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BLANCHARD

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BELIEVE IN
ATHEISTS?



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Anyone reading this volume will immediately see the level of study and research that has gone into its preparation. Its scope and subject matter are of the greatest importance today and it is to be hoped that it will have the impact upon people's thinking that it deserves.

The Rev. Dr A. T. B. McGowan, B.D., STM, Ph.D.
Highland Theological College, Dingwall, Scotland

As a one-time atheist myself, I commend John Blanchard's keen and discerning intellectual and spiritual critique of atheism. No self-respecting atheist should be without it.

The Rev. Dr Nick Needham, B.D., Ph.D.
Highland Theological College, Dingwall, Scotland

I read John Blanchard's chapters on scientific aspects of the subject with pleasure. They are lucidly written and thoroughly researched. He has amassed a great deal of information and presented it in a compelling way. I thoroughly recommend this work to the believer and the sceptic. The reader must react to it.

Dr J. H. John Peet, B.Sc., M.Sc., Ph.D., C.Chem., FRSC
Guildford, Surrey, England

I have the highest regard for John Blanchard. His work is concise and biblically based. It is pertinent, applicable and relevant to Christians in the twenty-first century.

Dr Patrick Sookhdeo, Ph.D., D.I.
Pewsey, Hants, England

The breadth and depth of John's reading is quite breathtaking and his grasp of modern scientific and philosophical trends stunning. This book is going to be a great help to any honest thinkers who are prepared to face the challenge which it presents. It is also an absolute gold-mine of 'quotable quotes'. Students will revel in it.

The Rev. Derek Swann, B.A., B.I.
Cardiff, Wales

A veritable *tour de force*. Not only does the author fairly and squarely face the doubts and contradictions posed by unbelievers, but he also provides evidence that is both accessible and convincing.

The Rev. Daniel Webb
European Missionary Fellowship, Welwyn, Herts, England

John Blanchard's arguments lead to the inevitable conclusion that atheism is both illogical and untenable. Anyone who remains an atheist after reading this volume does so in wilful contradiction of the overwhelming evidence for the existence of God.

Dr A. J. Monty White, B.Sc., Ph.D., C.Chem., MRS

Does God believe in atheists?

John Blanchard

 EP BOOKS

EP Books
Faverdale North, Darlington, DL3 0PH, England
e-mail: sales@epbooks.org
web: www.epbooks.org

EP Books USA
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Contents

[Foreword by Sinclair Ferguson](#)

[Preface to the second edition](#)

[Introduction](#)

[1.The Greeks had words for it](#)

[2.Movers and shakers](#)

[3.Conflict and confusion](#)

[4.Impossible things before breakfast](#)

[5.The legacy](#)

[6.Every man for himself](#)

[7.Five steps to nowhere](#)

[8.Protagoras rides again](#)

[9.The dogmatists](#)

[10.The impossible option](#)

[11.Masks](#)

[12.Deviations](#)

[13.Matter matters](#)

[14.Such is life](#)

[15.Glory and rubbish?](#)

[16.Pointers](#)

[17.Status and standards](#)

[18.The book that speaks for itself](#)

[19.A God-free zone?](#)

[20.Nothing but the truth — I](#)

[21.Nothing but the truth — II](#)

[22.The case against God](#)

[23.The case against the case against God](#)

[24.The last word](#)

[Appendix — Dealing with Dawkins](#)

[1.The man and the mission](#)

[2.Science: the answer to everything?](#)

[3.Morality: rights and wrongs?](#)

[4.Religion: the root of all evil?](#)

[5.God: necessary or non-existent?](#)

[6.The Bible: the book that speaks for itself](#)

[7.Christianity: evidence and effects](#)

[8.Jesus: the man for all reasons](#)

[9.Faith: beyond the facts](#)

[Further reading](#)

[Notes](#)

[Index of names](#)

[Index of subjects](#)

[Scripture index](#)

Foreword

by the Rev. Dr Sinclair B. Ferguson, M.A., B.D., Ph. D.

The book you are holding in your hands may well be unique and certainly is remarkable. It is very probable that you have never read anything quite like it before. *Does God Believe in Atheists?* belongs to no ordinary book category because it seems to belong to so many different categories. One does not need to be a prophet to predict that it will be frequently consulted and its material widely used.

John Blanchard is a widely respected author and communicator of the Christian faith. He is well known for his ability to talk about serious things without being lugubrious, and about deep and difficult things in a way that helps others to understand them. But even by his normal standards of excellence and clarity, this work is a *tour de force*.

Does God Believe in Atheists? is a one-volume encyclopaedia of information related to what the German philosopher Martin Heidegger said was the most basic question of all: why is there something and not nothing? In more commonplace terms, is there a God?

Over the thousands of years in which the library of human literature has been compiled, the question has been discussed, weighed and answered — often affirmatively, sometimes negatively and in recent times, uncertainly. It is one of the extraordinary achievements of this volume that it provides an informed, coherent account of several millennia of these discussions and debates. In addition — and herein lies its genius — it does so in a manner that is both understandable and wonderfully readable.

