

## Are Beliefs About God Theoretical Beliefs? Reflections On Aquinas And Kant

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Our question presupposes a contrast between theoretical beliefs and non-theoretical beliefs. If there is no such contrast, then there is no sensible question to be asked concerning whether beliefs about God are theoretical beliefs. With what, then, are theoretical beliefs to be contrasted? We might contrast theoretical beliefs with observational beliefs, where observational beliefs have a content that reports the result of direct observation. Given this way of drawing the theoretical/non-theoretical distinction, many people obviously have beliefs about God that are theoretical, and many people obviously have beliefs about God that are non-theoretical, mystics and ordinary pew-folk alike.<sup>1</sup> If we focus on *function* rather than *content*, we might contrast theoretical beliefs, those used in an explanatory way, with those that are not so used. On this way of drawing the contrast, many people obviously have theoretical beliefs about God. After all, many theists use some of their beliefs about God to answer sundry "why" questions; and a belief that is deployed to answer a "why" question is deployed in an explanatory way. Nevertheless, on this way of drawing the contrast, many theists obviously have non-theoretical beliefs about God, as both a brief conversation with one actively engaged in a living theistic religion and a look at various creeds would reveal.

Now, even if beliefs about God count as theoretical on some precisification of 'theoretical', *faith in God*, or *belief in God*, considered as a virtue, involves theoretical belief and much more besides. Famously, Aquinas distinguished living faith from lifeless faith, paradigmatically exemplified in "the demons [who] believe and tremble". Although we shall not pursue the matter here, it is certainly important to understand what distinguishes *mere* theoretical belief--lifeless faith--from living faith, or, alternatively, what distinguishes mere belief *about* God from belief *in* God. But what importance can there be in the question of whether beliefs about God are theoretical beliefs? After all, the ways we have cashed out that question leave us with a question that is not very interesting; not very interesting because the ways noted so far of clarifying the question leave us with a question whose answer is all too obvious. So why should anyone bother filling up journal space with a lengthy answer to a question with a seemingly all too obvious answer?

The need to address our question has been created by two independent sources, one of which has its roots in Kant and the other of which has its roots in certain responses to what these days is poorly named but popularly known as Reformed epistemology. In what follows, we shall focus almost exclusively on the first; as for the second, we shall content ourselves with making a couple of important points that lead to questions for further research.

### I. The First Source

The first source of the need to address our question consists in a tendency in certain intellectual circles which we regard as deplorable. This tradition distinguishes theoretical beliefs from what we might call *practical beliefs*. At a first gloss, theoretical beliefs are commitments to the world's being a certain way, whereas practical beliefs are commitments to certain pictures to live by. According to this conception of things, human beings have a "theoretical voice," which

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<sup>1</sup> On this and related matters, see, e.g., William Alston's *Perceiving God* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991), and Nelson Pike's *Mystic Union: An Essay in the Phenomenology of Mysticism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992).

expresses their views concerning how things really are, and a "practical voice," which expresses the views which they deploy as guides to acting in the world. Both deserve to be called beliefs--and yet the verdict of the "theoretical voice" on some matter may be quite different from that of the "practical voice". At a first gloss, then, this tradition appears to fragment the self: the practical self that guides action is to a considerable degree autonomous from the theoretical self that pursues an understanding of the world.

We must distinguish two versions of the theistic-belief-as-mere-practical-belief view. The first concedes that plenty of people have theoretical beliefs about God but that they *ought* to have practical beliefs instead. The second postures as, in effect, a piece of descriptive anthropology. It holds that, *in fact*, no one (except perhaps certain misguided philosophers and theologians) has theoretical beliefs about God, and that in ordinary religious communities, theistic beliefs (and, *a fortiori*, a belief that God exists) function as practical beliefs. We admit to being a little hesitant to ascribe this second sort of view to anyone. Borrowing a turn of phrase of Wittgenstein's: "For a blunder, that's too big." Yet we know all too well what strange pronouncements can issue from thinkers gripped by a philosophical picture, and *especially* when disguised by solemn terms of philosophical art. Indeed, as we shall see, when confronted with certain figures, there is little hermeneutic alternative but to take them as propounding the second version just described.

Why is our opinion of the theistic-belief-as-mere-practical-belief view so low? There are three reasons. First, we think that an injunction to mere practical belief, and the philosophical rhetoric that surrounds it, is likely to deter people from the sort of faith that we take to be the most desirable, one that involves a commitment of the intellect to the truth of theism. Second, we take it that the second version of the theistic-belief-as-mere-practical-belief view is bad descriptive anthropology (to say the least). Third, we take it that the injunction to mere practical belief operates with a misguided ideal of a fragmented self which is not possible for human beings. The first objection says beliefs about God ought not to be mere practical beliefs. The second says beliefs about God are not mere practical beliefs. The third says beliefs about God could not be mere practical beliefs. Our first objection may seem rather partisan: for it is grounded upon our own theistic belief and as such can only be motivated to the extent that our theistic belief can be motivated. But its partisan appearance can be dispelled if we put the objection like this: if the theistic God exists, then beliefs about Him ought to involve a commitment of the intellect to the truth of theism. Even nontheists can consistently hold this view. The second and third objections, we believe, can be motivated in a way that ought to be persuasive even to nontheists.

Before defending these critical remarks, we shall sketch a rather traditional position on the nature of various beliefs about God, namely, the view of Thomas Aquinas. After describing the central features of his view, we shall describe Kant's view of theistic belief, or rather, two distinct strands in Kant, one conservative and the other radical. We shall contrast Kant with Aquinas, and show traces of the radical Kant in some post-Kantian figures before returning to our critical task.

## **II. Aquinas: The Classical Position**

(1) Commitment to the existence of God centrally involves the intellect:

By virtue of their intellect, humans inquire after truth and when committing themselves to theism, their intellect acquiesces in the truth of the claim that there is a God. (See e.g. *Summa Theologica* [hereafter, *ST*] II,II, 2.1).

(2) Commitment of the intellect to p is commitment of the intellect to p is true.

On Aquinas' conception of belief, belief in the truth of some claim is not some additional commitment to the claim. Having formed a belief that p, I don't now ask myself whether to go on

and believe that p is true or whether p corresponds to reality, or whether p is the case, or whether it is a fact that p. Having taken a stand on some question of whether to believe p, I don't go on and take some further stand on whether or not to believe that p is true. Why, on this conception, is belief that p is true not some additional commitment to belief that p? The answer is because truth is the end of belief: to believe p *is* just to take a stand on p with regard to its truth.

(3) Our understanding of God is imperfect.

Following Aristotle, Aquinas says that our understanding of the world is rooted in sense experience. For sense experience furnishes us with the material from which our conceptions of the essences of things are abstracted. The "light of natural reason" then enables us to demonstrate various things from the kinds thus abstracted and to infer various things about the world from what is presented to us in sense experience. For Aquinas, the light of natural reason can furnish us with the knowledge that there is a God. But, crucially, we are in no position to thus obtain cognitive possession of God's essence. Aquinas' model of scientific demonstration--whereby the properties of things are demonstrated on the basis of our grasp of the essences of things--is thus inapplicable to God.

This middle position concerning our ability to gain understanding of God has come in for high praise from some quarters:

...the *Summa* is a masterpiece. It knows just what the human mind can attain and it attains it. It does not attempt to discover a synthetic principle whence all else follows. It knows that that principle is the divine essence and that, in this life, we cannot properly know it. On the other hand, it does not renounce all thought of synthesis to settle down to teaching catechism; for it knows that there is such a thing as imperfect understanding. Systematically, it proceeds to that limited goal.<sup>2</sup>

(4) Matters of faith are not fit objects for science.

