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## THE ARGUMENT FROM NON-BELIEF

Attempts have been made to prove God's non-existence. Often this takes the form of an appeal to the so-called Argument from Evil: if God were to exist, then he would not permit as much suffering in the world as there actually is. Hence the fact that there is so much suffering constitutes evidence for God's non-existence. In this essay I propose a variation which I shall call 'The Argument from Non-belief'. Its basic idea is that if God were to exist, then he would not permit as much *non-belief* in the world as there actually is. Hence the fact that there is so much non-belief constitutes evidence for God's non-existence.

Obviously not all gods will succumb to this line of reasoning. Gods who care little about humanity's belief or non-belief will be immune to it. The argument needs to be directed specifically against gods who place great value upon love and worship from humans. In this essay, it will be directed specifically against the God of evangelical Biblical Christianity, that form of Christianity which is based strongly on the Bible, especially the New Testament, which emphasizes the doctrine of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ and which seeks to help people obtain such salvation. In what follows, I shall use the term 'God' to refer specifically to the God of evangelical Biblical Christianity. The Argument from Non-belief, then, very roughly, is the argument that God, thus construed, does not exist, for if he were to exist, then he would not permit there to be as many non-believers in the world as there actually are. Here the term 'non-believers' does not refer just to atheists and agnostics, but to anyone who does not believe specifically in God, conceived in the given way, and in his son, Jesus Christ. Possibly the non-existence of other gods, or God conceived of in other ways, might also be established by a similar line of reasoning, and I shall comment briefly on that matter at the end.

To formulate the Argument from Non-belief more precisely, I put forward, first, these definitions:

Set P = the following three propositions:

- (a) There exists a being who rules the entire universe.
- (b) That ruler of the universe has a son.
- (c) The ruler of the universe sent his (or her or its) son to be the saviour of humanity.

Situation S = the situation of all, or almost all, humans since the time of

Jesus of Nazareth coming to believe *all three* propositions of set P by the time of their physical death.

Using the above definitions, the argument may be formulated as follows:

- (A) If God were to exist, then he would possess all of the following four properties (among others):
  - (1) *Being able* to bring about situation S, all things considered.
  - (2) *Wanting* situation S, i.e. having it among his desires.
  - (3) *Not wanting* anything that conflicts with his desire for situation S as strongly as it.
  - (4) *Not being irrational*, which entails that he would never refrain from acting in accord with his own highest purposes.
- (B) If a being which has all four properties listed above were to exist, then situation S would have to obtain.
- (C) But situation S does *not* obtain. It is *not* the case that all, or almost all, humans since the time of Jesus of Nazareth have come to believe all three propositions of set P by the time of their physical death.
- (D) Therefore [from (B) & (C)], there does not exist a being who possesses all four properties listed in premise (A).
- (E) Hence [from (A) & (D)], God does not exist.

#### I. SOME COMMENTS ON THE ARGUMENT

Note, at the outset, that situation S does not call for *every* person, without exception, to believe set P. It allows the possibility that in some cases special circumstances may prevent such belief. That qualification in itself helps make premise (A) of the Argument from Non-belief true.

Dividing (A) into four premises, we should inquire of each of them whether it receives Biblical support. Premise (A<sub>1</sub>) is supported by the Bible's repeated claim<sup>1</sup> that God is all-powerful. There are various ways by which God might have brought about situation S. One way would be direct implantation of the given beliefs into people's minds. (A possible Biblical example of belief-implantation would be the case of Adam and Eve.) Another way would be the performance of spectacular miracles. For example, God could speak to people in a thunderous voice from the sky or use skywriting to proclaim the gospel message worldwide. In addition, back in the days of Jesus, events could have occurred differently. Instead of appearing only to his followers, the resurrected Christ could have appeared to millions of people, including Pontius Pilate and even Emperor Tiberius and others in Rome. He could thereby have made such a definite place for himself in history that it would have enlightened billions of people coming later about the truth of set P.

<sup>1</sup> Gen. 17. 1, 35.11; Jer. 32. 17, 27; Matt. 19. 26; Mark 10. 27; Luke 1. 37; Rev. 1. 8, 19.6.

Finally, God might have brought about situation S through non-spectacular, behind-the-scenes actions. For example, he could have sent out millions of angels, disguised as humans, to preach to people in all nations in such a persuasive manner as to get them to believe set P. Another useful action would have been to protect the Bible itself from defects. The writing, copying, and translating of Scripture could have been so carefully guided (say, by angels) that it would contain no vagueness or ambiguity and no errors of any sort. Also, it could have contained a large number of clear and precise prophecies that become amazingly fulfilled, with that information widely disseminated. Then people reading it would have been much more likely to infer that everything in it is true, including the propositions of set P. If all that had been done, then Situation S would probably now obtain. Certainly the way God is depicted in the Bible, he has the *power* to accomplish all such things, which makes premise (A1) of the argument true.