Here is a college course on philosophy, anthropology, geology and the life sciences — yet packaged in such a way that a person of average intelligence will be able to follow, understand, enjoy and find deeply relevant. If you are not a Christian, you will discover that these pages provide a fascinating account of the intellectual and ethical systems that, often unknown to you, have influenced the way you think as a twenty-first-century human being. If you are a Christian you will find this work to be an illuminating survey of what lies behind modern thought; and that survey will better equip you to explain the Christian faith to your own contemporaries. Whether Christian or not, you will quickly discover from John Blanchard's ability to clarify the big issues that being a Christian does not involve the sacrifice of the intellect, but rather leads to its truest and best use.

Here is a book on religion and theology. It is bulging with facts and fascinating information. The notes alone, which display John Blanchard's wide interests and reading, run into somewhere over 2,300. Yet nobody need be afraid of these pages for that reason. For John Blanchard takes great care not only to make everything clear, but also to make it enjoyable, by sharing with us all kinds of interesting information about the great thinkers and scholars in world history. Big ideas, complex thoughts, recondite philosophies and scientific theories are all explained in a way that even a modestly educated reader can understand. When all this comes packaged with a sense of humour and a love for golf (the latter without the former would surely be a grave philosophical aberration), you know that you have a book worth reading!

Most of all, however, this is a book that will challenge you to think and help you to do so.

Even in our post-modern (or has it become post-post-modern?) world, many young men and women enter college or university in the hope that there they may still discover learning that will provide the key to the meaning of life. Surely philosophy, whether moral or natural, can guide them? Surely the

wisdom of the ages, recorded in history and literature, will direct them? But, alas, there seems to be a
inbuilt frustration code in every branch of human wisdom and learning. The real meaning of existence
still proves to be elusive. Indeed, if we are to listen to Richard Dawkins (who features frequently
these pages), the very idea that there is meaning of the kind we seek is a non-starter.

But the deep quest of the human mind and the thirst of the human spirit underline for us the
Dawkins' answer will not do. It fails at stage one, simply because it does not take account of the way
reality is, including — indeed perhaps especially — the reality of our own existence. The 'Why'
question which scientists as scientists cannot answer will not allow itself to be satisfied by answers
the 'How?' question which they often can.

Enter John Blanchard. With his great apologist predecessor Saul of Tarsus, he is convinced that
'The world in its wisdom did not know God.' He recognizes that it takes a different kind of wisdom
find answers to ultimate questions. Paradoxically, the chief reason he excels as a guide to the history
of human wisdom is just this: he has also been educated in another college, where divine wisdom
taught. He himself has been a diligent scholar in that school, and learned his lessons well. I think you
will find him an outstanding and reliable professor in the classroom you are about to enter.

Sinclair B. Ferguson
First Presbyterian Church
Columbia, South Carolina

Preface to the second edition

When this book was first published in 2000, I never dreamed that within a few months it would be voted 'Christian Book of the Year' at the inaugural UK Christian Book Awards; nor could I have known that the rise of 'the New Atheism' (a more aggressive version of the old model) would heighten the subject's profile in such a way that the present volume would be called for.

It has often been said that the most important questions anyone could ever ask are: 'Who am I?' 'Why am I here?' and 'Where am I going?' As they deal with the issues of a person's identity, meaning and destiny, they are obviously of great significance, but even these are secondary when placed alongside one which is both fundamental and inescapable: '*Does God exist?*'

This is *the* question, and every debate about human life and death, and about the universe in which humanity lives and dies, ultimately revolves around it. Several years ago, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* published a set of fifty-four volumes marshalling the writings of many eminent thinkers in the Western world on the most important ideas that have been studied and investigated over the centuries. The subjects covered included law, science, philosophy, history and theology; the longest essay of all was on the subject of God. Addressing the question as to why this should be the case, co-editor Mortimer Adler wrote, 'More consequences for thought and action follow from the affirmation or denial of God than from answering any other question.'¹ The outstanding Latvian philosopher Isaiah Berlin, who died in 1997, elaborated the point in his book *Concepts and Categories*:

The world of a man who believes that God created him for a specific purpose, that he has an immortal soul, that there is an afterlife in which his sins will be visited upon him, is radically different from the world of a man who believes in none of these things; and the reasons for his action, the moral codes, the political beliefs, the tastes, the personal relationships of the former will deeply and systematically differ from those of the latter. Men's views of one another will differ profoundly as a very consequence of their general conception of the world: the notions of cause and purpose, good and evil, freedom and slavery, things and persons, rights, duties, law, justice, truth, falsehood, to take some central ideas completely at random, depend entirely upon the general framework within which they form, as it were, nodal points.²

If Adler and Berlin are right, looking into the subject addressed in this book is hardly a trivial pursuit. Those who disagree over the question of God's existence are not merely crossing paper swords over some interesting but ultimately irrelevant point of science, philosophy or theology. They are disagreeing over the greatest issue of all. The contemporary British philosopher C. Stephen Evans hits the nail on the head when he says that believing in God is not like believing in the Loch Ness Monster: 'The Loch Ness monster is merely "one more thing"... God, however, is not merely "one more thing". The person who believes in God and the person who does not believe in God do not merely disagree about God. *They disagree about the very character of the universe.*'³

As this also involves the fundamental basis of all human life and behaviour, it is hardly surprising that no issue provokes more controversy. The question of God's existence has raged for centuries – and 'ragged' is the right word to use, with millions of people persecuted, punished, tortured, maimed or killed for their convictions on the matter — while theologians, philosophers, psychologists, psychiatrists, scientists and sociologists galore have fought tooth and nail over the question.

