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Introduction

In this book I will be looking to persuade you that the probabilities favor the existence of a god, relying on rational forms of argument accessible not only to traditional devout believers but to current self-professed atheists as well. In other words, I will not be relying on arguments from "faith alone." For those who already believe that a god exists, I will for some of them be adding additional rational arguments to support their already existing views; for nonbelievers at present, I will be offering rational reasons for why they might want to reconsider their position. My conclusion does not necessarily mean exactly the Christian God of history but it does mean the existence of a god of some kind whose essence is supernatural. That is, as I dare to suggest, an important theological conclusion in and of itself, even if it does not conform fully to a traditional Christian understanding.

My rational case for a (very probable) god, as I should say at the outset, will not "prove" that a god exists. "Proof" (actually, in science this means a long record of uncontradicted empirical confirmation that can never be absolutely final) is feasible in the scientific investigation of the natural world but in the case of a supernatural essence, such as a god, there is no similar method of knowledge verification available. Thus, to concede that a scientific "proof" is necessary to estimate the likelihood of the existence of a god would be to concede from the outset that a god is unlikely. Indeed, because this demand is impossible to satisfy, the insistence on a "proof" of a god in the manner of the scientific method is a part of the rhetorical arsenal of those who stridently assert the nonexistence of any god. Yet, the largest part of the ordinary knowledge by which we guide our lives is not based on any such forms of scientific proof.

It is further evidence of the fundamentalist worship of science in our own times that most of the scientific faithful remain altogether blind to the supernatural miracles that routinely surround their daily existence.

Foremost among these supernatural miracles, as a leading contemporary American philosopher Thomas Nagel explained in 2012, is human consciousness. Nagel writes that human "consciousness is the most conspicuous obstacle to a comprehensive naturalism that relies only on the resources of physical science" to understand the world. Indeed, he concludes that we will simply have to face the fact that "the existence of consciousness seems to imply that the physical description of the universe . . . is only part of the truth" of human existence, requiring an acknowledgement of the necessity of some kind of supernatural elements of a reality that "threatens to unravel the entire naturalistic world picture" that dominates so much of contemporary thinking—especially among the educated elites in the United States and Europe.[1]

Similar to Nagel, the Oxford philosopher Daniel Robinson writes that "consciousness introduces a new ingredient in the perceptual transactions between organisms and environments. The ingredient is the actual state of experience itself, what may be called a 'mental' state presumably widespread in the animal kingdom." In order for a human being (or other animal) "to possess such a mental state," it is necessary, as Nagel has also long said, that "there is something that it is to *be* that organism—something it is like *for* the organism" to perceive its own existence. It follows logically that since the "standard reductionist accounts of the mental"—accounts that seek to reduce consciousness to physical terms alone—"are essentially indifferent to the subjectivity of such experience, the accounts are fatally incomplete" as a statement of the full human condition. Despite the many best efforts of philosophical reductionists to offer an effective rejoinder, as Robinson considers in 2008, "Nagel's argument retains its power."[2]

It is remarkable that no even remotely plausible scientific hypothesis has yet been offered as to how our brains that exist in observable and measurable time and space might create the mental contents of our consciousness that exist outside measurable time and space. As the distinguished contemporary philosopher Colin McGinn puts it, "since we do not observe our own states of consciousness, nor those of others, we do not apprehend these states as spatial." If we were to seek to explain consciousness in scientific materialist terms, it would mean "that something essentially non-spatial emerged from something purely spatial—that the non-spatial is somehow a construction out of the spatial. And this looks more like magic" than a scientifically comprehensible truth.[3]

1. Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*, 35.
2. Robinson, *Consciousness and Mental Life*, 44.
3. McGinn, "Consciousness and Space," 220, 223.

As McGinn thus suggests, it will always be outside the scope of the physical sciences to explain how material events occurring in the physical world of our bodies and brains create the complex nonmaterial thoughts—such as the contents of this book as I have written it—that populate our mental universe. How did atoms and molecules create this sentence that I am writing at this moment? Did "I" have anything to do with it, or was it simply materially predestined in advance, as Pierre Laplace in the early nineteenth century argued in principle for everything that would happen in the future of the world? Is it merely my own human hubris that I think that "I" had a great deal to do with it—or even that "I" exist as an autonomous and independently thinking human being? These are of course questions of ancient philosophical and religious interest but the religion of scientific materialism, having no plausible answers, largely ignores them today.

Sigmund Freud, as himself a self-professed atheist who denied the existence of a god, and was seeking to confirm the modern scientific faith that the methods of physics can be extended to explain everything in the world, even the events of human consciousness, once claimed that he had established a mental physics of the "forces" of the interactions among separate parts of the human mind that was capable of explaining scientifically the workings of human consciousness. But Freudianism is now seen more commonly to have been a new modern religion rather than an exercise of anything like the scientific method—not many people take the scientific claims of Freud seriously any more.

