

Lesson 3

God

I am the Lord thy God . . . Thou shalt have no other gods before me. . . .—Exodus 20:2–5

There is no god but Allah.—Qur'an III

No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him. —John 1:18

I am the sacrifice! I am the Prayer! . . . I am the Father, Mother, Ancestor and Guard! The end of learning! That which purifies I am . . . the Way, the Lord, the Judge, The Witness, the Abode, the Refuge. . . . Death I am, and immortal life . . . I am Visible Life and Life Invisible. —Bhagavad Gita, 9:16–19

How Do I Think About Religion?

For the following questions, check each statement that applies to you.

I believe what I do (about religion) because

- 1. I have thought about and justified it to myself.
- 2. It gives my life meaning.
- 3. It sounds good to other people.
- 4. I've never really thought about it.
- 5. My parents told me so.

When I go to a religious service, I feel

- 1. Awed and overwhelmed by emotion.
- 2. Peaceful and joyful.
- 3. Comfortable and secure.
- 4. Nothing.
- 5. Uncomfortable, bored, or angry.

Hearing talk or reading about “spirituality”

- 1. Makes me think long and hard about what it means.
- 2. Reminds me of what is important.
- 3. Makes me think less of the speaker–author’s intelligence.
- 4. Turns me off.
- 5. Makes me crazy.

Organized religion and religious institutions

- 1. Are they the only true vehicles for spiritual values?
- 2. Embody the spiritual identity of a community.
- 3. Are important social, not spiritual, institutions.
- 4. Are contrary to the true idea of religion.
- 5. Are socially irresponsible, parasitic institutions.

Believing in God

In most Western philosophies, the idea of God is one of the most important single concerns. It is God who ultimately makes sense of the universe, who gives life meaning. If we believe that life ought to be fair, for example, many thinkers hold that it is important to believe that there is some powerful being who will make things come out in some fair way—if not in this life, then in another. To believe in God allows a person to have that confidence; not to believe takes it away. Thus, the French philosopher Camus believed passionately in justice but felt that, because he was also an atheist, there could be no guarantee (in fact, there was little likelihood) that justice would ever be realized. And so, he concluded that life is “absurd,” and that any meaning to be found in life must come from our struggle against the unfairness and irrationality we find in it. On the other hand, many people believe in God just because they cannot see, from their perspective, any ultimate justice in the universe. Again, it is God who makes sense of things, despite the apparent “absurdity” of life. The book of Job, in which God allows all sorts of misfortune to afflict a completely innocent man, makes this point powerfully, and the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard used it to prove that “the absurd” that we encounter—far from leading to **atheism**—is the premise of true faith in God.

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), one of the most important philosophers of modern times, is often recognized as the father of **existentialism**. He lived his entire life in Copenhagen, and after a short period of wild living and a brief engagement, he devoted his life to spelling out “what it means to be a Christian.” His basic point: To be religious is to make a passionate, individual choice, a “*leap of faith*” against all evidence, even against reason itself. Faith is something personal, not a matter of doctrine, churches, social groups, or ceremonies. The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes me to do; the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die. — Søren Kierkegaard, Journals (at the age of twenty-two)

We begin this lesson with a brief discussion of what it means to believe in God, which is followed by a review of various traditional Western conceptions of God, as well as a few nontraditional alternatives. We then consider one of the major reasons that some people do not believe in God, the problem posed by the presence of evil in the world, and some of the solutions proposed by theists. Next, we will look at some of the “proofs” that have been offered for the existence of God as well as arguments against using this strategy to bolster belief.

To believe that God exists is not the same as to believe in God. The eighteenth-century philosopher Voltaire, for example, said he believed in God as a hypothesis in physics because there had to be some initial force to set the universe in motion, which he likened to a giant watch, governed by Isaac Newton’s laws of motion. But Voltaire also said that “God is no more just or moral than he is blue or square.”

Voltaire (1694–1778) was the leading philosopher of the French **Enlightenment**. He was a skilled critic and a dedicated political reformer who used his connections with the courts of Europe and the aristocracies of France and England to promote religious tolerance and other enlightened reforms. He was continuously at war with the Catholic Church in France. Although he was not an atheist but rather a **deist**, he rejected

Christianity as an institution and once bragged, “I am tired of hearing how only twelve men established the Christian church; I should like to show that only one can destroy it.”

In other words, God played no role in his view of life and its values at all; God had nothing to do with justice, reward and punishment, the rules of morality, or the meaning of life. But the book of Job and Kierkegaard’s philosophy make it quite clear that belief in God is not necessarily tied to a conviction that the just will be rewarded and the wicked punished. According to Kierkegaard, believing in God gives life meaning even if we can’t make sense of apparent unfairness in life; meaning must be found in a profound and passionate faith, not in a mere factual belief in the existence of some superior being. Kierkegaard’s view suggests that believing in God, as a matter of great importance to our view of life, is not just a matter of intellectually accepting the proposition that God exists. It is also a matter of passion, a sense that God somehow matters to us and that we, in turn, matter to God.

Gods and Goddesses

This feeling, that the universe is not a mere It to us but a Thou, forced on us we know not whence, that by obstinately believing that there are gods (although not to do so would be so easy both for our logic and our life) we are doing the universe the deepest service we can, seems part of the living essence of the religious hypothesis.—William James, 1902

When a Western person says he or she does or does not believe in God, we can usually assume that the God in question is some loosely defined Supreme Being drawn from the Christian or the Hebrew Bible or the Qur’an. According to this traditional conception, God is a spiritual being, infinitely intelligent and infinitely powerful. God knows everything (including everything that will happen at any time in the future), and God can do anything—change the course of history, make the sun stand still, bring the dead back to life, part the waters of the Red Sea, enter into the human world as a seemingly ordinary person, and so on.

To gain some perspective on our own religious beliefs, it is important to appreciate the variety of beliefs and gods and goddesses that have satisfied the religious urge throughout history. There are religions—Buddhism, for example—that do not include a concept of God in anything like our own sense. There are a great many religions that place far more emphasis on ritual and community activity than our sometimes very contemplative and faith-oriented religions. There are religions that distribute the various functions of our God among many gods and goddesses—for example, the gods and goddesses of the ancient Greeks, Romans, and northern European peoples.

In some ancient religions, the question “Who is your God?” had a very specific meaning: it meant, which gods or goddesses do you particularly pray to and rely upon? This might depend, in turn, on the city you lived in because each town or city had its own patron deity. It might depend on your family and what you did for a living. Farmers would tend to worship the goddess of the harvest; a blacksmith would tend to worship the god of metalworking (Vulcan, in Roman mythology). In times of war, the gods and goddesses would typically choose sides; for instance, in the Trojan War, according to Homer, some chose the cause of the Greeks, others the side of

the Trojans, and they often intervened in the battle itself, directing an arrow to its mark or otherwise helping or hindering one side or the other.

In the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, there is only one God, not several. (This is called **monotheism**, as opposed to the **polytheism** of many other cultures.) But our conceptions of the one God have changed significantly over the past two thousand years, and even within the Bible, which was written over the course of a thousand years or so, the conception of God changes dramatically. Even in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, despite the emphasis on God as the Supreme Being, the existence of other, lesser deities is acknowledged in the commandment, “I am the Lord your God, and you shall not have strange gods before me.” Our ideas about how a person relates to God have changed even more significantly. To say that a person “believes in God,” therefore, is not enough. We must also know which conception of God he or she has in mind.

