ROBIN ATTFIELD  
*Lecturer in Philosophy, University College, Cardiff*

THE GOD OF RELIGION AND THE GOD OF PHILOSOPHY

Ever since the time of Pascal men have feared that the ‘God’ worshipped by believers and the ‘God’ contemplated by philosophers were somehow different. The former was personal, historically active, slow to anger and plentiful in mercy; the latter was dubiously able to be described in personal terms at all, and infinite in such a way as to baffle the imagination. The ‘God’ of the former at least had the advantage of complying with what was alleged to be religious experience: and so it was not surprising that religious men feared that the ‘God’ of philosophy threatened that experience itself; whereas at times philosophers have fed such suspicions by denying to God various properties not on logical grounds but because close involvement with man seemed to them not to comport with the divine dignity.

Before tackling the question of the relation of the different beliefs involved, I must locate the problem. At least this much is clear: the problem concerns two concepts, not two Gods. It might be thought that the only way to make progress is to discuss God himself, rather than human notions: ultimately we are interested in what answers to our notions, and not just in the notions themselves. But we cannot assume that there is something answering to every notion, nor that even when there is, there are as many things as notions. In the present case no one is suggesting that there are two Gods; indeed this is impossible on either view, since there cannot be more than one omnipotent agent. The ‘Gods’ of religion and of philosophy are therefore ideas, though ideas which may themselves have an application. They are different accounts of what it is to be God, accounts which allow us to have some idea what we are asking when we ask if God exists or what we are confessing when we declare belief in God.

Neither among religious men nor among philosophers is there agreement as to the nature of God. But on the side of religion, the Judaeo-Christian tradition at least supplies some common ground between what individual Jews and Christians have at various times believed. On the other hand there is much less agreement among philosophers. A large number of practising philosophers in Britain today are atheists or agnostics: and, although to be an atheist or an agnostic one needs a notion of God to deny or doubt, it is hardly to be expected that they would all have in mind the notion which, for example, Aquinas had. Others again hold that the term ‘God’ is meaning-
less, and not a genuine concept at all: they would hold that it involves self-contradictions and confusion, and claim not to understand the language of those who talk of God, whether to confess, doubt or deny. The philosophical 'God' which Pascal had in mind was that of Descartes, a notion largely coloured by that philosopher's readiness to employ the ontological argument (an argument now widely discredited). It is normally important, therefore, to ask, 'Which philosopher's God?' before generalising about the God of philosophy.

Theologians are all too ready to regard the 'God' of philosophy as a speculative idea, and would often associate this idea with either Aristotle or the neo-Platonists. It must be granted that at various times philosophers have formulated systems, and in their systems have accorded to God a variety of roles: and further that even when those systems are internally consistent, as in the case of Spinoza, the entire edifice itself is gravely questionable. Indeed, if this were the whole of the story, the philosophical notion or notions of 'God' could perhaps be dismissed as an arrogant fiction of man's sinful presumption: though even then the logical consequences would probably be more far-reaching than would appear at first sight.

But this is not the whole of the story. Aristotle and Aquinas did not simply opt for a notion of God which happened to satisfy them, though no doubt they were not completely immune from pre-conceived assumptions. The character they ascribed to God was the character they felt rationally obliged to ascribe to him in the light of the arguments they devised or assessed, and in particular in the light of arguments for God's existence. Not surprisingly some arguments are arguments for a deity of one character, some for a deity of another: and some arguments are better than others. So a philosopher's notion of a being or agent beyond or distinct from the world of sensible appearances will very reasonably be geared to that argument (or those arguments) he takes to succeed in establishing the existence of such a being or agent. (This tenet, at any rate, holds good of those who consider reasoning about God's existence both appropriate and successful.)