Some clarification is in order here. For Aquinas, Christian beliefs fall into two categories: those that can be known by science and those that cannot. The ones that can be known by science are yet often known by faith. Further, this is a good thing: some people are too stupid to know by science what they believe by faith. And even people able to know by science what they believe by faith, may take longer to arrive at the belief by science. Moreover, beliefs acquired by faith may be more stable, more "free of doubt and uncertainty," than the more abstruse deliverances of science (*ST* II,II,2.4). The belief that there is an unmoved mover falls within the province of science though that belief is often held through faith. The belief that there is a Trinity is strictly outside the province of science.

(5) Our assent to Christian doctrines has no natural explanation.

The natural light of reason, even if it enjoins us to assent that there is a God, does not afford us any further information about Him. Additional beliefs about God cannot, therefore, be explained by natural reason. But nor, for Aquinas, are they to be explained as mere caprice, whim, etc. The proper explanation for such beliefs is that in these cases the human will, induced by the grace of God, moves the intellect to believe. Here the grace of God is given explanatory work to do viz-a-viz the facts of human religious psychology. According to Aquinas, the grace of God does not deliver upon humans (here and now) an ability to grasp God's essence; but it does move the human intellect to assent to the truth of claims whose assent is not enjoined by the natural light of reason.

(6) The speculative intellect by extension becomes practical.

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<sup>2</sup> Bernard Lonergan *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1967), p. 213.

The speculative and practical intellects are not distinct powers, according to Aquinas. What positive picture does he offer? He writes:

Truth and good include one another; for truth is something good, otherwise it would not be desirable; and good is something true, otherwise it would not be intelligible.... [T]he practical intellect knows truth, just as the speculative, but it directs the known truth to operation. (*ST I*,79.2)

It is not hard to see what is going on here. Suppose practical deliberation concludes with "I ought to do A". One feature of this outcome is that a certain conclusion is represented as true, namely, the good of A. Another feature of this outcome is that a certain end is intimated to the will, namely, the doing of A. When engaging in deliberation of this sort, the intellect represents certain things as true, and in this respect it is speculative. The intellect also induces the will to operate by representing certain ends as good, and in this respect it is practical. What is crucial here is that the will's inducement requires that the intellect represent certain things *as true*. For the intellect can only provide the requisite inducement to the will by accepting-as-true that certain ends are good. In effect, the intellect's accepting-as-true the goodness of certain ends functions both as an assertion and as a command. Considered as a command, whereby the intellect "serves notice"<sup>3</sup> to the will, accepting-as-true the goodness of certain ends is practical. Considered as an assertion, accepting-as-true the goodness of certain ends is speculative. (The extent to which we reckon it possible to *disobey* such commands will depend on the extent to which we reckon weakness of will possible, a topic that need not concern us here.)

Notably, some neo-Thomistic writers have departed significantly from the Thomistic conception of the relation of the practical to the speculative intellect. In doing so, we believe, they unnecessarily encourage the radical positions that we deplore. A good example of this departure is provided by the remarks on practical insight offered by Bernard Lonergan:

...the speculative or factual insight is followed by the question whether the unity exists or whether the correlation governs events, the practical insight is followed by the question whether the unity is going to be made to exist or whether the correlation is going to be made to govern events. In other words, while speculative and factual insights are concerned to lead to knowledge of being, practical insights are concerned to lead to the making of being.<sup>4</sup>

By contrast, Aquinas says that practical insight *at once* knows being and directs the will to make being (to use Lonergan's turn of phrase). In practical deliberation, one acquires knowledge of how things ought to be and *at the same time* directs the will to make the world such that it is as it ought to be.

To our mind, Lonergan shows serious confusion when he goes on to write:

...judgment is concerned to complete one's knowledge of an actuality that already exists; while decision is concerned to confer actuality upon a course of action that otherwise will not exist.

One can judge how things ought to be even if things are not yet how they ought to be (and perhaps will never be how they ought to be) just as one can judge how things will be even though the object of one's judgment is "not an actuality that already exists." To say that decisions about how one ought to act in no way involves commitment to truth, we fear, artificially

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<sup>3</sup> We borrow this phrase from Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1957), p. 255.

<sup>4</sup> In *Insight* (Philosophical Library, New York, 1957), p. 609.

separates the practical and speculative intellects. We shall have more to say on this matter in due course. For now we primarily aim to describe Aquinas' view.

(7) The practical deployment of an intellectual belief that God exists is not inevitable.

For Aquinas, belief that God exists is the route to moral perfection. Yet, as we've noted, Aquinas is fully aware that such belief does not necessarily give rise to action: there is lifeless faith.

(8) The natural light of reason and faith never conflict.

On Aquinas' view, it is appropriate to see the natural light of reason as silent on sundry matters of faith, but utterly inappropriate to suppose that the natural light of reason conflicts with faith. That is to say, the natural light, properly deployed, will never deliver a verdict contrary to faith. Faith meanwhile, need not undo any of the deliverances of the natural light: it merely adds to them: "The gifts of grace are added to nature in such a way that they do not destroy it, but rather perfect it." (*Expositio super librum Boethii De trinitate* [hereafter, *BDT*] 2.3; see also *ST I*, I.8).

Aquinas has good theological reasons for maintaining this, of course. Since God gives us the natural light, it would be strange for Him to give us a faculty that enjoined rejection of matters of faith, which also constitute a gift of God. And so he concludes: "It is impossible that the contents of philosophy should be contrary to the contents of faith, but they fall short of them."

Here, in short, is Aquinas' position on whether beliefs about God are theoretical beliefs: The bare belief that there is a God is a fit belief for theoretical science though it is often held by faith. Many other beliefs about God are not fit beliefs for theoretical science. Whether or not fit for theoretical science or arrived at through theoretical science, theistic beliefs are commitments of the intellect to truth. Many of these commitments, moreover, are then put to *explanatory ends*. To take one of many examples, beliefs about the grace of God are used to explain the source of various beliefs about God. If "theoretical belief" means "part of theoretical science," only bits of Christian doctrine count. If "theoretical belief" means "arrived at by theoretical science," some bits of Christian doctrine will be theoretical for some people but not for others. If "theoretical belief" means "commitment to truth," then all Christian beliefs are theoretical beliefs. If "theoretical belief" means "beliefs given to explanatory deployment," then some Christian beliefs are theoretical beliefs. How about practical beliefs? Well some beliefs will, *in addition* to their status as commitments-to-truth, serve as inducements to the will. So considered, some beliefs will be practical as well as theoretical. But it just makes no sense on Aquinas' view to say that some beliefs are *merely* practical.

Having described Aquinas' view, we should emphasize that, *viz-a-viz the main question of this paper*, it would be relatively insignificant were it to turn out that speculative reason cannot secure any of the doctrines of the Church. Suppose that all of those doctrines, including a belief in an unmoved mover are matters of faith. This departure from Aquinas need have no bearing on the idea that ordinary theistic beliefs are commitments to truth. It just means that the scope of faith would be wider than Aquinas thought. This departure will not, by itself, offer any answer *significantly* different to Aquinas' answer to the question "Is belief that God exists a theoretical belief?"

To understand how one might attempt to motivate an answer significantly different to Aquinas', we would do well to look at Kant. For better or worse, Kant's work served historically as the condition of the possibility of a view of theistic belief that regards it as a mere practical belief. After presenting some strands of Kant's thought, we reveal their presence in some post-Kantian figures.