For human beings, their consciousness precedes matter, not the other way around; the very concept of "matter" is itself a creation of the human mind. The "material world" (even as we can only perceive this "world" in our minds today) and the "mental" (again even this is a matter of our own internal perceptions of one distinctive part of human consciousness) are two separate elements of the same ultimately mental contents of human consciousness. Quantum mechanics in the twentieth century added a radically new element in that the manner of our conscious perceptions, even of the external world, could seemingly change drastically what we actually perceived as this outside "reality." In other words, there was no fundamental reality other than the—admittedly complex and surprising—reality of human consciousness and its perceptions of itself and the "outside" world. The central importance of human consciousness in quantum mechanics meant that the scientific materialism that today dominates the thinking of so much of the American university world, and large parts of wider American elites, was effectively dead as a matter of ultimate truth.

For example, the historical reality for us of the "physical universe" of protons and other atomic and subatomic particles over as much as a

billion years or more, as the brilliantly imaginative Princeton physicist John Wheeler once observed, is not finally determined, amazingly enough, until a human observation occurs. Astonishingly by commonsense standards, if there is one form of observation, then more than a billion years of subatomic history as we perceive it comes out one way, if there is another form of human observation, this history comes out another way. As Wheeler writes,

> The idea is old that the past has no existence except in the records of today. In our time this thought takes new poignancy in the concept of Bohr's elementary quantum phenomenon and the so-called delay choice experiment. Ascribe a polarization, a direction of vibration, to the photon that began its journey six billion years ago, before there was any Earth, still less any life. [All this is] meaningless! Not until the analyzer [the observational instrument] has been set to this, that, or the other specific chosen orientation, not until the elementary quantum phenomenon that began so long ago—and stretches out, unknown and unknowable, like a great smoky dragon through the vast intervening reach of space and time—has been brought to a close by an irreversible act of amplification [observation]; not until a record has been produced of either "yes, this direction of polarization" or "no, the contrary direction of polarization"; not until then do we have the right to attribute any polarization to the photon that began its course so long ago. There is an inescapable sense in which we, in the here and now, by a delayed setting of our analyzer of polarization to one or another angle, have an inescapable, an irretrievable, an unavoidable influence on what we have the right to say about what we call the [subatomic] past.[4]

Eugene Wigner, another great Princeton physicist (winner of the Nobel prize in 1963) who, also like Wheeler and unusually for a working physicist, occasionally ventured into philosophical explorations of the larger meaning for understanding human reality of quantum mechanics and other twentieth-century developments in physics, once examined such matters of the centrality for physics of consciousness in an essay, "Remarks on the Mind-Body Question." Wigner wrote that as a result of twentieth-century physics "the very study of the external world led to the conclusion that the content of consciousness is an ultimate reality." In quantum mechanics, "all knowledge of wave functions is based, in the last analysis, on the 'impressions' we receive" as conscious beings. Given the ultimate priority of consciousness, the quantum physics understanding of reality leads to an intellectual outcome where "solipsism may be logically consistent" with the current state of scientific

4. Wheeler, *At Home in the Universe*, 181.

thinking in physics but it is beyond doubt that "monism in the sense of [scientific] materialism is not" compatible with contemporary physics.[5]

As Wigner puts it most simply, we can know from quantum mechanics that "thought processes and consciousness are the primary concepts, that our knowledge of the external world is the content of consciousness and that the consciousness, therefore, cannot be denied. On the contrary, logically, the external world could be denied—although it is not very practical to do so," the route of solipsism (Wigner himself agrees that there is in fact an existence of a physical world outside our minds alone, even if it is not logically or scientifically necessary).[6] Werner Heisenberg, a co-discoverer of quantum mechanics in the mid-1920s, and today commonly ranked among the greatest physicists of history, would similarly reflect years later that in the wake of quantum mechanics "the mathematical formulas indeed no longer portray" an objectively existing material "nature, but rather the forms of our knowledge of nature," as experienced mathematically in our conscious minds. As a radical consequence, he writes, "we have renounced a [materialist] form of natural description that was familiar for centuries and still was taken as the obvious goal of all exact science even a few decades ago" (Heisenberg was writing in 1958).[7] So new atheists today such as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris find little support for their scientistic views among the leading physicists of the twentieth century, physicists whose theories of the natural world, however seemingly mysterious, magical, and otherworldly by ordinary standards of thought, have passed the most exacting of empirical confirmation and today form the deepest understanding of reality available to us from physics.

