

## **Part I**

# **Natural Theology**

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## **Chapter 1. The Priority of Natural Theology**

The term ‘theology’ in a broad sense covers all more or less systematic ways of talking and writing about God or gods. In western academic traditions, it is customary to distinguish between two very different kinds of theology. The one, called “revealed” theology, is the endeavour by believers to interpret and systematise the contents of texts that are considered as divine revelations, such as the Talmud, the Bible, the Koran, the Vedas, or the Book of Mormon. The other, called “natural” or “rational” theology, consists in attempts to prove or make probable the existence of God or gods, and to acquire knowledge about them, on the basis of evidence or premises that can also be accepted by non-believers, such as empirical knowledge about the natural world.

It is the aim of this first chapter to establish the thesis that natural theology has a priority over revealed theology. But which kind of priority is meant? In the context of discovery, there usually is no temporal priority of natural theology. Individuals do not discover and endorse religious ideas for the first time by studying its intricate arguments. Living religions are shared forms of life, as is often said, into which most believers were born. Typically, religious education starts early in infancy, long before children develop their mature intellectual capacities, and it often proceeds by means of ritualised repetitions. Critical thought about the doctrinal tenets of a religion is discouraged in many traditional cultures, or even considered as sinful or at least indecent, and it is sometimes punished by social exclusion or worse.

Even the relatively rare adult converts to an established religion are usually not attracted to it because they have become convinced by the arguments of natural theology that its core beliefs are true. There are many other aspects of religions or sects that may be

appealing to outsiders, such as ravishing rituals, the sense of belonging provided by close-knit communities, the elevated feeling of human dignity conferred on the believers by the conviction that they belong to the elect, the appeal of high-minded ethical ideals, financial and social interests, or the longing for a life after death, which only the faithful will enjoy. In some cases, converts have had exceptional experiences, which they interpret within the framework of an established religion.

In the great monotheist religions and in Hinduism, the doctrinal contents of faith are contained in and derived from a corpus of ancient texts, which are often considered as eternally valid divine revelations. It is to such a revelation, and, indeed, to revealed theology, that the faithful and their priests or ministers are ultimately referred whenever they seek enlightenment and stand in need of reasons for justifying their religious beliefs or practices. Yet, these revelations and the numerous problems that they raise provide the believer with sufficient reasons to engage in natural theology and critical philosophy of religion.

In the present chapter I shall argue succinctly that natural or rational theology is indispensable for the conscientious religious believer. It may be that believers have come to endorse a religious creed because they were raised within a religious community, or in a quest for personal significance, and not because they know of good arguments or evidence for its truth. Historically speaking, belief in a revelation may precede rational deliberation. Yet, rational or natural theology has an epistemological priority over revelation in the context of justification. What I mean by this is that, at least in our modern, science-informed culture, merely referring to the text of a revelation and to revealed theology as a justification for what one believes will never be sufficient. If one aims at being a rational or reasonable person in endorsing a creed as true, one will also need the arguments of natural theology in order to justify one's reliance on a specific religious revelation in the first place.<sup>1</sup>

Somewhat schematically, we might distinguish between on the one hand reasons for engaging in natural theology that are put forward by authors of holy or revealed texts, and on the other hand reasons resulting from problems about these texts. An example of the first kind of reason is contained in Paul's letter to the Romans, I: 18-20:

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<sup>1</sup> The objection that we might have properly basic religious knowledge of a mystical or experiential nature, which does not stand in need of inferential justification, will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 below.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse...

According to the standard interpretation of this passage, “what can be known” refers to what one can know about God on the basis of our empirical knowledge of the world, and not to God’s special revelation to Israel and in Christ. Clearly, the idea is that God is not a despotic autocrat, who punishes people merely because they do not believe in him, but that he has a righteous nature, so that his wrath must be deserved. Allegedly it is deserved by unbelievers who have not received some direct propositional revelation from God, if at least the whole world is an unmistakable sign or a *revelatio generalis* of his existence, so that the unbeliever should have known better.

However, since Paul is somewhat over-optimistic about the clarity with which the world testifies to the existence of God - if that were really clear, all reasonable Hindus, Buddhists, and atheists would immediately convert to monotheism - at least some clever monotheists ought to engage in natural theology, and produce convincing evidence or arguments for the truth of their monotheism on the basis of empirical and public phenomena. Here is a clear case, then, in which the text of a revelation incites the believer to engage in natural theology, that is, in apologetic philosophy of religion.

### ***Issues of Truth and Interpretation***

By far the greatest number of reasons for practicing natural theology is of the second kind, however, and I shall discuss briefly six types of arguments for doing so. A first reason is that many contradictions are discovered within allegedly revealed texts, and that it is not always easy to explain them away by the accommodating interpretations of revealed theology.