Yet this is an issue which not only profoundly affects all the other questions that humanity asks about its existence and environment; it is one in which both sides cannot be right. Either God exists, or he does not exist.⁴ There is no point in looking for compromise, a kind of halfway house in which both sides can live in agreement. To say that God *is* and at the same time *is not* is a crass violation of the law of contradiction. The truth must lie on one side or the other.

This is the background against which this book is written — though it is not the one I had in mind originally set out to produce a brief, straightforward analysis of the historical, logical and existential problems facing those who believe that God does *not* exist, but I soon found myself drawn into taking a much broader approach. The further I went, the more I realized that atheists (and agnostics, for that matter) face a huge raft of questions to which, in what were then nearly forty years of writing, broadcasting and public speaking all around the world, I had never heard convincing answers. Bringing these questions together and asking them in their proper context soon spilled over into something much larger than the book I first had in mind: what follows is the result.

Prefaces to quite slender volumes have been known to include thanks to all kinds of people, including numerous friends and family members, and have sometimes seemed to fall only just short of complimenting the family pet for remaining silent while the master of the house was at work. In this case, failing to thank those who have made significant contributions to the present book would be worse than churlish.

Firstly, I owe a huge debt to a team of men who have read through all or part of the manuscript and have made numerous corrections and suggestions. It is humbling to realize how many flaws would have slipped through without their kind and careful work, and I am particularly grateful to the following: Rev. Andrew Anderson, Rev. Peter Anderson, Professor Edgar Andrews, Dr John Baigent, Professor John Blanshard, Ron Blows, Professor Desmond Burrows, Derek Cleave, Rev. Ian Densham, Rev. Noel Due, Professor Julian Evans, Dr. Niall Fraser, David Fryett, John Garvie, Rev. Graham Hind, Dr Andrew McGowan, Jonathan Morgan, Rev. George Murray, Rev. Philip Miller, Dr Nic Needham, Dr John Peet, Alan Radcliffe-Smith, Rev. Tony Seagar, Dr Patrick Sookhedo, Rev. Derek Swann, Michael Taylor, Rev. Daniel Webber, Dr Monty White and Rev. Alistair Wilson.

In addition to these, my special thanks are due to John Canales for his great help in the writing of chapter 13 and to Dr Andrew Blanchard for similar assistance in the writing of chapter 14. Without their expert input, I would have been sunk without trace.

I owe a special debt to some sixty friends who made this writing project a particular focus for their prayers and to hundreds of other Christians who upheld me throughout my research and writing. In the United States, Trey Lee and David Henderson ‘hung in there’ (as Americans would say) throughout the project, and their constant encouragement meant a great deal to me.

For many years Evangelical Press (now EP Books) has published almost all of my books and I am grateful to the entire EP team for their part in handling my work. I would like to pay a special tribute to EP’s indefatigable editor, Anne Williamson, who has once again brought her meticulous skills to bear on my manuscript. Her work is necessarily behind the scenes, but her significant contribution to the present book deserves to be expressed openly.

It has been said that a good book does not need a foreword and that a bad book does not deserve one. Be that as it may, Dr Sinclair Ferguson has honoured me by his generous commendation, which I greatly appreciate.

Finally, I must once again express my thanks to Joy Harling, who was my secretary while the original manuscript was being written. How she coped with my constant revisions (and dreadful scrawl) I will never know. This particular project involved her in an immense amount of work, which she undertook cheerfully, swiftly and with great efficiency.

My sincere hope is that what follows will be of help to many who are genuinely seeking for truth

and a great encouragement to those who have found it.

John Blanchard

Banstead

Surrey

May 2011

Introduction

As we begin to uncover the problems faced by atheists and agnostics, we need to bear in mind that theists can hardly be said to have everything their own way. Speaking at a conference of religious leaders in 1945, the universally respected scholar and author C. S. Lewis told his audience, ‘It is very difficult to produce arguments at the popular level for the existence of God’¹ — and this in spite of the fact that he had by then been a totally convinced believer for almost fourteen years. The contemporary philosopher Os Guinness goes even further and says, ‘God’s existence not only *cannot* be proved, *should* not be attempted.’²

In his recent book *Explaining Your Faith*, theologian Alister McGrath fine-tunes the point and writes, ‘God’s existence can neither be conclusively proved nor disproved.’³ This seems fair comment but it depends for its validity on the meaning he attaches to the word ‘conclusively’. It is true only if he means that it is impossible to persuade everybody. Yet to say this is to say nothing; after all, the Flat Earth Society is still in business! George Mavrodes makes the point well: ‘We are, of course, especially interested in whether there is any argument that will prove God’s existence to everyone. Such an argument has apparently not yet been invented... The invention of such an argument would, of course, be a wonderful thing, just as would be the development of a drug that would cure all diseases. But there is not much reason to believe that either of these is possible.’⁴

Facing any issue in which diametrically opposed views seem to have both strengths and weaknesses, we need to examine the data with an open mind (or at least a readiness to listen to what both sides are saying) and then come to conclusions based either on what becomes satisfying evidence, or, failing such evidence, reasonable probability. In other words, when we can get no clear answer to the question, ‘What does this *prove*?’ we should ask, ‘Where does it *point*?’