### III. Kant On Theistic Belief

In the *Preface* to the second edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant famously wrote that "I have...found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*." In itself, this does not enjoin a radical departure from the tradition outlined above. Indeed, many strands in Kant's work cohere quite nicely to form a fairly traditional view of theistic belief. Yet there are other strands in Kant's work that point to a radical departure from tradition and they have been used (sometimes without explicit acknowledgment of Kant) as the conceptual underpinning for pictures of theistic belief as radically non-theoretical. We shall sketch first a conservative and then a radical picture of Kant's view of theistic belief. We do not intend to capture fully all the diverse strands of Kant's thought on the matter. It is nevertheless instructive to play them off against each other.

#### *The Conservative Kant*

(1) God is not manifest in the realm of intuition.

Like Aquinas, Kant believes that God is not seen in sense experience; relatedly, the concept of God has no direct application to the objects directly presented to us in sense experience.

(2) Speculative reason cannot prove the existence of God.

Kant thought that traditional attempts to demonstrate the existence of God were misguided. Our grasp of the concept of God does not enjoin us to believe that God exists, and so ontological arguments are awry; deployment of theses about cause and effect to infer a first cause are illegitimate uses of those principles, and so cosmological arguments run awry; and so on. *Contra* Aquinas, scientific reasoning does not secure *any* transcendental conclusions.

There may be other important ways that even the conservative Kant departs from Aquinas regarding the relation of natural reason to Christian doctrine. Aquinas held that there were a number of roles that human reason could play with regard to Christian doctrine. We have mentioned one of them, namely, that of securing some "preambles to faith" by deploying natural reason. But there are others too. For example, in *BDT* 2.3, Aquinas mentions two other uses of natural reason *viz-a-viz* Christian doctrine: "throwing light on the contents of faith by analogies" and "refuting assertions contrary to the faith". It is an interesting question whether Kant might have allowed that reason might play either of these latter roles. Our view--one that we shall not argue for here--is that Kant would be generally wary of even these views about the usefulness of reason *viz-a-viz* matters of faith, though his use of reasoned reflection "to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*.", might be seen as an instance of the third strategy.

(3) The existence of God is nevertheless a requirement of human reason: practical reason.

For Kant there is no *a priori* proof of God's existence. Nor is there a legitimate argument from the data of sense experience to the existence of God (either of a cosmological or teleological variety). Scientific thought cannot, however, dispense altogether with thoughts about God. According to Kant, science needs--for reasons we need not examine here--to consult *the idea of God*. That idea (which he called "a regulative idea") regulates scientific inquiry. Nevertheless, there is another use of human reason apart from the use of reason to construct empirical science in response to the manifold of intuition (sense experience). Human reason engages in deliberation about how one ought to act. Through such deliberation the existence of God (as opposed to the mere idea of God) enters the picture. Practical reason transports us beyond sense experience by requiring us to believe propositions that can receive no validation by a scientific engagement with sense experience. For practical reasoning cannot motivate people unless they hope that good things happen to good people, that people are ultimately happy in accordance with their degree of virtue. In order to hold out this hope, we must believe that our existence

extends beyond death and that a righteous being metes out punishment and reward in accordance with virtue. Without this hope, human desire cannot harmonize with human will, since this harmony is required for us to act in accordance with the legislation of practical reason. For Kant, this does not constitute a proof of the existence of God. But it constitutes something like a proof of the following: in and by being moral agents, we will believe that God exists.

Concerning those ideas (including the idea of God) which merely regulate reason in its application to sense experience, Kant writes:

Now no object in intuition can be given to the categories so far as they are to be applied to these ideas; but that such an object really exists and that here the category as a mere form of thought is not empty but has significance--this is sufficiently certified by an object which practical reason indubitably presents in the concept of the highest good, namely, by the reality of the concepts that are required for the possibility of the highest good.<sup>5</sup>

(4) It is a good thing that the existence of God is secured by practical and not theoretical reason.

It is important to Kant that the existence of God is hidden from sense experience and science. There are two related ideas that lead him to this conclusion. First, Kant takes himself to have secured a link between being moral and being a theist. For if one attains theism in and by pursuing the good, then anyone who denies theism would "have to be a scoundrel".<sup>6</sup> Second, if we had access to God through science, we would no longer be able to act for the sake of the good, since we would act out of fear of punishment or hope of reward:

And suppose further that we could really reach as much certainty through this knowledge as we do in intuition. Then in this case, all our morality would break down. In his every action, man would represent God to himself as a rewarder or avenger. This image would force itself involuntarily on his soul, and his hope for reward and fear of punishment would take the place of moral motives.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, Kant is less concerned than Aquinas to leave a place for lifeless faith. Yet, while there is a contrast on that score, it should not be overstated. After all, Aquinas says that while demons believe by their "natural intellectual acumen," in man there is a "certain affection for the good" delivered by even lifeless faith (*ST* II,II,5.2).

Kant has related concerns about what he calls "fanaticism" which "promises...supersensuous intuition or feelings".<sup>8</sup> Reliance on purported divine instructions revealed by a supersense will, he thinks, deter people from acting for the sake of the moral law. The idea can be put this way: a righteous being that wanted us to act *for the sake of the good* would not provide us with any such supersense.

(5) Reason can neither deny nor prove the possibility of the claims given in revelation.

Kant says as much in various places, especially in *Religion within the Bounds of Reason*, concluding that belief in those claims is strictly a matter for faith and not reason.

That concludes our sketch of the conservative Kant, a sketch that certainly resembles the views of the actual Kant in recognizable and significant ways.

How does the conservative Kant begin to reconcile the above picture with the suggestion of the *Critique of Pure Reason* that unless concepts have application to sense experience they are meaningless? Recall the dictum that while intuitions without concepts are blind, concepts

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<sup>5</sup> *Critique of Practical Reason* (New York: Library of Liberal Arts, 1956), edited by Lewis White Beck, p. 143.

<sup>6</sup> *Lectures on Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), edited by Allen Wood, p. 123.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>8</sup> *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 143.

without intuitions are empty. If that dictum were right, it would seem that the idea of God is meaningless and could not apply to an object.

The conservative Kant answers as follows: the only way that speculative reason can confer meaning on a concept, certify a thought as non-empty, is by relating it to sense experience. Yet that is not the only way that a concept can acquire significant content, not the only way that a concept can gain the ability to express a real possibility. An excellent expression of this strand of Kant's conservative view is found in a footnote to the Preface of the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

...I can think whatever I please, provided only that I do not contradict myself, this, provided my concept is a possible thought. This suffices for the possibility of the concept, even though I may not be able to answer for there being, in the sum of all possibilities, an object corresponding to it. But something more is required before I can ascribe to such a concept objective validity, that is, real possibility; the former possibility is merely logical. This something more need not, however, be sought in the theoretical sources of knowledge; it may lie in those that are practical.<sup>9</sup>

What view does the conservative Kant offer us concerning whether beliefs about God are theoretical beliefs? Nothing significantly different from Aquinas' position. If "theoretical belief" means "part of empirical science" or "established by reason," then beliefs about God are not theoretical. But if "theoretical belief" means "commitment to the truth that cannot be directly observed," then the conservative Kant says beliefs about God are theoretical.

### ***The Radical Kant***

The radical Kant takes on the "as-if"-ery of the discussion of the role of the idea of God as a regulative idea in science and extends it to all thought or talk of God.