For example, it was no whim of philosophers when they concluded that the Creator was unchangeable ab extra, i.e. unchangeable by initiatives other than his own except through his own consent. This doctrine, which sometimes sticks in the throat of religious believers, turns out to be indispensable, at least if the arguments for the existence of God are taken seriously. For an unchangeable God is able to cause a world of change, and reflection on such a God allows change to be explained. And it will not do to say that a changeable God could cause change equally well. For if the changeable world has to be explained by references to what causes or makes possible all change, a changeable God would need to be explained in the same way. The regress of explanations can only stop if the ultimate author of change is a God unchangeable ab extra; and then economy of reasoning
allows us to dispense with any intermediate Gods (i.e. Gods directly responsible for the flux of our world but themselves susceptible to change through the agency of some ulterior deity).

Accordingly where philosophical reasoning has been married to natural theology, the notions of God adopted will not have been adopted arbitrarily. The question about God’s character which such philosophers may be seen as asking themselves is as follows: ‘What must God be like if he is able to create and if there is reason to believe that such a one as he exists?’ And the proper replies include, at least, omnipotence, aseity and omniscience; or at any rate the latter will be included if God is personal, as the teleological argument suggests. The latter argument further suggests that God is purposive, and a lover of order rather than chaos (but it does not alone establish God’s benevolence or love). And it is the notion required by these arguments in natural theology taken together which I shall henceforth refer to as ‘the philosophical notion of God’. On this notion God is omnipotent, indestructible, uncreatable, unchangeable ab extra, omniscient, purposive and a lover of order.

It is now possible to explain why the notion of ‘God’ held by some philosophers is thought unsatisfactory by religious believers. For the philosophical notion of God stops short at crediting God with any particular sort of will (apart from his loving order), though it does imply he has a will of some sort. It is a sketchy and scanty notion, and those who held it are not thereby committed to any view of God’s purposes for man’s salvation or for the course of history. Indeed it is largely couched in negative terms, and it led Aquinas to maintain (though on my view incoerently) that though we can know that God is, we cannot know what he is at all. This overstates the position, yet the ‘God’ of natural theology is certainly much less clearly delineated than, say, the ‘God’ of the prophets.

If, then, God answered to the philosophical notion discussed above, and no more, he would scarcely be fit for worship. Once the religious man realises this, he is immediately inclined to leave the philosophers to their squabbles and pay no further heed to what they say: for he is usually confident that the character of God is what his own religious experience or that of his community suggests it to be, and satisfied that he has no need to consult the philosophers on this topic.

This however would be a serious error of judgment. For no-one’s feelings guarantee the existence of what one believes to cause those feelings or of what one believes to be the object of such experiences. Religious experience is fully compatible with there being no God. It is therefore no independent source of information about what, if God exists, he is like. It is certainly likely to involve some fairly clear notion of God, but that is little help, for if God exists he may answer to an altogether different notion or description.

If, on the other hand the religious believer takes his stand on revelation,
he is in no better case. Let it even be granted, as some revelationists claim, that knowledge of God is only possible if God reveals it. A minor point to notice here is that natural theology is even so not excluded, as God might reveal himself through human reasoning. The major point, however, is that the revelationist relies on assumptions with which revelation cannot possibly supply him, and for which he relies on natural theology. For the revelationist builds on the assumption that God reveals. But this cannot be taken for granted: it makes perfectly good sense to deny it. It is assumed in the first place that God exists and it is assumed in the second place that he is of such a character as to reveal himself. If, then, the case of the revelationist is based on nothing but itself, the man he confronts can grant that what he says is imposing and, perhaps, internally consistent, but deny that there is any more reason to believe any of it than there is to believe in Zeus or in Thor.

We thus arrive at the position where it is seen that the philosophical notion of God arrived at by natural theology is too scanty for worship; whereas religious notions of God are adequate for worship but such that without support independent of appeals to special experience or to revelation the existence of a God so understood is intellectually unfounded. The religious notions may be void unless philosophers can support belief with grounds: the philosophical notion under discussion is of a deity too remote and unknown to be of practical interest unless the notion is somehow enriched, perhaps by notions deriving from purported revelations.