God and Gallup

Proposition 1: Only a minority of people are atheists.

Proposition 2: Most people are atheists.

Proposition 3: Nobody is an atheist.

This might seem a decidedly unpromising start, yet a case can be made in favour of each one of the propositions. As we shall soon see, everything hinges on the meanings given to the key words involved.

There may never have been a period in history when opinion polls have been as widely used as at present. From politics to economics, morality to aesthetics, and sports to the arts, random sampling is assumed to give a significant indication of what people as a whole are thinking. Not surprisingly, religion has had a great deal of attention from the clipboard crews and, as far as the existence or non-existence of God is concerned, the results seem to point in the same general direction and to support Proposition 1.

A worldwide poll taken in 1991 put the global figure for atheists at just 4.4%, and although a category labelled ‘other non-religious’ produced a further 16.4%, this still left nearly 80% professing

some kind of belief in some kind of god.⁵ These figures tie in fairly accurately with those quoted in *Operation World*, which puts the ‘non-religious/atheist’ total at 970 million, some 20% of the world population.⁶

In 1991, the prestigious Barna Report, an annual survey of values and religious views in the United States, found that 74% of adults interviewed agreed ‘strongly’ or ‘somewhat’ with a statement affirming the existence of ‘only one true God’.⁷ In 1986, average figures in a study of religious activity and belief in ten countries in Western Europe suggested that 75% believed in God, with only 11% believing in ‘no god at all’ and 16% registering as ‘don’t know’.⁸

In a Marplan Survey taken in the United Kingdom in 1979, around 82% expressed a religious belief of some kind, while 73% specifically said they believed in God.⁹ A Gallup Poll undertaken in Great Britain in 1986 as part of a European Value Systems Study revealed that 76% of those interviewed believed in God,¹⁰ while *Britain Twenty Years On*, a survey taken a year later, gave the figure as 70% — the same as that quoted in 1994 by the presenter of a radio programme in the *Believing in Britain* series.¹² In a 1989 review of social attitudes in Britain, 34% claimed to have ‘no religion’, a 3% increase on the 1983 figure.¹³ At the end of 1999, a British survey conducted by Opinion Research Business suggested that 38% were ‘not religious’.¹⁴

White lies...

Taken at their face value, these statistics seem to put atheists in a relatively insignificant minority, but the fact is that the numbers conceal at least as much as they reveal.

To make the most obvious point first, the surveys beg the all-important question as to what the pollsters had in mind when they used the word ‘God’. Did they mean a personal being, or a impersonal life force; a conscious deity, or cosmic dust; a living entity totally ‘outside’ the universe, or some kind of universal energy woven into its fabric? The difference a clear definition would make to the statistics can easily be illustrated. In the Western European survey, 75% of those polled said they believed in God, but when just one qualification was added — as to whether they believed in ‘a personal God’ — the figure dropped dramatically to just 32%.¹⁵ This simple example brings to mind the old saying that there are three kinds of lies — white lies, black lies and statistics. What is certain is that statistics cannot always be taken at face value; we shall need to dig deeper if we are to go beyond the figures to the facts.

It is already obvious that the place to begin digging is in the field of definitions. The eighteenth-century French philosopher François-Marie Arouet, who wrote under the pen-name of Voltaire, is quoted as saying, ‘If any man will reason with me, let us first define our terms.’ To talk about ‘theism’ and ‘atheism’ is to engage in a dialogue of the deaf until we determine what we mean when we use these words and, as the meaning of the second depends directly on that of the first, we must begin with ‘theism’. This is not as simple as it seems. One dictionary defines theism as ‘belief in the existence of gods or a god’,¹⁶ but as the same dictionary’s primary definition of ‘god’ is ‘superhuman being worshipped as having power over nature and human fortunes’¹⁷ it is immediately obvious that ‘theism’ is much too vague a term for us to use in this book. It allows too much scope for wiggling.

Nor is the problem solved by giving ‘god’ a capital ‘G’, because, as the British pop singer George Harrison put it in the 1960s, ‘When you say the word “God” people are going to curl up and cringe — they all interpret it in a different way.’¹⁸ The American scholar David Elton Trueblood took the same line: ‘Nothing is easier than to use the word “God” and mean almost nothing by it. It is easy to be right if we are sufficiently vague... in what we say.’¹⁹ The influential British theologian John Robinson said much the same thing: ‘The word “God” is so slippery and the reality so intangible that man

today are questioning whether they have reference to anything that can usefully or meaningfully be talked about at all.’²⁰

This is precisely the kind of problem we face, and vague answers will not help. When responding to particularly difficult questions on BBC Radio’s *Brains Trust* some years ago, Professor C. E. M. JOYCE would often begin, ‘It all depends what you mean by...’ We need to get that issue settled before we go any further.