More recently, in 2014 leading MIT physicist Max Tegmark observes that twentieth-century "discoveries in physics challenge some of our most basic ideas about reality"—or as one might equally well say, physics challenges some of our basic ideas about "theology." Indeed, Tegmark takes things to the surprising extreme of arguing that "our physical world not only is *described* by mathematics, but that it is mathematics, making us self-aware" conscious beings who exist at the most fundamental level as "parts of a giant mathematical" world of formulas and other abstractions somehow accessible to human consciousness by intense processes of rational introspection—yet another supernatural miracle that routinely affects our human existence.[8] Human beings, it would seem, are uniquely made

5. Wigner, "Remarks on the Mind-Body Question," 169, 171, 173.
6. Ibid., 174.
7. Heisenberg, "The Representation of Nature in Contemporary Physics," 105.
8. Tegmark, *Our Mathematical Universe*, 6.

in the image of a god for whom mathematics is central to his thought. Human beings uniquely among species on earth have the capacity to think mathematically, as such a god seemingly also does, and has transmitted this ability to his human likenesses on earth—for whatever his reasons for doing so, possibly just for mutual stimulation and enjoyment.

Thus, besides human consciousness, another existence outside any world of physically observable and measurable time and space, and of immense practical significance in human affairs, even if it is more remote from the daily experience of ordinary people, is the world of abstract mathematical ideas. A world-class mathematician of our times, Edward Frenkel, a professor of mathematics at the University of California at Berkeley, explains in a 2013 book intended for wide audiences that most professional mathematicians today understand their task as the exploration of a nonmaterial Platonic world of abstract ideas—a world outside observable and measurable time and space that consists of preexisting mathematical truths that have existed for eternity, although now becoming accessible to human consciousness in practice only in the past few thousand years, thanks to the extraordinary efforts of some very remarkable human beings from at least Archimedes to Carl Friedrich Gauss. As physics has only recently revealed to human beings, these mathematical truths, as we have now learned, are also miraculously embodied in physical reality, having shaped the workings of the physical world for billions of years, eons before any human beings had any concept of mathematical truthfulness and the miraculous ability of mathematical truth to shape everything that exists in "physical" reality.

Frenkel thus writes that the modern "world inhabited by mathematical concepts and ideas" is a revived version of the much older "Platonic world of mathematics," following in the ancient Greek tradition of "Plato, who was first to argue that mathematical entities are independent of our rational activities" as work within the consciousness of each individual human person. In other words, human beings do not create the mathematical reality that some of the most gifted among human beings are able to perceive—and from which we all benefit every day in our ordinary lives through the use of mathematics by physicists to establish the knowledge that leads to modern human control over nature. Declaring for a revived Platonism, Frenkel thus affirms that "I believe that the Platonic world of mathematics is separate from both the physical world and the mental world"—existing as a world of its own outside both matter and human consciousness.[9] Again, this is by the standards of scientific materialism a miracle, thus demonstrating once again—since we can know with complete confidence that an independent

9. Frenkel, *Love & Math,* 234.

mathematical world exists and is "true" for every person in the world who reasons with correct mathematical logic—that scientific materialism is dead as a possible understanding of human reality. To compound the miracle, as the leading contemporary British physicist Roger Penrose has marveled, the workings of the perceived "physical" world of measurable matter and space has in every case thus far been found by physicists to behave exactly according to one or another part of the abstract world of nonmaterial mathematical ideas—again, bringing us back to Plato.[10]

This miraculous ability of nonmaterial mathematics to control the material world in which we seemingly live out our lives is similar to the ability of nonmaterial events in our own human consciousness to control our own seeming "physical" bodily actions—something outside measurable time and space controls something in measurable time and space. With the exceptions of Wigner, Penrose, and some others, most physicists today routinely go about their business of establishing the exact relationships between mathematical truths (as they are shared in common in the consciousnesses of the physicists of the world) and "observed" events in the "outside" physical world (also shared by these physicists in their consciousnesses), never seemingly contemplating how miraculous all this is.

In light of the above, we can be rationally confident that there is a large supernatural and miraculous element to our very own human existence. Two possibilities then arise: that we are alone in the world, and that we are ourselves gods in somehow creating the events of our own consciousness (solipsism), or that the events of our consciousness (and the existence of other minds with which we share "rational" faculties) are somehow a reflection of some kind of supernatural entity that traditionally has gone by the name of a "god." As this book will argue, I opt for the latter choice—I believe a material world exists, even as I recognize that this has no sure rational and scientific justification, and that a god governs our perceptions of this world. Since the choice is not a matter of a conclusion reached by the scientific method, however, we can only defend this choice—that there is a real external world governed by mathematical laws—on the grounds that it seems to us, according to all the evidence of our eyes, minds, and our rational thoughts, "very probable."