For example, there is at first sight an embarrassing contradiction within the New Testament concerning what has been regarded traditionally as the great central fact of Christianity: the resurrection of Jesus. In his first letter to the Corinthians (15: 35-50),

probably written between 53-57 CE, Paul seems to deny that Jesus was resurrected with his earthly or physical body, arguing that he was raised with a new, spiritual and heavenly body (*sooma pneumatikon*), since “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God”. But the author(s) of the gospel according to Mark, who possibly wrote around 70 CE, and the authors of the later gospels that were incorporated into the New Testament, tell the story of the empty grave. This latter account seems to contradict the older view of Paul, since it implies that Christ was resurrected with his earthly physique. The unknown authors of the four canonical gospels, which were later attributed to Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John in order to give them more authority, wrote their texts thirty-five to sixty-five years after Jesus’ death.<sup>2</sup> They had not known Jesus and probably had never been in Jerusalem. Did they invent the story of the empty tomb in order to assimilate Jesus to great heroes of the Greco-Roman world within in which they were living, such as Hercules, Romulus, and Aeneas? There still is a lively debate among experts on this issue.<sup>3</sup>

Another important contradiction within the New Testament is concerned with the attitude Christians should adopt in order to have a right standing before God. Paul argued that keeping the Jewish law can have no role whatsoever in salvation. For if people could be justified before God by doing what God prescribed in the law, there would have been no reason to crucify Jesus as a sacrifice for the sins of humans. Paul concluded that the only way to be justified is by having faith in our atonement by the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>4</sup> However, the author(s) of the gospel according to Matthew, writing some thirty years after Paul, clearly disagreed with him on this crucial issue. In Matthew we read that followers of Jesus who do not keep the law, and, indeed, who do not keep it better than most religious

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<sup>2</sup> Whereas Jesus’s disciples were lower-class, illiterate peasants from Galilee, who spoke Aramaic, the authors of the gospels attributed to disciples of Jesus were well educated Greek-speaking Christians who very probably lived outside Palestine. Cf. Ehrman (2009), p. 106.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. for a recent overview of the vast literature: Allison (2005), Chapter 6. According to Allison, who is a believing Christian and who declares that he “should very much like to believe in the literal resurrection of Jesus” (p. 214), there is no contradiction, since “Paul believed in ‘some sort of continuity between the present physical body and the totally transformed resurrection body – in spite of all discontinuity’” (p. 314). But the textual evidence Allison adduces for this view, such as 1 Cor. 6:12-20, is insufficient. For a more ample discussion of this issue, see Chapter 10, below.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Romans (1-3) and Galatians (1-3).

Jews, will never attain salvation: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20).<sup>5</sup>

The Koran also contains numerous contradictions, which are not easily resolved by the interpretative methods of revealed theology. One of them concerns the attitude that Muslims should adopt with regard to those who do not believe in the god of Islam, such as polytheists. According to a first text, usually called “the sword verse”, Muslims must kill unbelievers unless they convert:

Then, when the sacred months are drawn away, slay the polytheists wherever you find them, and take them, and confine them, and lie in wait for them at every place of ambush. But if they repent, and perform the prayer, and pay the alms, then let them go their way; God is all-forgiving, all-compassionate (Q9:5).

According to the “tribute verse”, however, unbelievers need not to be fought or killed even though they do not convert, on condition that they pay some kind of tax and endure some kind of humiliation:

Fight those who believe not in God and the Last Day and do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden - such men as practise not the religion of truth, being of those who have been given the Book - until they pay the tribute out of hand and have been humbled (Q9:29).

It may be that this second text does not contradict the first, because *lex specialis derogat lege generali*, and it is often interpreted as saying that Jews and Christians, who have been given the Book, need not to convert to Islam if they pay tribute and are humbled. But this solution is not available for a third text, which seems to preach unconditional tolerance with regard to unbelievers:

No compulsion is there in religion. Rectitude has become clear from error (Q2:256).

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<sup>5</sup> For a popular account of such contradictions in the New Testament, cf. Ehrman (2009), pp. 85-92 and passim.

Whereas this last text was an embarrassment for Muslims in earlier ages, it is stressed much by those modern Muslims who want to avoid the disgrace that Islam is a religion propagated by the sword or by more technologically advanced forms of violence. But it is not easy to interpret away the contradiction between the third text and the other, more violent ones.