Premise (A2) states that if God were to exist then he would *want* situation S, where that is to be understood in a kind of minimal way, meaning only that situation S is *among* God's desires. So, it is a desire that might be overridden by some other desire, which creates a need for premise (A3). When premise (A2) is understood in this weak sense, it is clear that it, too, is supported by the Bible. There are at least five different arguments to show that. Let us label them Arguments (1)–(5).

*Argument (1)*. The Bible says that God has commanded people to 'believe on the name of his son Jesus Christ' (I John 3. 23). The way that is usually interpreted, it calls for at least belief in the truth of the propositions of set P. It follows that God must want people to believe those propositions, which makes premise (A2) true.

*Argument (2)*. There is another Biblical commandment to the effect that people love God maximally (Matt. 22. 37–38; Mark 12. 30). But loving God maximally (i.e. to an extent that could not possibly be increased) requires that one be aware of *all* that God has done for humanity, which, in turn, calls for belief in the propositions of set P. Hence, again, God must want people to believe those propositions, which makes premise (A2) true.

*Argument (3)*. A third argument for (A2) is based on the Great Commission, according to which God (via his son) directed missionaries to preach the gospel to all nations (Matt. 28. 19–20) and to every creature (Mark 16. 15–16). Since set P is part of the gospel, he must have wanted people to believe the propositions of set P. Furthermore, according to the Book of Acts,<sup>2</sup> God went so far as to empower some of the missionaries to perform miracles which would help convince listeners of the truth of their message. So, getting people to believe that message must have been a high priority for him. This is good evidence that premise (A2) is true.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 3. 6–18, 5. 12–16, 9. 33–42, 13. 7–12, 14. 1–11, 28. 3–6.

*Argument (4).* According to the Bible, God ‘wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth’ (I Tim. 2. 4, NIV). The ‘truth’ here referred to includes the gospel and, thereby, the propositions of set P. Interpreting it that way, the verse is in effect telling us that God wants (among other things) situation S. And that makes premise (A2) true. The support for (A2) is here very direct.

*Argument (5).* The final argument for (A2) is more controversial. One of its premises is the claim that, according to the Bible, God wants all humans to be saved. There are indeed verses, like the one quoted in Argument (4), above, that either state it directly or else point in that direction.<sup>3</sup> But in order for a person to be saved he/she must believe in God’s son.<sup>4</sup> Hence, God must want people to believe in his son, which entails believing the propositions of set P. It follows that (A2) must be true.

There are two main objections to this argument. One is that some verses in the Bible indicate that God does *not* want all humans to be saved.<sup>5</sup> The other is that the Bible is not perfectly clear about the requirements for salvation and some verses suggest that charitable behaviour might be sufficient,<sup>6</sup> in which case belief in God’s son would *not* be a necessary condition, after all. It appears, then, that the premises of this last argument for (A2) leave some room for doubt.

In defence of Argument (5), it could be pointed out that there are conflicting interpretations of the relevant verses among Biblical scholars, and some of them favour Argument (5). Furthermore, evangelical Christianity supports such interpretations. It regards God as a loving and merciful being who wants *all* to be saved, at least in the minimal sense of having that as one of his desires. In addition, evangelical Christianity accepts the doctrine that belief in God’s son is an absolute requirement for salvation. Thus, although there are other forms of Biblical Christianity based on other interpretations of the relevant verses, that form which fosters belief in the God of evangelical Christianity, the being referred to in the Argument from Non-belief, would accept the premises of Argument (5). That then allows Argument (5) to provide further Biblical support for premise (A2) of the Argument from Non-belief.

Even if Argument (5) were rejected, the other four arguments would suffice to establish premise (A2). It might be said, then, that, like premise (A1), premise (A2) receives good Biblical support.

When it comes to the argument’s next premise, (A3), the situation is different. There are no Biblical verses that support it directly. If (A3) is to

<sup>3</sup> Matt. 18. 12–14; John 12. 32; Rom. 5. 18, 11. 32; I Cor. 15. 22; Col. 1. 20; I Tim. 2. 4, 6; II Peter 3. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 16. 15–16; John 3. 18, 36, 8. 21–5, 14. 6; Acts 4. 10–12; I John 5. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Prov. 16. 4; John 12. 40; Rom. 9. 18; II Thess. 2. 11–12. Also, Jesus spoke in parables so that not everyone would understand and thereby get saved. See Matt. 13. 10–15; Mark 4. 11–12; Luke 8. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Matt. 25. 34–40, 46; Luke 10. 25–37, 18. 18–22; John 5. 28–9; Rom. 2. 5–7, 10; James 2. 24–6.

receive any support at all from the Bible, it would need to be of an indirect nature. One possible argument for premise (A<sub>3</sub>) is the following. Let us call it 'Argument (6)'. The way the verb 'conflicts' is used in (A<sub>3</sub>), in order for God to have two conflicting wants, it would have to be *impossible* for him to satisfy both of them simultaneously. But for God, nothing is impossible.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, he cannot have conflicting wants, which makes premise (A<sub>3</sub>) automatically true.