In my view natural theology does supply grounds for some sort of belief which make it possible to proceed beyond this impasse. Material objects exist but might not have: their existence can only be explained by the existence of something of such a character as to be unable to be created, changed or destroyed, and the cause of whose existence it therefore makes no sense to seek. Then again the regularity of the universe through time and space could have been otherwise, with some zones of time or of space differing (in the behaviour of the matter occupying them) from others. This regularity can only be explained by a cause of regularity able to operate on all times and places and accordingly not subject to spatial or temporal limitations: and it can best be explained by a purposive agent desirous of order.

This is not the place to deal with the objections to such reasoning such as those of Hume and Kant, though I am confident they can be dealt with. Its role in this paper is to supply a notion of an agent able to create, and to hint at the reasoning which supports belief in the existence of such an agent. My present interest lies in how to proceed beyond this point. How, if at all, can this scanty philosophical notion of God be reconciled with that of religion?

There seem to be three crucial requirements. (1) The notions must be compatible. (2) There must be grounds for supposing that the world’s
Creator is of such a character as to reveal himself. (3) It must be possible to recognise revelations on some criterion.

(1) The requirement of compatibility is important because of what will happen if it is disregarded. If the philosophical arguments only support belief in the existence of a deity who has the property of being non-\( x \), and some prophet or visionary lovingly dwells on the ways and will of a deity who has the property of being \( x \), so much the worse for the beliefs of the prophet or visionary. His writings may be great poetry and inspire to high endeavour, but what he says cannot rationally be credited.

This compatibility requirement calls for a great deal of reflection. It does not demolish the Christian religion, but it does exclude a number of things Christians have wanted to say. The reflection is often called ‘negative theology’, and most preachers and ordinary believers have at some time or other indulged in it, saying to themselves, ‘I could not find a God credible who had such-and-such a characteristic.’ But this reflection has its rules and its discipline: it certainly is not implied that believers can swallow or reject religious tenets as their mood directs them; rather their meditations will only be sound if they stick to the arguments.

The reason that this reflection does not demolish Christianity is as follows. It might seem that whatever is not built into the philosophical notion of God introduced above is to be rejected: but this is not so. It is quite possible, as far as the cosmological and teleological arguments go, that God has a will for men: it is just that those arguments supply no information on this subject one way or the other. What they effectively exclude, however, is the denial of what is essential to the notion of God involved. Thus if it is held that God is physically located in space, either in one place as Baalim-worshippers held or in all space as Sir Isaac Newton held, the philosopher can properly point out that on such a notion of God there is no reason to think God exists, for such a God would not be able to create. Only the denial of essential attributes of the God of the philosophical notion is excluded.

Yet the effects of the compatibility requirement are still far-reaching. For God is often thought of as subject to the same sort of qualities as ourselves: and our own thoughts, emotions and desires involve all sorts of limitations in knowledge and limitations attendant upon our situation in time and space. Thus some ascriptions of human predicates to God miscarry just because God lacks these limitations. One quite important instance is the ascription to God which is sometimes made of changes of intentions in the light of new events. Yet if God is somehow timelessly the contemporary of all events, such changes of mind would have no place. This may not be too serious, as the religious point can be re-expressed: God, perhaps, so makes the world that evil actions often produce unpleasant consequences for the agents concerned; or again, when at particular times sinners seek forgiveness, perhaps God timelessly forgives them. Again, though God does not do
things at one time or another, perhaps, in creating the world he (timelessly)
brings it about that particular events happen at one time or another. In such
ways it will quite often be possible to re-express religious tenets so that they
will stand examination. Not that such strict re-expression is necessary in
most practical contexts: but where it is impossible, the appropriate tenet
can hardly be held if believers expect their beliefs to be taken seriously.

(2) But compatibility is not enough. It is possible to hold, compatibly
with the belief that an omnipotent Creator exists, that he is benevolent or
that he is malevolent (though not, of course, both). Thus though there is no
difficulty in the way of enriching the philosophical notion of God, the matter
of reasons and arguments arises again if the enriching is not to be vain and
futile. Anyone can stipulate that to be God an agent must not only be able
to create but also, for example, love righteousness: but mere stipulation is
idle. For whether a love of righteousness is built into the definition of 'God'
or not, the question remains whether or not the world's creator is in fact of
this quality. And as it has been declared that he is by great religious leaders
and great religious books, this whole kind of question rests on whether God
reveals himself and whether we can recognise his revelations if he does.

