

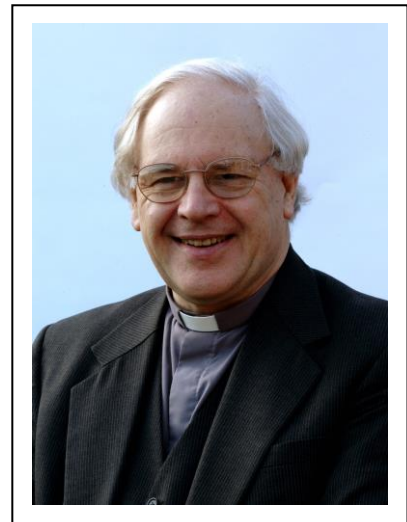
# The Challenge of Atheism: Lessons for Christians

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## 1. THE ORIGINS OF ATHEISM: A SIMPLE, MATERIALIST VIEW OF HUMANKIND

From the ancient world up until the post-Reformation era, belief in God or the gods was deemed to be relatively “normal.” *Explicit* atheism was largely an exception. Admittedly, Democritus (mid-fifth to fourth century BC) appeared to teach an *implied* atheism as a part of his theory of atoms. Epicurus (341–270 BC) shared a similar viewpoint. Although their philosophies were influential, these views were not the norm.



Even Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), in spite of his criticism of popular religion, did not commit himself to explicit atheism. He did, however, promote a materialist view of the world. Everything, he urged, is generated by causal forces or human appetites and passions. “Religion” is largely due to ignorance of second causes. In his political treatise *Leviathan* (1651), the supreme power is the state, especially the monarch. A social contract, primarily built on self-interest, prevents civilization sliding back into the remote past, when, as is often quoted, life was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

As David Berman shows in his history of atheism, British government legislation in 1677–1678 and in 1697 tended to drive explicit atheism underground. Nevertheless, without doubt many in England, at least in the upper classes, regarded Hobbes’s philosophy as *implying* atheism, which they adopted.<sup>1</sup> Berman cites a number of “free thinkers,” including John Wilmot, earl of Rochester, who even believed in a Supreme Being, and could not think that the world came into being through mere chance. He characterized

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<sup>1</sup> David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain from Hobbes to Russell* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 48–69.

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such a being as “a vast power,” even if not “personal.” Hobbes himself was ambiguous. Much more explicit in his earlier atheism was Daniel Scargill in his work *Recantation* (1669). In this work he recants his previous denial of God as “dangerous and malicious.” He explained that, in the past, he “gloried to be ... an Atheist.” Berman described this as “avowed atheism” in contrast to the “speculative atheism” of Hobbes. Whether Hobbes’s cautious ambiguity was sincere or diplomatic we cannot be certain, but he had at least provided a theoretical basis for atheism. It is simply a fact that in the seventeenth century *avowed* atheism was generally regarded with horror as subversive.

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Anthony Collins (1676–1729) is almost universally identified as a Deist (discussed below). He was well known for his *Essay concerning the Use of Reason* (1707) and for *A Discourse of Freethinking* (1713). Henning Graf Reventlow associates him with “the heyday of Deism,” as do most writers, but Berman rejects the term “Deist” for him, calling him “a speculative atheist.”<sup>2</sup> He argues, “For prudential reasons Collins held back from ... publishing his atheism.”<sup>3</sup> Berman’s next major milestone is probably David Hume (1711–1776). Hume is on record as denying “atheism” twice, and clearly his philosophy points in the direction of skepticism and probably atheism. But his “atheism” is not as clearly explicit or avowed as that of Baron d’Holbach (1723–1789) or Denis Diderot (1713–1784). Both writers were *avowed* atheists, representing the spirit of the French Enlightenment, especially in d’Holbach’s *System of Nature* (1770).

In Britain, avowed or explicit atheism emerged in the last decade of the eighteenth century. The Romantic poet Percy Shelley (1792–1822) represents an early-nineteenth-century example. Shelley’s system of atheism has been called “Hume made explicit.” Like Hume, he concentrated on sense experience, and argued that the world can be explained in a nontheistic, naturalistic way. Like some of the French atheists, he argued that the world did not “need” what he called the hypothesis of God.

Materialism is best seen in the writers of the French Enlightenment. Julien de La Mettrie (1709–1751) wrote *Man the Machine* in 1747. Human beings, he argued, merely reflect physiological processes; speech is no more than physical sound; the human mind is reduced to neurons in the brain. Similarly, d’Holbach saw the whole world as a machine, a huge system of material particles. Again, as in Hume, knowledge is derived from sensation or sense experience. The mind is explained as an “epiphenomenon,” a by-product of the increasing complexity of physical organisms. In many ways this is the simplest kind of atheism. It relies on a mechanistic account of everything, and stands in

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<sup>2</sup> Henning Graf Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World* (London: SCM, 1984), 354; Berman, *History of Atheism*, 70–92.

<sup>3</sup> Berman, *History of Atheism*, 75.

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contrast with the more sophisticated atheism of Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud. It relies not on Hegel or social theory, but upon a reductive version of empiricism.

Lessons for Christian believers will become more sophisticated when we observe the forms of atheism that follow Feuerbach. Meanwhile, Christians need to value more highly the significance of *God's gift to humankind of reason* (see chap. 6, on humanity). If this form of atheism were true, atheists would then have *no grounds whatever for claiming that their own argument was rational, or even reasonable*. For presumably their argument arose simply from a *random pattern* of physical atoms, molecules, or neurons in the brain. An atheist would also strain to account for, or to explain, *art or music*, except as sound patterns of wavelengths that could be observed on an oscilloscope. We discussed this in chapter 3, under the argument from design. Christians may find that they have to think twice before sharing the tendency *to disparage and underrate human reason*. It is no accident that the largely secular world of reporting in media today has replaced the traditional question, "What do you *think* about this?" with "How do you *feel* about this?" As we shall note below, rationality is part of "the image of God." In countries where there may be wealth, security, and education, many Christians seem often passively to accept the values of largely materialist societies.