Of two contradictory propositions, at least one must be false, and if both propositions are part of a monotheist divine revelation, this raises the question of how an omniscient veracious god can reveal to us something that is not true. There seem to be only three possibilities here, each of which casts serious doubts upon the supernatural inspiration of an allegedly revealed text. Either the relevant god really did not tell the truth at one moment, or the receiver of the revelation misinterpreted it, or, finally, the supposed revelation was not a real revelation at all, but has some natural explanation. For example, modern psychiatric research has shown that some patients who suffer from temporal lobe epilepsy or schizophrenia have a tendency to be fanatically religious, and to claim to hear voices and the like. In the ancient world, these diseases were generally interpreted as interventions by demons or gods. Should we not suppose that the very intelligent founders of religions, such as Paul, were afflicted by such mental disorders?<sup>6</sup> Surely believers need arguments of natural theology in order to dispel these sceptical doubts, so that this discipline has an epistemological priority over revealed theology in the context of justification.

One might object to this conclusion that resolving the apparent contradictions between passages in a revelation is the proper task of revealed theology. Should not all contradictions be interpreted away on the assumption that the texts of the Bible or the Koran, though written down by humans, are ultimately inspired by an omniscient and veracious god? If, for example, the Bible is a communication from God to mankind, it is no wonder that its texts require deep and perceptive reflection in order for us to understand what they mean.<sup>7</sup> But there are two reasons why this objection is not very convincing. One is that with regard to many contradictions it turns out to be extremely difficult to explain them away by a religious interpretation. Take, for example, the contradiction between Paul's letters to the Romans and to the Galatians on the one hand, and the gospel according to Matthew on the

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<sup>6</sup> This was suggested by a number of 19<sup>th</sup> century authors, such as Nietzsche (1881, §68). For modern research on temporal lobe epilepsy and extreme forms of religiosity, see: Caranza et al. (1999), Dewhurst & Beard (1970), and Landsborough (1987). For the interpretation of epileptic attacks in traditional cultures, see: Jilek-Aall (1999), and Wohlers (1999).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Plantinga (2000), pp. 381-

other hand concerning the proper attitude believers should adopt to be justified before God. It is difficult to imagine a clearer contradiction: either obedience to the law is necessary for our salvation (Matthew) or it is not (Paul). These contentions cannot both be true.

The second reason is that the interpretative results of the so-called “historical-critical” method of interpretation, or “historical biblical criticism”, are much more convincing than those of revealed theology. Whereas the latter discipline assumes that God is the principal author of the Bible, so that all biblical passages are written, ultimately, by one and the same person, who is omniscient, veracious, and eternal, the former method does not use this assumption of a super-natural inspiration. The critical method focuses instead on the historical situation and possible intentions of the human authors.<sup>8</sup> It turns out that most contradictions can be understood very well by assuming that the texts concerned were written by different authors who were inspired by very different oral traditions in different parts of the Roman empire, and who had different beliefs and objectives in writing their texts. But if this is so, is it not a very convincing reason to reject the presupposition of revealed theology that God is the principal author of the Bible? Believers need to practice natural theology in order to refute this plausible conclusion.

A second type of reason for engaging in natural or rational theology is provided by empirical discoveries and advances in science and scholarship over the ages, which have shown that many passages in revelations are not true, at least if taken in their traditional interpretations.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, a book such as the Bible is so full of incredible stories that quite often no sophisticated investigations are needed in order to establish that it contains falsehoods, such as the claim that Adam, Seth, Enosh, and Kenan all lived for more than nine hundred years (*Genesis* 5:5-14). Should we re-interpret these passages in order to make them compatible with ordinary experience or with the results of modern science and other empirical data, which we now have?

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<sup>8</sup> Plantinga (2000), Chapter 12, nicely spells out the philosophical differences between these two approaches, and distinguishes three varieties of historical biblical criticism. But since he does not compare in detail the results of revealed theology with those of historical bible scholarship, his argument that the latter cannot be a defeater of Christian belief is utterly unconvincing.

<sup>9</sup> A classic overview is White (1896). Although more recent historical research has corrected White’s results at many points and has criticized his warfare-metaphor, White’s survey is still of great value. For criticisms of White, see, for example, Lindberg & Numbers (1986).

Again, in such cases of conflict there seem to be three possibilities only, and each of them is equally problematic for a religious believer. We may map these possibilities as the horns of two interlocked dilemmas, the first of which is as follows. Either (a) we stick to an originalist and strictly historical interpretation of the text, or (b) we develop a modernizing interpretation, which makes it compatible with contemporary science and scholarship.

In favour of the first option (a), traditional theologians put forward the argument from divine authority. If an old holy text is revealed by God, we should understand this text as it was originally intended, since the authority of God is absolute, and humans have no right to change the meaning of a revelation on their own account. But this first option immediately triggers a second dilemma, given the incompatibility between the holy text as originally intended and results of modern science and scholarship. Should we (c) endorse the former or (d) endorse the latter?