One defect in this argument is that it paradoxically claims both that God cannot have conflicting wants and that for God nothing is impossible, which seems to be a contradiction. But the more basic defect in Argument (6) is that it interprets 'for God, nothing is impossible' in an unrestricted way. Most theologians and philosophers of religion recognize that omnipotence needs to be restricted to what is logically possible and to what is consistent with God's other defining properties.<sup>8</sup> God might have two desires that *logically* conflict. Since it is *logically* impossible for both desires to be satisfied, even a being who is omnipotent (defined in the appropriate way) would be unable to satisfy both of them. And that is how 'conflicts' in premise (A<sub>3</sub>) is to be taken. The word 'logically' could be inserted just before it. Thus, Argument (6) is a failure.

Another argument for premise (A<sub>3</sub>), to be labelled 'Argument (7)', appeals to the *force* of earlier arguments, especially Arguments (1)–(3). Looking back at Argument (1), we note that, according to the Bible, God has *commanded* people to believe in his son, which is quite forceful. Although that may not prove it, it does *suggest* that God's desire for situation S is not overridden by any other desire. As for Argument (2), according to the Bible, God's commandment that people love him maximally is described as the *greatest* of all the commandments (Matt. 22. 38, NIV). That too *suggests* that God wants people to be aware of what he has done for them and so to believe set P, and that this is not a matter overridden by other considerations. Finally, as was already pointed out in Argument (3), according to the Bible, God not only sent out missionaries to spread the gospel worldwide, but also empowered some of them with the ability to perform miracles to help get their listeners to accept the message. That *suggests* that situation S must have been such a *high priority* in God's mind as not to be overridden by anything else. Argument (7), then, is the argument that premise (A<sub>3</sub>), though not directly expressed in the Bible, is nevertheless *suggested* by several Biblical passages, particularly in the *forceful* way that premise (A<sub>2</sub>) is Scripturally supported.

Argument (7) is admittedly inconclusive, for it only appeals to 'suggestions' that are hinted at in certain Biblical verses. It concedes the point

<sup>7</sup> See the references for note 1, above.

<sup>8</sup> For example, according to Titus 1. 2 and Heb. 6. 18, it is impossible for God to lie.

that premise (A<sub>3</sub>) receives no explicit support from Scripture. On the other hand, this weakness may not be fatal, first of all because any support, even of an indirect nature, is better than none, and secondly because (A<sub>3</sub>) is put forward not just as a claim but also as a challenge. It says that if God were to exist, then he would *not* have a certain type of desire, one which both logically conflicts with and also equals or even overrides his desire for situation S. It is certainly a challenge to even conceive of possible candidates for such a specialized desire, for it is hard to understand what God might want from humans as much as their belief (on which depends their love and worship). There is absolutely nothing in the Bible to imply that God might have such a desire. To deny its existence, then, appears not to be such a terribly bold claim. It should be taken as a *challenge* by anyone who wishes to try to refute premise (A<sub>3</sub>) of the Argument from Non-belief to describe a plausible candidate for the specialized desire called for. To do so would attack (A<sub>3</sub>) and thereby the argument itself. This issue will be taken up further on in the essay.

Premise (A<sub>4</sub>) denies that God is irrational. The point here is that God would not simply abandon one of his goals for no reason. Rather, he would perform whatever actions are called for by a goal that is not overridden by any other goal. The idea that God is not irrational in this sense is implied throughout Scripture. It is implied by those Biblical verses that declare him to have infinite understanding (Psalm 147. 5) and to have created the universe through his wisdom and understanding (Prov. 3. 19). It is also implied by verses that say of God that he does what he wants and nothing ever prevents from happening those things that he wants to happen (Isa. 46. 9–11; Eph. 1. 11). The Bible is largely the story of a Supreme Being who is eminently rational in having goals and performing actions to bring them about. Premise (A<sub>4</sub>) therefore receives excellent Biblical support.