## 2. "GOD" AS A HUMAN PROJECTION: FEUERBACH AND FREUD

In the wake of Hegel's pupil Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872), a far more insidious form of atheism emerged than reductionism or materialism as such. In his youth Feuerbach studied theology in Heidelberg, and philosophy in Berlin. He became disenchanted with Hegel's thought, along with other "young left-wing Hegelians," who included David F. Strauss and Bruno Bauer. Feuerbach sums up the development of his earlier thought in the well-known quasi-chronological aphorism: "God was my first thought; reason, my second; humankind, my third and last thought." We can see this threefold transition by noting his disillusion first with theology and then with Hegel. He believed that theology masked the true *human* origin of religion, while Hegel's philosophy, he claimed, deified reason at the expense of humanity and life. Thus in his major work, *The Essence of Christianity*, he wrote: "The divine is nothing else than the human being, or rather human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, i.e. real, bodily man, made objective—i.e., contemplated and revered as *another, a distinct being*."<sup>4</sup> Religion, he urged, "is consciousness of the infinite"; but this is directed to some supposed object, when it is

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<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1957), 14, italics mine.

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really humankind who is “not finite,” but has an “infinite nature.”<sup>5</sup> He concluded that the aim in religion is “That God may be all, man must be nothing.”<sup>6</sup>

This can be viewed in two ways. From Feuerbach’s viewpoint, in order to create “God,” humankind must be diminished. From the Christian point of view, Feuerbach deifies and elevates humankind into the infinite; humankind will not accept the constraints of being *creatures*. In this second light, his thinking represents *hubris* and idolatry, by putting humankind in the place of God. *Theology becomes anthropology*. This becomes even clearer in Feuerbach’s other major work, *The Essence of Religion* (1845). Humankind “projects” or imposes images of its own nature onto “God.” It would be left partly to Nietzsche, but mainly to Freud, to develop this notion of *projection* further.

Feuerbach had begun his critique of idealism in his work *Thoughts on Death and Immortality* (1830), even before Hegel’s death. Anticipating Nietzsche’s “aphorisms,” he produced a number of insightful but bitingly cynical “epigrams.” Many were satirical, for, he wrote, “Satire—it is a microscope—greatly magnified things.”<sup>7</sup> He wrote ironically, “What distinguishes the Christian from other honourable people? At most, a pious face and parted hair.”<sup>8</sup> In the same vein he declared: “I admit it: the Christianity you proclaim is pure: but for this very reason it is colourless, odourless, and tasteless.”<sup>9</sup> Feuerbach saw Christianity only as a *human phenomenon*, much like certain courses in sociology of religion or even “religious studies.” There is a lesson here, not only for Christians, but specifically for Christian theologians. Too often *theology* is reduced to descriptions of *human phenomena*. People often say, “My faith was my anchor,” which seems less blunt than “*Christ* was my anchor,” which may have been the truth. From his point of view, Feuerbach dignified humanity; from the opposite viewpoint, he reduced “God” to a human projection of the infinite into a constructed object “out there.”

From his point of view, Feuerbach taught a philosophy of liberation; from the Christian viewpoint, he taught human self-sufficiency and thereby idolatry. His materialism is seen clearly in his aphorism “Man is what he eats.” Does this really dignify humanity?

*Christians are not immune from shaping God in their own image.* Catholic theologian Karen Kilby has claimed that an overegalitarian concept of the “social Trinity” too readily follows Feuerbach in imposing late-twentieth-century egalitarian democracy onto a

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<sup>5</sup> Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 26.

<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *Thoughts on Death and Immortality: From the Papers of a Thinker* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 175, epigram 1.

<sup>8</sup> Feuerbach, *Death and Immortality*, 205.

<sup>9</sup> Feuerbach, *Death and Immortality*, 234.

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theology of the Trinity. Similar caveats about our concept of God can be made. Does our doctrine of God too easily reflect the particular culture of our church or of society?

Another Catholic theologian, Walter Kasper, makes some illuminating comments on Feuerbach's link with Hegel. He comments, "The religious projection thus leads to alienation and estrangement, to the negation of man. In this perspective atheism is the negation of negation, and thus ... a 'No' to God and a 'Yes' to man.... Faith in God becomes faith in man himself.... Religion and the church are replaced by politics, prayer by work."<sup>10</sup>

Further, Feuerbach's assertion of atheism remains simply *assertion* rather than careful critical *argument*. Hans Küng comments, "Must reason and Bible, politics and religion, work and prayer, earth and heaven, necessarily exclude one another?"<sup>11</sup> Whether we might wish for God or not, *wish does not determine reality*. Nothing exists or fails to exist merely because we may wish it.

*Sigmund Freud* (1856–1939) was an atheist from the beginning of his life, and he regarded conscious states as the "interplay of *forces* which assist or inhibit one another." As Hans Küng observed, "The human *psychē* [was] understood as a kind of machine."<sup>12</sup> Both Küng and Paul Ricoeur note that most of Freud's terms for neurological or mental activity constituted metaphors drawn from the semantic domain of either *physiology* or *economics*. His most distinctive concern was to explore the unconscious. Often he viewed this as a reservoir of repressed wishes and also repressed prohibitions and guilt. Acute conflict within the unconscious can be a source of *neurosis*. A clinician may attempt to bring those conflicts to conscious awareness.

Freud focused especially on the figure of the father as a source of simultaneous judgment and love, of prohibition and forgiveness, or of protection and kindness. This double impact of the father figure made a strong impact especially on the infantile stage of human development. Freud was influenced by E. B. Tylor's theory that animism constituted the threshold of emerging religion, together with R. R. Marett's theory of a "pre-animistic" stage. Freud saw parallels between human childhood and a supposed totemist stage in the history of humankind. When the totem ceased to serve as a substitute for the father figure, he wrote, "The primal father, at once feared and hated, revered and envied, became the prototype of God himself."<sup>13</sup> Religion, he believed, arose from "a

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1991; orig. 1982), 29.

<sup>11</sup> Hans Küng, *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today* (New York and London: Collins, 1980), 208.

<sup>12</sup> Küng, *Does God Exist?* 268.

<sup>13</sup> Sigmund Freud, "An Autobiographical Study," in *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (1959; reprint, London and Toronto: Hogarth Press, 1989), 20:94.