Greek God(dess)	Roman God(dess)	Norse God(dess)	Function
Zeus	Jupiter	Odin	King
Hera	Juno	Freyja	Queen
Ares	Mars	Tyr	War God
Athena	Minerva		Wisdom
Aphrodite	Venus	Frija	Love Goddess
Poseidon	Neptune	Aegir	Sea
Hermes	Mercury	Loki	Trickster God
	Janus	Heimdall	God of Beginnings

The Traditional Western Conceptions of God

It is essential to see our own conception(s) of God in social, historical, and cultural perspective. This does not mean that one should no longer believe that his or her God is the “true” God, but it does mean that one should not pretend that his or her conception is the only one possible. Even a religious belief has a particular set of origins, a set of social interests, and a distinct cultural perspective. In the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, there is but one God (although in most sects of Christianity, God is characterized as a “Trinity” of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”). He is distinctively a male God. And our conception of God is inevitably **anthropomorphic**, at least to some extent—that is, we describe God in terms of our own attributes. The Greek and Roman gods and goddesses were almost wholly anthropomorphic, in the sense that they had almost all the usual human characteristics, except that they were more powerful, they were immortal, and they could do some things that most humans wouldn’t dream of doing. (Zeus could change himself into a swan or a bull, for example, and all the gods and goddesses used their powers at times to transform people into different kinds of plants and animals.) The Greek gods and goddesses often misbehaved—they became jealous and vengeful when their love was thwarted; they sulked and behaved childishly.

The God of the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions still retains essential anthropomorphic features. As children, some of us are taught through illustrations in Sunday school books that God is a kindly old man with a long white beard, much as he is shown in Michelangelo’s famous painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. And even as adults, we are taught to

attribute some very human emotions to God—for example, in the Bible, God is sometimes said to be a “jealous God,” who wreaks vengeance on those who do not believe in him or listen to his commandments. Lot’s wife, for instance, is turned into a pillar of salt for disobeying the command not to look back at the burning city, and Jonah is devoured by a “big fish” for not obeying God’s order to warn an offensive city that it should change its ways. Yet God is said to be characterized by infinite love, compassion, and patience.

Syncretism: The Merger of Religions

Religions do not remain the same when they travel. Here is an account of “syncretism” (a kind of merger) in the arrival of Christianity into Mexico.

In the context of religion, syncretism refers to the process by which different or originally contradictory beliefs and practices are combined into new religious doctrines or belief systems. The conversion of the indigenous people of the New World to Christianity was not a simple affair in which the ancient religious beliefs completely disappeared while the Christian doctrines were accepted wholeheartedly. Instead, syncretism between native and Christian beliefs emerged, giving rise to a new religious perspective that incorporated doctrinal and ritual elements from both traditions. The impetus for this syncretistic process often came from the efforts of mestizo (people of mixed Indian and Spanish blood) or Indian communities. The reason for this may lie in the fact that members of these communities had a stronger need to find a basis for identifying with the new religion, or perhaps it was an attempt to retain some measure of dignity and cultural solidarity in a situation in which they were politically, economically, and culturally disfranchised.

One of the most prominent cases of syncretism involves the appearance of the Virgen de Guadalupe to a poor Indian named Juan Diego at the hill of Tepeyac near Mexico City. The dark-skinned Virgin spoke to him in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, and told him that a shrine should be built on the site of her appearance. When Juan Diego notified the archbishop of his experiences, his story was met with skepticism. But the Virgin appeared to him a second time and instructed him to pick some roses in a nearby area (even though it was not the season when roses could bloom) and take them to the archbishop as proof of her appearance. Juan Diego followed her instructions and placed the roses in his cloak. When he extended his cloak to show the archbishop the roses, both men were amazed to see that the image of the Virgin was miraculously imprinted on it. This incident convinced the archbishop of the truth of Juan Diego’s story, and what is now the most famous basilica in Mexico was built at the foot of the Tepeyac Hill. Juan Diego’s cloak now hangs on the high altar of the Basilica of the Virgen de Guadalupe. — Jorge Valadez, American philosopher, 1993

Throughout the Bible, it is made clear that although God has many human attributes, some of these differ from our own not only in degree but also in kind: God feels not just a sense of love and justice but also an infinite one, which we cannot comprehend. Indeed, one of the features of Christianity as it has developed is the strong emphasis on the **mystery** of God, the fact that it is impossible for us to understand him or comprehend his ways. And yet, it is also part of the traditional conception of God in the major Western religions that he listens to our prayers and cares about us. God is also described as a rational being. Yet perhaps the most blatant evidence of the continuing anthropomorphizing of God is our insistence on using the pronoun he to refer

to him. Why should we think that God has sex (or gender)? Many men and women are now challenging this traditional, patriarchal conception of God, charging that thinking of God as male is more a matter of politics than religion.

Even though the central tenet of the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions is the existence of one God, we must fully appreciate the wide variety of conceptions of this one God throughout our long history. From the somewhat picture-book image of God as a kindly old man, prone to jealousy and rage, and with his “chosen people,” we have evolved an enormous variety of complex and abstract philosophical ideas about God. Among these are the idea that “God is love” in 1 John 4:8; the image of God as a continuously active creator in the philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas; and the conception of God as merely the first principle of physics in the thinking of Voltaire, Thomas Jefferson, and some other eighteenth-century deists¹. Some people conceive of God as a distant mystery, an ideal we long for throughout our lives but never encounter or truly “know.” Other people conceive of God as an immediate presence that they feel in their lives virtually every waking moment. Some people claim to know God through a personal relationship (for instance, through the person of Jesus); for others, God is an abstract force, an impersonal cosmic power, perhaps simply identical to the universe itself. To say that one believes in God is therefore not yet to say which conception of God.

God As Transcendent

Much of our traditional conception of God emphasizes God as **transcendent**—that is, beyond the ordinary world of human experience, outside ourselves, and distinct from the world he created. In the Old Testament, God existed before creating the universe and still exists outside of it. But if God is outside of ordinary human experience, intervening in human affairs only on rare instances, how is it that we can know of God’s existence, and how are we able to relate to God at all? Some people would not see knowing God as a problem because they would also see God as present everywhere and all-knowing, revealing himself to anyone who believes in him. Others see it as a serious problem and consider the effort to reach out to God one of life's most monumental tasks. Still other people, though believing in God, would say that we cannot know him at all but simply must have faith. And some people would say that, in general, we cannot know God, but, on rare occasions, we can indeed have a direct experience of God, and those experiences—**mystical** experiences—are enough to sustain us, even for a lifetime. (Mystical does not mean mysterious; it refers to an immediate experience of a direct, intimate union with God.)

Relating to God is another question. One view is that we cannot know God personally but that we can know him and relate to him through his earthly representations—the church, certain important people (the pope for Catholics, the king in some national conceptions of religion), through the Bible or other scriptures, or through the teachings of certain more recent figures. Another view is that the knowledge of God and our relationship to him must be direct and personal. The German churchman **Martin Luther** (1483–1546), who initially sought to reform the Catholic Church from within, initiated the **Reformation** in Christianity, in part because he

¹ Both as the author of the Declaration of Independence and as the third president of the United States, **Thomas Jefferson** (1743–1826) wrote on many subjects, some of which are philosophical.

saw the Church as interfering with the direct relationship between the individual and God.² The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, on the other hand, rejected even the influence of Luther's Reformation because, in his mind, the Lutheran Church still interfered with what he considered to be the most crucial element in religious belief, the purely personal relationship between the individual and God, not based on or helped along by any church or community of believers.

