of the different goals and the truth or falsity of the different creeds; but the pilgrim on Earth can be guided only by probabilities. I argued in Chapter 5 for the Christian religion having the best goals to pursue, and I have argued elsewhere for the high probability of its Creed on evidence publicly available in an educated environment. If I am right about these two matters, then pursuing the Christian way will be the rational<sub>5</sub> act (the act best to do by objectively correct criteria) for anyone aware of this public evidence. But it is not necessary for someone to accept both my assessment of the worth of the goals of different religions and to accept my estimate of the latter probability, or indeed either of these, for it to be a highly rational<sub>3</sub> act (the best act to do given her evidence and the way she assesses it) for her to follow the Christian way. For she may still consider that the probability of its Creed is just high enough, and the goodness of its goals just good enough, so that, on balance, it is good to follow the Christian way and better to follow it than to follow any other way. To follow the Christian way will, then, be exhibiting rational<sub>3</sub> faith (the faith which you should exhibit, given your evidence and your way of assessing it).

As described so far, there is a process of investigation which lasts some time, and then a pursuit (or non-pursuit) of a way which lasts the rest of our life. This description is an over-simplification in that we may well rightly start pursuing a way provisionally before we have finished our inquiries; and new evidence may always appear and doubts about how well we conducted our earlier inquiry may surface at any stage of life, necessitating more inquiry. For a person to fail to reinvestigate at this stage would make following his existing way of life no longer a rational<sub>3</sub> act. Indeed, an openness to the possibility that our conclusion about which, if any, is the right way to pursue may be mistaken should, I suggest, never be entirely absent from our lives, so important is the issue. But the issue is so important that such openness must not inhibit serious pursuit of one way until we have become moderately well convinced over a period of time that the pursuit of that way is a mistake. But if theism of any kind is true, God may be expected (in virtue of his perfect goodness and in answer to prayer)—other things being equal—to give to the committed and honest follower of a theistic religious way deeper religious experience in her prayer and worship, and a deeper understanding of His nature and purposes for humans, leading

to a more convinced belief of which is the correct religious way to pursue.

At any stage of this process, we may fail to follow our consciences. We may believe that we ought to investigate, or follow a certain religious way, and fail to do so. Such failures make us deeply culpable. Or we may believe that, although we have no duty to do such things, they are good to do, and still we may not bother. That makes us what I called in Chapter 2 quasi-culpable. Someone who fails to pursue the goals of religion when he believes it good to do so, above all when he believes that he ought to, risks making himself the sort of person unfitted for the good things which religions offer. He risks 'losing his soul'. And he does not need a very strong belief that some creed is true in order to pursue a religious way, just a determination to seek the best.

It has been the opinion of the considerable majority of theologians down the centuries that the act of acquisition of Christian faith is voluntary or free.<sup>1</sup> If faith is simply belief, as Aquinas held, it can be

<sup>1</sup> In some sense of 'voluntary'. This has always been stressed in the Orthodox and Catholic traditions (e.g. in the Catholic tradition by the decrees of both the First and Second Vatican Councils. See Denzinger 3035, and *Dignitatis Humanae* 10, 'The act of faith is of its very nature a free act'.) It has also been taught by many Protestants, apart from those influenced by the Classical Protestantism of Luther and Calvin. But most discussions in any of these traditions tend to confuse believing that propositions are true (which, I have argued, cannot be chosen) with acting on the assumption that propositions are true (which, I have argued, can be chosen). For example, the relevant article (154) in the English translation of the recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1994) moves immediately from a claim about 'believing' to a claim about 'trusting' in God, as though these were the same things.

I believe that, for most theologians, the claim that faith is voluntary (e.g. in so far as it involves pursuing the goals of religion) is the claim that its exercise is an exercise of libertarian free will (that is, a freedom to choose one way or the other, despite all the causal influences which act upon the agent); although, for some theologians (e.g. Augustine), the claim seems to be simply that it is an exercise of compatibilist free will (a kind of free will that is compatible with our actions being predetermined by God). For the latter group of theologians, as well as for those who deny that humans have free will, God's grace is not merely necessary for the acquisition of faith, but sufficient—given God's grace, we shall acquire faith; without it, we shall not. I have claimed in this book that we are blameworthy or praiseworthy in respect of, and only in respect of, our chosen, or in some sense 'voluntary', actions, and not in respect of states in which we find ourselves (e.g. having a particular belief at a particular time); but I have not discussed whether this requires also that our chosen actions are chosen freely in the libertarian sense. I discuss the issue of whether we do have libertarian free will in my book *The Evolution of the Soul*, 2nd edn. (Clarendon Press, 1997), ch. 13; the issue of whether we need it in order to be morally responsible for our actions in *Responsibility and Atonement*, ch. 3; and the issue of what is the majority Christian tradition about human free will in

voluntary only in the sense that we can choose not our beliefs but whether to seek beliefs resulting from adequate inquiry into religious truth. However, the sort of Christian faith that matters ('meritorious faith' in Thomist terms) is, I have urged, a matter of pursuing the goals of the Christian religion on certain assumptions believed to be more probable than rival assumptions, and, in particular, on the assumption that God will do for one what one wants or needs. For one who pursues the Christian way, the pursuit of those goals will be, as Aquinas claimed, doing the actions which the love of God would lead us to do. That faith, which is trust in God, is voluntary. If my arguments about the worth of the Christian goals and the probability of the Christian Creed are correct, to exercise that faith will be to exercise a rational<sup>5</sup> faith. It will be the best thing for anyone to do with his life.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore'.

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Letter to the Hebrews 1: 8–16

*Responsibility and Atonement*, 138–40, amplified in *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 33–5. My view is that we do have libertarian free will; we need it in order to be morally responsible; and that all this is the majority Christian tradition.

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