Defining deity

Charles Dodgson, a professor of mathematics at Oxford University from 1855–1881, used his famous *nom de plume* Lewis Carroll in writing a number of children’s stories that have charmed generations of readers ever since. In *Alice Through the Looking Glass* one of his best-known characters gets involved in verbal gymnastics:

‘When *I* use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be the master — that’s all.’²¹

That kind of delightful dottiness is fine for children’s fiction, but it will hardly do when we are discussing the most important question human beings could ever ask. It may therefore be helpful if at this point I seek to establish a bench-mark by setting out what I mean when I use the word ‘God’ from here on. Put in a nutshell, I mean ‘a unique, personal, plural, spiritual, eternally self-existent, transcendent, immanent, omniscient, immutable, holy, loving Being, the Creator and Ruler of the entire universe and the Judge of all mankind’. Let me elaborate a little.

- By ‘*unique*’ I mean that there is only one God and that all other objects or ideas given that name are figments of misled imagination.
- By ‘*personal*’ I mean that God is not a ‘thing’ or ‘power’, influence or energy, but that he lives, thinks, feels and acts.
- By ‘*plural*’ I mean that there are distinguishable persons within a single Godhead.
- By ‘*spiritual*’ I mean that God has no physical attributes or dimensions, that he does not have a body, or any characteristics that can be defined in terms of size or shape.
- By ‘*eternally self-existent*’ I mean that he has always had the power of being within himself and has neither beginning nor end.
- By ‘*transcendent*’ I mean that God is over and above all things, outside of time and space, completely distinct from the universe, and not to be confused with it in any way.
- By ‘*immanent*’ I mean that, while remaining separate from it in being and essence, he permeates the entire universe.
- By ‘*omniscient*’ I mean that he knows everything, including the past, the present and the future.
- By ‘*immutable*’ I mean that he is unchangeable in every aspect of his being.
- By ‘*holy*’ I mean that he is utterly without blemish or deficiency in his being, essence or actions.
- By ‘*loving*’ I mean that he cares for all of creation and that in a very special way he demonstrates his love to humanity and communicates this to individuals.
- By ‘*Creator*’ I mean that by his own choice and power he brought into being all reality other than

himself.

- ~~By ‘Ruler’ I mean that he is in sole and sovereign control of everything that exists or happens and that nothing can prevent him doing as he pleases.~~
- By ‘*Judge of all mankind*’ I mean that he alone determines the eternal destiny of every member of the human race.

Four things need to be said about this conception of God.

Firstly, it is not a shot in the dark, or a random collection of ideas, but reflects what has been consistently accepted by millions of people over thousands of years and is now held by the largest religious grouping the world has ever known. This does not necessarily say anything in its favour, but does at least give it some kind of perspective.

Secondly, as we shall see much later in this book, it is no more than an outline, just sufficient to prevent the word ‘God’ from being so slippery that nobody can get hold of it.

Thirdly, although it gives a clear indication of what I will mean when I use the word ‘God’ in the course of this book, it is not necessarily what is always meant by the authors and speakers I will be quoting; this will be obvious in most cases.

Fourthly, as we shall see in later chapters, fine-tuning the definition of God in this way will obviously produce more atheists than would settling for deity as being no more than a vaguely defined supernatural principle or power.

The other side

Accepting that theism is belief in the existence of God, what is atheism? Again, the answer is far from straightforward. A simple dictionary definition, based on the Greek words *a* (without) and *theos* (God) is ‘disbelief in the existence of God or gods’,²² but the history and use of the word are much more complex.

In ancient Greece the word ‘atheist’ was used to describe three groups of people: those who were impious or godless; those who were without supernatural help; and those who did not accept the prevalent Greek idea of deity. The earliest Christians were often called atheists by their contemporaries because they refused to accept the existence of the popular pagan deities of their time, and one religious group has sometimes accused another of atheism even when both claimed to believe in a supernatural Being of whom at least part of our outline of who and what God is would be true.

Yet even these examples do not exhaust the uses of ‘atheism’. Swami Vivekananda, an Indian who was instrumental in bringing Hinduism to the West, once said, ‘Just as certain world religions say that people who do not believe in a personal God outside themselves are atheists, we say that a person who does not believe in himself is an atheist. Not believing in the splendour of one’s own soul is what we call an atheist.’²³

It would simplify things if we could settle for the general idea that atheism is the rejection of theism, but the difficulty of pinning down the meaning of theism makes the issue a lot more complicated than that. As long as our concept of God is sufficiently vague, our first proposition — that only a minority of people are atheists — is already proved. However, if we define God in the way I have suggested, our second proposition, which says that most people in the world are atheists, comes into play. It will take us twelve chapters to discover whether this is the case. We will then prepare the way for our third proposition, and follow it by examining some of its implications.

I should add one technical point. In recent years, authors have had to wrestle with the issue of inclusive language, and I have been caught up willy-nilly in the struggle. Rather than getting into the

tortuous syntax which can sometimes be involved, I have often opted for the use of 'man', 'him', 'he' and 'his' when maleness is not necessarily implied, but in every case the meaning will be obvious. The same applies to 'mankind'.

1.