Let us consider now the other steps of the argument. Premise (B) should not be controversial. It is based on the idea that if there is no reason whatever for situation S to not obtain then S must obtain. This appears to be a corollary of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. It might be objected that sometimes things fail to happen even when there is no reason for them to fail. For example, an electron may fail to make a quantum leap to a higher orbit even when there is no reason for that to not happen. But in that case there *is* a reason for the electron to not make the leap: no rational being exists who wants the electron to make the leap as one of his top priorities and who has the power to bring it about. That may not be a very illuminating explanation for the electron's failure to make the quantum leap, but it *does* provide *some* reason. In the case of situation S, however, there would not even be that sort of reason if there were to exist a being who possesses all four properties listed in premise (A). In that case, it appears, situation S would *have to* obtain. Whoever doubts premise (B) is probably not understanding it properly.

Premise (C) is an empirical fact about our world. Christianity may be the most widespread religion, but it still claims a *minority* of the earth's people, which suffices to make (C) true. Premise (C) is the proposition from which the Argument *from* Non-belief derives its name.

Note that the Argument from Non-belief is also an argument *for* non-belief in that it aims to prove the non-existence of God. Thus, it is both 'from non-belief' and also 'for non-belief', which implies circularity. However, the circularity is avoided when the two different types of 'non-belief' are specified. The argument proceeds *from* the fact of widespread non-belief in *set P*, as one of its premises, *to* a proposition which expresses non-belief in *God*, as its conclusion.

Step (D) is the first conclusion in the argument. It follows logically from premises (B) and (C) by *modus tollens*. The final conclusion, step (E), also follows logically, from steps (A) and (D), though it is not a direct inference. Premise (A) entails the proposition that if God exists, then there would exist a being who has all four properties (1)–(4). And *that* proposition, together with (D), logically entails the final conclusion, (E), by *modus tollens*.

Since the conclusions of the Argument from Non-belief follow logically from its premises, the only way to attack it would be at one or more of the premises. Dividing (A) into four, there are a total of six premises to be considered: (A<sub>1</sub>), (A<sub>2</sub>), (A<sub>3</sub>), (A<sub>4</sub>), (B), and (C). Of these, I hope to have shown above that only (A<sub>2</sub>) and (A<sub>3</sub>) leave room for debate. The other four, as I see them at least, are not controversial. And of the two premises about which there may be some debate, (A<sub>2</sub>) strikes me as the one that is more clearly true, being well supported within the Bible. Nevertheless, there may still be some opposition to it. There may be people not convinced by the alleged Biblical support who wish to attack the idea that God wants situation S. I shall begin my defence of the Argument from Non-belief by considering an objection to its premise (A<sub>2</sub>).

## II. THE FUTURE-KINGDOM DEFENCE

There is a time reference built into the Argument from Non-belief because situation S refers explicitly to the period from the time of Jesus of Nazareth to the present. Since the present keeps changing, the argument's time reference keeps changing. Every time the argument is expressed, it refers to a slightly longer span of time. And new humans keep getting born, thereby continually enlarging the set of humans referred to in situation S. What we have, then, is a temporal series of situations, S<sub>1</sub>, S<sub>2</sub>, S<sub>3</sub>, ..., S<sub>n</sub>, where the 'situation S' referred to each time the argument is expressed is a new one further along in the series. The advocate of the Argument from Non-belief concedes this point, but insists that it does not affect the truth of any of the premises. It may not be exactly the same situation S from one moment to the

next, but the difference is quite minor, and God still wants the new situation S anyway, so premise (A<sub>2</sub>) remains true.

The objection to be considered here is that premise (A<sub>2</sub>) is *false*, after all, because God is really not interested in any of the situation S's, whether past, present, or future, but rather, a future situation somewhat like S. It is a situation in which everyone will believe the propositions of set P, but most of the people will have come to believe those propositions in an *afterlife* rather than prior to their physical death, as specified in situation S. Since it is this other situation that God wants, and not situation S, the argument's premise (A<sub>2</sub>) is false. Let us call this objection to the Argument from Non-belief 'The Future-Kingdom Defence'. It is a defence of God's existence which appeals to the idea of a future society in which God, or his son, reigns as king and in which everyone believes all three propositions of set P (or *knows* them, as an advocate would put it). People who died without having been sufficiently enlightened about the gospel will be resurrected at the time of the future kingdom and given another opportunity 'to come to the knowledge of the truth'. Because of this, God does not want situation S, which relates only to belief prior to physical death. And so, premise (A<sub>2</sub>) of the Argument from Non-belief is false.

There are several objections to the Future-Kingdom Defence. First of all, there are conceptual problems with the idea of a general resurrection of the dead in which people somehow come back to life in new bodies and can nevertheless be identified as the people they were prior to death. This is a large topic in itself, and we need not pursue it here. It should just be noted that many are not convinced that such an afterlife is even conceptually possible.