Now clearly it is no use appealing to Scripture to settle these questions,
since the status of Scripture is one of the issues at stake. The only book we
can look to here is the book of creation. Now it is likely that the creator
would reveal to man his will for human life if indeed he has such a will; for
otherwise we could scarcely learn that will and God's purposes would be
frustrated. The grounds, in their turn, for the belief that God has a particular
will rest on the nature of the material universe and on that of man. These
I consider in turn.

Now if the overall effect of the universal regularities that obtain in nature
is conducive to human welfare, it is at least likely that God has some sort of
purpose for men or human affairs. The problem of natural evil and suffering
here arises, but for once at the proper level: the proper level is that of
universal regularities, not that of particular acts or occurrences; for if God
governed the world at the latter level, no scope would in any case be left
for men to plan and choose how to live in that the world would be too
unstable for serious choices to be possible or for choice to be efficacious
enough from our point of view to be worth making. So natural evil at the
level of particular events is no objection to divine benevolence, since the
latter precludes particular interventions. The believer in God's benevolence
and therefore in his purposiveness can only properly be challenged at the
level of universal regularities: and here he can challenge his critic to describe
alternative regularities which would be more beneficial in overall outcome.
To the best of my knowledge, this has not been done; granted that any
alternative laws, e.g. ones on which, perhaps, disease would not be trans-
mitted by viruses, would have to be genuinely universal, and therefore apply
to cell growth and decay in general including the growth of those living organisms which we are glad to see alive. I would hold, then, that there is a slight presumption at least in favour of belief in the creator's benevolence from a survey of the nature of the material universe.

The other ground for belief in the creator's purposiveness being of one particular sort is the human capacity for self-determination. That this capacity exists can be proved to anyone who has followed the argument of this paper, or any other argument. For if we could not believe or do anything but what we actually do believe and do, and if we also believed ourselves to lack the power to do or believe otherwise, then we could not regard ourselves as doing or believing what we do or believe for good reasons, since we should have been bound to do or believe it anyway, regardless of reasons. But those who either accept or reject my (or anyone else's) conclusions on the strength of grounds are thereby committed to holding that they believe whatever it is that they do believe for good reasons: that is, that they were able to assess the available evidence, could have assessed it differently, but in fact assessed favourably the grounds for the beliefs which became theirs. So no-one can take his own denial of human freedom of choice seriously: for anyone who makes this denial cannot hold that he believes anything that he believes for good reasons. And as anyone who either agrees or disagrees with me on rational grounds relies on reasons, no-one can consistently deny human freedom.

But, granted the existence of a deity able to create and therefore to bring about what would not have been the case otherwise, to acknowledge human freedom is already to say that man, necessarily one of the creatures of such a deity, resembles the deity in this all-important respect: he too is able to bring about what would not have been the case otherwise, both in his reflection and in his action.

Why then should a creative agent, himself omniscient and purposive, endow some of these creatures with the powers to reason and choose well or badly, powers to some extent resembling his own; and thus by their own choices to develop well or badly both themselves and the world around them? It is unlikely that this should be some colossal practical joke of an indifferent divine magician. The creator must have wanted some of his creatures to be able to do what they were not bound to do; must have wanted his creation not to be machine-like in all respects but to embody creativity, creaturely though it was itself. And certainly only by exercising choices and taking responsibility for our own acts and beliefs can we become mature people: this seems to be essential to what it is to be human.