The Greeks had words for it

The theory has often been put forward that religion evolved slowly over many millennia, beginning with very primitive ideas and gradually developing into today's concepts. Wrapped up in this theory and an important element in the thinking of many atheists, is the idea that monotheism (belief in one God) is a comparatively recent refinement. In the nineteenth century, two anthropologists, Sir Edward Tyler and Sir James Frazer, popularized the notion that the first stage in the evolution of religion was animism (which involved the worship of spirits believed to inhabit natural phenomena), followed later by pantheism (the idea that everything is divine), polytheism (belief in a multitude of distinct and separate deities) and eventually by monotheism.¹

However, recent studies in anthropology have turned this scenario on its head and show, for example, that the hundreds of contemporary tribal religions (including many which are animistic) are not primitive in the sense of being original. Writing from long experience in India, and after extended studies of ancient religions, the modern scholar Robert Brown states, 'The tribes have a memory of "High God", who is no longer worshipped because he is not feared. Instead of offering sacrifice to him, they concern themselves with the pressing problems of how to appease the vicious spirits of the jungle.'² Other research suggests that tribes 'are not animistic because they have continued unchanged since the dawn of history' and that 'The evidence indicates degeneration from a true knowledge of God.'³ After working among primitive tribes for many years, one modern expert says, 'The animism of today gives us the impression of a religion that carries the marks of a *fall*,'⁴ while another bluntly refers to 'the now discredited evolutionary school of religion' as being 'recognized as inadmissible'.

The evidence of modern archaeology is that religion has not evolved 'upwards', but degenerated from monotheism to pantheism and polytheism, then from these to animism and atheism, a finding confirmed by the Scottish academic Andrew Lang in *The Making of Religion*: 'Of the existence of belief in the Supreme Being among primitive tribes there is as good evidence as we possess for any fact in the ethnographic region.'⁵ In *History of Sanskrit Literature*, the Oriental expert Max Müller, recognized as the founder of the science of the history of religions, came to the conclusion: 'There is monotheism that precedes the polytheism of the Veda; and even in the invocations of the innumerable gods, the remembrance of a God, one and infinite, breaks through the mist of idolatrous phraseology like the blue sky that is hidden by passing clouds.'⁶ In *The Religion of Ancient Egypt*, Sir Flinders Petrie, universally acknowledged as one of the world's leading Egyptologists, claimed, 'Wherever we can trace back polytheism to its earliest stages, we find that it results from combinations of monotheism.'⁸ In *Semitic Mythology*, the Oxford intellectual Stephen Langdon, one of the greatest experts in his field, said, 'In my opinion the history of the oldest civilization of man is a rapid decline from monotheism to extreme polytheism and widespread belief in evil spirits. It is in a very true sense the history of the fall of man.'⁹

These statements make it clear that the scenario suggested by Tyler and Frazer will not fit the facts. There is no convincing evidence for any development in nature religions from animism through polytheism to monotheism. The idea that religion itself is something man invented has proved just as baseless. When the British naturalist Charles Darwin went to Tierra del Fuego in 1833, he believed

that he had discovered aborigines with no religion at all. There are atheists today who still lean heavily on this, in spite of the fact that a scholar who went to the region after Darwin, and spent many years learning the language, history and customs of the Fuegians, reported that their idea of God was well developed and that he found ‘no evidence that there was ever a time when he was not known to them’.¹⁰

The same overall picture emerges in studies centred on the traditions of the oldest civilization known to man: original belief in a ‘High God’, followed by degeneration into polytheism, animism and other corrupt religious notions.

To trace all the currents in the ebb and flow of man’s religious thinking over the centuries is beyond anyone’s ability, but it is possible to track down some of the people whose ideas not only made a marked contemporary impact but still affect the way many people think today on the issue of the existence of God. In this and the next eleven chapters we will make a high-speed pass over the last 2,500 years or so and identify some of the most influential characters and concepts. One point before we begin: animism, pantheism, polytheism (and some of the other ‘-isms’ we shall touch on as we go along) are usually treated as facets of theism, but for the purpose of this book I want to draw the lines elsewhere and to treat them as aspects of atheism, on the grounds that they fail to square with the definition of God proposed in the introduction.

*Let me interrupt myself at this point. Readers with little or no exposure to philosophical thinking may find parts of the next few chapters a little difficult at first reading. However, it is important to realize that modern atheistic and agnostic theories are often a reworking of ideas put forward over previous centuries. In many cases, modern thinkers are standing on the shoulders of those who went before them, rather than producing totally new ideas. As recently as 1998, a survey carried out among students and academics found that the philosophers who have contributed most to the advancement of human understanding lived over 2,500 years ago, while the well-known contemporary French philosopher Jacques Derrida headed the list of thinkers ‘whose contribution to the subject has been most overrated’.*¹¹

Getting even a general picture of how modern atheistic and agnostic ideas developed over the centuries will, I believe, prove a great help when reading the later parts of the book.

From myths to monism

Questions about the physical world in which we live and the nature of reality have fascinated men of all ages and cultures. The first written evidence we have of this is the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which dates from 2,000 B.C. and tells how the eponymous hero scoured the earth in his search for the meaning of the universe, life, death and immortality.