Beyond that, however, it becomes more difficult to say much about this god with a similar degree of confidence. The god that we can probabilistically know to exist may or may not bear a close resemblance to the traditional God of Christianity. It is difficult—impossible really—for us personally to verify the miracles of the Bible, as compared with the supernatural miracles

10. Penrose, *The Road to Reality*.

of a god of mathematics as manipulated by physicists that we daily experience in our own lives as providing the knowledge basis for human control over the "natural world," including the electronic technological marvels such as television and the Internet that populate our daily lives. Compared with the old biblical miracles, such modern scientific miracles are more impressive and we can be far more certain of their actual real existence.

This book will delve more deeply into such matters. It will offer five rational ways for thinking about the question of a god, including further development of the arguments just made above. I have benefited greatly from an outpouring of writings in recent years that have newly discussed developments in the philosophy of human consciousness, mathematics, physics, evolutionary biology, and theology that are of true theological significance—even as such recent writings and developments were not available to previous inquirers into the age-old question of the existence of a god. Their large theological implications also have not thus far received wide attention among the general public. Very little that is said below is entirely new; my contribution is to bring together and interpret the cumulative implications for theology of the many recent contributions in various intellectual disciplines (even if they often do not see themselves in theological terms) that nevertheless bear importantly on the question of a god.

The Rational Method of This Book

As noted above, I do not claim that the arguments made in this book prove the existence—or nonexistence—of a god. The question of a god's existence lies outside the domain of science. Science is a particular method of inquiry about the workings of the natural world as grounded in the scientific method, as originally developed in the seventeenth century. This method is not applicable, however, to the question of the existence of a god. As an issue lying outside measurable time and space, there is no empirical test that can be devised that would either conclusively confirm or reject a "scientific hypothesis" that a god exists.

Many people might suggest, therefore, that there is little point in even discussing the existence of a god. Although they may not realize it, however, such people typically conflate "science" with "rational." If nothing rational can be said about a god, it seemingly would become a matter of "faith alone," a common view in Protestant religion dating back to Martin Luther. Indeed, Luther himself said that there is nothing an individual can do to achieve true faith in God; such faith is a pure gift from God that cannot be influenced by human action, some people (the elect) being favored

by God and others—likely the majority—less fortunate (the condemned), all this according to God's own grand plan that is beyond any full human rational understanding. The existence of actual true faith then becomes a matter for individual private introspection as to whether it might be present (with no certainties ever possible) and in which broader rational debate within a community of fellow religious inquirers is desirable but offers no sure answers as to the correct path of salvation. Indeed, this Protestant "privatization of religion" had a large impact on the understanding of the relationship of church and state of the nineteenth and twentieth century, helping to justify the exclusion of religion from state affairs.

"Rational" argument, however, is not limited to the scientific method. The methods of rational argument were long ago elevated to new heights by the ancient Greeks. The results in their time were as revolutionary for the world as the consequences in our own time of the global spread of the form of reasoning we know as "science"—itself a specific form of rational argument that has been spectacularly effective in one particular domain, discovering the workings of the natural world. Even as this book rejects the applicability of science to the question of a god's existence, it seeks to follow in this long history of rational argument in Western thought, now offering yet another application of "rational" methods to incorporate the latest relevant scientific and philosophical developments of our time that offer important insights into the question of a god's existence. I will be following an approach to religion once described by the philosopher Thomas Nagel as "reflection on the question of existence and nature of God using only the resources of ordinary human reasoning. This is not the source of most religious belief, but it is important nonetheless," and it is in fact the approach employed by Nagel himself in his own philosophical writings concerning religion.[11]

In suggesting that the existence of a god is open to rational debate and discussion, I do not mean to deny a legitimate role for a simple personal faith that has long had a large role in the history of Christian and other religion. But I am concerned that "faith alone" has proven an unreliable method historically of distinguishing better from worse—truer and less true—religious beliefs. Too many people have had a deep personal faith in some rather strange and occasionally very harmful—to them and to others—religious "truths." God may ultimately control the events in the world but he seems content to allow human beings in the exercise of their free will to believe devoutly in an extraordinarily wide range of things. So elements of faith may in the end be necessary for the deepest religious convictions but a sound religion must also be based on more than faith alone. Facts

11. Nagel, *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament*, 20.

and rational arguments must have a central role; indeed, my view is that we should let them carry us as far as they can. In this respect I depart from Luther (my own family origins over one hundred years ago were in Lutheran Sweden and Finland) and many other Protestants and adopt a view closer to Thomas Aquinas and others in the Roman Catholic tradition.[12]

Yet, I also have the traditional Protestant skepticism of any one official church body and priesthood with its authoritative "experts" in religion. I have the related Protestant conviction that each person must individually study and in the end come to his or her own convictions in matters of religious truth. This helps to make it possible for me to justify my approaching even some of the most fundamental questions of religion as an "informed amateur." Erwin Schrodinger, one of the great physicists of the twentieth century, a co-discoverer with Werner Heisenberg in the 1920s of quantum mechanics, took up questions of philosophy and religion later in life. As Schrodinger commented, it was much to be desired that some people should attempt to bring together "the sum total of all that is known into a whole" interpretation of human mental and physical existence. Indeed, that is the true essence of theology, the effort to understand the "meaning of the human condition in the universe," necessarily including the capacity to make illuminating generalizations about the whole world that go beyond the reductive methods of science, a task in which there cannot be any uniquely qualified "experts."[13]