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longing for a father ... as a defence against childhood helplessness." Such an "illusion" is not sheer "error," but a "wish-fulfilment as a prominent factor in its [religion's] motivation."<sup>14</sup> Religion, Freud asserted, is "a universal obsessional neurosis" of humankind.<sup>15</sup>

In Freud's theory, this becomes compounded with his use of "the Oedipus complex." In the Oedipus legend, the protagonist kills his father and marries his mother. In his *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud wrote, "Psychoanalysis has taught us that a boy's earliest choice of objects for his love is incestuous, and that those objects are forbidden ones—his mother and his sister."<sup>16</sup> In the same book he declared, "At bottom God is nothing more than an exalted father."

Freud's specific work on "projection" arises from his consideration of *paranoia*. Paranoia, he explains, entails "delusions of persecution," in which a mechanism of "projection" operates. He writes, "An internal perception is suppressed and ... enters consciousness in the form of an external perception. In delusions of persecution ... what should have been felt internally as love is perceived externally as hate."<sup>17</sup> Paul Ricoeur, however, comments, "The mechanism of projection is singularly more obscure than its role."<sup>18</sup> Hence to the infant, the face that gazes into the cradle is "magnified into infinity." In Ricoeur's language, the omnipotence of thoughts of the self generated in narcissism "projects this omnipotence into reality."<sup>19</sup> Freud's use of the Oedipus legend then suggests "the son's efforts to put himself in the place of the father-god." Repentance and reconciliation then enter in. Freud traces the emergence of Judaism and Christianity in a volume full of historical fantasy, namely, *Moses and Monotheism*. This depicts Moses as an aristocratic Egyptian who worshiped Aten, followed by prophets who call for a return to a monotheistic god. This in turn is followed by acts of repression by the law, sacrifice, and redemption. God is both judge, projected by the *superego* of human beings, and love, projected by the human *id* or *libido*. At this point we may offer the following comments on Freud.

(i) *Religion as "Patently Infantile."* Freud concluded that religion is "patently infantile," especially in his work *The Future of an Illusion* (1927). Religion promotes a sense of guilt and longing for help and comfort. It externalizes this longing into an illusory figure.

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<sup>14</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: Norton, 1961), 40.

<sup>15</sup> Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, 55.

<sup>16</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Points of Agreement in Mental Life between Savages and Neurotics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004; orig. 1913), 7–20.

<sup>17</sup> *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 12:66.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 239.

<sup>19</sup> Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 241.

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Religion implies childish *over-dependency*. Bonhoeffer, among others, took up this point in lessons for believing *Christians*. Too often, he wrote in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, we seek to make mature adults *regress* into childhood, by magnifying feelings of guilt, shame, and dependence, and by promoting infantile attitudes, even including a “projection” of “God.” There is some truth in this censure, even if Bonhoeffer tended to exaggerate it.

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(ii) *Rejection of the Mechanistic Worldview*. On the other hand, Küng and Ricoeur, while accepting a number of Freud’s insights, thoroughly reject the *mechanistic worldview* on which Freud based his work. Volney Gay has set out a good selection of clinical cases on the basis of which Freud reached many of his conclusions.<sup>20</sup> Gay refers to Freud’s search for truth as “a eulogy to the claims of science,” as if *hypotheses* from clinical evidence could really guarantee *truth*.<sup>21</sup> Küng concludes, “Freud took over from Feuerbach and his successors the essential arguments for his personal atheism.”<sup>22</sup> Further, he writes, “We have long ceased to take every advance in science ... as contradictory of belief in God.”<sup>23</sup> Christians need constantly to distinguish between the achievements of scientific *method* and the pretensions of a scientific *worldview*.

(iii) *The Need for Hermeneutics*. Ricoeur has brilliantly shown, especially from Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*, the need for *hermeneutics*, both of texts and of human life. Although many of Freud’s claims about the unconscious remain open to question, undoubtedly there are *ambiguities* in human life and communication that point to the need for hermeneutics. In spite of the need for healthy caution, it seems that “Freudian slips,” “free association,” and unconscious “giveaways” point often to a “text” below the surface of conscious thoughts. As Donald E. Capps has shown in *Pastoral Care and Hermeneutics*, pastoral counseling needs less to be dominated by “therapeutic” and clinical models, and more to draw on hermeneutics for in-depth understanding and communication.<sup>24</sup> Charles V. Gerkin, in *The Living Human Document*, convincingly makes the same point.<sup>25</sup> The relation between Freud and hermeneutics has been immortalized by Paul Ricoeur.

At a homely level, I have often suggested to students that a sudden flare-up between family members may be caused not by some trivial, apparent crisis of the moment, but

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<sup>20</sup> Volney P. Gay, *Reading Freud: Psychology, Neurosis, and Religion* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983).

<sup>21</sup> Gay, *Reading Freud*, 101.

<sup>22</sup> Küng, *Does God Exist?* 299.

<sup>23</sup> Küng, *Does God Exist?* 303.

<sup>24</sup> Donald E. Capps, *Pastoral Care and Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984; Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Charles V. Gerkin, *The Living Human Document: Re-visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984).

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by some deep-seated, long-enduring resentment about something different, which has built up over the months or years. All Christians need to understand conflicts as arising not necessarily from what has last been said, but often from prior attitudes, from histories, or from deeply buried assumptions. This does not provide any defense of Freud's theories about *religion*, but heeds one or two of his insights.

## 3. "GOD" AND SOCIAL MANIPULATION: NIETZSCHE AND MARX

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*Friedrich Nietzsche* (1844–1900) was in some ways the philosophical successor to Feuerbach. He was a nihilist and an avowed atheist. He became professor at Basel in 1870, but resigned in 1879 because of poor health. During the 1880s he produced several well-known works, including *The Gay Science* (1882), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–1885), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), and *The Twilight of the Idols* (1889). His most aggressively antitheist book, *The Antichrist*, appeared in 1895. Between 1889 and his death in 1900 his mental health collapsed.

Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), glorified the driving force and raw energy depicted in Euripides' tragedy *The Bacchae*. From the first he represented the "Dionysian" principle of life-affirming force and will, as represented by the Bacchae, as opposed to the "Apollonian" principle of restraint, harmony, and order, represented by Pentheus. His life-affirming principle found common cause, at least in the earlier years, with Richard Wagner, although he later broke with him.

Nietzsche stressed sheer *will* over all *rational* systems. In *The Gay Science* he declares that both Western philosophy and religion are "fictions" and "lies." Also in *The Gay Science*, his "madman" proclaims that God is dead. He adds that there will perhaps be caves in which God's "shadow" will be shown. Elsewhere in the same book the madman cries, "Whither God?... I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers."<sup>26</sup> Since supposedly "God is dead," everything is permitted. *There is no longer any foundation for truth, ethics, or rationality.*

Thus in his *Notebooks* of 1873, Nietzsche writes, "What is truth?—A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms."<sup>27</sup> In *The Will to Power*, which Frederick Copleston calls "his real thought," Nietzsche writes, "*Truth is that kind of error without*

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<sup>26</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (London: Vintage, 1974), sect. 125; cf. sect. 108 (Ger. *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*). Also in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 18 vols. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1909–1913).

<sup>27</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. W. Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1968; orig. 1954), 46.



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which a certain species ... cannot exist.”<sup>28</sup> “All that exists consists of *interpretations*.” He also writes, “Truths are illusions we have forgotten are illusions.”<sup>29</sup> Nietzsche’s atheism is partly connected with his suspicion of language in religion. He declares, “I fear we shall never be rid of God, so long as we still believe in grammar.”<sup>30</sup> He repeats his criticism in *Human, All-Too-Human*: “We are constantly led astray by words ... a hidden philosophical mythology.”<sup>31</sup> His suspicion of language follows the tradition of Hobbes, and was later developed by Fritz Mauthner, and in another direction by Wittgenstein and Ryle.

Nietzsche saw religion and knowledge as an *instrument of power and manipulation*. A typical ironic example might be: “ ‘God forgiveth him that repenteth’ —in plain English: him that submitteth himself to the priest.”<sup>32</sup> Or, even more bitterly, Nietzsche asserts, “ ‘the salvation of the soul’ —in plain English ‘The world revolves around me.’ ”<sup>33</sup> Language can *disguise* the manipulative power of religion.

For Christians the lesson is clear. Most of us have read about, or even witnessed, the abuse of Christian doctrine or Scripture as an instrument of power to manipulate others, or to impose personal will and control over them. Ever since the “splits” (Gk. *schismata*) in ancient Corinth (1 Cor. 1:10), churches have used apparently Christian values to gain ascendancy in power struggles.<sup>34</sup> Paul made it clear that the splits at Corinth were in no way due to doctrinal principles, but reflected a power play to impose personal preferences onto others in the church.<sup>35</sup> Many in the past have appealed to “the will of God” to manipulate another into following their wishes. Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave warning about this, especially in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

Nietzsche’s program includes “the transvaluation of all values,” as he calls it in *The Will to Power*. In this sense he is a nihilist, but in a different sense he points beyond this to something new, although he does not know what this “new” world order will be. All he will say is that “Life is will to power.”<sup>36</sup> E. Jünger thinks that Nietzsche’s view of metaphor may more positively point to some reality beyond the “nothing,” and Küng seems to hint

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<sup>28</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, vol. 2; also in *The Complete Works*, vol. 12, aphorism 481; cf. F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 7 (London: Burns and Oates, 1968), 395.

<sup>29</sup> Nietzsche, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 46.

<sup>30</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Complete Works*, 12:22.

<sup>31</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human*, in *The Complete Works*, 7:ii, 192, aphorism 5.

<sup>32</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, in *The Complete Works*, 16:131, aphorism 26.

<sup>33</sup> Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 16:186, aphorism 43.

<sup>34</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 120–33.

<sup>35</sup> L. L. Welborn, “On Discord in Corinth: 1 Cor. 1–4 and Ancient Politics,” *JBL* 106 (1987): 85–111; also in Welborn, *Politics and Rhetoric in the Corinthian Epistles* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997), 1–42.

<sup>36</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 254.

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at this possibility.<sup>37</sup> As with Feuerbach, his atheism was *asserted* rather than *proved*. He believed that Christianity served to render humankind weak, mediocre, and submissive. It is against this background that Jürgen Moltmann calls the Holy Spirit “Yes to Life” or “A Universal Affirmation.”<sup>38</sup> He comments, “The liberation of life from the iron grip of morality, and the intensification of life in ‘the will to power’ was the message of Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*. The moral instrumentalization of life was to be replaced by life’s free intensification by way of its creative expression.”<sup>39</sup> But, for Moltmann, what liberates us is neither the death of God nor narcissistic Dionysian ecstasy, but the Spirit of Life who comes from God.

Karl Marx (1818–1883), partly like Nietzsche, saw religion as a tool for keeping the masses content, weak, and docile. In his view the ruling classes deployed it to promote submission of the proletariat. In this sense, he called religion “the opium of the people,” which is well known, although the phrase may not have been original to Marx.<sup>40</sup> In the same work Marx wrote, “The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness.” Religion functions to create illusory fantasies for the poor, to keep them submissive and content with their lot. Thus it is socially manipulative.

There can be no question that Marx was a materialist. For him, economic forces of labor and production were more fundamental than “ideas.” He observed, “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.”<sup>41</sup> Admittedly in early years, in the period of the Paris Manuscripts, he regarded himself as a humanist. He wrote, “Atheism is humanism mediated ... through the suppression of private property.”<sup>42</sup> The so-called *Praxis* School of Yugoslavia in the 1960s stressed this *earlier* aspect, and with the exception of its atheism, so did many Latin American liberation theologians. Mainstream Marxists, however, concentrate on the “scientific” and “historical” aspects of later Marxism after 1844.

In 1847 Marx produced the short work *Communist Manifesto*. At the beginning of the *Manifesto* he and Engels asserted, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles: freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to

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<sup>37</sup> Küng, *Does God Exist?* 394–403; and Eberhard Jüngel, *Theological Essays*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989).