Other ancient writings record mythical accounts tying the origin and meaning of the cosmos to the forces of nature, with magic as the greatest force of all. In the eighth century B.C. the famous Greek poet Homer wrote of gods and goddesses who were personifications of nature, presided over by Zeus ‘the Father of gods and men’. The distinction between these gods and human beings was one of power, not virtue. One writer says, ‘They connived, cheated and lied to help themselves and their favoured patrons among men,’¹² while another adds, ‘Among their normal activities were perjury, war and adultery.’¹³ Not surprisingly, in Homer’s scenario man was a meaningless and helpless nonentity, separated from the deities by an impassable gulf and doomed at the end of his miserable life to complete annihilation. Anyone tempted to dismiss these polytheistic notions as ancient and irrelevant history, nothing more than crude steps in man’s early development, should think again. As we shall

see in chapter 11, some of today's largest world religions are clearly polytheistic.

A sea change in men's thinking took place around the sixth century B.C. and was centred at Miletus, a Greek colony on the coast of Asia Minor. These so-called Milesian philosophers were headed by Thales (*fl. c.* 585 B.C.), usually thought of as the father of Greek philosophy, who rejected mythological explanations of the origin and nature of the universe and substituted the basic ideas of natural science, believing that the physical world contained rational and intelligible evidence as to its origin and meaning. Within this general framework, Thales embraced monism, the theory that all reality consists of only one basic stuff or essence out of which everything in the cosmos was made. He believed that this primal substance was water, which was said to contain the cause of motion and change, and therefore of life itself. In this sense it could be said to be 'divine'. This may be what lay behind his well-known saying, 'All things are full of gods,' though scholars have disagreed as to precisely what he may have meant by this. Similar uncertainty in being able to nail down the precise meaning of their statements leads one modern philosopher to say of the Milesian philosophers that 'Their place in the history of unbelief is... ambiguous.'¹⁴

Other philosophers of the same era focused their monism elsewhere. Anaximenes (*fl. c.* 550 B.C.) taught that the primal substance was air; Heraclitus (*fl. c.* 500 B.C.) saw fire as the first principle of reality, from which everything flowed in a constant state of flux, guided by a kind of universal reason. Parmenides (*fl. c.* 480 B.C.) believed that the only reality was 'being', of which nothing can be said other than that it is. Empedocles (*c.* 495 – *c.* 435 B.C.) taught that all matter was composed of four elements — earth, water, air and fire — and that their interaction explained all motion and change.

Monism has taken various other forms over the centuries, some regarding the primal substance as material and others as spiritual, but it is in direct conflict with theism for several reasons. Firstly, the totality of things includes evil, whereas God is without evil of any kind. Secondly, the process and structure of substance and ground of monism are impersonal, whereas God is personal. Thirdly, monism implies that there is no essential difference between good and evil, because eventually everything flows into a single unity, an idea which runs counter to theism and has serious implications. C. S. Lewis says of monism, 'There are no moral absolutes; moral values are only relatively true and sociologically useful and the question of ethics is only the question of the optimal ground rules.'¹⁵ But to say that right and wrong are ultimately the same is to destroy any basis for law, order and morality in society. We will look more closely at this in a later chapter.

There are modern echoes of monism's ancient ideas in the New Age Movement, which begins with the assumption that there is only one essential principle in the cosmos, into which all things, including humanity, are destined to merge. In the 1970s the hugely successful film *Star Wars* made use of the idea that good and evil were two facets of the same reality (the so-called 'Force') with the film's hero, Luke Skywalker, making use of its good side and its villain, Darth Vader (ultimately revealed to be Skywalker's father), tapping into the dark or evil side.

Socrates

The next landmarks were put in place by the three giants of ancient Greek philosophy. The first of these was Socrates (*c.* 470–399 B.C.) who rebelled against the natural approach adopted by his predecessors and changed the whole direction of philosophy. Although possessing 'one of the keenest minds of all time',¹⁶ he left no written record of his ideas, but we know of these from his brilliant pupil Plato, who used Socrates as the main character in a series of *Dialogues*, or dramatized discussions of philosophy, and from the Greek historian Xenophon.

Socrates differed from the natural philosophers in that he was primarily concerned with ethics

matters rather than the nature of the universe. In his own words, 'I have nothing to do with physical speculations.'¹⁷ Socrates claimed to be driven by an inner voice to search within the human soul psyche for a solid foundation for knowledge, though this 'inner voice' would have borne little or no resemblance to the God outlined in the introduction. Socrates was an optimistic rationalist, believing that reason was the only path to knowledge and that humanity could be perfected, not by the external influence of a divine Creator but by the acquisition of true knowledge. He also believed that evil would eventually disappear from an educated world: in the words of his famous dictum, 'He who knows what good is will do good.'

Socrates also held that the human soul was a prisoner of the body and that death released it to inhabit the eternal world of ideas. His views outraged many influential Athenians and at the age of seventy-one he was brought before a jury of 500 of his peers on a charge of disbelieving in the gods (in their view, atheism) and corrupting the youth of the city. By a narrow majority he was found guilty and sentenced to death by drinking hemlock within twenty-four hours, the form of capital punishment then prescribed by law. Gathering his friends around him, he continued to argue for the immortality of the soul until the poison took effect. Incidentally, Socrates provides us with an almost humorous example of the need to define our terms, because it could be said that an atheist was condemned by the atheists for refusing to embrace atheism!