Before the scientific method can come into the picture, there must be some prior method of human understanding. Modern science was itself a product of Western religious thought, not the other way around. Before human thinking can even begin, and the proper scope and reliability of the use of the scientific method can itself be assessed, there must be an initial rock of rational thought to stand on. This is ultimately a question that falls to—that is of the essence of—theology. The subject matter of theology includes the roles and methods of science but it also includes many other things as well. Theology—properly understood—is thus capable of judging the methods of science; but it does not work the other way around.

Partly owing to the startling discoveries of twentieth-century physics, Schrodinger expected that new fundamental things could be said in our

12. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas famously offered five rational proofs for the existence of God. I should note that it is a coincidence that five rational ways for thinking about the question of a god are suggested in this book. I was reminded by a friend that Aquinas had given five ways of demonstrating the existence of God—the five proofs—after I had already settled on my five ways that are discussed below. See Kenny, *The Five Ways*.

13. Schrodinger, *What Is Life?,* 1.

time about religion but recognized a great problem in that today it is "next to impossible for a single mind fully to command more than a small portion" of the scientific and many other forms of relevant knowledge of the world. But Schrodinger was nevertheless willing to plunge ahead, declaring that: "I can see no other escape from this dilemma (lest our true aim be lost forever) than that some of us should venture to embark on a synthesis of facts and theories, although with secondhand and incomplete knowledge of some of them—and at the risk of making fools of ourselves. So much for my apology."[14] In embarking on this admittedly very ambitious book of my own, I found Schrodinger's remarks consoling and encouraging.

In writing this book, as noted previously, I have consulted with a wide body of contemporary professional literature in various fields, sifting through it all for those insights most relevant to my task. I have also consulted various contemporary theological resources. There has been a surprisingly large body of important writings bearing on the question of the existence of a god only in the last few years. Reading this literature, I can report that at the highest levels of contemporary intellectual inquiry the existence of a god is being explored today with an increasing interest and seriousness—a surprising development for the many people who not so long ago concluded that religion was fading away.

Doing "Qualitative" Social Science

Since history cannot be repeated, there is often only one grand "experiment" available to the social sciences. Thus, it is not possible to scientifically confirm or reject—in the manner of the physical sciences—broad hypotheses relating to long run human historical causation and explanation. Another significant problem in the social sciences is that there are frequently large numbers of "variables" interacting simultaneously, many of them highly correlated with one another (they are said by econometricians to be "collinear"), making it difficult or impossible to isolate statistically the causal influence of any one variable. A further major complication for human beings today is that events in society can be significantly influenced by ideas in the minds of the participants themselves. Even the ideas of social scientists can have significant influences on human outcomes (popular expectations of upward or downward economic trends, for example, as influenced by professional economic forecasters, can themselves have real impacts on the final economic outcomes).

14. Ibid.

Regarding the physical sciences as the highest form of learning, economists and other social scientists since World War II have devised various mathematical modeling, statistical and other formal quantitative methods in hopes of replicating the successes of physics. Unfortunately, however, this effort has mostly failed.[15] Moreover, it is the most important questions—dealing with issues of the greatest historical and social significance—that are the least suitable for applying the formal methods of social science quantitative analysis. Some social scientists have responded to this problem by tightly limiting their attention to those narrower problem areas in society that have the best prospects for using the formal methods that most closely resemble the physical sciences. Many other social scientists, unfortunately, have shown a virtually religious commitment to using the mathematical and statistical methods of the physical sciences even when they do not work well—thus mostly failing to illuminate the social and economic problems under study. Northwestern University decision theorist Charles Manski comments that economists and other social scientists "regularly express certitude about the consequences of alternative decisions" in offering their advice to nonexpert policy makers. However ethically questionable, such social scientists frequently offer "exact predictions of outcomes, . . . expressions of uncertainty are rare. Yet, policy predictions often are fragile. Conclusions may rest on critical unsupported assumptions or on leaps of logic" that mainly reveal the pre-existing beliefs and values of the researcher, as is also a common characteristic of much religious thought.[16]

In recent years a few other social scientists, however, have increasingly been accepting the inevitability of using less formal (more "qualitative") social science methods for many—probably most—inquiries into social decision making, including conclusions with respect to the most important aspects of human affairs. The overall method of such "qualitative social science"—of interest here because it is potentially applicable as well to theological inquiries about the existence of a god—is well summarized as follows:

> The [qualitative] social science we espouse seeks to make descriptive and causal inferences about the world. Those who do not share the assumptions of partial and imperfect knowability

15. The editorial page editor of *Barron's,* Thomas Donlan, writes: "Is economics a science? It isn't much like physics, chemistry, physiology or medicine, the hard sciences for which Nobel prizes are awarded. Economics is more like another Nobel subject, literature. . . . But it is [even] more like the award for peace." "A Slippery Course of Study," 43.