<sup>38</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (London: SCM, 1992).

<sup>39</sup> Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 85.

<sup>40</sup> Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of the Right* (Cambridge: CUP, 1970; orig. 1843), introduction.

<sup>41</sup> Karl Marx, “Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach” (1845), in *Marx: Early Writings* (London: Pelican, 1975), 423.

<sup>42</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (Moscow: Progress Publisher, 1959; orig. 1832; Ger. 1844), and *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of the Right*.

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one another."<sup>43</sup> In the following pages, Marx argued that in history the feudal society gave way to capitalism, and it is predicted that property-owning bourgeoisie will be challenged by the oppressed proletariat. Marx and Engels used the term "dialectical materialism." Some understand Marx as reacting against Hegel and against his stress on ideas; others regard him as reacting primarily against capitalism. Probably both are true, but Marx did draw upon Hegel's historical reason and dialectic.

The result of revolution was the introduction of state socialism, and Marxist eschatology looked forward to this, in turn, being overtaken by communism, when labor and production would receive from each "according to his ability," and give to each "according to his needs." At the stage of revolution, however, the last king and the last priest would be destroyed. Earlier Marx wrote, "Man makes religion; religion does not make man."<sup>44</sup>

After the revolution of 1919, Russian Marxism flourished under Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) and under Joseph Stalin (1879–1953). Lenin increased Marx's antipathy toward religion, reemphasizing its supposed role as a tool of establishment class struggle. Under Khrushchev, especially after 1956, this rigidly dogmatic approach began to ease. In China, Marxism underwent a variant form under Mao Tse-tung (1893–1976). Meanwhile in Germany, Georg Lukács (1885–1971) maintained a Marxist profile, especially in *History and Class-Consciousness* (1923). In France, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) and Louis Althusser (1918–1990) developed variant forms.

The theologian Helmut Gollwitzer criticized Marxist atheism for attempting to treat *all* types of religion as if they were one thing.<sup>45</sup> Further, a human being constitutes *more than a unit of production*. The so-called paradox of materialism remains; if a human being is merely a mechanistic being, why should the arguments of atheism be regarded as *rational*? Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and Marx all suffer from this problem. As Hans Küng concludes, a materialist worldview "cannot be demonstrated."<sup>46</sup> This does not make the question of social justice any less urgent for Christians, nor the need to recognize that Christianity and the Bible *can* be used for manipulative purposes or mere power play.

## 4. THE ATTACK ON REVELATION

Karl Barth, among others, has stressed that Christianity stands or falls with belief in God's self-revelation. Divine revelation is not human discovery. Humankind does not construct

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<sup>43</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Communist Manifesto* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 79.

<sup>44</sup> Marx: *Early Writings*, 244.

<sup>45</sup> Helmut Gollwitzer, *The Existence of God as Confessed by Faith* (London: SCM, 1965), 82–87.

<sup>46</sup> Küng, *Does God Exist?* 244.

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“God” by thinking “upward” from humanity; this is idolatry. Faith or belief is a response to the self-revelation and grace of God. This is metaphorically “downward” to humanity. It involves being addressed by God, called by God, and redeemed by God. Hence attacks on revelation cut the ground from beneath the feet of the responsive, listening, and obedient Christians.

Revelation, Barth stresses, is “an act of God.”<sup>47</sup> It addresses us as “a promise, a judgment, a claim.”<sup>48</sup> It is therefore dynamic, and takes the form of an event. Barth comments, “For me, the Word of God is a *happening*, not a thing ... an event ... a living reality.”<sup>49</sup> He adds, “God is known through God, and through God alone.”<sup>50</sup> God’s “knowability” is not a natural capacity or natural right, but depends on God’s “good pleasure.” As many Christian theologians have urged, there remains a sense in which God is “hidden.” “The hiddenness of God is the inconceivability of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”<sup>51</sup> He discloses or reveals himself, because he is love. In E. Jüngel’s phrase, it is through Christ that God becomes “conceivable” or “thinkable.”<sup>52</sup>

It is not simply the tradition of Luther and Barth that speaks in this way. Karl Rahner, eminent Catholic theologian, writes, “Being is luminous, it is *Logos* [Word or Speech]; it may be revealed in the word.” Humankind needs “an open ear for every word that may proceed from the mouth of the eternal.”<sup>53</sup> His Catholic collaborator Yves Congar similarly expounds “the self-revealing God,” who brings about “revelation in history” and “speaks.”<sup>54</sup> Together they prepared the section of Vatican II documents entitled *Dei Verbum*, on the doctrine of revelation. Denis Farkasfalvy comments, “The climate which followed the Council made most Catholic exegetes merge with their Protestant colleagues” on this subject.<sup>55</sup> Vatican II speaks of “hearing the Word of God with reverence,” and appeals to biblical concepts of revelation in Romans and in Hebrews 1:1–2, “God has spoken to us by the Son.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Barth, *CD I/1*, 143.

<sup>48</sup> Barth, *CD I/1*, 150.

<sup>49</sup> Barth, *CD I/2*, 26 and 42.

<sup>50</sup> Barth, *CD I/2*, 179.

<sup>51</sup> Barth, *CD I/2*, 197.

<sup>52</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1983), 111; cf. 229 and 226–98.

<sup>53</sup> Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word* (London: Bloomsbury, 1994), chap. 5.

<sup>54</sup> Aidan Nichols, *Yves Congar* (London: Chapman, 1989), 14–15.

<sup>55</sup> Denis O. Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration and Interpretation: A Theological Introduction to Sacred Scripture* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>56</sup> Austin P. Flannery, ed., *Documents of Vatican II* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 750–51.

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Pannenberg devotes some seventy pages to a discussion of revelation in his *Systematic Theology*. Following Barth, he comments: "God can be known only if he gives himself to be known. The loftiness of divine reality makes it inaccessible to us unless it makes itself known."<sup>57</sup> He also endorses what Luther and Barth say about the hiddenness of God. In the biblical accounts, Pannenberg underlines the special revelation of God to Noah (Gen. 6:13), Abraham, Moses, and the covenant people of Israel. In linguistic terms revelation becomes associated with God's action. He concludes, "It is incontestable that even if in varying words and thought-forms the biblical witnesses do speak expressly of divine revelation."<sup>58</sup> He concedes that the vehicles of revelation take many forms, even in Scripture. One is the revelation of "mystery" in an apocalyptic sense (1 Cor. 2:7–9). Perhaps most of all, self-disclosure through Christ occurs in the Johannine prologue (John 1:14) and in the opening verses of Hebrews (Heb. 1:1–2).