Plato

The second of the three Greek giants was Plato (428–347 B.C.), now acknowledged as one of the greatest thinkers of all time, who taught philosophy at his renowned Academy, the prototype of our modern university, which he established in Athens and which lasted for 1,000 years. His enduring influence is such that the twentieth-century British philosopher and mathematician A. N. Whitehead, one of the founders of mathematical logic, commented that all subsequent philosophy is mere 'footnotes to Plato'.

According to Plato's famous *Theory of Forms*, the world is divided between 'reality' and 'appearance', an idea that has percolated throughout the entire history of Western culture. He taught that whereas we can have nothing more than opinions about tangible things ('appearance', or the world of the senses) we can have true knowledge of things that can be understood by reason ('reality' or the world of ideas).

Within this world of ideas, he said that 'All mankind, Greeks and non-Greeks alike, believe in the existence of gods,'¹⁸ though he qualified this by writing of 'the malady of atheism', an atheist being defined as 'a complete unbeliever in the being of gods'.¹⁹ In his blueprint of the ideal state, Plato made 'impiety' a crime punishable by five years' imprisonment for the first offence and death on a second conviction.²⁰ Although he rejected relativism and believed in absolutes such as good and beauty, he did not believe in a transcendent Creator who brought the world into existence out of nothing, but in what he called a 'Demiurge', a divine architect who designed the world out of pre-existent materials.

With Socrates, he held that evil came about by ignorance rather than malice and that to know good was to become good. In this model, men and society were perfectible by the development of the moral values inherent in human nature, but every era of human history has shown this utopian idea to be a mirage.

Aristotle

Plato's most famous pupil, and the third of the Greek giants, was Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), a prolific

philosopher who wrote extensively on most branches of learning, including ethics, politics, logic, rhetoric, psychology, botany, zoology, astronomy, history, mathematics and poetry. He founded a school in Athens, the remains of which were unearthed during excavations in 1997. Aristotle's Lyceum was an alternative to Plato's Academy and they became the Oxford and Cambridge of the ancient world. His direct influence, drawing the whole field of knowledge into a philosophical unit, extended well into the Middle Ages, and the discovery of the Lyceum's ruins in 1997 prompted the *Sunday Telegraph* to say that he has 'seldom been out of the news these last 2,000 years and more'. One modern writer calls him 'not only the last of the great Greek philosophers', but 'Europe's first great biologist',²² and many of his principles can be traced in the thinking of contemporary atheists.

Aristotle began by defending Plato's views, but he later became critical of them and eventually rejected all the essential features of his teacher's metaphysics. Although he covered a vast field of learning, his major contribution to our subject was his complete explanation of reality without any reference to a personal God. Aristotle rejected the idea of a transcendent world of changeless forms and principles and emphasized instead the existence of individual, material objects. Human beings, like all other objects, were a mixture of form and matter, though reason made them unique and able to attain union with the divine. God, on the other hand, was pure form, existing without matter and, as such, was separate from all material things and not subject to change. This 'Unmoved Mover', or 'First Cause', set the world in motion and would draw everything to its final end or purpose.

There are glimmers here of elements present in traditional theism (which certainly says that God is not less than the 'Unmoved Mover' or 'First Cause') but, as with Plato, Aristotle's notions of the Supreme Being were 'abstract, coldly intellectual, impersonal, detached, and unconcerned about the world'.²³ He once defined God as 'thought thinking itself'²⁴ — something far removed from a personal and transcendent Creator and Sustainer of the universe with whom people can have a living relationship.

The atomists

Other philosophers developed ideas which were variations on these themes. One was Democritus (c. 460–370 B.C.) who believed that reality consisted of empty space and an unlimited number of invisible, eternal and unchangeable building blocks which moved because of their own innate power and for which he coined the word 'atoms' (the Greek *atomos*, from the negative *a* and the verb *temno* 'to cut', means 'indivisible'). As to ideas of deity, he assumed the existence of extra-terrestrial beings which had more or less human forms but no interest or involvement in human activity.

Another atomist was Epicurus (341–270 B.C.) who, like Democritus, believed that even the human soul, thought and emotion could be explained by the movement and collision of atoms, while at death the soul's atoms disperse 'and when death is present we no longer exist'.²⁵ For these philosophers, man could be understood only as the sum of his physical parts. Epicurus believed in an infinite number of worlds, but no gods.

These atomists were among the Greek philosophers who laid the earliest foundations of the scientific approach to the cause, course and climax of human history that was to be so dominant many centuries later. Their philosophy was a basic form of naturalism, a view of the world that places man firmly in the atheistic camp because it totally excludes the supernatural or spiritual. Naturalism, which has been called 'the oldest philosophy in Western civilization',²⁶ says that our universe is a closed system in which everything has a 'natural' explanation. Not only does every event have its cause within the system, but no events within the system have any effect beyond it. Man's thoughts, ideals, attitudes and actions are all determined by biochemical laws, which in turn are governed by

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