Preference for a holy text given its incompatibility with scientific results (c) was well expressed in a book on astronomy published in 1873 at the publishing house of the Lutheran Synod of Missouri, in which the author squarely rejects all the astronomical discoveries made in modern times that conflict with Biblical texts:

Let no one understand me as inquiring first where truth is to be found – in the Bible or with the astronomers. No; I know that beforehand – that my God never lies, never makes a mistake; out of his mouth comes only truth, when he speaks of the structure of the universe, of the earth, sun, moon, and stars...<sup>10</sup>

Although this option is preferred by some contemporary creationists as well, it is rather unattractive in view of the high reliability and the technological fruitfulness of many scientific procedures and results.

Since few religious believers who endorse a revelation will be able to accept horn (d) that the relevant passage in the revelation is simply false, on the grounds I mentioned above, most modern believers resort to horn (b) of the first dilemma. Either they embrace a doctrine of “the living scripture”, which claims that the meaning of a revelation changes over time, or they hold that the true meaning gradually dawns upon humanity in the course of history. In

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<sup>10</sup> *Astronomische Unterredung zwischen einem Liebhaber der Astronomie und mehreren berühmten Astronomen der Neuzeit*, by “J.C.W.L.” (St. Louis, 1873), quoted by White (1896), Vol. I, p. 151.



Islam, we find a well-funded industry of reading the discoveries of modern science back into the Koran. For example, the verse in which God says of heaven “We extend it wide” (Q51:47), is now translated as “We are expanding it”, so that it refers to the modern cosmological discovery of an expanding universe.<sup>11</sup> In Hinduism, similar attempts are made to substantiate the claim that quite some modern science can already be found in the Vedas.

Yet from a religious point of view this second horn of the first dilemma is not very attractive either. It implies that the authority of science and historical scholarship has precedence over the authority of a divine revelation, and that the agenda for the religious reinterpretation of that revelation is set by the external advances in secular knowledge. Moreover, whereas there is a fairly reliable methodology for the historical or originalist interpretation of texts, there is no well-established method for modernizing interpretations, which is agreed upon by all factions within a religion. As a consequence, it seems that, religiously speaking, nearly “anything goes” if one accepts the doctrine of the living scripture or another principle that justifies modernizing interpretations, as is shown by the many irresolvable disagreements between such interpretations. Finally, we may wonder why theologians have not proposed the interpretations of their holy texts, which allegedly contain modern scientific insights, before scientists discovered these insights. If these interpretations are the correct ones and divinely inspired, should theologians not have developed them independently from science on the basis of the holy texts, their theological background knowledge, and promptings by the Holy Spirit?

Summarizing these difficulties, we may say that the religious believer who relies on a revelation is faced with the following trilemma of options in the face of scientific and scholarly progress. Either (c) reject modern scientific and scholarly results if they contradict the revelation in its originalist interpretation, or (d) accept that this revelation contains falsehoods, or, finally, (b) accept that the progress of science and scholarship sets the agenda for re-interpreting the revelation, so that the authority of science overrules religious authority.

One might try to escape between the horns of this trilemma by arguing that a revelation such as the Christian one, the Koran, or the Vedic scriptures consists of two parts, one part containing the essential and eternal truths of Christianity or Islam or Hinduism, and another part containing the *Weltanschauung* of an ancient culture. One might argue further that God (or the gods) had good grounds to speak to the original receivers of the revelation in

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<sup>11</sup> My examples of the Koran in this section are borrowed from Cook (2000).

the vocabulary of their world-view, which is now outdated, and to give them a “culture-relative revelation” instead of an absolute one, because they simply would not understand it otherwise. This is one of the solutions that Richard Swinburne offers in his book *Revelation*, following to some extent the tradition of so-called doctrines of “accommodation”.<sup>12</sup> As he claims:

False scientific presuppositions would make no difference to the religious content of the message, that is, to the kind of life and worship which it sought to encourage. A mistaken view of what God had created, or where Heaven was, would not affect the praiseworthiness of God, or the desirability of Heaven. It therefore follows [...] that, so long as context allows a clear distinction between statement and presupposition, false scientific presuppositions would not render the revelation false.<sup>13</sup>

However, this view is confronted by difficulties of its own. First of all, the kind of life recommended to the earliest followers of Christ, for example, depended partly on the factual presupposition that the utopian kingdom of God on earth would arrive soon during the time of their life, so that no investments in a long-term future were needed.<sup>14</sup> But the kingdom of God did not arrive, which created the so-called problem of the Postponed Parousia.<sup>15</sup> This