Some relatively minor attacks on the notion come from a minority of Christian thinkers. James Barr argued that the term "communication" more accurately reflects biblical thought than "revelation." He calls the terms that correspond to "revelation" both "limited and specialized."<sup>59</sup> But this still admits the importance of God's communicative action. More serious may be F. Gerald Downing's argument that terms for "revelation" are relatively few, and often bear a performative force expressing simply commitment.<sup>60</sup> But the introduction of a self-involving dimension does not invalidate revelation. Performatives always *presuppose* statements of truth, as J. L. Austin and others firmly make clear.<sup>61</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, Eberhard Jüngel, and a host of modern theologians examine the concept with care, and expound it positively. Ebeling insists that we should not play off the terms "Word of God" and "revelation" against each other.

In his book *Holy Scripture*, John Webster specifically argues that Scripture is the central source of all Christian thinking.<sup>62</sup> More recently in his book *The Domain of the Word*, Webster argues that the medium of human words does not undermine "God's providential ordering of all things," while sanctification by the Holy Spirit ensures that Scripture is properly "Holy Scripture."<sup>63</sup> He observes, "To acknowledge the authority of Scripture is ... to confess a norm and place oneself beneath its judgement. But it is also to pledge oneself to a basic act of redeemed intelligence: hearing the text, following its

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<sup>57</sup> Pannenberg, *ST* 1:189.

<sup>58</sup> Pannenberg, *ST* 1:195.

<sup>59</sup> James Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation: A Study of the Two Testaments* (London: SCM, 1966), 88.

<sup>60</sup> F. G. Downing, *Has Christianity a Revelation?* (London: SCM, 1964), 179 and 20–125.

<sup>61</sup> John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), 45–56.

<sup>62</sup> John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003).

<sup>63</sup> John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 14–17.

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sequence, waiting upon the words of the glorious company of the apostles, and the goodly fellowship of the prophets so that we can do what Scripture instructs us to do.”<sup>64</sup> On this basis, “Christian theology is biblical reasoning.”<sup>65</sup>

For N. T. Wright, the place of revelation and the Bible enjoyed a firm consensus in the Christian church from the beginning until the Reformation and post-Reformation era. A genuine challenge to the concept of revelation came only with the era ushered in by the rationalism of the Enlightenment.<sup>66</sup> Because Enlightenment thought regarded “reason” as the central capacity of human beings, it came to see “reason” as the arbiter of revelation. Kant’s work *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* sums up the point.<sup>67</sup> Many such thinkers opted for atheism or for Deism, with its concept of a distant, remote God. In Karl Rahner’s thought, revelation is the presupposition for belief in a personal God, with whom we can enter into a relationship. In Scripture itself the resources of *wisdom* are far more fruitful than any consideration of “knowledge” or “reason.”

Wisdom enables us to face and to negotiate the complex and practical questions of daily life. In the OT it is associated with *education, training, and community*. The Hebrew word *chokmāh* occurs 200 times in the OT, and is used especially in Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. In the postcanonical books wisdom occurs frequently in Ben Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) and Wisdom of Solomon. In postbiblical thought Vico and Gadamer contrast its communal basis with the narrow individualism of reason.<sup>68</sup> Wisdom often uses indirect communication to address subtle and complex issues of daily life. In the NT, Wisdom Sayings are ascribed to Jesus, Paul, and James.<sup>69</sup>

Henning Graf Reventlow traces this in more detail. He surveys Deist doctrine in John Toland, especially in his *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696 and 1702), and in Anthony Collins in his *Essay concerning the Use of Reason* (1707).<sup>70</sup> Humankind, these writers argued, had all it needed in “reason,” even if in theory they also granted the existence of Christian revelation. Each pointed in the same direction. But Reventlow reaches a subtle and masterly conclusion, after much study of their works. They tried, he concludes, to

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<sup>64</sup> Webster, *Domain of the Word*, 19.

<sup>65</sup> Webster, *Domain of the Word*, 115.

<sup>66</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Scripture and the Authority of God—Getting beyond the Bible Wars* (New York: Harper One, 2005), 3–105.

<sup>67</sup> Wright, *The Last Word*, 83.

<sup>68</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989), 19–30, and G. B. Vico, *On the Study Methods of Our Time* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).

<sup>69</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, “Wisdom in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures,” *Theology* 114 (2011): 163–72; and vol. 115 (2011): 1–9; cf. Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), especially 155–208.

<sup>70</sup> Reventlow, *Authority*, 294–308 and 354–69.

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demonstrate the parallel between the “natural” religion of reason and Christian revelation; but they “in fact demonstrated precisely the opposite.”<sup>71</sup> They concluded, “Revealed religion is superfluous.”<sup>72</sup>

It is impossible to sum up the vicissitudes in the development of the concept of revelation in theology between the eighteenth century and today. This would require not a single-volume systematic theology, but a specialist book on the subject. H. D. McDonald has traced theories of revelation from 1700 to 1960 in two sequential volumes.<sup>73</sup> In his second book McDonald notes the impact of materialism, Darwinism, and radical biblical criticism. But some attacks on the unique authority of the Bible concerned the *mode* of revelation rather than its necessity as such. Even Barth, who majors on revelation as the act and self-disclosure of God, expressed reservations about “the freezing of the connection between Scripture and revelation”; Brunner asserts, “Divine revelation is not a book or a doctrine.”<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, James Orr argues, “It is reasonable to expect that provision will be made for the *preservation* of the knowledge of revelation *in some permanent and authoritative form.*”<sup>75</sup> Orr adds that revelation includes “the whole divinely guided history of the people of Israel, and ... the apostolic action in the founding of the Church.”<sup>76</sup> John Webster convincingly offers a similar argument today.