Certain recent Christian thinkers have interpreted the idea of having a relationship to God in terms of relationships to other human beings. The Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1904–1984), for example, describes God as an “absolute mystery” that we cannot understand and cannot properly be conceived of as a “person” in our finite sense. Nevertheless, we can relate to God because we have been created in such a way that being inclined toward God is a structural aspect of what we are as human beings. This is evident in our continual tendency to keep moving our (metaphorical) gaze beyond what is immediately in front of us toward something beyond it and our reaching, ultimately, toward God. We have the choice to accept or reject God through our everyday choices, especially in relation to other people. A critic of this view might consider Rahner's account as reducing religion to ethics, but Rahner would respond that the reverse is the case: he shows ethics to have a spiritual dimension. Although his conception of God is transcendent, we respond to God through our thoroughly immanent responses to other human beings.

God as Immanent

Although he claims that we relate to God in our everyday acts and encounters with others, Rahner considers God to be transcendent. His view can be classified as an instance of **panentheism**, the belief that although God transcends the world, God nevertheless dwells within every part of it. Protestant theologian Marcus Borg has recently defended panentheism as offering a conception of God that draws attention to God's nearness and places the focus of religion on relationship rather than belief as such. Borg explicitly rejects the idea that God cannot be both transcendent and immanent, and he sees panentheism as a coherent theory that can better inform spiritual life than traditional concepts that consider God distant from us.

Some people, however, do not believe that God is transcendent in any respect. They hold, rather, that he is an **immanent** God, a God not outside of us or distinct from the universe. The view that God has an immanent reality has been formulated in many ways, including the Christian conception of God's incarnation as a man and the idea of a Holy Spirit who infuses us all. Some thinkers, however, hold a more extreme position, according to which God is simply identical to the cosmos.

If one holds that God is completely immanent, the problem of our knowledge of God and relation to him resolves itself because we do not have to “reach out” at all, but can simply look within ourselves to find God. Difficult questions still arise, however. What aspects of our experience are relevant to perceiving God? Loving another person? A deep experience of faith?

² German religious reformer **Martin Luther** (1483–1546) was a Roman Catholic monk, priest, and theologian who led the Protestant Reformation. Stressing personal faith over church ritual, he was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church in 1521.

(And how do you know when it is really faith, as opposed to some nonreligious but still very powerful experience?) Feeling a pang of conscience? Feeling awe during a thunderstorm or while gazing at the Grand Canyon?

Which Side Is God On?

The Divine Law is against communism. — E. F. Landgrebe

Fascism is God's cause. — Arthur Cardinal Hinsley

God did not mean for women to vote. — Grover Cleveland

God loves you. God doesn't want anyone to be hungry and oppressed. He just puts his big arms around everybody and hugs them up against himself. — Norman Vincent Peale

God ordained the separation of the races. — Reverend Billy James Hargis

Who says I am not under the special protection of God? — Adolf Hitler

God has marked the American people as His chosen nation. — Senator Albert Beveridge

There never was a lawgiver who did not resort to divine authority. — Machiavelli

None of us is here by accident. Behind the diligence of our staff, supporters, and our own individual campaign efforts, behind the votes of the people, we recognize divine appointment. — Reverend Richard Halverson, opening the predominantly Republican United States Senate session of 1981

God as Totally Immanent: Pantheism

There have been several conceptions of God as immanent, as within us, or as identical to the universe. Perhaps the simplest and most powerful of these conceptions is **pantheism**. The most famous Western defender of pantheism is the seventeenth-century Jewish philosopher **Baruch Spinoza** (1632–1677), who, in a simple phrase, insisted that God is everything, identical to the universe itself. Spinoza's aim was to develop a conception of God that would not involve that terrible distance between the Supreme Being and us, and that would leave room for any number of different religions and conceptions of God without insisting that any one of them was the only "true" religion. In Spinoza's view, we are God, though not as individuals, nor even humanity as a whole; we are an integral part of the whole of the universe (or what Spinoza called the "One Substance") and thus an integral part of God as well. (According to Spinoza, God has an infinite number of attributes, of which we know only two—mind and body.) In one of his more striking images, Spinoza suggested that each of us is like a tiny worm in the blood of some great being. We see only our immediate surroundings and tend to treat them alone as reality, with a vague idea of a greater being "outside of us." But, in fact, we are part of that great being, and once we appreciate this, we transcend our limited perceptions and our idea of something outside of us and instead come to see ourselves as part and parcel of that great being. The being, in this case, is the whole of the universe. And, for Spinoza, believing in God is actually coming to realize what we

really are, not discovering the existence of something beyond our experience that we ourselves are not part of.

It is worth mentioning, however, that Spinoza's views were not well received, even in his native Holland, then the most liberal and religiously tolerant nation in Europe. His insistence on religious tolerance was too extreme, and his own views too unusual. He was exiled from the Orthodox religious community in which he had grown up, and his works were banned for Christians and Jews alike until well after his death. And despite his devout beliefs, he was called an "atheist" because, in his view, God could not have created the universe (because he was the universe) and praying to God—as opposed to simply believing in God—makes no sense. One lesson to be learned from Spinoza, more than anything else, is that intolerance has, throughout history, greeted virtually all innovations in conceptions of God, even those that are proposed by unquestionably religious people. For most people, it is not just believing in God that counts but believing in the "right" God—that is, the right conception of God, even if, as Spinoza argued, it is one and the same God for all of us.

Spinoza's pantheism has its parallels in some Eastern religions—in some forms of Buddhism, for example, in which the idea of a God separate from the universe is not even intelligible because nothing exists as a separate reality; all is connected. In Hinduism, too, Brahman (the fundamental divine reality) is everywhere, even in animals and in lower forms of life. But the religious perspective of pantheism renders somewhat confusing our usual question, "Do you believe in God?"

Other Religions—Other Alternatives

More than three thousand years old, **Hinduism** does not place the unique emphasis on the one God that the Semitic religions do; in fact, some Vedantic (Hindu) sects do not include any conception of God. There is simply a conception of ultimate reality (**Brahman**) that is impersonal and shows no special concern for human beings. Hinduism is often thought to be a polytheistic religion, but in fact, theistic Hinduism stresses a singular divine reality that can take many forms. Instead of the all-important emphasis on historical revelation (to Moses, to Saint Paul, to Muhammad), Hinduism stresses revelation and wisdom within everyone, which involves recognizing and feeling "one" with the whole of the cosmos (*samadhi*).

Buddhism developed from Hinduism (Buddha was the son of an Indian king in the sixth century BCE). It teaches that dissatisfaction is the universal condition of human existence because of our continuous insistence on self and individuality. Relief from suffering and ultimate peace (nirvana) becomes possible when we give up these notions. **Zen Buddhism**, a more recent development (seventh century CE), originated in China and later spread (with great success) to Japan. Zen stresses the importance of meditation and direct master-student teaching. It has become quite popular in the United States in the past half century.