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Swinburne (RMA), pp. 75-84. According to traditional doctrines of accommodation, Biblical passages such as Joshua 10:12-14, where it is said that God made the Sun and the Moon stand still in order to enable Joshua to win a battle, are written in a language “accommodated” to the understanding of the common man, so that they are not incompatible with the Copernican view of the diurnal rotation of the Earth, for example. Such a doctrine of accommodation was proposed already by Copernicus’s only pupil Georg Joachim Rheticus (1514-1574), without whose assistance Copernicus’s book *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium Libri VI* would not have been published during his life time (in 1543, the year of Copernicus’s death), and a doctrine of accommodation was also endorsed by Copernicans such as Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642). Cf. for Rheticus’ tract on the holy scripture and the motion of the Earth: Hooykaas (1984).

<sup>13</sup> Swinburne (RMA), p. 77.

<sup>14</sup> Cf., for example, Mark 9:1: “Truly I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power”; Mark 13:30: “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place”; Matthew 24:44: “Therefore, you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect”.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Sanders (1993), chapter 11.

shows that scientific and other factual presuppositions are not irrelevant to what is considered as the core Christian message. A scrupulous history of what Christians throughout the ages regarded as essential revelations in the Bible will reveal that this essential content has shifted over time and has gradually dwindled during the last centuries. For example, a good many contemporary Christians do not believe in an afterlife any more, because they cannot reconcile the idea of spiritual survival after bodily death with the results of modern brain research, which show in ever greater detail the extent to which our mental life depends upon specific bodily processes.

Another difficulty for the doctrine of accommodation consists in a new dilemma. Were the false scientific presuppositions of the outdated *Weltanschauung* in terms of which the revelation is formulated, part of what God communicated to the original receivers of the revelation or not? In the first case, the omniscient god deceived his audience in a somewhat patronizing manner. Instead of revealing to early believers the true view of the universe, with its trillions of galaxies and super-massive black holes, he communicated to them a false but consolingly comfortable picture of the world, in which humans play a central role. How can one trust such a patronizing deceiver with regard to the other things he is saying, which constitute the “religious content” of the message? In the second case, much of what is claimed to be revealed is in fact not revealed by God. Those who regarded themselves as “eyewitnesses and ministers of the word”, the word being God’s revelation in Christ, are in fact telling us many things from hearsay.<sup>16</sup> But how can one trust witnesses who have from hearsay what they claim to have witnessed themselves? In both cases, our confidence in the text of a revelation should be seriously undermined, and we have to engage in natural theology in order to discover whether, how, and where we can restore it.

#### ***Four Further Reasons***

This brings me to a third reason for practising natural theology or critical philosophy of religion. Historical research done during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Luke I: 2-3: “those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word”. Of course, historical bible scholarship has established that “the gospels as we have them were not written by eyewitnesses on the basis of first-hand knowledge of Jesus”. Cf. Sanders (1993), p. 63.

demonstrated to what extent the content of revelations is influenced by earlier sources and cultures, which were not at all regarded as divinely inspired by the alleged receivers of these revelations. As Andrew D. White already wrote in his classic *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* of 1896:

[i]t has now become perfectly clear that from the same sources which inspired the accounts of the creation of the universe among the Chaldeo-Babylonian, the Assyrian, the Phoenician, and other ancient civilizations came the ideas which hold so prominent a place in the sacred books of the Hebrews.<sup>17</sup>

The same is true of other ingredients of Christianity, such as the belief that a god dies in order to save his people, and it also holds for the Koran. Again, the question is how a believer can reliably distinguish between those contents of revelations that were really inspired by God and contents that the authors had from hearsay, or which are false. Since revelations do not provide us with the intellectual instruments for doing so, the believer will have to resort to cultural history, historical bible criticism, and natural theology.

When we radicalise this third reason for engaging in natural theology, we obtain a fourth one. If by historical research large parts of alleged revelations can be traced back to older sources, which are not considered as divine revelations by present-day religious authorities, it will seem far-fetched to claim that a god or gods played a role in the genesis of specific texts at all. Is it not much more plausible to assume that full explanations of the origin of all alleged revelations will merely refer to human and all-too-human causal factors? These texts never contain pieces of knowledge or moral insights that humanity did not already possess before the alleged revelatory communication by a god, or which humans could not have acquired without divine assistance. Hence, there is no good reason to postulate a god in order to explain the origins of these texts.