16. Manski, *Public Policy in an Uncertain World*, 2–3. See also McCloskey, *The Rhetoric of Economics*; and DeMartino and McCloskey, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Professional Economic Ethics*.

> and the aspiration for descriptive and causal understanding will have to look elsewhere for inspiration or for paradigmatic battles in which to engage.
>
> In sum, we do not provide recipes for scientific empirical research. We offer a number of precepts and rules, but these are meant to discipline thought, not stifle it. . . . We engage in the imperfect application of theoretical standards of inference to inherently imperfect research designs and empirical data. Any meaningful rules admit of exceptions, but we can ask that exceptions be justified explicitly, that their implications for the reliability of research be assessed, and that the uncertainty of conclusions be reported. We seek not dogma, but disciplined thought.[17]

As three Harvard social scientists write, the goal of such qualitative social science is often "to infer beyond the immediate data to something broader that is not directly observed"—such as, for example, the possible existence of a god.[18] Few social scientists admittedly have taken up the question of the existence of a god as a part of their professional efforts, but there is no reason in principle why such qualitative social science methods might not be applied to this long-standing central question for human beings. In the twentieth century, the social sciences displaced traditional Jewish and Christian theology as the most authoritative way of thinking about the human condition in society and the world. My own background and training as a social scientist that led to a strong interest in religion is unusual among contemporary writers about theological questions. My approach in this book might be described as being in part a special form of "qualitative" social science. It draws on traditional theological resources but seeks to integrate them—always using rational methods such as the social sciences ideally apply—with ideas and knowledge from many other specialized physical and social scientific sources.

Religion is Back

Partly reflecting the influence of Protestant religion, the American intellectual world was filled in the twentieth century with people who thought of religion exclusively as a matter of having some form of private faith. As this way of thinking was manifested among social scientists, religion thus was not a product itself of rational analysis but was a given "preference"

17. King, Keohane, and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*, 7.
18. Ibid., 8.

within an individual's overall "preference function," about which little could be said other than that it existed. Among economists, they might seek to study religion "objectively" but they considered that there was little of interest that could be said about the way in which the religious and other contents of an individual preference function were formed. Other social scientists approached religion in similar ways; its contents and influence on society could be usefully studied but not much of great interest could be said about the original sources of religious convictions themselves, and how they might have arisen as forms of belief and would continue to evolve in the future. The strong belief among social scientists and other academics that they could say little or nothing about the relative merits of differing religions or about the manner of improving the religious beliefs of a society was one reason that they showed such little interest in the twentieth century in studying the role—as obviously large as it has been—of religion in society. Their aversion was not as great but few policy makers saw it as their province to seek to improve the "culture" of a nation, perhaps as a necessary precondition, for example, to rapid economic development.

Even many such people, however, have recently been changing their mind. Stanley Fish does not fit the image of a typical defender of religious inquiry. A Yale PhD and former professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley, Johns Hopkins University, and Duke University, Fish is well known as a leading postmodern humanist. Yet, at his *New York Times* blog, Fish in 2009 revealed a surprisingly strong interest in religion. More and more people, he wrote, are seeking answers to "theological questions . . . like, 'Why is there anything in the first place?' 'Why what we do have is actually intelligible to us?' and 'Where do our notions of explanation, regularity, and intelligibility come from?'" Many who once worshiped at the altar of "liberal rationalism and its ideology of science," he suggested, have concluded that this was yet another false idol.[19]

Religion thus is back. Actually, it never went away, although it often took novel forms in the twentieth century. In deciding matters of sexual morality, the upbringing of children, marriage relationships, and other aspects of private behavior, a Freudian gospel, and its psychological successors, eclipsed the traditional Christian ethical messages.[20] In the public arena, as I have explored in writings over the past twenty years, secular religions such as Marxism, the American progressive "gospel of efficiency," the neoclassical economics of the second half of the twentieth century, and other forms of "economic religion" were the leading influences on government

19. Fish, "God Talk."

20. Vitz, *Psychology as Religion*; Epstein, *Psychotherapy as Religion*.

policies around the world.[21] In economic religion, "efficiency" and "inefficiency" take the earlier Christian place of "good" and "evil." Toward the end of the century, yet another secular religion, environmentalism, challenged the economic gospels—questioning the whole idea of "progress" as the path of the future salvation of the world.[22] So what is actually new is that a god—explicitly, no longer in such disguised forms—is back.[23] This was not only a Western but a worldwide phenomenon, as the secular gods of the twentieth century everywhere faced growing challenges.