Let us say a little more about the regulative role of the idea of God in science. On this matter, Kant writes in the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

...We declare, for instance, that the things of the world must be viewed *as if* they received their existence from a highest intelligence. The idea [of God] is thus really only a heuristic, not an ostensive concept. It does not show us how an object is constituted, but how, under its guidance, we should *seek* to determine the constitution and connection of the objects of experience. (A 671/B 699)

...[W]e must view everything that can belong to the context of possible experience...*as if* the sum of all appearances (the sensible world itself) had a single, highest and all-sufficient ground beyond itself, namely, a self-subsistent, original, creative reason. For it is in the light of this idea of a creative reason that we so guide the empirical employment of *our* reason as to secure its greatest possible extension--that is, by viewing all objects *as if* they drew their origin from such an archetype. (A 672-673/B 700-701)

...the idea of [God], like all speculative ideas, seeks only to formulate the command of reason, that all connection in the world be viewed in accordance with the principle of a systematic unity--as if all such connection had its source in one single all-embracing being, as the supreme and all-sufficient cause.... The speculative interest of reason makes it necessary to regard all order in the world as if it had originated in the purpose of a supreme reason. (A 686/B 714)

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<sup>9</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: St. Martin's, 1965), translated by Norman Kemp Smith, B xxvi. Quotations in the text from the *Critique of Pure Reason* are from Kemp Smith's translation.



Two things stand out in these passages. First, Kant claims that the idea of God is necessary for scientific discoveries to be made. Without "the assumption of a supreme intelligence" reason would not be led to "altogether new views as to how the things of the worlds may be connected" in a law-like and purposive fashion. "Thus if, in studying the shape of the earth..., of the mountains, seas, etc., we assume it to be the outcome of wise purposes on the part of an Author of the world, we are enabled to make...a number of discoveries" (A 687/B 715). Second, unlike ordinary assumptions with empirical content--e.g., the hypotheses of science--the idea of God is "regulative only," functioning *only* as a "command of reason" to seek "purposive unity," "only [as] a heuristic, not an ostensive concept."

Strikingly, Kant says that even in using the idea of God in this merely regulative, heuristic way, one undertakes a "doctrinal belief" in God.

Purposive unity is, however, so important a condition of the application of reason to nature that I cannot ignore it, especially as experience supplies me so richly with examples of it. But I know no other condition under which this unity can supply me with guidance in the investigation of nature, save only the postulate that a supreme intelligence has ordered all things in accordance with the wisest ends. Consequently, as a condition of what is indeed contingent, but still not unimportant purpose, namely, to have guidance in the investigation of nature, we must postulate a wise Author of the world...

Even of this theoretical relation it can be said that I firmly believe in God. (A 826/B 854)

A question arises: How do we reconcile the view that to do science we merely need to think that things are as if God made them with the view that to do science we must believe that God exists? To think that things are *as if* they were created by a wise Author is not to believe that there *is* any such Author. An earlier gloss on "doctrinal belief" makes this worry yet more vivid. Regarding his doctrinal belief that other worlds are inhabited, Kant says that "I should be ready to stake my all on the contention--were it possible by means of any experience to settle the question". But thinking that things are *as if* there were a God is not a *preparedness to stake one's all* on there being a God should there be any means of settling the question.

Kant reconciles "doctrinal belief in God" with mere "as-if"ery about God by gutting belief of any commitment to truth. This is no better seen than in the following passage:

The term 'belief' refers only to the guidance which an idea gives me, and to its subjective influence in that furthering of the activities of my reason which confirms me in the idea. (A 827/B 855)

This remark is extremely important, especially in light of the fact that for the radical Kant (as cited in the paragraph before last) the idea of God is a mere *guide*, a heuristic device, indeed, an imperative, for how one should employ one's reason in investigating nature. We have here the germ of a conception of belief that, in contrast to the "being prepared to stake my all" conception, begins to pull apart the notion of *believing p* from the notion of *commitment to the truth of p*. Belief that there is a God, *qua* theoretical belief, now amounts to using the *idea* of God as a mere guide for empirical discovery and theory-building, regarding the idea of God as an imperative to behave in certain ways vis-a-vis the goals of science. Belief that there is a God thus appears to fall short of a commitment to a belief that *God exists* is true. One of the Thomistic principles adverted to above--that belief that p commits one to a belief that p is true--is under attack. Kant inserts a subtle wedge between belief in God and belief that *God exists* is true.

Now, as Vaihinger has made very clear, also littered around the Kantian corpus are significant signs of mere "as-if"ery with regard to belief in God, when it comes to the regulative use of the idea of God in *moral* practice.

...we must continually examine our conscience as if we had been called to account before a judge.<sup>10</sup>

His severe self-reproach will speak to him as if it were the voice of a judge to whom...he had to give account.<sup>11</sup>

Practically we create these objects ourselves, according as we consider the idea of them to be helpful to the purpose of our pure reason.<sup>12</sup>

To believe in such a ruler practically and morally, does not mean first to assume his reality as true, in order that we may realize the end imposed.... No, it means that, in accordance with the ideal of that purpose, we are to act as we should if such a world-government really existed.<sup>13</sup>

Vaihinger, keen to focus on this radical strain in Kant, offers the following gloss:

In other words, in the Kantian sense, in the sense of the Critical Philosophy, the expression, "I believe in God" means simply that "I act *as if* a God really existed".<sup>14</sup>

The radical Kant also appears in his last work--the *Opus Postumum* -, though again this is not unequivocal. There, he affirms that

A command, to which everyone must absolutely give obedience, is to be regarded by everyone as from a being which rules and governs over all. Such a being, as moral, however, is called God. So there is a God.<sup>15</sup>

But what does Kant mean by the claim that "there is a God" here? Charity bids us to postulate that whatever he means is compatible with his other claim that the existence of God is left open by the discussion: "Whether there is a God, whether there are worlds or one absolute world-whole (universum), is not here decided."<sup>16</sup> Moreover, what Kant means by the claim that there is a God must be compatible with what *looks* like an affirmation of the *non*-existence of God:

Whether there is a God (in substance) or not, cannot be a point of controversy, for it is not an object of dispute (objectum litis). It is not existing beings outside the judging subject, about whose characteristics it would be possible to dispute, but a mere idea of pure reason which examines its own principles.<sup>17</sup>

Here, note, "existing beings outside the judging subject" is contrasted with the mere idea of God; the idea of God is *not* an idea of "existing beings outside the subject."

Finally, Allen Wood has recently (but unwittingly) drawn our attention to another source of Kant's unwillingness to use "belief" or "faith" with respect to God in any sense that carries ontological commitment. According to Kant, the appropriate propositional attitude toward the results of the practical arguments for God's existence is "postulation," "assumption," "presupposition," "belief for practical purposes," or "acting as if". For, according to Kant, practical arguments cannot justify commitment to the truth of the claim that God exists since that attitude would require either theoretical evidence, which Kant says is unavailable, or experiential evidence, which Kant rejects. Thus, given these theses, Kant must in all consistency regard it inappropriate to hold an attitude toward the claim that God exists which would involve a

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in H. Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of 'As If'* (London: Routledge Kegan and Paul, 1924), p. 301.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 302.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 303.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 305.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 306.

<sup>15</sup> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), edited by Eckhart Forster, p. 207.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

commitment to its truth. Nevertheless, Kant repeatedly speaks of belief in God. And there is the wedge. Belief in God is divorced from a commitment to the truth of God exists.<sup>18</sup>

Let us sum up the views of the radical Kant. (1) We do have a need for God-thoughts in moral practice and theory-building in science. (2) Yet, it is enough here that we view the world *as if* there were a God. (3) Further, this by itself counts as believing that God exists. (4) Finally, it is nigh on meaningless (or just plain false) to suppose that the idea of God applies to something "outside the judging subject". One does not understand what the idea of God is for if one treats it as something other than a mere heuristic device.

Although we believe that the radical Kant can be found in the Kantian corpus, our concern in this essay is not so much to convince the reader of his presence as it is to present a strand in Kant that seems to have led many of his students to endorse a view decidedly different from the view espoused by the conservative Kant.<sup>19</sup> To them we now turn.

#### IV. Post-Kantian Radicalism

After Kant, we find a diverse lot propounding views bearing a distinct family resemblance to those of the radical Kant. Indeed, their debt to Kant, direct or indirect, is typically quite significant.