If God is identical to the universe, then what is the difference between believing in God and believing in the existence of the universe? Perhaps an atheist can respond: "I believe in the universe, but I do not see any reason for calling it 'God.'" But the religious attitudes and discipline of Spinoza, the Buddhists, and nontheistic Hindus show that such a view cannot be

sufficient, for there is an enormous difference between an atheist who simply believes the universe exists and a pantheist who believes the universe is divine. What is this difference? One might say that it is a difference of attitude. What the atheist and the pantheist believe in (namely, the existence of the universe) might in a narrow sense be the same, but the way they look at it and act in it is entirely different. But this changes religious belief in something into a religious attitude toward everything, and, accordingly, the idea of believing in God changes radically.

God as Process

Hegel's notion of Spirit was not only all-expansive regarding the universe but also expansive in the dimension of time. One of Hegel's bold suggestions was that God as universal spirit cannot be comprehended just in terms of God's present existence—as a being of a certain sort at a certain time—but must be comprehended through a long period of development, as a **process**. In other words, it is not as if God has always been what he is now; rather, he is in the process of **becoming**. One might say that God is constantly creating himself—and the universe as well. This means, for example, that the continuing battle between “creationists” and “evolutionists” may be a false fight, for God's own existence is an evolutionary process. In some respects, this is an extremely ancient religious idea. The ancient Egyptian monotheist **Akhnaton** (1353–1336 BCE) argued that God was continually self-creating.³ Buddhism has long argued that ultimate reality (they would not call it God) must be understood in terms of process rather than in merely static, eternal terms. In contemporary times, the process view of God has been defended by philosopher **Charles Hartshorne**.

God in Everyday Life

The ordinary believer does not, however, report an awareness of God as existing in isolation from all other objects of experience. His consciousness of the divine does not involve a cessation of his consciousness of a material and social environment. It is not a vision of God in solitary glory, filling the believer's entire mind and blotting out his normal field of perception. . . . The believer meets God not only in moments of worship, but also when through the urgings of conscience he feels the pressure of the divine demand upon his life; when through the gracious actions of his friends he apprehends the divine grace; when through the marvels and beauties of nature he traces the hand of the Creator; and he has increasing knowledge of the divine purpose as he responds to its behest in his own life. In short, it is not apart from the course of mundane life, but in it and through it, that the ordinary religious believer claims to experience, however imperfectly and fragmentarily, the divine presence and activity. —John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, 1957

³ More than three thousand years separate the births of Egyptian thinker **Akhnaton** (1353–1336 BCE) and American philosopher **Charles Hartshorne** (1897–2000), but both believed that God was constantly self-creating.

God as Transcendent Creator: Deism

The perspective of the French philosopher Voltaire was far removed from that of such thinkers as Rahner and Borg, whose conceptions of God emphasized relationship. Voltaire defended a conception of God as a necessary hypothesis for physics. Although he considered himself an enemy of the church, Voltaire found atheism unthinkable, and he sharply criticized his intellectual friends who did not believe in God. But Voltaire's belief in God was, from most Christian points of view, extremely limited. Not only did he not believe in Christ and most of the doctrines and dogmas of Christianity, but he also did not even believe that God had any personal or human-like attributes. God could not be said to be just, or wise, or merciful. He could not be said to be loving, jealous, or concerned with what happens to us. Voltaire would not be impressed by arguments from believers that "we simply can't understand God's nature." If you believe in God and defend yourself in this way, Voltaire can respond, "See, you agree with me. God is not just, merciful, loving, and so on." You might want to qualify your statement and say that "God is just, but God's justice is infinite, and we can't always understand his ways." To say, instead, that we cannot understand God at all, that our human word justice does not apply to him in any sense, and that "his ways" are beyond our comprehension is to raise the question of how we are to characterize our belief. Voltaire insists that we give up the "superstitions" of anthropomorphism, but in doing so he loses the conception of God as a moral being and as a personal God. The view that God created the world but has no further role in it is called **deism**.

Voltaire's view reduced the conception of God to the minimum, and it was not long before another Frenchman, the great scientist **Pierre-Simon Laplace** (1749–1827), was heard to say (to the emperor Napoleon), "I have no need of any such hypothesis." To believe in God simply as an initial creative force is to believe much less than what is required even for what many of us would consider the most rudimentary religious belief. A God who is conceived of as an impersonal force, indifferent to the concerns of human beings, is not a God to be worshipped, not a God who gives meaning to our lives. In many people's opinion (both theists and atheists), such a force is not worth the name "God" at all.

God as the Unknown Object of Faith

As we noted earlier, **Søren Kierkegaard** rejected the idea that the Christian church (or any church) is a necessary intermediary between ourselves and God. He attacked what he sarcastically called "Christendom" and the "Christian hordes" for their hypocrisy. For them, he complained, "being a Christian" just meant that their parents were Christians, that they went to church occasionally, and that they nodded their unthinking assent whenever anyone asked, "Do you believe in God?" According to Kierkegaard, being a Christian or being "religious" in general was not something in your life; it had to be everything. Believing in God was not a matter for intellectual debate; Kierkegaard had nothing but disdain for theologians who spent their time trying to prove God's existence. In one of his powerful aphorisms, he commented, "To stand on one leg and prove God's existence is a very different thing from going down on one's knees and thanking Him."

For Kierkegaard, being a Christian was a matter of total **commitment**, requiring what he called a **leap of faith**. One could not know God. One could not know that God existed or anything about

him. But one had to act as confidently as if one were certain of his existence, in an intimately personal relationship (like a son and his father or even, Kierkegaard suggested, like two lovers). God is the great unknown, Kierkegaard said, but at the same time, one had to believe that God was totally familiar and immediately present. Indeed, Kierkegaard was so vehemently against the idea of knowing God (that is, in an abstract, intellectual way) that he rejected the whole of Christian **theology** and its attempts to develop a rational and comprehensible conception of God. Instead, he said that any adequate conception of God is thoroughly incomprehensible and irrational. What is important is therefore not our conception of God but the passion with which we believe in him. Again, we can ask, “Believe in what?” But Kierkegaard would say that such questions are not only irrelevant but also contrary to religious feeling. He stated, “If anyone succeeded in making Christianity plausible, on that day Christianity would be squashed,” and “When faith begins to lose its passion, proof becomes necessary in order to command respect from unbelief.” In other words, trying to understand God is antithetical to believing in him, and rationality only gets in the way of faith. Although Kierkegaard rejected the idea of a conception of God, he had a distinctive conception of what it means to be religious. So, despite his attacks on philosophy, he was very much a philosopher, offering us a radical conception of what it is to believe in God.

God as the Unknown: Kierkegaard

But what is this unknown something with which the Reason collides when inspired by its paradoxical passion, with the result of unsettling even man’s knowledge of himself? It is the Unknown. It is not a human being, in so far as we know what man is; nor is it any other known thing. So let us call this unknown something: the God. It is nothing more than a name we assign to it. The idea of demonstrating that this unknown something (the God) exists could scarcely suggest itself to the Reason. For if God does not exist, it would of course be impossible to prove it; and if he does exist, it would be folly to attempt it. From *Philosophical Fragments*, 1844

God as a Moral Being

Of all the characteristics that have been attributed to God, one set stands out above the rest. Whether you believe that God created the universe, that he once entered into human form as Christ, that he once parted the Red Sea, or that he is a transcendent being or an immanent spirit, what makes religion so important in many people’s lives is the moral features of God, his care for justice and his concern for us. This is what makes Voltaire’s conception of God so unimportant and trivial; it is what makes Kierkegaard’s conception so all-important and vital. In terms of the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament, perhaps the single most important lesson, repeated on virtually every page, is that God is a moral being who has given us laws—the Ten Commandments but thousands of other commands, too. In the New Testament, the most important message, again repeated on almost every page, is that God cares, that God is the Divine Judge, concerned with virtue and evil on earth, who punishes the wicked and rewards the good. Indeed, even if one doesn’t believe in God as primarily a divine judge who issues rewards and punishments, it is basic to the traditional idea of God to consider God as a moral being, as a being who cares, not an indifferent force in the universe.

