Preface

"Religion" in the academic environment I have worked in for more than twenty years—at the School of Public Policy of the University of Maryland—is an awkward subject. Unlike some other departments, it is not that my longtime colleagues are hostile to religion or do not acknowledge the potential practical benefits of religion—many of them would readily admit that religion, for whatever reason, often seems to make people more agreeable, more honest and trustworthy, good neighbors if you will—or reliable business partners. But many of these same colleagues would say that religion has little to offer with respect to explaining the fundamental "truths of the world." For that, they look to science, both in its physical science and social science versions. Religion for them is a kind of happy illusion, however great a role it has obviously played over the totality of human history, perhaps overall for the good but sometimes also with terribly destructive consequences.

As a professional economist by training and thus more broadly a social scientist, I fit well personally in many ways in this academic environment. My own professional history, however, shows some significant indications of heretical tendencies. After majoring in mathematics at Brandeis University, and then getting a PhD in economics at Princeton University in 1971, I left the academic world in 1972 in part because I was uncomfortable with what I saw as a limited understanding of the realities of the human condition in my own field of economics—and that seemingly was also true of the other social sciences, although I was less familiar with them. I ended up working as an economist in the Office of Policy Analysis of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior in Washington, DC from 1975 to 1993.[1] It was there that I first clearly recognized that much of American public policy debate, including matters relating to natural resources and the environment that I was directly involved with in my work, were really about religion—broadly understood to include not only Christianity and other traditional religions

1. Nelson, "The Economics Profession and the Making of Public Policy"; Nelson, "The Office of Policy Analysis in the Department of the Interior."

but also "secular" (or some prefer to label them "implicit") religions as well.[2] I resolved by the mid-1980s to explore in my own writings the religious dimensions of public policy debate in the United States as necessary to achieving a fuller understanding of the American political and policy making worlds—focusing on my professional areas of special concern, natural resources and environmental policy. I did not realize it at the time, but this was taking me into the realm of theology.

Since 1990, while also continuing to pursue actively more conventional public policy subjects, I have been spending a good part of my time thinking and writing about religion (including in this category belief systems such as economics and environmentalism), including three books and many scholarly (and also more popular) articles, an area of intellectual activity of mine that my School of Public Policy colleagues today often find meritorious (for one thing, I have had some success) and intellectually interesting but it clearly puts me well outside the social science and public policy mainstreams.[3]

This book takes me even further afield. In it I explore the question of whether a god exists (throughout this book, I will write generically of "a god"— assumed to be a monotheistic god, unless it is specifically the Christian God I am referring to, or is being discussed by others, and in such cases I will use "God"). While I have written a great deal over the past twenty-five years about matters relating to religion, and three of my books have been widely reviewed in religious magazines and theology journals (as well as

2. The late British Anglican vicar Edward Bailey launched a scholarly movement in the 1970s to study what he labeled as "implicit religion"—a term he preferred to the similar "secular religion" and included belief systems such as Marxism as literal forms of religion. As interest spread in his efforts, he founded the Centre for the Study of Implicit Religion and Contemporary Spirituality in 1995, began publishing the journal *Implicit Religion* in 1998, and held annual meetings in England for many years where international scholars with related interests assembled. Partly due to Bailey's efforts, there is now a chair of implicit religion at Cambridge University. He writes in 2012 that there is much to be gained if we recognize the presence of actual religions in modern life whose religious tenets are mainly expressed in hidden and thus implicit ways. Hence, as Bailey puts in, we may advance significantly in our understanding of the world, and the workings of modern society if we "apply something of what we now know about [traditional] religious life, to ordinary secular life" where actual religion is often still powerfully present in disguised forms. Bailey, "'Implicit Religion': What Might That Be?," 196. See also Bailey, "Implicit Religion: A Bibliographical Introduction"; Bailey, *Implicit Religion in Contemporary Society;* Bailey, *Implicit Religion: An Introduction*; and Bailey, "Implicit Religion" (2009); and Bailey, "Implicit Religion" (2010).

3. My books relating to religion include *Reaching for Heaven on Earth*, *Economics as Religion*, and, most recently, *The New Holy Wars*. Among my other recent writings, see also "The Secular Religions of Progress," "Bringing Religion into Economic Policy Analysis," "Economics and Environmentalism", and"Calvinism Without God."

in social science journals), I have not previously attempted a book as ambitious as this one. Like many people, however, I have often wondered over a lifetime whether a god exists. But I have never committed a sustained intellectual effort to answering this question—until now. I think by writing, so this book is in part the record of the recent progress of my thinking, taking me from a long-standing basic agnosticism as recently as about eight years ago to now believing that a god (very probably) exists. This god may well resemble but is not necessarily the precise divinity of Christianity or any other of the traditional major religions of Western or other world history.

It may be possible for me to make a contribution to a subject about which such an enormous amount has already been written over such a very long time because in the twentieth century, and now early in the twenty-first century, there appeared a number of important arguments, scientific discoveries, and other new evidence relating to the question of a god, as generated in areas such as physics, evolutionary biology, the philosophy of human consciousness, and the history of religion. Indeed, the pace of such discoveries seems to have accelerated in recent years; just since 2010 multiple significant writings bearing on the question of a god have appeared.[4] Despite their large theological significance, few theologians study such matters as part of their routine theological training or research. In part, the character of much of the theology being done today reflects the disciplinary specialization that characterizes the contemporary university, now ironically extending even to theology itself. As with other areas of university life, the professionalization of theology imposes its own significant intellectual limitations for obtaining an understanding of the largest questions of the human condition on earth.

Moreover, the leadership of the institutional religions of the United States typically have a greater detailed knowledge of the history and contents of their own religions. Their thinking on theological matters almost inevitably is influenced significantly by their long-standing religious commitments. Hence, there are few if any "experts" whose specialties include all of the important diverse areas of knowledge that today must be brought together in studying "theology"—in the most traditional sense of the word, as seeking to encompass the full truths of the human situation, theology being the best way we have available to us of seeking to understand the "meaning

4. Four important recent books are: Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*; Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*; Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*; and Dworkin, *Religion Without God*. While they do not discuss at any length the existence of a god or other explicitly theological topics, two other important recent contributions with large theological implications are Frenkel, *Love & Math,* and Tegmark, *Our Mathematical Universe*.

of it all." Thus, even as I am an outside "trespasser" in the world of theology, this may offer me some advantages as well as disadvantages.

As I will conclude in this book, it is possible to make a strong probabilistic case for the existence of a god by reaching across diverse specialized areas of contemporary inquiry in the physical sciences, philosophy, evolutionary biology, the social sciences, and theology. While most of the individual arguments made in this book have been made by others, the totality of them, as I have assembled and developed them below, offers, at least as I like to think, a fresh perspective on an age-old question of immense interest to many people—the question of whether a god exists. As this book will document, I have now concluded that there is a strong (a very probable) case that a god—in the sense of some supernatural, superhuman power overseeing the world—does in fact exist.