Some of these figures are described in the work by Vaihinger already cited. With good justification, Vaihinger presents Forberg as one that "clearly grasped and presented, at least in its basic principles, Kant's as-if doctrine, particularly in relation to the philosophy of religion."<sup>20</sup> Forberg wrote in his "The Development of the Concept of Religion":

Believe that no good action done or even merely designed by you, no matter how small and obscure and humble it be, will be lost in the haphazard course of things! Believe that somewhere in this course of things there is a plan, imperceptible to you, it is true, but calculated on the ultimate triumph of the Good! Believe that the kingdom of God, the kingdom of truth and of justice will come on earth; and do you but work for its coming!<sup>21</sup>

But, then, he continues:

It is our duty to believe in an ordering of the affairs of this world such that one can calculate on the final success of all good plans, and that the striving to advance the Good and oppose Evil is not quite in vain; or, what comes to the same thing, to believe in a moral world-government or in a God who rules the world according to moral laws. Yet this belief is by no means a duty in virtue of its being theoretical, i.e. an idle speculation, but simply and solely in so far as it is practical, i.e. in so far as it is a rule of conduct. In other words, it is not a duty to believe that there exists a moral world-government or a God as a moral world-ruler; our duty is simply to act *as if* we believed it.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See Wood's "Rational theology, moral faith and religion," *The Cambridge Companion to Kant* (Cambridge, 1992), edited by Paul Guyer, 404-405. Wood does not there make the point that we do, although he provides the rationale for it.

<sup>19</sup> Our contention that there is a radical strain in Kant's writing about theistic belief will trouble those of his interpreters who rightly favor his conservative strain. Notably, in the latter part of this century, we think of Allen Wood. While we hold in high esteem Wood's exposition of Kant's views on religion, and while we heartily agree that the conservative Kant that Wood gives us is a more worthy philosopher to engage, we cannot agree with some of his early attempts to explain away the textual evidence for the radical Kant, some of which we have already marshalled. Contrast, for example, Wood's interpretive remarks on pages 148-49 of *Kant's Moral Religion* (Cornell, 1970) with the quotations above.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Vaihinger, *ibid.*, p. 322.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 323.

(Note in passing how, *contra* Aquinas, "theoretical" belief is glossed as *mere* theoretical belief here, as if a theoretical belief has, by its very nature, to be idle.) And further:

Can an atheist possess religion? Answer: Certainly. We can say of a virtuous atheist that in his heart he recognizes the very same God whom he denies with his tongue. On the one hand practical belief and theoretical unbelief, on the other, theoretical belief (which then becomes superstition) and practical unbelief can very well exist together.<sup>23</sup>

How can practical belief sustain itself in the face of theoretical unbelief? Forberg writes:

And even if we admitted the worst, that the actual impossibility of the kingdom of God could, at this very moment be demonstrated, what would be the consequence? Would all efforts to attain the kingdom of God, i.e. all morality, necessarily cease at once and unselfishness disappear entirely from the face of the earth? Why should it? Does effort become impossible the moment success is seen to be impossible?... No. But it at once becomes irrational (says the imaginary interlocutor)... Unquestionably that is so, if success be the final aim of effort, the goal the final aim of the runner. But what if the striving were a final aim in itself! What if there were no goal to be attained or, what is the same thing for the runner, only a goal set at an infinite distance? What if the goal were there for the sake of the race, not the race for the sake of the goal?<sup>24</sup>

Vaihinger also discusses the views of F.A. Lange in some detail, who wrote that while the "overwhelming balance of probability" is against "the dreams of our imagination (the religious ideas of God, immortality, etc.) possessing any reality," we may nevertheless "create for ourselves in imagination a fairer and more perfect world," appropriating a new notion of truth to go with it:

And if there are men who live a life of such complete spiritual exaltation that for them everyday realities take a secondary place, how can they describe the vividness, permanency and practical efficacy of their experiences, than with the word 'truth'?... We must, for the present, acquiesce in the double meaning of the word 'truth'.

With Forberg we have a forthright affirmation of a sort of double meaning of the word "belief". With Lange we have a forthright affirmation of a sort of double meaning of the word "truth". Indeed, it is a striking tendency in intellectual circles resembling the radical Kant that a proliferation of putative double meanings is imputed to language in order to forge a sort of compromise between the voice of the speculative intellect and that of the practical intellect. The speculative intellect says "God does not exist" or "It makes no sense to say 'God exists'"; the practical intellect says "There is a God". The speculative intellect says "I don't believe in God"; the practical intellect believes in God. The speculative intellect says "There is no truth in theism"; the practical intellect says "The kingdom of God truly awaits us". How else can one describe oneself in these ways without succumbing to self-conscious doxastic schizophrenia in one's already fragmented self except by giving an equivocal victory to each fragment?

Turning to writers in this century, it is easy to find views resembling those of the radical Kant. He is particularly manifest in the traditions of philosophical writing on religion stemming from, firstly, noncognitivist responses to logical positivism, and secondly, the later Wittgenstein.

The most notable figure in the the first-mentioned group is R.B. Braithwaite.<sup>25</sup> Under the influence of the verifiability criterion of meaning, Braithwaite argued that beliefs about God are more aptly viewed as intentions to carry out a certain policy, subsumable under a sufficiently

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 324.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 325.

<sup>25</sup> *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1955).

general principle to be a moral one, together with the implicit or explicit statement (but not the assertion) of certain stories of moral exemplars. Thus, when one speaks of God, one does not claim that God is thus-and-so; rather, one expresses the direction of one's will, say, toward an agapeistic way of life, as modeled by Christ in various narratives in the four Gospels. While there are differences between Braithwaite and Kant, there are important similarities. In Braithwaite we find Kant's wedge between belief in God and commitment to the truth of various things about God, as well as Kant's deployment of the idea of God for merely regulative and imperatival purposes.<sup>26</sup>

The writings of Wittgenstein himself contains various remarks that bear *some* affinity to the post-Kantian radicals we have mentioned:

Christianity is not a doctrine, not, I mean a theory about what has happened and will happen to the human soul, but a description of something that actually takes place in human life. For 'consciousness of sin' is a real event and so are despair and salvation through faith. Those who speak of such things (Bunyan for instance) are simply describing what has happened to them, whatever gloss anyone may want to put on it.<sup>27</sup>  
Predestination: It is only permissible to write like this out of the most dreadful suffering--and then it means something quite different. But for the same reason it is not permissible for someone to assert it as a truth, unless he himself says it in torment.--It simply isn't a theory.--Or, to put it another way: If this is truth, it is not the truth that seems at first sight to be expressed by these words. It's less a theory than a sigh, or a cry.<sup>28</sup>

Queer as it sounds: The historical accounts in the Gospels might, historically speaking, be demonstrably false and yet belief would lose nothing by this: not, however, because it concerns 'universal truths of reason'! Rather, because historical proof (the historical proof-game) is irrelevant to belief. This message (the Gospels) is seized on by men believably (i.e. lovingly). *That* is the certainty characterizing this particular acceptance-as-true.<sup>29</sup>

In a religious discourse we use such expressions as: "I believe that so and so will happen," and use them differently to the way in which we use them in science.<sup>30</sup>

Wittgenstein's writing on religion has sprouted a mini-tradition in the philosophy of religion whose prominent exponent is D.Z. Phillips. It should be conceded straightaway that there are significant differences between Wittgensteinian/neo-Wittgensteinian views on religion and the radical Kant. The idea of God as a universal postulate of practical reason is missing. Furthermore, the idea of theistic beliefs as non-propositional expressions has just as much prominence as the idea of theistic beliefs as guides to acting. The central claim here is that religious activity--both verbal and non-verbal--expresses primordial responses to the world. (A crude gloss, using Thomistic language: religion is fundamentally the expression of the appetitive soul and not the intellectual soul.) Burning in effigy expresses love. The purificatory rites before hunting and after the kill express the gravity and importance with which the occasion is regarded. Kissing the picture of a loved one expresses one's love. In addition to their expressive role (which, we concur, we should take seriously), do religious beliefs attempt to characterize

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<sup>26</sup> After writing this paper, we were quite pleased to discover that in his recent *Kant as Philosophical Theologian* (Barnes & Noble, 1988), Bernhard M. G. Reardon agrees with us that Kant is the intellectual precursor of the non-cognitivist response to verificationism. See pp. 62-65.