On the *modes* of revelation, within the church and theology, debate has continued. Some theologians in the tradition of Hodge and Warfield insist that it is universally “propositional.” Many others place more emphasis on the Word of God as *promise*, such as Luther, Tyndale, and Barth. In contemporary theology this merges with the emphasis on *speech acts*.<sup>77</sup> Yet, speech acts may *presuppose* propositions.<sup>78</sup> Fundamentally the Roman Catholic Church has asserted officially (1995) that the Bible is “the written testimony to a series of interventions in which God has revealed himself in history.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Reventlow, *Authority*, 388.

<sup>72</sup> Reventlow, *Authority*, 383.

<sup>73</sup> H. D. McDonald, *Ideas of Revelation, 1700–1860* (New York and London: Macmillan, 1959), and *Theories of Revelation, 1860–1960* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1963).

<sup>74</sup> McDonald, *Theories of Revelation*, 168; Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason: The Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946), 8.

<sup>75</sup> James Orr, *Revelation and Inspiration* (London: Duckworth, 1910), 155.

<sup>76</sup> Orr, *Revelation and Inspiration*, 157.

<sup>77</sup> E.g., Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 197–280.

<sup>78</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *Thiselton on Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006), 51–150.

<sup>79</sup> J. A. Fitzmyer, ed., *The Biblical Commission’s Document “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church”* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1995), 191.

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## 5. BETWEEN ATHEISM AND THEISM: DEISM, PANTHEISM, AND AGNOSTICISM

(i) *Deism*. In general, Deists believe that God exists, but also that God has *no personal* dealings with the world. Revelation does not take place in a series of divine acts in history. God did create the world, it is affirmed, but, like a self-regulating machine, the world goes on its way independently of God. God may be transcendent, but God is in no way immanent in the world. Some use clearly impersonal terms for God, like F. H. Bradley's term "the Absolute." The belief in divine interventions such as miracles would seem to imply that God's creation was imperfect, and in need of regular repair. Prayer and worship are unnecessary and inappropriate, other than to benefit a person's mind. Some argue that Aristotle foreshadowed Deism in his *Metaphysics*, book 12, in which God is forever separated from material and changeable things.

More accurately, there are many different versions of Deism. In general terms, however, it is essentially *rationalist*. It springs from the age of reason in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in England. Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), in *Sartor Resartus* ("The Tailor Re-tailored" [1836]), an allegorical and satirical novel, caricatures the Deist "God" as "an absentee God, sitting idle ever since the first Sabbath, at the outside of the universe, and seeing it go."<sup>80</sup> His title satirizes the notion of language as the garment of thought. The Deists regarded revelation as superfluous, since humankind could use *reason* to fathom all the truths of "natural religion."

Deism is broadly associated with the so-called scientific revolution that began with Isaac Newton (1642–1727) and others. Theists of the day often called them "atheists." God was typically thought of as "the Higher Power." Anticipations of Deism came with Robert Burton in 1621, while "the father of English Deism" is generally agreed to have been Lord Edward Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1648), who made an explicit statement of Deism in *On the Truth* (1624). From England Deism spread to France, and later to the United States. Reventlow refers to Edward Herbert as "a first representative (of Deism) on English soil."<sup>81</sup> But at this very early stage in the development of Deism, he remains "a lonely figure." His basic philosophical stance was that of Aristotle, Cicero, and the Stoics. Fundamentally, he believed that all people can arrive at the truth on the basis of reason. But he is not always consistent, and his literary remains included prayer and signs of religious devotion. His central theme was that of "natural religion" and morality. For the most part, he was ahead of Deism's time.

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<sup>80</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh* (Project Gutenberg e-book, #1051), bk. 2, chap. 7.

<sup>81</sup> Reventlow, *Authority*, 186.



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A more characteristic period for Deism was 1690–1740. Matthew Tindal's *Christianity as Old as Creation* (1730) was often referred to as "the Deists' Bible." Before him came Charles Blount (1654–1693), who championed natural religion in several publications. Blount had a direct link with Herbert, and at the time caused a considerable public uproar. For example, he fulminated against the prophet Elisha as "that hot, angry prophet, who cursed the poor children, and made them be destroyed with bears, only for calling him Bald-pate" (2 Kings 2:23–24).<sup>82</sup>

John Toland (1670–1722) was more significant, especially for his *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696). Toland was an admirer of John Locke's work on reason, although it is doubtful whether Locke reciprocated this admiration. Even so, G. Gawlick argued that Toland presupposed Christian revelation, and that he was more positive toward theism than many other Deists. Nevertheless, Toland wrote: "Nothing can be said to be a Mystery, because we have not an adequate Idea of it."<sup>83</sup> Reason, he argued, is the critical standard of judgment about all things, and conveys clear and distinct ideas. No Christian doctrine, he urged, can be reputed to be a mystery.

Matthew Tindal (1657–1733) wrote several important books: *The Liberty of the Press* (1698); *The Rights of the Christian Church* (1706–1709); and toward the end of his life, *Christianity as Old as Creation* (1730; 4th ed. 1733). Like other Deist writers, his major themes were human reason and natural religion. The last work was translated into German in 1741. Tindal claimed that Christianity was identical with the *timeless religion of nature*. This book became the focal center of the controversy between Deism and Christian theism. Like Toland, Tindal claimed an affinity with Locke's empiricism. As the second title indicates, Tindal also attacked the established church and its religion, especially "High Church" and "Popish" priests. Yet he followed Locke in advocating tolerance toward Dissenters. He especially attacked "priestcraft" and "superstition."

If Tindal had provided "the Bible of Deism," Anthony C. Collins (1676–1729) represented, according to Reventlow, Deism's peak and heyday. In his *Discourse in Free Thinking* (1713) he stressed the use of *reason and evidence*. His critics accused him of stating the obvious. His aim, however, was to undermine appeals to authority, and this included special revelation. His rejection of theism at times anticipated Nietzsche, as when he claimed, "All priests ... are hired to lead man into Mistakes."<sup>84</sup> Collins also wrote about prophecy (1724), and this provoked controversy especially with W. Whiston, A. A. Sykes, and E. Chandler. Indeed, there arose a significant anti-Deist polemic. One of many examples is

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<sup>82</sup> Charles Blount, *Philostratus* (1680), 37.