But if there is no convincing argument from the text of an alleged revelation for positing a god as one of its sources, the existence of a god should be argued for independently from revelations. Indeed, since a revelation is by definition a direct communication from a god to a human being, the claim that a specific text contains a revelation presupposes that this god exists. Hence, one should first establish the existence of that god by arguments of natural

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<sup>17</sup> White (1896), Vol. I, p. 2.

theology, before one can believe in a specific revelation and engage in revealed theology. What is more, having established the existence of this god by natural theology, one should also argue that this god is likely to have revealed that very text to those specific people at this specific moment in human history.

As we have seen above, alleged revelations contain factual falsehoods, which cannot always be removed by accommodating interpretations. What holds for the factual contents of revelations is also true for their moral doctrines. On the one hand, holy texts contain moral norms that many of us now find unacceptable and even wicked or at least barbaric. We read for example in Deuteronomy 21: 18-21:

If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son, who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and, though they chastise him, will not give heed to them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives, and they shall say to the elders of his city, “This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.” Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones; so you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel shall hear, and fear.

Stoning to death is of course a punishment that was popular at the time Deuteronomy was written, and it is prescribed for many other sins, such as not being a virgin when you marry, or committing adultery (22:20-24).

Christians will perhaps reproach me that I quote from the Old Testament and not from the New. But in the New Testament, we also encounter many problematic moral evaluations, such as Paul’s view that homosexuality is sinful and a punishment by God for unbelief. As Paul says in his letter to the Romans 1:27: “and the men... gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error”. If Christian believers are not convinced by this passage because they endorse the biblical pronouncements on homosexuality, other passages from the New Testament may be more compelling. According to the Revelation to John, those who worship “the beast” will “drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger” and will be “tormented with fire and

sulphur... for ever and ever”.<sup>18</sup> But is it morally acceptable that those who sinned intermittently by worshipping another god, or committed evil deeds, will burn eternally in the Lake of Fire? Should punishments not be proportional to the crimes committed both in severity and in duration?

On the other hand, many of the values that some of us now hold in high esteem are not found in most revelations. The Bible does not recommend the value of intellectual curiosity, for example, which is essential to scientific and scholarly research, or the value of religious tolerance. However, if revelations are not a reliable guide for ethics, religious believers have to resort to natural theology in order to find out to what extent their revelation can be trusted in this respect, and, indeed, whether it can be trusted at all. This is a fifth reason for engaging in natural theology.

Finally, a sixth reason derives from what is usually called the problem of the diversity of religions. Believers who ground their religious beliefs on a revelation may be subjectively justified in holding these beliefs as long as they have never heard about other revelations that are incompatible with their own. However, as soon as they become aware of such competing revelations, and this is likely in our globalised world, these incompatible revelations are potential defeaters of the religious beliefs they endorse. Why should one prefer, for example, the Christian belief that Jesus is God incarnate to the Muslim belief that God was never humanly incarnated because there is only one god? And why should one prefer the monotheism of the Abrahamic religions to Hindu polytheism (cf. Chapter 4, below)?

With a small leap of the imagination, believers will fancy that if they had been born into another religious tradition, they would have been equally convinced of a religious creed incompatible with the one they happen to endorse now. However, if the religion to which one adheres is selected by the accident of birth, and if one also has the conviction that salvation and eternal life depend upon accepting the creed of the only true religion, one has a powerful motive for engaging in a comparative consumer research of religions. This means engaging in natural theology and attempting to show that one religious revelation is more likely to be true than the competing revelations, given the available evidence.

### ***A Pyrrhonian Crisis?***

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<sup>18</sup> *Revelation* 14:9-11 and passim.

The problem of the diversity of religions can be further elucidated with reference to the idea of a Pyrrhonian crisis. One might say that an authoritative revelation such as the New Testament, the Koran, or the Book of Mormon aims at functioning as a criterion for religious truth.<sup>19</sup> What is written in such a holy text, if interpreted adequately, must be true, so the traditional believer argues, because it is revealed or at least inspired by an omniscient and veracious god.

If revelations function as criteria of religious truth in this manner, incompatibilities between the texts of different revelations can be seen as raising a dispute about the correct criterion of religious truth. But according to the Greek sceptic Sextus Empiricus, a dispute about the criterion of truth can never be resolved, because in order to argue for one's criterion of truth one has to use premises of which one claims that they are true. Hence one has to presuppose one's criterion of truth in order to substantiate the claim that it is the correct criterion.<sup>20</sup> In other words, as soon as a dispute about the criterion of truth arises, it risks to degenerate into a mutual bombardment with circular arguments. This is called a "Pyrrhonian crisis" in honour of Pyrrho of Elis (around 365-275 BCE), the originator of a school of Greek sceptics.