<sup>27</sup> *Culture and Value*, 28e.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 30e.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 32e.

<sup>30</sup> *Wittgenstein on Religious Belief*, p. 57.

how things are? Here, Phillips' "theoretical voice" kicks in and distances itself from the "expressive voice" of religious discourse in a way not unlike other post-Kantian radicals:

When rituals are seen as expressions of this kind, it can also be seen that in no sense are they based on hypotheses or opinions. They are not founded on anything, but express values concerning what is deep and important for the people concerned--birth, death, hunting, cultivation of the crops, personal relations, etc.<sup>31</sup>

When we speak of matters concerning the souls of men we may be concerned with a wide range of matters concerning people's relationships with one another.... ["He is prepared to sell his soul...", "My soul is in distress," "My soul is raised up in thanksgiving," "The body imprisons the soul," "His soul shall be judged," "Each man's soul has an eternal destiny: heaven or hell".] In all these examples we are talking about a person in a certain way. Talk about the soul is a way of talking about people.... [S]uch talk is not based on an opinion or any kind of hypothesis. It is not dependent on any kind of conjecture about some odd substance inside the body called the soul.<sup>32</sup>

It is all too easy to conclude that if religious expressions which involve talk of God are not referring expressions, if no object corresponds to such talk, such expressions cannot say anything.<sup>33</sup>

To ask whether God exists is not to ask a theoretical question.<sup>34</sup>

Because the question of divine reality can be construed as 'Is God real or not?' it has often been assumed that the dispute between the believer and the unbeliever is over a matter of fact.... That this is a misrepresentation of the religious concept is made obvious by a brief comparison of talk about facts with talk about God. When do we say 'It is a fact that...' or ask 'Is it a fact that...'? Often we do so where there is some uncertainty. For example, if the police hear that a wanted criminal has died in some remote part of the world, their reaction might be to 'check the facts'. A fact might not have been: it is conceivable that the wanted criminal had not died. On the other hand the religious believer is not prepared to say that God might not exist. It is not that as a matter of fact God will always exist, but that it makes no sense to say that 'God might not exist.'<sup>35</sup>

## V. Critical Remarks

We shall confine our critical attention to two questions:

1. Do post-Kantian radicals accurately describe how theists hold their theistic beliefs?
2. What place can theism have in the life of one who denies the truth of "God exists"?

### *Question 1*

It is fitting to begin by asking what is actually going on when religious believers confess their faith. We thus begin with some descriptive anthropology. In connection with this, let us ask the following related questions:

- (a) Do many contemporary theists believe that "God exists" expresses a truth?
- (b) When affirming their faith in the words of the Nicene Creed, do Christian theists express a belief that it is true that there exists one God?

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<sup>31</sup> *Religion Without Explanation*, p. 36.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>35</sup> *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry* (London: Routledge, 1970), pp. 1-2.

(c) Does theoretical reason bestow the same sense on the words "God exists" as that intended by theists when they confess their faith using those words?

(d) When traditionally minded philosophers such as Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, and so on affirm "God exists" are they affirming more or less the same proposition that non-philosophical theists affirm when they confess their faith using those words?

Why do we ask these questions? Because post-Kantian radicalism seems to suggest a 'no' answer to some or all of them. When, for example, Phillips says that "God" does not *refer* to some entity he does not take himself to be contradicting religious believers when they claim that God exists and when they claim to be talking *about* a being that created the cosmos. Apparently, Phillips, as a philosopher, takes himself to attach a sense to "...refers to..." that is very different to the sense that ordinary religious believers attach to "...is about a being...". This is a special instance of the doctrine of double meaning already adverted to. Post-Kantian radicalism claims, almost always, to find a double meaning in some or all of: "refers," "believes," "exists," "object," "is true," "God," "there is..." , etc.

We can quickly make progress on this descriptive anthropological question by seeing how various theses about theism and theistic belief support a "no" answer to any of (a)-(d).

(1) It is false that God exists.

As far as we can see, this provides no good grounds for a "no" answer to any of (a)-(d) above.

(2) The claim that God exists is not to be evaluated by the epistemic standards of empirical science.

Again, as far as we can see, this provides no good grounds for a "no" answer to any of (a)-(d) above. (And the same goes for such theses as "Questions about whether a view is rational or irrational do not really have proper application to religious matters".)

(3) The claim "God exists" is meaningless.

Even here, we believe, the bearing on descriptive anthropology has been overestimated. Consider (a) for example. Suppose (per impossibile) that we made the philosophical discovery that "God exists" is meaningless. That would hardly show that ordinary religious people don't believe that the words "God exists" expresses a truth. Nor would it show that they don't believe that the term "God" refers to something "outside of the judging subject". It would merely show that ordinary religious people are wrong to believe that "God exists" expresses a truth and that "God" refers to an extradermal being.

Now, of course, claim (3) has *some* bearing on (a) to (d) above. If "God exists" expresses no proposition then *a fortiori* Aquinas and the God-fearer in the street are not affirming the same proposition when they utter the words "God exists". But we warn against any inference from (3) to the conclusion that theists are not *attempting* to speak the truth, to refer, etc. (in the sense of "true" and "refer" expressed by Aquinas and other traditionalists) when they utter the words "God exists".

In passing, we ought to expand on the parenthetical "per impossibile" above. No philosopher has ever succeeded in showing "God exists" to be meaningless, nor that any other fundamental theistic beliefs are meaningless. While it is common knowledge that Braithwaite and his friends argued from verificationist conclusions about religious language, it is not widely known that some other post-Kantian radicals concur, including those in the neo-Wittgensteinian tradition:

One can see intellectually that it makes no sense to speak of surviving death because philosophy has shown the belief to be meaningless.<sup>36</sup>

But, pending a revival of long-dead philosophical doctrines about linguistic meaning, we cannot see what could possibly lie behind philosophical posturing of this sort.

(4) Religious views have the function of expressing primordial affective responses to the world, a function shared by many non-linguistic responses and activities (kissing the earth, etc.).

Again, it is hard to see how this claim might have any direct bearing on (a) to (d) above. Consider an analogy: Phillips' work has the function of expressing admiration and respect for the work of Wittgenstein. But that does not mean that it does not attempt to describe how things are. There are, of course, various non-linguistic activities that would be akin to Phillips' work along the functional dimension of expressing admiration for Wittgenstein (dusting our gold-leafed, leather-bound copies of the *Philosophical Investigations* weekly, visiting Vienna and Cambridge annually, etc.). But we should hardly conclude blithely that such activities are alike on the dimension of attempting to describe how things are.

(5) It is inconceivable to ordinary religious believers that God does not exist.