Thus, in virtually all conceptions of God, among the most important questions (apart from whether you believe or not) are: What moral characteristics does God have? How much does he care about us? What will he do for us? Will he answer our prayers? (And which ones? Probably not our angry childhood prayer that the kid down the block be struck down by lightning. But what about our prayers for a more peaceful world, or for the strength to carry on through some ordeal, or to be cured of some terrible affliction?) What are God's laws? (He says, "Thou shalt not kill." Does that mean never? Except in war? Except in some [so-called just] wars?) And, perhaps most important of all, what is God's role in controlling the amount of suffering and evil here on earth? Indeed, this problem has struck most philosophers and religious thinkers as so important that an entire field has grown up around it: it is generally known as the **problem of evil**.

The Problem of Evil

The problem of evil begins with the main ingredient in most of our conceptions of God: God is, simply put, good. But this conception seems at odds with one obvious fact about the world—that evil and suffering flourish. Now, it doesn't matter much how you understand "God is good," whether you think that means that God watches over us every minute and protects us from harm, or that God created us and so cares for us in some general way. The point of the conception is that God does care about us and therefore cares what happens to us. But if this is so, why is there so much evil and suffering in the world, even among young and innocent children?

The argument can be fleshed out as follows. First, we can summarize the traditional Western conception of God in three statements:

1. God is all-powerful;
2. God is all-knowing,
3. God is good.

But if there is evil in the world, then, so the argument goes, one of three things must be true:

1. He can't do anything about it;
2. He doesn't know about it; or
3. He doesn't care about it.

But all these possibilities contradict the traditional conception of God, so our problem remains unresolved.

Denial of God

This argument has prompted an enormous number of responses. One is to conclude that God does not exist because to deserve the name "God," a Supreme Being must have all three features in the first list. But there are many ways of defending belief in God against this argument, and it is fair to say that every theistic philosopher who has ever written has felt obliged to respond to the problem of evil in one way or another.

Two Kinds of Evil

The first move for many philosophers has been to distinguish moral from nonmoral evil, with moral evil arising from our actions and intentions and nonmoral evil consisting of natural

disasters and “acts of God.” The evil of the Holocaust and the murder of millions of Jews, Gypsies, Catholics, and other minorities was a moral evil. The great earthquake of Lisbon in 1755, in which thousands of innocent people were killed while they sat in church on Sunday morning, is a nonmoral evil. Most arguments aimed at solving the problem of evil focus on one or the other of these.

The Death of God: Nietzsche

The Madman.—Have you ever heard of the madman who on a bright morning lighted a lantern and ran to the marketplace calling out unceasingly: “I seek God! I seek God!”—As there were many people standing about who did not believe in God, he caused a great deal of amusement. Why! is he lost? said one. Has he strayed away like a child? said another. Or does he keep himself hidden? Is he afraid of us? Has he taken a sea-voyage? Has he emigrated?—the people cried out laughingly, all in a hubbub. The insane man jumped into their midst and transfixed them with his glances. “Where is God gone?” he called out. “I mean to tell you! We have killed him—you and I! We are all his murderers!” From *The Gay Science*, 1882 — From *The Complete Works of Nietzsche*, ed. Oscar Levy, vol. 10 (T. Foulx, 1910).

Denial of Evil

One answer to the problem of evil is to say that, contrary to appearances, there is no evil or suffering. This response requires pretending that nothing is wrong. (It is always easier to do this regarding other people’s troubles rather than your own, of course.) For example, there have been people who have asserted—despite all evidence to the contrary—that the Nazis did not in fact murder millions of Jews. (Others, not surprisingly, have responded that such denials are themselves evil and cause irreparable harm.) Some people deny that war is evil, even insisting that everyone killed or injured in a war—not only soldiers but civilian adults and children—somehow deserved it. But this solution becomes increasingly implausible and insensitive the more we look at it.

Many people who suffer do so because of their own errors, of course, so arguably this suffering does not reflect on God’s goodness. But many who suffer did not bring their problems on themselves, especially children who starve to death or are murdered in war. You might say, “They are being punished for their parents’ sins,” but this would hardly count as justice. Justice, whether human or divine, means punishing the person who deserves it, not someone else. Would you think it fair if one of your parents or grandparents got a reckless-driving citation from the police and the authorities took away your driver’s license? Justice, whether human or divine, means punishing the person who deserves it, not someone else.

A Few of God’s Commandments: Old Testament and New

Old Testament

Honor thy father and thy mother . . . Thou shalt not kill. . . Thou shalt not commit adultery. . . Thou shalt not steal. . . Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. . . Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox . . . nor any thing that is thy neighbor’s. Exodus 20:12–17

New Testament

“You have heard that it was said [to the men of old], ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak, as well.”...“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust . . . You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”...“Judge not, that you be not judged.”...“So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.”...“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.” Matthew 5:38–40, 43–48; 7:1, 12; 22:37–40

The Least of the Evils

Some people have said that God, in his wisdom, saw all the different ways the world could be and deemed that a certain amount of evil and suffering was required in all of them. Pain is needed, for example, to indicate when we are in danger, as when our skin comes in contact with fire. God chose the world with the least amount of suffering, or, in German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz’s positive terms, “the best of all possible worlds.” This solution requires a good deal of faith on our part because it is easy to imagine any number of small changes in the world that might make it a better world and would not appear to throw off the balance of things. One way of saying this is to agree that there must be some evil and suffering in the world, but why so much?

The least-of-all-evils position is that there is no more evil in the world than is necessary except, perhaps, for the evil that we bring on ourselves—that is, moral evil. (See “The Free-Will Solution” that follows shortly.) As for nonmoral evil—the catastrophes of nature or the “acts of God” that wreak havoc on so many lives—theologian-philosopher John Hick suggests that such events are “soul building.” They may make our lives less predictable and more tragic, but they also make us better people. This is a common interpretation of the book of Job, in which a good man is made to suffer to “test” his faith. A very different version of the “least of the evils” suggestion has been popularized by the American Rabbi Harold Kushner, according to which it is God’s limited power that, as he puts it, explains “why bad things happen to good people.” God is not omnipotent. Says Kushner, neither is he cruel. His power is limited by the laws of nature, the extent to which human nature has evolved, and the moral freedom of human beings. Most traditional theists, however, would rather find the explanation in us or in our limited understanding than in God himself.

The Aesthetic Solution

An elegant variation on the least-of-the-evils type of solution—which is sometimes defended by those who argue that God is a process or, in the case of some nineteenth-century Romantics, a kind of cosmic artist—is the vision of a world that is defined by dramatic and aesthetic

categories rather than by our rather limited insistence on personal well-being. Once again, this solution urges us to take in “the big picture” to see that the beauty and goodness of the whole depend, in part, on the shadows and tragedies that seem to us evil. By considering God as a process, we can take what we consider evil in the world as essential steps in God’s (and the world’s) development. Traditionally, such efforts to explain how the existence of evil is compatible with the existence of God have been termed **theodicies**. If we include the whole of history in our vision rather than simply the particular concerns of the present, we would see, according to the process view, that the evil in the world is, in some sense, a necessary part of the story and not an argument against God’s existence or his goodness.