A second objection is that the Future-Kingdom Defence has no basis in Scripture and may even conflict with it regarding the doctrine of salvation. The argument claims that some people will not attain salvation by what they do or believe in *this* life, but rather, by what they do and believe in the *next* life. It is only in the afterlife that they will come to believe in God's son and thereby meet that important requirement for salvation. But the Bible does not say anything about such a possibility, and, in fact, some verses seem to conflict with it. The Bible says, 'Now is the day of salvation' (II Cor. 6. 2) and 'It is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgement' (Heb. 9. 27). This seems to require that the criteria for salvation be satisfied in this life and leaves no room for anyone coming to satisfy them *after* having been resurrected into the next life.

The third objection is clearly related to the second one. If the Future-Kingdom Defence were correct, then just about everyone will eventually attain salvation. People who are aware of having become resurrected and who are at that time preached to by angels and given the opportunity for salvation are not likely to let such an opportunity slip by. Yet, according to

the Bible, Jesus himself said that very few people will be saved (Matt. 7. 14; Luke 13. 23–4). So, here is still another place where the argument seems to conflict with Scripture.

The fourth objection to the Future-Kingdom Defence is that it seems to be incompatible with the Great Commission. Why should it be important to God to have missionaries go forth to spread the gospel to all nations, beginning at the time of Jesus of Nazareth, if people will receive another chance at such education in the afterlife? Presumably they would learn the truth of the gospel much more readily than under past or present conditions, for they would presumably be aware that they are in an afterlife, which in itself would make an enormous difference. Why should missionaries struggle to convince people of the gospel message in this life when the same job could be accomplished effortlessly (say by angels) in the next life? The Future-Kingdom Defence has no good answer. Until some answer is given, the argument appears incompatible with the Great Commission.

The fifth objection is similar to the fourth one. There is a great mystery surrounding the Future-Kingdom Defence. Why should God set up the world in such a way that there is a prior period when people are pretty much left on their own, followed by a kingdom-period in which God or his son reigns? What is the purpose of it all, especially if people can become resurrected from the one period to the other and have the more important portion of their existence, including satisfaction of the criteria for salvation, during the second period? Why even bother with the earlier period? The argument leaves all this unanswered, and that is still another reason to regard it unsatisfactory.

Finally, there is excellent Biblical support for premise (A<sub>2</sub>) of the Argument from Non-belief, as shown above in Arguments (1)–(5). The Future-Kingdom Defence has done nothing to undermine that support. For that reason alone, it ought to be rejected, but the above objections to the argument also render it untenable.

It appears that the only way to attack the Argument from Non-belief is through its premise (A<sub>3</sub>). Let us turn, then, to a consideration of two objections to the argument that accept its premise (A<sub>2</sub>) but reject its premise (A<sub>3</sub>).

### III. THE FREE-WILL DEFENCE

According to this objection, which may be called ‘the Free-Will Defence’, premise (A<sub>3</sub>) of the Argument from Non-belief is false because there is something that God wants even more strongly than situation S and that is the *free* formation of proper theistic belief. God wants people to come to believe in his son *freely* and not as the result of any sort of coercion. He knows that people would indeed believe the propositions of set P if he were to directly implant that belief in their minds or else perform spectacular

miracles before them. But for him to do that would interfere with their free will, which he definitely does not want to happen. Since God's desire that humans retain their free will outweighs his desire for situation S, it follows that premise (A<sub>3</sub>) is false, which makes the Argument from Non-belief unsound.

There are many objections to the Free-Will Defence. First and foremost, assuming that God wants to avoid interfering with people's free will, it is *not* clear that that desire actually *conflicts with* his desire for situation S. Why should showing things to people interfere with their free will? People *want* to know the truth. It would seem, then, that to show them things would not interfere with their will, but would conform to it. Even direct implantation of belief into a person's mind need not interfere with his/her free will. If that person were to *want* true beliefs and not care how the beliefs are obtained, then for God to directly implant true beliefs into his/her mind would *not* interfere with, but would rather comply with, the person's free will. An analogy would be God making a large unexpected direct deposit into someone's bank account. It would make the person quite pleased and would not at all interfere with his/her free will. Furthermore, as was explained previously in Section I, there are many different ways by which God might bring about situation S. It is not necessary for him to use either direct implantation or spectacular miracles. He could accomplish it through relatively ordinary means. It would be ludicrous to claim that free will has to be interfered with whenever anyone is shown anything. People have their beliefs affected every day by what they read and hear, and their free will remains intact. Finally, even the performance of spectacular miracles need not cause such interference. People *want* to know the truth. They *want* to be shown how the world is really set up. To perform miracles for them would only conform to or comply with that desire. It would therefore *not* interfere with their free will. Hence, the Free-Will Defence fails to attack premise (A<sub>3</sub>) of the Argument from Non-belief because it fails to present a desire on God's part that *conflicts with* his desire for situation S. That failure makes the Free-Will Defence actually irrelevant to premise (A<sub>3</sub>).