First, this claim is so strikingly silly that it is scarcely worth reflecting on what follows from it. It is not hard at all to imagine ordinary participants in religious communities saying "Perhaps God does not exist". (Phillips will, no doubt, have yet more recourse to the doctrine of double meaning at this point.) Now, some religious believers may find it so compelling to think that there is a God that it is virtually inconceivable to them that there is no God. But we cannot see how this is supposed to affect (a) to (d) above. For even though it is inconceivable to us that we are the only people on the planet, it remains a fact that we are not alone. Furthermore, if uncertainty is the mark of theoretical belief, then one need only look to various other sorts of religious claims to find manifest uncertainty. For example, many Christians share Aquinas' view that to be certain as to who will and won't attain salvation is to manifest a sin of presumption. Finally, even if it were inappropriate to use "God exists" or "God does not exist" in a religious community, it does not follow that neither is true. We must not confuse the conditions under which it is appropriate to utter a sentence for the conditions of its truth. For example, even if we never find ourselves in circumstances in which it is appropriate to use "I exist" or "I don't exist," nothing follows about their truth.

(6) Ordinary religious people believe that they believe that there is a God, etc., but they do not believe that there is a God; they are, for the most part, in a state of self-deception.<sup>37</sup>

This claim, if correct, would indeed suggest a significant emendation to the descriptive anthropology offered by the classical position. Indeed, (6), if correct, would seem to offer far better grounds for a critique of that anthropology than (1)--(5) above. Nor do we deny that it is outright incoherent to suppose that such self-deception can occur. We agree, further, that were a person to be guilty of such self-deception, it would not be surprising to find that person engaging in many of the religious practices that theists engage in.

We offer two observations concerning (6).

First, it does not seem to be very much in the spirit of post-Kantian radicalism. On the picture offered by (6), so called "practical belief" in God will end up being "a belief that you believe that God exists," a second order belief produced by self-deception that can sustain and explain some religious activities. The writers we have been describing hardly seem amenable to the view that theistic belief is, at least standardly, a form of self-deception. This is not intended as, in itself, a

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260.

<sup>37</sup> This possibility was brought to our attention by Georges Rey.



criticism of the "theism-as-self-deception" view. We merely wish to point out that it offers a critique of the traditional view of theistic belief that is very different from the one that we have been pursuing.

Second, as an empirical matter, we find the self-deception view exceedingly implausible as a piece of descriptive anthropology. Perhaps a good way of making vivid the empirical issue is to ask oneself: Would theists be prepared to stake a good deal on the truth of theism were the opportunity to arise? If they would, then, it would be very hard to suppose that they were deceived about whether or not they believed that God exists, given that preparedness. So, as an empirical matter, *would* ordinary theists be prepared to stake a good deal on the truth of theism? Perhaps some of them--the doubting Thomases, so to speak--would not. But one who supposes that such self-deception is virtually ubiquitous among ordinary believers simply evidences, we believe, a failure to have lived among believers.

There is a way of looking at (d) above that is very tendentious, and another way that makes it look rather less so. One might think to oneself: "It is very tendentious to claim that ordinary theists are committing themselves to what *philosophers* commit themselves to when *philosophers* claim that *it is true* that God exists and that "God exists" *corresponds to reality*." To adopt this perspective on the descriptive anthropological issue is, once again, we believe, to risk being trapped by a picture. Here is a better picture: When *philosophers* say *it is true* that God *exists* and that "God exists" *corresponds to reality* they are saying *no more* than what ordinary people are saying when they say that God exists.

In short, we just don't know of any reasons that have been provided by proponents of post-Kantian radicalism for offering a 'no' answer to all of (a) to (d) and, indeed, we just don't know of any reasons for offering a significantly different descriptive anthropology than that offered by the classical position.

## **Question 2**

Suppose one jettisons the dubious descriptive anthropology of post-Kantian radicalism. One admits that ordinary religious people think that it is true that God exists and that they don't think this in any significantly different sense from Augustine, Aquinas, etc. Still, such a person may deny that the words "God exists" expresses a truth, i.e. they may be a theoretical atheist in Forberg's sense. To what extent can beliefs about God play a role in the life of the theoretical atheist? Does a significant option--*mere practical theism*--remain? We take this to be a question rather different from that raised by Question 1 above. Perhaps post-Kantian radicalism can gain a secure foothold here.

There can be little dispute that in a limited way one can take on board some religious writings even if one is a theoretical atheist. For example, one might take the parables of the New Testament to be enlightening on issues about how one ought to conduct oneself even if one doesn't believe there is a God. But what is provocative about the proponents of post-Kantian radicalism is that they envisage someone taking on board, say, Christian practices in a much more thoroughgoing way even though one does not believe any Christian doctrines are true.<sup>38</sup> And on this score, post-Kantian radicalism fails miserably.

Some useful light can be shed on this issue by reflecting on two attitudes that were important to Aquinas and Kant alike: hope and despair.

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<sup>38</sup> To avoid unnecessary prolixity, we shall not keep qualifying everything we say to take account of double meaning doctrines: Lange will say, "but *in a sense* one will believe in the truth of Christianity, etc." Yes, of course Lange will say that.

First, hope. Central to Aquinas' thinking on hope is the idea that it involves assent of the intellect. "Now the object of hope is, in one way, eternal happiness, and, in another way, the Divine assistance...and both of these are proposed to us by faith" (*ST II,II,17.7*). How exactly does hope require faith? It is not hard to see how Aquinas is thinking here. *Prima facie*, it is hard to think of people hoping for God to render assistance to them unless they believe that there is a God who is able to provide such assistance. Again, *prima facie*, it is hard to see how people might maintain hope for eternal life and yet be utterly convinced that they will cease to exist upon dying.

Regarding despair, Aquinas sees a deep connection with the intellect:

Now the true opinion of the intellect about God is that from Him comes salvation to mankind, and pardon to sinners...while it is a false opinion that He refuses pardon to the repentant sinner, or that He does not turn sinners to Himself by sanctifying grace.

Therefore, just as the movement of hope, which is conformity with the true opinion, is praiseworthy and virtuous, so the contrary movement of despair, which is in conformity with the false opinion about God, is vicious and sinful. (*ST II,II,20.1*)

Can Christianity, for example, provide someone with hope about the future without that person taking the truth of various Christian claims with complete intellectual seriousness? Can one hope that God will assist one while denying forthright that there is a God? *Prima facie*, that seems like sustaining real hope that the fire brigade will catch one as one falls off a building while feeling perfectly confident that the fire brigade is not there. Is it not clear that insofar as one is confident that the fire brigade is not there, then hope will give way to despair? Similarly, insofar as one is intellectually secure that there is no God to provide assistance, won't that attitude lend itself to despair, at least with respect to ever receiving divine assistance?

Post-Kantian radicalism seems to require a fragmentation of the mind here. It seems to require our maintaining certain sorts of attitudes whose satisfaction apparently requires the truth or serious possibility of certain states of affairs actually obtaining even while the intellect denies that those states of affairs actually obtain.

We can put these issues in sharper relief by reminding ourselves that what is at issue here are matters concerning the nature of human psychology. It is no good for a philosopher to recommend some sort of policy concerning how various components of one's mental life *ought* to relate to beliefs about God unless that philosopher has good reason to suppose that we *can* in fact adopt such a policy. But, *can* we human beings maintain hope in divine assistance even though our intellect disowns theoretical theistic belief completely? What evidence is there that human beings can maintain such a stance? *Can* we, in general, avoid despair without intellectually taking seriously states of affairs whose reality would be a ground for hope? We confess to not knowing quite what it would be like to put the proposals of various post-Kantian radicals into practice. And we confess to not knowing any good reason for thinking that human beings are capable of putting these proposals into practice in any thoroughgoing way.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Admittedly, only some sorts of God-related hopes presuppose the existence of God. If one hopes that God will save one, that presupposes His existence. If one hopes that there is a God who will save one, one is not thereby presupposing God's existence. But even the latter sort of hope requires belief in the real possibility of divine existence. Or so we contend. In both cases there is theoretical belief: in the first case, a theoretical belief that God will save one, and in the second case, a theoretical belief that there is a real possibility of salvation by God. The second sort of case allows a sort of faith which involves theoretical belief but rather less than forthright theoretical belief in the relevant religious propositions; nevertheless, it is a variety of faith that is certainly important. (For more on this latter point, see Robert Audi's discussion of "global faith" in "The Dimensions of Faith and the Demands of Reason," in *Reasoned Faith* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), ed. Eleonore Stump.) But the second sort of cases does not allow for beliefs about God that are merely

Let us return to Forberg: "And even if we admitted the worst, that the actual impossibility of the kingdom of God could, at this very moment be demonstrated, what would be the consequence?" Would theists continue just as before to engage in petitionary prayer were they convinced by this demonstration? Would they continue to express gratitude to God for this and that? Would they continue to worship God? Would they continue so readily to maintain hope of reunion with the dead? As an empirical matter, we find the answers to all these questions obvious. All these practices and attitudes would wither. Perhaps they would not vanish entirely. Theoretical atheists may, in a moment of helplessness, call out for God to help them. But they would certainly wither.