The Free-Will Solution

Another solution, perhaps the most powerful and controversial of all, is the so-called **free-will** solution—the argument that God created us with free will, the ability to do what we want. Accordingly, we have created the evil and suffering in the world ourselves, and it is no reflection on God’s goodness. But the problems pointed out in this solution are these: First, again, why so much evil and suffering? Couldn’t God have created us a little bit wiser and less reckless to begin with, still with free will but with a little more intelligence, compassion, and self-control? Second, if God created us with free will, does that mean that he cannot interfere? If so, then that would seem to mean that he is not all-powerful. If he can interfere, then the question is why he does not (since our suffering often far outweighs our errors). And if he does interfere, then the question, once again, is whether we are free at all. Third, if God is all-knowing and knew in advance what terrible, misfortunes we would bring on ourselves, then why did he give us free will in the first place? Wouldn’t we be much better off without it, preprogrammed by God to be good, kind, and considerate to each other? And fourth, even if one accepts the free-will solution, it still seems most unlikely that all the evil and suffering in the world are due to our own errors and abuse of our freedom. Innocent children have been killed by natural disasters while they sleep or even while they are praying in church. How could God have allowed (or caused) this to happen?

Justice in the Afterlife

Another solution is the appeal to some further court of justice, not in this life but later, in which the good are rewarded and the wicked punished. But this raises problems, too: even if you believe in divine reward and punishment, the question of justice reemerges. Is it fair to allow an innocent man to suffer even if you intend to give him an elaborate reward later? Is it fair to reward some people who have not had a chance to prove themselves (for example, infants who are killed in war), while other people have to spend a lifetime proving their moral worth? And if you believe that this life is in some sense a “test” for the next one, it is important to ask whether it is entirely fair (since some people in some societies do not even know that they are being tested) and whether a truly good God would test his believers at all.

Consider the story of Job, mentioned above, one of the most celebrated case studies in the problem of evil. According to the biblical story, God permitted all kinds of terrible sufferings to afflict Job, who was a good man and believed in God wholeheartedly. Job’s wife and children died, his life was ruined, and he developed all kinds of painful diseases. And why? Just to test

him? Just to win a bet with the devil (as the biblical story suggests)? Is this justice? And does it make everything all right again if God at the end of the story restores to Job all that he has lost? Job's equanimity in the face of hardship may be one of the great expressions of faith of all time, but it does not answer—it only intensifies—the problem of evil.

God's "Mysterious Ways"

Some people have handled the problem of evil by an appeal to God's "mysterious ways." We do not understand why God does as he does, and we should not question him. But this answer is very much at odds with the need to know something about God to have reason to believe in him. Furthermore, is there any just interpretation of some of the more brutal stories in the Bible (for instance, the Job story or God's destruction of whole cities)? Sometimes we can understand why a wise person does something we do not understand; he or she seems more in command of the situation than we are. But there are limits to how far we can stretch this sort of explanation, and when we cannot even imagine a sense in which a course of action is just, appealing to "mysterious ways" is no longer an answer to the problem but an admission that we have no idea how to deal with it.

Working Out an Answer

None of these responses is adequate, but none of the objections given is final either. Indeed, the whole history of religion—Judaism and Islam, Buddhism and other Asian religions as well as Christianity—has been taken up with various attempts at answering this problem. So, if your philosophy includes belief in God, it is essential that you determine what moral qualities you believe God has and whether these can be made compatible with the existence of evil and suffering in the world. If you do not believe in God, of course, the problem of evil will seem to you to be a final reply, a proof that there cannot be a God who is powerful and all-knowing and just and caring as well. But then you must face the question of whether there is any reason for the evil and suffering in the world and any way for us to deal with it besides simply accepting it at face value.

Faith and Reason: Grounds for Believing

For many believers, belief in God and knowledge of him were matters of pure **reason**. Reason did not in any way contradict faith but rather supported it. The eleventh-century theologian **Saint Anselm**, for instance, developed a famous and ingenious "proof" of God's existence (which we will discuss shortly)⁴. The philosopher **Saint Thomas Aquinas** also developed a number of ways of proving God's existence and nature (which we will discuss also), and indeed much traditional theology and scholarship is dedicated to this view that knowledge of God is essentially **rational** and that we can know that he exists by examining our thoughts about him. On the other hand, there are believers, as we indicated before, who have insisted that God cannot be rationally known at all. As we have also already mentioned, there are mystics who believe that we can

⁴ Italian-born **Saint Anselm** of Canterbury (1033–1109) produced several influential texts of philosophical theology. His famous ontological argument for the existence of God in *Proslogion* (1078) borrows from **Augustine's** in *On the Free Choice of the Will*

know God only through a special kind of experience that most people might never have and in which, if only for a moment, God seems to present himself to us directly. But how we believe we can relate to God of course depends on our conception of him. If we believe in a largely anthropomorphic, personal conception of God, then relating to him through prayers and reasonable requests makes perfectly good sense. If, on the other hand, our conception of God is of an all-embracing universal love or a great spirit who watches over the universe, then personal requests may be quite out of line.

Most of what we have said applies primarily to those who believe in some conception of God, but everything we have said applies just as well to atheists. If you do not believe in God, which conceptions of God do you not believe in? If you take references to God to indicate a wise old man who grants prayers and answers requests somewhat capriciously, your disbelief might well be justifiable by virtue of ordinary common sense. But suppose someone insists, rather, that the proper conception of God is of a vital force that keeps the world in existence or perhaps the existence of the universe itself; what would it be not to believe in God so conceived? To be an atheist, in other words, presupposes a conception of God just as much as to be a believer; it is just as much a question of what one does not believe as it is a question of what it is that one does believe.

The Cosmological Argument

A good example of a philosopher who believed in God as the most reasonable position is **Saint Thomas Aquinas**⁵. In the thirteenth century, he introduced some of the proofs, or what he called the “Five Ways,” which are still standard in rational approaches to religion. (In fact, almost all of these ways had been invented long before Aquinas—some of them by Aristotle.) For example, it was Aquinas who defended the proof that you are probably quite familiar with; it is sometimes called the **cosmological argument**. It has many variations, but the simplest one is this: Everything must be caused by or created from something else. Therefore, there must have been a first cause, or what Aristotle called a “prime mover,” and this is God.

Of course, one might object that the universe has always existed and thus does not require explanation by a “first cause” that supposedly created it. Or one could admit that God created the universe but then argue (as many deists did) that having set it in motion, God lets it exist without any further interference on his part. To answer such objections, Aquinas makes it clear that he thinks of God as a first cause in two senses, as both the cause of the universe’s coming into existence and the cause of its being preserved in existence from one instant to the next.

The Argument from Design

⁵ One of the most important Christian philosophers of all time, Italian-born **Saint Thomas Aquinas** (1225–1274) synthesized Neoplatonic Christian theory and the newly rediscovered work of Aristotle.