There is another objection to the Free-Will Defence that also aims to show its irrelevance. Let us ask: how are beliefs formed and to what extent is a person's will involved in that process? Philosophers have argued, plausibly, that people do not have direct control over their own beliefs.<sup>9</sup> However, it is usually conceded that the will does play an indirect role in the process of belief formation. We make choices regarding which propositions to try to verify or falsify, and how strenuously such attempts are to be pursued. And those choices indirectly affect what beliefs we end up with. This view, that

<sup>9</sup> H. H. Price, 'Belief and Will', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume* 28 (1954), pp. 1-26; Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self*, chap 9 (Cambridge University Press, 1973); Louis Pojman, 'Belief and Will', *Religious Studies* xiv (1978), 1-14; H. G. Classen, 'Will, Belief and Knowledge', *Dialogue* xviii (1979), 64-72.

the will plays, not a direct, but an indirect role in belief formation, may be called 'weak doxastic voluntarism'. Whether or not it is correct is a large topic in itself, which I shall not pursue here. But I do want to propose that there is a kind of irrationality inherent in willfully controlling one's own beliefs, even when that is done only indirectly. Beliefs are like 'a road map through the pathways of life', where the more closely the map matches the actual roads, the better. To interject *will* into the process of belief formation, even indirectly, would go counter to that function of belief, for it would interject something additional to experience and thereby prevent the belief from representing reality exactly as experienced. It would be like capriciously altering a road map. It seems more reasonable to relegate the will to its proper role, the performance of actions, and keep it as far away as possible from the process of belief formation. People who interject their own will when forming beliefs are being to some extent irrational and 'losing touch with reality'. If I were to fully explore this issue, I would argue that normal people do not do that. Thus, if God were to show things to normal people, and thereby cause them to acquire beliefs, then he could not be interfering with their free will for the simple reason that the wills of normal people are not involved in belief formation. But most of the billions of non-believers in the world *are* normal people, not irrational. Hence, the Free-Will Defence is a great failure with regard to *them*. God could certainly show them things without interfering with their free will.

Even if there were irrational people whose free will would be interfered with by God showing them things, it would seem that such people would be *benefitted* by coming to know how things really are. So, the Free-Will Defence does not even work well for such people, if there are any, for it has not made clear why God should refrain from showing them things of which they *ought* to be aware. Such 'interference with free will' seems to be just what such people need to get 'straightened out'.

There is a further objection concerning God's motivation. The Free-Will Defence seems to claim that God wants people to believe the propositions of set P in an irrational way, without good evidence. But *why* would he want *that*? Why would a rational being create people in his own image and then hope that they become irrational? Furthermore, it is not clear just *how* people are supposed to arrive at the propositions of set P in the absence of good evidence. Is picking the right religion just a matter of lucky guesswork? Is salvation a kind of cosmic lottery? Why would God want to be involved in such an operation?

Sometimes the claim is made that, according to the Bible, God really *does* want people to believe things without evidence. Usually cited for this are the words of the resurrected Christ to no-longer-doubting Thomas: 'because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed' (John 20. 29). Also, Peter praises those who believe in

Jesus without seeing him (I Peter 1. 8). But the message here may not be that God wants people to believe things without any evidence whatever. It may be, rather, that there are other forms of evidence than seeing, such as, for example, the testimony of friends. Perhaps God is simply indicating that he approves of belief based on the testimony of others. Note that, earlier, the resurrected Christ had upbraided some of his disciples for not trusting the testimony of other disciples (Mark 16. 14). His words to Thomas may have been just a continuation of that theme. Thus, it is not clear that God desires irrational belief on the part of humans, nor is it clear *why* he should want that, if indeed he does.

As another objection to the Free-Will Defence, even if it were true that showing people things interferes with their free will, that seems not to have been a very important consideration for God. According to the Bible, he did many things, some of them quite spectacular, in order to cause observers to have certain beliefs.<sup>10</sup> An advocate of the argument needs to explain why God was willing to do such things in the past but is no longer willing to do them in the present.

Finally, the claim that God has non-interference with human free will as a very high priority is not well supported in Scripture. According to the Bible, God killed millions of people.<sup>11</sup> Surely that interfered with their free will, considering that they did not want to die. Furthermore, the Bible suggests that God knows the future and predestines people's fates.<sup>12</sup> That, too, may interfere with human free will. In addition, there are many obstacles to free will in our present world (famine, mental retardation, grave diseases, premature death, etc.) and God does little or nothing to prevent them. This is not conclusive proof that God does not have human free will as a high priority, but it does count against it. It is at least another difficulty for the Free-Will Defence. Considering these many objections, the argument seems not to work very well. So let us turn to a different sort of defence against the Argument from Non-belief.