Our discussion of post-Kantian radicalism has focused on descriptive rather than normative issues. And, indeed, we think that this is the proper focus. The real poverty of post-Kantian radicalism is thrown into sharpest relief when one sees that it is bad psychology, bad anthropology. But is there a psychologically realistic picture that might capture some of post-Kantian radicalism, and, if so, is there anything to recommend it?

Here is a possibility: a person can oscillate in their theistic beliefs. When among religious folk they may be compelled to believe certain theistic propositions to be true, whereas when mingling with those unfriendly to theism, they may no longer find these propositions compelling. And here is another option: when striving to be a good person, one finds theistic belief compelling, but not otherwise. (Note: there is no double meaning of "belief" here, just change of belief.) Perhaps some people are like this: fundamental beliefs about God wax and wane according to the company one keeps or according to variation along some other fluid dimension. Recall St. Paul's words in this connection: "Bad company corrupts good morals"; perhaps bad company also tends to corrupt theistic belief. If there were people like this, would it show that theistic belief is not a theoretical belief in any interesting sense? No. All it would show is that the theistic beliefs of some people are radically unstable, incapable of surviving outside certain environments.

Nevertheless, these *are* psychologically realistic possibilities. Are they to be recommended? *Should* we try to become unstable people that oscillate in this way? We see no reason to become oscillators of this sort.

## V. The Second Source

Suppose that we are right to reject the theism-as-mere-practical-belief view. And let us suppose that theistic beliefs are theoretical beliefs, in a sense that implies that to believe that God exists is to believe a proposition that has a truth-value standardly expressed by "God exists" (never mind the doctrine of double meaning). Furthermore, let us suppose that while *some* theistic beliefs are *not* deployed by *all* theists to answer various why-questions, and that while some theistic beliefs are not so deployed by *any* theists, *some* theistic beliefs, e.g. fundamental ones like the belief that God exists, *are* deployed by *all* theists to answer various why-questions. These beliefs, then, are properly conceived as at least parts of explanations of certain facts as well as certain events in the history of the world. So conceived, fundamental theistic beliefs are theoretical beliefs in a richer sense than that to which we have just alluded: they can and do function in explanations.

Now, it is quite natural to infer from the suppositions just stated that whatever epistemic merit fundamental theistic beliefs have, they have it in virtue of meeting certain standards distinctively appropriate for explanations, e.g. fairly universal standards of best explanation. After all, if the

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practical. (We are grateful to Paul Draper and those at St. Joseph's University who helped us see the need to address this issue.)

theoretical/non-theoretical distinction is just the explanation/non-explanation distinction, then, since fundamental theistic beliefs are or figure in explanations, what else could their epistemic status depend on except meeting, or failing to meet, explanatory standards? In a frame of mind like this, our title question can naturally be understood as the question: "*Do* beliefs about God meet explanatory standards, standards appropriate for assessing theories?", or, alternatively, "*Must* beliefs about God meet explanatory standards?"

Now, we do not wish to castigate our fellows who try to argue that fundamental theistic beliefs do meet explanatory standards. However, we do wish to caution against just assuming that they must. Specifically, we reject the following line of thought: *since* fundamental theistic beliefs figure in explanations, their epistemic merits depend either wholly or partially on their meeting broadly explanatory standards.

What we have in mind is this: Many sorts of beliefs can be used to answer why-questions, e.g. the vast majority of our hum-drum perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, beliefs about other persons and beliefs based on testimony. Yet, despite that fact, the source of their epistemic merits arguably lies elsewhere, e.g. they may be the undefeated products of reliable belief-forming processes. Thus, even if such beliefs were put to explanatory purposes, it would not follow that whatever epistemic status they had depended on whether they met standards appropriate to explanations. What would follow is that, if such beliefs *met* those standards, they would be even better off epistemically than they otherwise would be. Meeting such standards would be epistemically supererogatory, so to speak. On the other hand, if those beliefs were put to explanatory purposes and *failed* to meet the relevant explanatory standards, they would have whatever epistemic merit they would have had if they had not been put to such purposes, provided one who held them did not in the meantime "switch" grounds for holding them.<sup>40</sup>

Of course, we do not deny that some beliefs have whatever epistemic status they possess in virtue of meeting standards distinctive of good explanations. If a professional member of one of the natural or social sciences believes a theory, the epistemic status of her belief (in the typical case) hangs on whether it meets whatever standards are relevant to such explanations, e.g. those trans-revolutionary standards definitive of what Kuhn calls "normal science": predictability, fit with well-confirmed theory, etc. Notably, however, such beliefs are, in the first instance, formed in a community the unifying goal of which is to explain certain domains of data, to answer various why-questions about which members of the community are commonly concerned. It is also notable that there is no other nonexplanatory mode of cognitive access to the subject matter. This fact stands in stark contrast with humdrum perceptual beliefs and the like, whose entree into our doxastic lives has nothing to do with explanation and whose subject matter permits us nonexplanatory modes of cognitive access.

And it also arguably stands in sharp contrast with fundamental theistic beliefs. Rarely, if ever, does a theist come to believe that there is a God or that He created the world, or, in the case of traditional Christians, that God was in Christ reconciling Himself to the world, or that Christ rose from the grave, or that He will come again to judge the living and the dead or that there is a world to come, etc. on the grounds that these beliefs figure in answers to various why-questions. They are, in the typical case at any rate, held on quite different grounds: broadly speaking, testimony and religious experience. And, if these grounds are undefeated, reliable modes of

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<sup>40</sup> The rationale for the qualification is this: Suppose you stopped believing that there is a chair in front of you on the basis of your sensory experience, and *really* switched to believing it on the basis of the fact that the chair-hypothesis best explained the appearances. Then, if the chair-hypothesis failed to be the best explanation, your belief would not have the epistemic status it would have had if you had not switched grounds.

access to the subject matters in question, then fundamental theistic beliefs are in good epistemic standing, even if they were to fail to meet distinctively explanatory standards.

We are led to a series of important questions, questions that are at the forefront of contemporary philosophy of religion: What reason do we have to believe that testimony and theistic religious experiences are reliable sources of information? Do we have good reason to believe that they are not? But from the vantage point of the title question of this essay, the most important question is this: *Even if* testimony and experience can contribute to the epistemic status of a theist's fundamental theistic beliefs, can they so contribute *independently* of any consideration of the explanatory merits of those beliefs? Or, alternatively, is there something about the epistemology of testimony and religious experience such that theists *must* have recourse to the explanatory merits of fundamental theistic beliefs if either testimony or religious experience are to have any hope at all of functioning as sources of epistemic merit? These are large questions, our answers to which must wait for another occasion.<sup>41</sup>

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## Notes