A very different argument for rationally believing in God is one that is probably familiar to you as well. If we look at the world, we can see that it is intricately designed, with everything in its place and its purpose. There are bugs for birds to eat, bark for bugs to eat, rain so trees can grow, clouds to produce rain, and so on.

In fact, the universe is so perfectly designed, with the stars in their orbits and our brains in our skulls, that one cannot believe that this all came about by chance. So, one must believe that behind the design of the universe is a designer, namely, God. The British philosopher William Paley defended this argument, which is often called the **argument from design**, by drawing the analogy between our finding a watch in a field, and assuming that some person must have been there, and our seeing the intricate design of the world and concluding that some intelligent creator must have made it⁶. Voltaire, who despised the argument from design, made fun of it in his novel *Candide* with such quips as, “Isn’t it wise of our creator to give us noses; otherwise, we wouldn’t have any way of wearing our eyeglasses.” On a more serious note, the argument from design seems to conflict with **Charles Darwin**’s theory of evolution and natural selection, because the Darwinian theory seeks to explain how a complex world could come into existence over time without assuming a divine creator⁷. But Darwin himself believed in God and saw no incompatibility between his theory and his religious beliefs.

One advantage of the process conception of God is that it makes this conflict entirely avoidable. But the idea of an evolving God-in-process tends to threaten, if not undermine, the argument's premise by design, if only because it shifts the analogy from a fine and finished mechanism (the watch in the field) to a partially completed, still imperfect, and in-process world.

The argument from design is a particularly good and dramatic example of the use of arguments from analogy in philosophy. Paley’s argument depends on the similarity between the watch and the world in a great many crucial aspects, whereas the Scottish philosopher David Hume points out that there are many critical points at which the analogy breaks down.

The Ontological Argument

Besides the cosmological argument and the argument from design, the **ontological argument** is a fascinating philosophical argument for rational belief in God’s existence, formulated by the eleventh-century monk Saint Anselm. The word **ontological** means “having to do with the nature of existence,” and the argument, which has been developed in hundreds of variations, is essentially this:

1. We cannot conceive of God except as an infinite and most perfect being.

⁶ English theologian and philosopher **William Paley** (1743–1805) propounded a version of the design argument. His moral theory combines utilitarianism and supernaturalism.

⁷ English naturalist **Charles Darwin** (1809–1882) changed the world when in 1859 he published *The Origin of Species*, which elaborated the theory that species evolve as a consequence of natural selection. Darwin rivals Aristotle as the most influential biologist of all time.

2. A being who had all perfections (justice, omnipotence, omniscience, and so on) except for the perfection of existence would not be “most perfect.”
3. Therefore, the most perfect being necessarily exists.

So stated, the argument is peculiar and somewhat crude, but new versions of the ontological argument are still being produced today, using all the resources of modern logic. The point behind the argument in all its variations, however, is to prove by logic alone that, from the very idea we have of God, it is necessary that God exists. And if this is so, then belief in God is a rational belief, justifiable on strictly logical grounds.

Many philosophers have questioned this logic, even if they themselves devoutly believed in God’s existence. The most famous of these was Immanuel Kant, who argued that the flaw in the argument was its second premise—the idea that existence was a “perfection or any other kind of property.” Existing, Kant argued, just isn’t like being just, being omnipotent, and being all-knowing. Although a being can exist without being just, it makes no sense to say that a being is just if it doesn’t exist. Indeed, it doesn’t make sense to say that it is a “being” at all.

Rational Faith

Some attempts to show that belief in God is rational are of a very different kind. Kant, for example, rejected all three arguments (the cosmological argument, the argument from design, and the ontological argument) and instead argued that belief in God is rationally necessary for anyone who would be a morally good person. The result is a moral proof for God’s existence, the aim being not so much to prove God’s existence as a matter of knowledge (on a par, for instance, with our scientific beliefs) but rather as a necessary feature of our moral outlook on the world. The argument is familiar: for virtue to be rewarded and vice to be punished, there must be some all-powerful, all-wise judge who can—if not in this life, then in another one—make justice prevail, reward the good, and punish the wicked. Kant called our belief in such a God **faith**. But by this, he did not mean an irrational feeling or a belief that we hold despite all evidence to the contrary. Faith in God was, for Kant, every bit as justified as knowledge, and not simply a matter of feeling; a purely rational attitude that can be defended with reasons, with arguments, and with proofs. Without belief in God, Kant argued, our sense of morality and justice would be without foundation.

Pascal’s Wager

A different kind of proof is an argument formulated by the French philosopher and scientist **Blaise Pascal**⁸. Pascal’s argument presents us with a kind of betting situation, and the argument is therefore called **Pascal’s wager**. It runs like this: Either we believe in God, or we do not. If we believe in God and he exists, we will be rewarded with infinite bliss. If we believe in God but he does not exist, then the worst that has happened is that we have given up a few sinful pleasures that we might otherwise have enjoyed. But even if God doesn’t exist, the edifying feeling of

⁸ **Blaise Pascal** (1623–1662) was a French polymath of great fame. Making his first contribution to geometry at sixteen years of age, he is perhaps best known for his “wager.”

having faith in him is rewarding in itself. If we do not believe, however, and God does exist, we may enjoy a few pleasurable sins, but we will be punished with eternal damnation. If we do not believe that God exists, then there is, of course, no problem. Now you don't have to be much of a gambler to figure out which alternative is the better bet; it is to believe. Any rational person will therefore believe in God: why risk eternal damnation in return for a few sinful earthly pleasures?

Pascal's Wager		
The Possibilities:	If God exists,	If God does not exist,
We Believe	ETERNAL REWARD	We've missed a few pleasures but edified ourselves through prayer
We Do Not	ETERNAL DAMNATION	We're OK, and we've had some good times

Irrational Faith

Not all arguments for believing in God are rational arguments, however, and not all beliefs need to be backed up by an argument aimed at convincing anyone else. The most prominent example of a philosopher with this view of religious belief is Kierkegaard, whom we have already discussed. For Kierkegaard, unlike Kant, for instance, faith is distinctively **irrational**, and proofs of God's existence are utterly irrelevant. For Kierkegaard, faith in God is an intensely personal, passionate concern, not prone to "proof" by any means. Faith is a kind of commitment; it is precisely the fact that one cannot simply know that God exists—Kierkegaard calls this an "objective uncertainty"—that requires us to make the "leap of faith." A very different sort of irrationalist approach to religious belief is the ancient tradition called **mysticism**, which holds that one can come to believe in God through a special experience or vision that cannot be described or communicated to anyone else. (Such experiences are said to be **ineffable**.)

A mystic might agree that this experience has proved to him that God exists, but he need not say anything at all. In fact, a mystic does not even have to insist that what he has "seen" is true at all, but only that it is extremely significant personally. Thus, there is no argument with a mystic, for he doesn't have to tell you anything, and there is nothing you can say to refute him. And yet, mystical experiences are so powerful, according to those who have had them, that doubting God's existence becomes difficult or impossible afterward. Furthermore, the mystical experiences reported by people from many different countries at many different times share such similar features that one must wonder whether this, in itself, is a demonstration of the "truth" of these experiences. But for the mystic, this or any such demonstration is unnecessary, for he or she is not claiming to have "proved" God's existence. It is enough to have experienced God directly, if only for a moment or two; compared with that, what kind of proof would be more convincing?