The creator, then, so created some of his creatures that the exercise of choice was necessary for their flourishing. This policy however involves the possibility of those same creatures so choosing as to ruin their own lives and those of their fellows, and thus to frustrate at least one likely purpose of the
creator, namely that they would be able to exercise the capacity to choose and develop it. By this stage we can hardly imagine the creator as indifferent towards this possibility, if only for the reasons given: and another possible reason why he should not be indifferent, though one which it is difficult to establish, is that he created a world including autonomous creatures because he wanted them to love him. But this aside, enough has been said to suggest the likelihood that the creator would prefer some outcomes of choice to others; and would be likely to make provision for men to learn, not necessarily that a certain course of action was his will, but at least what it was good for them to do. These are my grounds for supposing that the creator is of such a character as to be likely to reveal himself.

(3) To say all this is already to say a fair amount about God's character: thus it is likely that he will 'not leave himself without witnesses'. The problem that remains, however, concerns which the witnesses are: among the dazzling and conflicting claims made on behalf of rival revelations, which are genuinely revelatory? And how should we recognise one that was?

This is an issue to which philosophers and students of the comparative study of religions are now giving attention. The main contribution I can make here is the thesis that it will almost entirely depend on what the man or the sacred book says, on the content of the message. And this is controversial, as others are prone to place stress on our reaction to the individual who conveys the alleged revelation, and on his bearing and impressiveness. I say 'almost entirely', because if the man strikingly fails to live up to his message, this may be an indication that the message is impractical, regardless of the merits it may seem to have. But beyond this it seems to me to be the message itself that counts.

For we have seen reason to suspect that God desires the flourishing of human individuals (and therefore necessarily also of human societies), and is likely to have made provision for men to discover wherein this flourishing consists and what social rules and qualities of character conduce to it or are constitutive of it. The only way then, surely, to test, without preconceived assumptions peculiar to one culture or religion only, the genuineness of a purported revelation with any ethical implications will be by asking how well it comports with what is likely to be God's will in these respects. So it will be to the content that we must turn. And if the content does appear to bespeak what a benevolent creator is likely to want his autonomous creatures to do, then it will be revelatory, regardless of the identity of the man who utters it, or of his country or period. For what other grounds could we have or need for supposing a message to be from God? For instance, the test that men will die for a genuine revelation is erratic: fanatics have been prepared to die for almost anything; but to the extent that men are only prepared to die for what is good, this test will apply, but only because it points in exactly the same direction as the previous one. If, granted the nature of man and
society, a given message conveys the best path to the flourishing of both, it will both be God's will and the sort of thing good men will stand by to the last.

There is in fact another test, but it again relates to the content of the purported revelation. This is simply the test of truth. If the conveyor of a purported revelation is convicted of serious falsehood, he emerges as either sincere but mistaken or else an imposter. On the other hand men who get their facts wrong do sometimes at the same time propound wise evaluations or solutions: and, though it does little credit to their powers of reasoning, what they say may still be revelatory as to its ethical content.

But where does all this lead with respect to religious notions of God which are derived from alleged revelations? It leads us this far, that there are criteria for recognising revelations: but for the person inclined to appeal to authority about the nature of God it has the drawback that by and large every allegedly revealed tenet must be taken on its own merits. This is clearly necessary if the above criterion is to be applied. The only modification that can be written in is as follows: where a particular source of revelation has always proved revelatory in the past it will be proper to accord it some authority, and there will be a slight presumption in favour of accepting as revelatory whatever else it says. But in principle any single tenet can always be scrutinised on its merits, so this modification is hardly a concession.

There seem then to be no grounds for crediting in general whatever is claimed as an attribute of God on the strength of revelation. Each tenet will have to stand on its own merits, and no one can be under any obligation, rational or moral, to believe what there are no reasons to support.

We have seen that in some degree attributes ascribed to God by religious believers can be philosophically defended, and that on the other hand the philosophical notion of God sets important limits on what the believer, or anyone else, can sensibly say about God. It has also been shown that the philosophical notion can defensibly be enriched in such a way as to make worship possible, but that any further enrichment, in the directions for example of Christology or soteriology, cannot simply be accepted on the basis of any purported revelation alone, but must be argued for in detail. And in some cases, like the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, I should anticipate that grave difficulties stand in the way. Nevertheless the theologian cannot afford to dispense with reasoned argument: otherwise no one is obliged to take his first principles seriously.