A similar Pyrrhonian crisis may emerge within one of the revealed religions, if a dispute arises about the criterion for the religious truth of interpretations of the revelation. This happened within Christianity, for example, when Luther claimed that the individual conscience of a believer could function as the (procedural) criterion for establishing the true interpretation, whereas the Church of Rome held that the authority of Pope and Councils had to function as the procedural criterion.<sup>21</sup> The Vatican could easily point out which disastrous consequences the Lutheran criterion would have, for it would lead to an ever-increasing fragmentation of Christianity. But arguments to the effect that its own institutional criterion of truth is correct turned out to be either circular or very weak. Because of this dispute on the criterion for establishing the true interpretation of Scripture, among other factors, the schism of the Reformation within Christianity has not been overcome to this very day.

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<sup>19</sup> Cf., for example, Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* (14 September 1998), §23.

<sup>20</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, II, Chapter iv.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Popkin (1979), chapter 1.

However, there is in principle a non-circular way of resolving a dispute about a criterion of truth for a given limited domain, such as religion. One might attempt to argue that quite probably a specific revelation is the true one, whereas conflicting revelations are less likely to be genuine revelations, on the basis of premises that all parties, including the non-believers, may accept as true. In order to do so, one should first show or make probable on the basis of such premises that the god of the relevant revelation exists. And this is the very project of natural theology.

### ***Natural Theology Defined***

The six reasons for engaging in natural theology summarized in the preceding sections show two things, which I call the indispensability and the epistemological priority of natural or rational theology. Rational theology (*theologia rationalis*) is commonly defined in opposition to theological articulations of revealed religion (*theologia revelata*) as the attempt to develop a coherent conception of one god, or of more than one deity, and to produce arguments, *a priori* or empirical, that establish or make probable the existence of this one god or of these deities. Rational theology is also called natural theology, because the premises of its arguments do not rely on supernatural sources such as revelations, although some authors restrict the application of the label ‘natural theology’ to those forms of rational theology that derive their arguments solely from more or less detailed knowledge of nature.<sup>22</sup> I shall ignore such restrictions and use the two labels as synonyms. In contrast to revealed theology, then, we may define rational or natural theology as the attempt to argue for the truth of a specific religious view on the basis of premises that non-believers will be able to endorse, that is, without appealing to the alleged authority of a revelation.

Rational or natural theology is indispensable to believers, we may conclude on the six grounds that I have given, because revelations are in themselves insufficient to justify or warrant religious belief, in view of the many difficulties with which they are beset. Although the alleged revelations have a crucial role in the so-called context of discovery, since without them the adherents of revealed religions would never have come across the contents of their creeds, their value in the context of justification is limited indeed. For example, particular

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 659 ff.



religions are confronted by the problem of religious diversity, which is liable to function as a defeater of each revealed religion, unless one can show that one's own alleged revelation is reliable and a real one, whereas conflicting alleged revelations are not. The traditional religious standards for validating a revelation, such as the internal criteria of its truth, the sublime nature of its moral doctrine and the fact that it contains verified predictions, or the external criteria of miracles and the noble character of a prophet, are invoked by most major religions in favour of their own revelation, so that they cannot settle the problem of the diversity of religions without further rational argument.

What is more, if a religion such as Roman Catholicism regards its own revelation as the only true and final one, so that it rejects the alleged revelations of Muslims or Mormons as pseudo revelations, it has to conclude that, in general, the subjective experience of "receiving a revelation" is a highly unreliable source of knowledge, because the Catholic doctrine of a revelation-monopoly implies that the vast majority of alleged religious revelations is not genuine.<sup>23</sup> But how can one convincingly argue that one's own alleged revelation can be trusted if one also claims implicitly that receiving revelations is not a reliable epistemic source or method? We can only conclude that, if the problem of the diversity of religions can be solved at all for believers, this must be done by natural theology, which has to develop arguments that are logically independent of revelations, and that plead in favour of one religious view and against the others.<sup>24</sup> This is why in the context of justification natural theology has epistemological priority over revealed theology.

### ***Four Conditions***

In this first chapter, I have focussed on reasons for engaging in natural theology that should be endorsed by believers in revealed religions. But it can also be rational for unbelievers to

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. the *Declaratio Dominus Iesus*, published by the Congregatio pro Doctrina Fidei of the Vatican in 2000.