#### IV. THE UNKNOWN-PURPOSE DEFENCE

The Free-Will Defence failed to identify a purpose that both outweighs God's desire for situation S and also logically conflicts with it. And yet, that failure does not prove that a purpose of the requisite sort does not exist. This leads to what might be called 'the Unknown-Purpose Defence'. It simply and

<sup>10</sup> Exod. 6. 6-7, 7. 5, 17, 8. 10, 22, 9. 14, 29, 10. 1-2, 14. 4, 17-18, 16. 12; I Ki. 18. 1-39; John 20. 24-8. See also the references in note 2, above.

<sup>11</sup> Gen. 7. 23, 19. 24-5; Exod. 12. 29, 14. 28; Num. 16. 31-5; Isa. 37. 36. There are also dozens of other verses that could be cited here.

<sup>12</sup> Prov. 16. 9, 20. 24; Isa. 46. 9-11; Jer. 10. 23; John 6. 64-5; Acts 15. 18; Rom. 8. 28-30; Eph. 1. 4-5, 11; II Thess. 2. 13; Rev. 13. 8, 17. 8. Also, if our hearts are ever hardened, then it is God who has hardened them. See Exod. 4. 21, 7. 3, 9. 12, 10. 1, 20, 27, 11. 10, 14. 8, 17; Deut. 2. 30; Josh. 11. 20; Isa. 63. 17; John 12. 40; Rom. 9. 18.

boldly states that God has *some* purpose which logically conflicts with his desire for situation S and which he wants fulfilled even more strongly than it, and that makes premise (A<sub>3</sub>) of the Argument from Non-belief false. When asked what the additional overriding purpose might be, the advocate of the Unknown-Purpose Defence declares, disappointingly, that it has not as yet been revealed to humanity. This argument, unlike the Free-Will Defence, clearly does attack premise (A<sub>3</sub>), being, in effect, not much more than a bare denial of it. The issue becomes that of which argument, the Argument from Non-belief or the Unknown-Purpose Defence, if either, is the sound one.

Both arguments carry a burden of proof. The advocate of the Argument from Non-belief claims to establish God's non-existence, so he has a definite burden of proof there. On the other hand, the advocate of the Unknown-Purpose Defence claims the existence of a certain purpose on the part of God, and so he, too, has a burden of proof: to show that that purpose does exist. It might be claimed that, because of the paucity of support for premise (A<sub>3</sub>) of the Argument from Non-belief, neither advocate has fulfilled his burden of proof, which creates a kind of 'Mexican standoff' between them on this score. However, there is *some* Biblical support for premise (A<sub>3</sub>), as presented in Argument (7) of Section I above. Although the support is only indirect, it does apply specifically to that premise. In contrast, the only support for the Unknown-Purpose Defence consists of very general intimations of unknown purposes on the part of God. For example, at Isa. 55. 9, God says, 'as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts'. This is too general to specifically support the argument's attack on premise (A<sub>3</sub>). For this reason, although neither side can be said to have proven its case, they are not on a par here. The Argument from Non-belief side has the stronger position.

The question might be raised why God has not revealed to people his purpose for permitting non-belief in set P. It would be in his interest to reveal that, for doing so would immediately destroy one main obstacle to people's belief in him and his son, namely, the Argument from Non-belief itself. Thus, for God to keep his purpose secret is clearly counter-productive. Presumably, according to the Unknown-Purpose Defence, God has some further purpose for all the secrecy, but that further purpose is also kept secret. All that secrecy is clearly a barrier between God and mankind. It undercuts the relationship between them that is the main theme of evangelical Christianity. Some find Christianity preferable to both Judaism and Islam because it depicts God as less remote from humanity and more concerned with its problems. But the Unknown-purpose Defence makes God remote again, which counts against it from a religious perspective. It is probably for this reason that Christians appeal to the 'unknown-purpose' idea only as a last resort.

The Unknown-Purpose Defence cannot be conclusively refuted. Barring some other proof of God's non-existence, obviously it is *possible* that he exists

and has the sort of unknown purpose that the argument attributes to him. The Biblical support for premise (A<sub>3</sub>) of the Argument from Non-belief, though worth mentioning, is in the end inconclusive. Nevertheless, there are at least two additional reasons for preferring the Argument from Non-belief to the Unknown-Purpose Defence. Each of the arguments presents us with a kind of worldview. The worldview presented by the Argument from Non-belief (call it 'W-N') is that the God of evangelical Biblical Christianity does not exist, which leaves open many alternatives. Among them are the following four: (1) there is no god at all; (2) there are many gods; (3) there is one god but it lacks the power to bring about situation S; and (4) there is one god but it does not want situation S. In contrast, the worldview presupposed by the Unknown-Purpose Defence (call it 'W-U') is that, specifically, the God of evangelical Biblical Christianity, who wants a close relationship with humanity and who possesses properties (A<sub>1</sub>), (A<sub>2</sub>), and (A<sub>4</sub>) of the Argument from Non-belief, among others, *does* exist but is very mysterious concerning his motivations, despite the apparently counter-productive character of that.