Such surprising developments of our times do not regularly make the daily news but some observant journalists have been taking note. In a 2009 book, two writers for *The Economist* magazine examine "how the global revival of faith is changing the world." John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge comment in *God is Back* that the "political classes in the West are waking up, rather late, to the enduring power of religion."[24] The modern belief in the redemptive powers of economic progress had first come under powerful challenge as long ago as the events of World War I, in which nine million soldiers and six million civilians died to little or no purpose, victims of the follies of their political leaders.[25] An even greater blow to progressive faith came in the 1930s and 1940s with the show trials and prison camps of the former Soviet Union, the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, and further vast bloodshed across the battlefields of Europe and other parts of the world. It was impossible within the framework of the rational secular religions of progress to reconcile such events with the very rapid economic growth of the developed nations over the previous hundred years.[26] Apparently, something fundamental about the human condition had been missed in the thinking of the modern age, dating as far back as events in the Enlightenment. If bad human actions were caused by bad external environments in which "sinful" humans had lived, as so many firmly believed, the immense material progress of the modern age should have yielded commensurate gains in moral progress—as had clearly not happened.

Many leading intellectuals experienced a great disillusionment as early as the 1920s but for a whole society ideas change more slowly. Even after the

21. Nelson, *Reaching for Heaven on Earth*; Nelson, *Economics as Religion*; Nelson, "What Is 'Economic Theology'?"; Nelson, "The Theological Meaning of Economics"; Nelson, "Economic Religion versus Christian Values"; Nelson, "Sustainability, Efficiency and God"; Nelson, "Economics as Religion" (1994).

22. Nelson, *The New Holy Wars*; Nelson, "Calvinism Without God."

23. Nelson, "The Secularization Myth Revisited."

24. Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *God is Back*, 19.

25. Fleming, *The Illusion of Victory*.

26. Nelson, "The Secular Religions of Progress."

many horrible events of the first half of the twentieth century, those devout who had grown up believing in one or another of the secular religions of progress often found it difficult to change their thinking. At stake was no less than the optimistic self-understanding of the modern age. Indeed, it took the abominations of a Hitler, Stalin, and others of their twentieth century ilk to force a painful religious reconsideration that gathered momentum in the last decades of the twentieth century. As the *Economist* writers Micklethwait and Wooldridge observe, the core question being raised in the new god debates is "the battle for modernity" and its transcendent (or not) meaning.[27]

The core belief in progress was based on an assumption—a core element of faith, really—that the fundamental realities in society lie in "natural" (i.e., physical) phenomena, amenable to definitive scientific analysis, and thus allowing human beings to transform the future by making conscious scientific choices to radically alter their exterior—above all their economic—environments. If society perfects the external economic environment, most of the leading secular religions of the modern age took for granted, this would lead to the perfection both of future society and of the internal person as well—bringing about a "new man" and a new "heaven on earth." Traditional religion was left to play a much diminished role, perhaps as merely an epiphenomenon that offered at most a reflection of the "real" underlying economic forces at work. By the end of the twentieth century, however, all this was increasingly coming into basic question, as seemingly yet another utopian illusion in a long history of such utopian and eschatological expectations that long predated the Enlightenment as well.

One sign of the current rethinking of the modern project is the final book of Ronald Dworkin, a longtime distinguished professor of legal philosophy at New York University. Although he died in February 2013, Dworkin had completed by then *Religion Without God,* which appeared later that year. Recognizing that the "secular" is often actually religion in a different form, Dworkin considered that "expanding the territory of religion improves clarity by making plain the importance of what is shared across that territory" of religion in all its full modern diversity of expression. As Dworkin writes, we can thus speak, literally, not just metaphorically, of "religious atheism" as one particular form of genuinely religious belief. Such secular forms of religion share with traditional religion the objective to inquire "more fundamentally about the meaning of human life and what living well means." Reflecting the full scope of religion today, Dworkin declares that "the new religious wars are now really culture wars," frequently involving

27. Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *God is Back*, 24.

competing secular understandings of the overall human prospect.[28] Well before Dworkin, a leading theologian of the twentieth century, Paul Tillich, said much the same about developments in twentieth-century religion, that they took a wide variety of forms, sometimes not even widely and explicitly recognized as religion, but they were in fact true forms of religion in that they dealt with matters of "ultimate concern."[29]

Another recent sign of the comeback of religion is that the antagonists of religion have been put on the defensive. It is no coincidence that, in addition to *The God Delusion* and other books by Richard Dawkins, other prominent "new atheist" writers have also recently emerged, including the late Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris.[30] Hitchens in *God is Not Great* advanced the view that "there are . . . several ways in which religion is not just amoral, but positively immoral."[31] There is admittedly less novelty in the arguments of such new atheists than many people realize; in many aspects, their writings represent an updating of the messages of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche—now around one hundred years or more old.