Religious Tolerance: Ritual, Tradition, and Spirituality

If there were only one religion in England, there would be a danger of tyranny; if there were two, they would cut each other's throats; but there are thirty, and they live happily together in peace.

Voltaire, Philosophical Letters

Religion plays a central role in many people's outlook on the world and in many people's lives. But it does not play a central role in everyone's view of the world or life, and within the same religion (for example, Christianity) there may be many religious outlooks and very different religious practices. We need to understand religion and appreciate both its power and its importance, but we should not presume that everyone has or should have a religion or a religious outlook. Nor is it enough to believe. In a complex and pluralistic world, it is necessary to learn to articulate and understand not only our own religious beliefs but also those of others. Indeed, the fact that religion is usually thought to be a matter of *belief* and not a kind of *knowledge* that can be demonstrated or proven (whether religion is, as Kierkegaard argued, irrational) means that religious **argument** has its limits. One can prove a mathematical theorem. One can adduce evidence for an empirical hypothesis. But one can only, at best, *explain* one's religious outlook and the important role it plays in one's life. When one really believes something of great personal importance, it may be natural to want to convince others to believe it as well. But attempting to demonstrate that one's religious outlook is the *right* one is at the same time risky business, for it can lead to irresolvable conflict in this multicultural world with its many different religions and outlooks, some of which are not religious at all.

And yet, mere logic would suggest that it is hard to believe something without believing that it is *true*. Thus, believing that one's religion is the "true religion" would seem to follow just from the fact that one believes in its doctrines. There is something odd about saying "I really believe that God is X, but perhaps it isn't so." Moreover, the admirable effort to bring all religions under one umbrella and argue that "we all ultimately believe in the same thing" tends to water down belief to the point where words like *God* or *a Supreme Being* designate very little, and this is even before one tries to include those religions (for example, Buddhism) that do not involve a concept of God. Many people object to the idea that the God of the Hebrew Bible, the Christian God, and Allah are the same God (although all Muslims are taught this in the Qur'an). Are the beliefs of a Taoist or a Confucian in any significant way like the beliefs of a Christian or a Zoroastrian? That is by no means obvious. Some great philosophers have tried to establish shared ground among the various religions, but for the most part, they have not been very persuasive. People tend to identify with the very particular aspects of their religion, and they easily find even minor differences in belief odd, alienating, or offensive.

So, how is religious tolerance possible? Part of the problem is that the philosophical understanding of religion tends to put far too much emphasis on religious doctrine and belief. To be sure, belief is an important part of religion, but it is not the whole of religion. We can point out at least two things that are also important and are by their very nature particular to one's religious affiliation in ways that are not readily shareable but nevertheless do not prove to be a threat to religious tolerance.

The first of these features of religion is *ritual*, in all its variations. Rationalist philosophers like Kant tried to eliminate ritual from what is essential to religion, dismissing it along with superstition as irrational and thereby weakening the status of religion. Irrationalist philosophers like Kierkegaard, too, did not consider ritual as essential to religion, emphasizing instead irrational passion and commitment. But what Kant and Kierkegaard failed to appreciate in their philosophies was the extent to which religion is a social phenomenon, not merely a matter of belief, and that religious practices and rituals are of primary, not merely secondary, importance. Here we should note those “heartfelt” routines whose virtue is their familiarity and intimate association with the most spiritual passions. Ritual is not merely something one *does* (that is, “just going through the motions”), but rather something one *lives*. It can involve everyday behavior (for instance, being respectful to your parents), as well as those special ceremonies in life (for example, getting married). But rituals have meaning whether they are universal. It is the particularity of the prayers, rituals, and ceremonies that give life to a person’s religion. But engaging in the rituals of one’s religion need not be experienced as divisive.

The other aspect of religion, which is not merely a matter of belief, is closely connected to the first. It is *tradition*, that sense of history that informs a person’s religion. Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Confucianism all trace their origins to a single founder, and it matters a great deal who that founder is, where he lived, and how the religion has developed. Christianity—and the various kinds of Christianity—are distinctive because of their distinctive histories, in part because of the different cultures in which they have developed. It is not irrelevant to Christianity that it grew out of Judaism within the Greco–Roman world. Islam, although it now has many non-Arab believers, is inextricably tied to Mohammed’s historical effort to unify the Arab people. Confucianism grew out of the cultural context in which Confucius lived, and it has flourished in East Asia. To ignore this would be to rob Confucianism as a religion of much of the meaning it has for its adherents. Rituals are, of course, products of tradition. A ritual counts as a ritual because of its established history in a religion. Thus, rituals tend to allow for only small variations, and it is virtually impossible to simply invent a new ritual. (Try it.) Church officials sometimes create rituals (or renovate old ones), but they usually have the full weight of tradition on their side.

Tradition, too, is. Different people have different histories, and these differences, again, are not necessarily matters of conflict (although the histories themselves may be filled with conflict). Nevertheless, the particularities of history and tradition make each culture and every religion what it is. Although one might postulate certain beliefs and rituals that go all the way back to primitive people (some way of dealing with the dead, for instance), the history of religion divides early on into very different and distinctive stories and accounts. Historically, it is certainly not the case that “all religions are the same.”

But there is one thing that all religions do seem to have in common, and that is the general sensibility that we call *spirituality*, the feeling that we are part of something much greater than ourselves. Spirituality, unlike religion, is not the province of one group or another. It is as much a product of individual piety as of organized religious training. It is available to hermits and loners, and it can be shared by millions of people. Spirituality is nonsectarian. It is by its very nature appreciative of the wonders of the universe and the miracle of existence, with or without belief in a creator. It need not involve any hint of an “us” versus “them” mentality. Spirituality is

not confined to religion; scientists experience it when they contemplate the wonders of the world. We all feel it, in a transient way, when we are moved or “swept away” by a powerful piece of music or a beautiful piece of art. Spirituality does not require doctrines (though doctrines may be brought in to supplement or explain it), and so one person’s or group’s spirituality is not in conflict with any other person’s or group’s spirituality. Spirituality may involve any number of traditions, practices, and rituals, but these need not become the basis of conflict. Religion and spirituality do not, like science, primarily provide us with explanations of the world. Rather, they provide us with edification, meaning, and significance, which are essential to our humanity.

Doubts

Doubt isn’t the opposite of faith: it is an element of faith. Paul Tillich, 1886–1965

If God plays any significant role in your philosophy, it is important to come to terms with these various conceptions, attitudes, and arguments. What or who is the God you believe in? What do you expect of God? What does God expect of you? Why do you believe in God? Should other people believe in God, too, or is that none of your business? Can you or should you prove that your belief in God is rational? If not, why would you accept an *irrational* belief? Psychiatrists, beginning with Sigmund Freud, define irrationality not only as believing what cannot reasonably be believed but also as believing what is harmful to believe. Freud argued that belief in God is irrational because it is a childish illusion that gives us unwarranted and sometimes destructive attitudes and expectations toward life. Other philosophers—for example, **Karl Marx**—have argued that belief in God is like a drug, which soothes our suffering but prevents us from seeing the ways in which we could improve the world we live in. (“Religion is the opium of the people,” he said.) The emphasis on divine justice and on an afterlife, he charged, is rationalization and compensation for our own injustice here on earth. So, one cannot simply say without thought, “I just believe in God on faith; that’s all.” Even if you accept the idea of an irrational belief, it is important to show why that belief is something more than a mere illusion (as Freud argued) or escapism (as Marx argued).