One reason for preferring W-N to W-U is that W-U is a relatively definite and narrow outlook, trying to specify what the exact state of affairs is, whereas W-N puts forward many different alternatives, any one of which *might* be true. We could infer that, given the data available to us, the *a priori* probability of W-N is greater than that of W-U. An analogy would be the example of ten boxes, numbered 1–10, and a marble which is in one of the boxes. One hypothesis simply states that the marble is *not* in box 8, whereas another hypothesis states that it *is* in box 8. Without any further information on the matter, the first hypothesis is more likely true than the second. In a similar way, because of the 'open' character of W-N and the 'closed' character of W-U, it is more reasonable to accept the former than the latter.

It might be objected that the marble analogy fails because we do not know the initial probabilities regarding God's existence and properties. It is like the case where some boxes may be too small to hold the marble, so we cannot assume that the initial probability for each of them is  $1/10$ . However, even given that the initial probability for each box is *not*  $1/10$ , there is nothing to favour box 8. Thus, the 'not box 8' hypothesis is still more likely true than the 'box 8' hypothesis, for we have no data to suggest otherwise. The mere structure of the hypotheses entails that result. In a similar way, without any further data, W-N is more probable than W-U, just in virtue of its 'open' character.

Another point in favour of W-N is that it does not leave important matters unexplained, as does W-U. W-U conceives of God as being mysterious and leaves unexplained not only why he has refrained from bringing about situation S but also why he keeps his motivation on this matter secret from humanity. As pointed out, that seems counter-productive. Why should God,

who clearly wants situation S and made a start towards it with the Great Commission, decide to back off and in the end forgo it? W-N contains no such mysteries but easily explains why situation S does not obtain: it is not something that would emerge in the natural course of events, nor is there any being who wants it and is able to bring it about. In choosing a worldview, people seek illumination, not mystery, and for that reason alone they should prefer W-N to W-U.

Premise (A<sub>3</sub>) of the Argument from Non-belief was put forward as a challenge: find a purpose on God's part that would explain why he has not brought about situation S. The Unknown-Purpose Defence has not met that challenge. It only claims that there *is* such a purpose and that the challenge *could* be met, but it does not actually meet the challenge or even tell us when that might happen. As long as the challenge remains unmet, it is reasonable to accept the Argument from Non-belief as *good grounds* for denying God's existence.

#### V. OTHER GODS

It might be possible to modify the Argument from Non-belief so as to make it applicable to God in general, for example, by dropping propositions (b) and (c) from set P. Or perhaps the argument might be applied to, say, the God of liberal Christianity or the God of Orthodox Judaism, or even the God of Islam.

Consider, for example, the God of Orthodox Judaism. Suppose propositions (b) and (c) of set P were replaced by the following propositions (call the new set 'P'):

- (b)' The ruler of the universe has a 'chosen people', namely the Israelites of the Hebrew Bible.
- (c)' He gave them a set of laws which he wants them to follow, namely the Torah.

And suppose situation S were to be replaced by the following:

Situation S': the situation of all, or almost all, descendants of the

Israelites since the time of Moses believing *all* the propositions of set P'.

A corresponding change would be made in the new premise (C). And the term 'God' would be understood to refer, not to any Christian God, but to the God of Orthodox Judaism. The rest of the argument would remain unchanged.

Would the new Argument from Non-belief be sound? There would be great problems with its premises (A<sub>2</sub>) and (A<sub>3</sub>). None of the arguments formulated above in Section I to support the original premises (A<sub>2</sub>) and (A<sub>3</sub>) would be relevant to Judaism. And it is unclear whether any analogous support for the new (A<sub>2</sub>) and (A<sub>3</sub>) could be gathered from the Hebrew

Scriptures. No other religion emphasizes evangelization as much as does evangelical Biblical Christianity, for which the original Argument from Non-belief seems tailor-made, so it seems unlikely that as strong a case could be made for the Argument from Non-belief in the context of any other religion. Nevertheless, it does not seem impossible. Perhaps, constructed in the right way, the Argument from Non-belief may pose a threat to belief in God in general or to religions other than evangelical Biblical Christianity. Exploration of this issue is a project for the future.

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