There is today in the new atheism the same naturalism grounded in the Darwinist evolutionary understanding of human origins that in the second half of the nineteenth century replaced the biblical creation story for large numbers of people. The implication of Darwin—both then and now—is to suggest for many people that traditional biblical religion is a myth, no more scientifically truthful than innumerable other tribal myths of human history. Thus, long before Dawkins wrote that the God of the Old Testament is a "sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully," and that the Christian religion is a "pernicious delusion," Nietzsche in the late nineteenth century was declaring that the belief in a Christian God was "our most enduring lie" which "turns life into a monstrosity."[32] Freud saw religion as a great "illusion" that is "comparable to a childhood neurosis"; seen from a scientific perspective, we must now "view religious teachings, as it were, as neurotic relics, and we may now argue that the time has probably come . . . for replacing the [religious] effects of [psychological] repression by the results of the rational operation of the intellect."[33]

For both the old, and now again with the new atheists, it is unimaginable that god might be a hidden cosmic intelligence whose "mind"—if

28. Dworkin, "Religion Without God."
29. Brown, *Ultimate Concern*.
30. Hitchens, *God is Not Great*; Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*; Harris, *The End of Faith*.
31. Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 205.
32. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 51, 52. Nietzsche quoted in Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 121.
33. Cherry, "Freud and Religion."

working in an altogether scientifically mysterious way—whoever and whatever "he" is—comprehensively controls the workings of the universe. While they are not as dogmatic, mostly stay out of public controversies about religious subjects, and have a generally more positive view of the practically beneficial role of religion in society, a large part of the American intellectual elite still holds today to such a naturalist way of thinking about religion. For them, the old truths of religion do not themselves have an objective validity; rather, religion is itself to be "explained" by more fundamental realities—in this respect Marxism was simply an extreme example of a much broader twentieth-century way of thinking. It is no longer necessary to look to a supernatural God because in the modern age the scientific method has given human beings much more verifiable and accurate ways of gaining access to the eternal truths of the world, as compared with the Bible or any other previous sources of divinely revealed knowledge.

In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins refers at great length to the many evil things that—he is, unfortunately, often correct to say—have been committed over the course of history in the name of religion. He also points to the many silly things that individual Christians—and groups of Christian faithful—have actually said in the past. All these real Christian failings, as Dawkins makes the case, represent a leading argument against the existence—or certainly the benevolent character—of God. An equivalent exercise, however, can be applied to the atheism that Dawkins advocates. Indeed, Soviet and Nazi "atheistic fundamentalisms" easily eclipsed Christian religion in encouraging a parade of horrors over the course of the first half of the twentieth century. But, of course, to treat "atheistic" forms of religion in this way would be no more fair than Dawkins's treatment of Christianity. The American theologian William Cavanaugh thus writes in *The Myth of Religious Violence* that it is rationally "incoherent" to argue that "there is something called religion—a genus of which Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and so on are species—which is necessarily more inclined toward violence than are ideologies and institutions that are identified as secular."[34]

Conclusion

Whatever the omissions and other theological failings of *The God Delusion* (and they are many), the book has nevertheless served a valuable purpose. Partly because of Dawkins's reputation as a leading popular expositor of biological evolution, combined with his skill as a writer, the book reached a large audience (*The God Delusion* made the *New York Times* best-seller list).

34. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 5.

Dawkins has been on the cutting edge of a new trend to a freewheeling and explicit debate about religion in the public arena, following a century or more of comparative relegation to the margins.[35] He therefore should be thanked for his success in bringing religion back to the center of public discussion.

In seeking to continue the discussion, this book is partly intended for those people who begin today with a deep skepticism about, or reject outright, the existence of a god. The book is also intended for those many Christian faithful who nevertheless have some doubts about and would find helpful a carefully developed statement of the strong rational grounds for believing in the (very probable) existence of a god, drawing mostly on sources outside past and current formal theology. The book is organized around the explanation and development of five rational ways of thinking about the question of a god. I hasten to add that there are many other ways—some putting a greater emphasis on reason and others on personal faith—of addressing this fundamental question for human beings, including the writings of a number of distinguished theologians explicitly operating within the Christian tradition.[36]

35. For rebuttals to Dawkins, see McGrath and McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion?*; Cornwell, *Darwin's Angel*; Ward, *Why There Almost Certainly Is a God*; Hahn and Wiker, *Answering the New Atheism*; and McGrath, *Dawkins' God*.

36. See, among many such writings, Lewis, *Mere Christianity*; Swinburne, *Is There a God?*; Craig, *On Guard*; Ward, *The Evidence for God*; and Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*.