<sup>83</sup> John Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious* (New York: Garland, 1702), 75.

<sup>84</sup> Anthony Collins, *Discourse in Free Thinking* (London, 1713; also New York: Garland, 1978), 109.

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that of John Conybeare's *A Defence of Revealed Religion*. Conybeare argued that natural and revealed religion differ only in their extent.

(ii) *Pantheism*. Pantheism stands at the opposite end of the spectrum to Deism, in that it stresses divine *immanence* rather than divine transcendence. The great problem with it is that if God comes to be identified with the world or with the "All," it is difficult to see how God can remain fully *personal* or *suprapersonal*. In the Greco-Roman world, Stoicism represented pantheism, with its notion of the world-soul, and cosmic *Logos*. Paul very probably rejected the notion of the Stoic world-soul when he declared, "We have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God" (Gk. *to pneuma to ek tou Theou*, 1 Cor. 2:12).

In the modern period of philosophy, however, most thinkers point to Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) as the supreme exponent of pantheism or of monist philosophy. He was expelled from the Jewish synagogue in Amsterdam for his unorthodox views of God in 1656. He had changed his Jewish name "Baruch" to the Latin form "Benedict." His major studies focused on Descartes, but he repudiated Descartes's dualism of mind and body in favor of monism: the belief that all reality is one. In terms of his pantheism, his most famous aphorism is "God or Nature" ("*Deus sive Natura*"), which appeared to *identify each with the other*.<sup>85</sup> God has no "personal" will or desire. Spinoza wrote: God is "a being absolutely infinite, i.e. a 'substance' consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each expresses an eternal and infinite essence." His philosophy was indeed much more complex than this, and some have claimed that he is more theist than naturalist. But the mainstream view of Spinoza is that he identified "God" with the "All" (Gk. *pan*), including the world and nature. Ethics derives not from "God" but from the use of human reason. Spinoza insisted that he was true to his Hebrew roots: "God is one."

Many argue that religious *mysticism* is pantheistic, entailing a sense of being merged into the All. A number of Hindu thinkers have formulated a sophisticated form of pantheism. This usually comes from the nondualist tradition in the Upanishads. The Supreme Being is often called the Brahman. But most *Christian* mysticism holds a more deeply personal view of God, and it is usually anchored especially in the historical events of the passion and cross. In the West, some cite Hegel as a pantheist, although others appeal to the distinctive complexity of Hegel's thought. Christian theism is passionately opposed to identifying God with the world. The Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* rejects any Gnostic idea of emanations of God. Theists believe that God is *personal* or *suprapersonal*, and that God is simultaneously *transcendent and immanent*, that is, different from, or "above," the world, and simultaneously at work within it.

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<sup>85</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 71–79.

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(iii) *Agnosticism*. Agnostics believe that it is impossible to know whether belief in God is true or false. At first sight agnosticism appears to be open and modest, and must not be identified with *avowed, explicit, or dogmatic atheism*. It derives from the Greek *a-gnosis*, “no knowledge.” But it does invite the response that has been called “the paradox of skepticism,” namely, how do we *know* that we *cannot* know?

On the other side, agnosticism must not be confused with *doubt*. Many Christian believers pass through periods of doubt, which may lead to constructive questions, reformation, and growth. Paul Tillich encourages doubt about some traditional formulations to entice us to find a more authentic God behind the “God” of early childhood teaching: to find “the God beyond god.”<sup>86</sup> Kierkegaard’s life as a Christian involved constant wrestling with doubt. At one end of a spectrum doubt can legitimately question complacent, simplistic, or unexamined beliefs. It may lead to something better. At the other end of the spectrum, some theologians and other people can come to relish doubt, to turn it into an idol, and can almost turn attempting to disturb others into a supposed calling.

Yet, *static* agnosticism may also be the fruit of pride. A perspectival view of belief as a mere noncognitive “point of view” tends to undervalue the testimony of millions, not least of historic eyewitnesses, to insist that belief and unbelief are *equally* “rational.” The history of theology and apologetics tends to gather a series of cumulative arguments on the rationality of belief. Philosophers like Alvin Plantinga set out such arguments brilliantly on the Internet and in their books. In a different tradition, Schleiermacher, in *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, lamented that many people too often listen to the voice of popular myths, rather than to the voice of those who have expertise and experience in matters of belief. Even if an atheist or agnostic holds religions in contempt, he wrote, “I will ask you ... just to be well-informed and thorough-going in this contempt.”<sup>87</sup> He asserted: “Millions ... have been satisfied to juggle with its (faith’s) trappings.... No room remains for the eternal and holy Being that lies beyond the world.”<sup>88</sup> Schleiermacher concludes that people need to be “taught by those who have devoted to it (religion) their lives.”<sup>89</sup>

As Christian theists, we may be grateful to God both for the anchor of the Bible, the sacraments, and the cross, and for what Irenaeus called “the rule of faith,” or the tradition of the apostles. But these things do not simply look to the past. As Barth and others stress, the witness of the Holy Spirit actualizes the Bible, apostolic tradition, and the message of

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<sup>86</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Scribner, 1948, 1962), 49–50.

<sup>87</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Trübner, 1893), 12.

<sup>88</sup> Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 1.

<sup>89</sup> Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 2.

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the cross day by day. In Pannenberg's words, these "prove the truth of God anew."<sup>90</sup> As the next chapter will confirm, rational reflection is also a gift of God, as we test this truth for ourselves and in public. The early Church Fathers, we have seen, provided a model of *rational belief*, based on *Scripture*, in the face of varied problems. Ultimately God himself is the guarantor of his truth and his promises. Meanwhile, this does not exclude the need for faith, obedience, and trust, especially in times of strain and testing. It is not simply "our faith," but the Trinitarian God, who is the source of all our confidence during our pilgrimage.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Pannenberg, *BQT* 2:8.

<sup>91</sup> Thiselton, A. C. (2015). *Systematic Theology* (pp. 80–101). William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.