<sup>24</sup> Religious believers may attempt to solve the problem by arguing that all religions of the world are diverse ways of conceptualizing "the transcendent", and that they are all valid or true to some extent, because the "noumenal" transcendent may appear to humans in many different ways. But of course, this pluralist solution, defended by John Hick and others, is nothing but a new religion, which is rejected by many of the established religions, so that it does not really solve the problem of religious diversity.

spend some time on the philosophy of religion if the following four conditions hold.<sup>25</sup> First, we should not (yet) know for certain whether one god exists, more than one god exists, or no gods exist, and which religious creed is true, if any. If we already knew for certain that universal atheism or some specific religious doctrine were true, it would be irrational to spend more time on research, because it would not make a difference. But in fact we do not know this for certain, and clearly people disagree on the issue, so that this first condition is satisfied.

Second, acquiring true beliefs on the religious issue should have some importance for us. This condition seems to be satisfied as well for a number of reasons. In general, having true beliefs is necessary for achieving our purposes, and all religions claim that some human purposes, such as enjoying a deep contentment during this life or earning an eternal blissful afterlife, can only be achieved if their creed is true and if one follows the way of that religion. If no religious creed is true, however, we should be ascetic with regard to these lofty ambitions and learn to accept that the ideal of achieving them is a chimera. Clearly, then, it makes a difference to our attitude in life whether we are religious or not. Moreover, if there is a god on whom we depend for our happiness, this may create moral obligations with regard to this god, such as the obligation to worship him, whereas prayer and worship are a waste of time on illusions if there is no god. Finally, having true beliefs may be important to us in itself, apart from its instrumental value for achieving other purposes. “[I]f history and physics are of importance for this reason, religious knowledge is obviously of far greater importance”, Richard Swinburne argues, since “a true belief here, whether theistic or atheistic, is of enormous importance for our whole world-view”.<sup>26</sup> Summarizing these reasons, we may conclude that having true beliefs about the religious issue is important for most of us, so that the second condition will be satisfied as well.

Even so, it would be irrational to engage in the philosophy of religion if it were unlikely that we can find out by research or critical reflection whether any religious view is true. Although most great religious traditions and most atheists have always held that rational inquiry can establish the (probable) truth or falsity of religious propositions about the

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<sup>25</sup> More precisely, it would be rational to spend time on it in proportion to the degree in which these four conditions are satisfied. Cf. Swinburne (FR), chapter 3, for an extensive discussion of this issue.

<sup>26</sup> Swinburne (FRa), p. 80. In (FRb), p. 85, Swinburne substituted ‘true religious belief’ for ‘religious knowledge’.

existence of God or gods, one may have serious doubts at this point for three kinds of reasons.

Some theologians have put forward a religious argument to the effect that religious belief is altogether beyond the jurisdiction of rational arguments, saying, for example, that faith radically transcends our rational faculties, because the latter are too limited for this sublime task, or because they are contaminated by the Fall of man. If this is the case, so these theologians argue *à la* Kierkegaard, we should reject rational considerations in the religious domain and engage in a religion by a blind leap of faith. But in which direction should we then leap blindly, and which religion should we embrace? We rarely think it wise to engage blindly in some course of life. The theological reasons for doing so in religious matters presuppose that we already accept a specific irrationalistic version of a specific religion, whereas the issue was whether we should endorse one specific religious creed in the first place.

The second kind of reason for thinking that it is futile to engage in the philosophy of religion is epistemological. Philosophers of the Enlightenment, such as Hume and Kant, have argued that no rational investigation into the truth of religious doctrines can yield knowledge, because of the nature of the inductive method or in view of the essential limitations of our epistemic faculties. Although these arguments of Hume and Kant were very influential in Western culture, often pushing religious believers into irrationalism concerning religion, I shall argue briefly in the next chapter that they are based on an outdated philosophy of science.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, a third kind of reason for regarding the philosophy of religion as pointless is the opinion that rational debates about the truth of religious doctrines have gone on for many centuries without leading to any progress or consensus. It seems sensible to conclude by a pessimistic induction that engaging in the philosophy of religion will not contribute much to forming our opinion on religions, and that whether one adheres to a specific religion or not cannot be more than a matter of irrational decision or unjustifiable habit. As Daniel Dennett says: "I decided some time ago that diminishing returns had set in on the arguments about God's existence, and I doubt that any break-throughs are in the offing, from either side".<sup>28</sup> But again, it may be that these debates in the past were not fruitful because they were not

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. also Swinburne (FRb), pp. 103-106.

<sup>28</sup> Dennett (2006), p. 27.

informed by a correct view of the methods to be used. Indeed, are break-throughs in the sciences not often achieved because of new methodological insights after many ages of fruitless discussions? If we provisionally accept this argument, which I shall develop in the next chapter, we may conclude that the third condition for it being rational to spend some time on the philosophy of religion is also satisfied, to wit, that this investment may yield convincing grounds for endorsing one religious creed rather than another, or for becoming a universal atheist.

About the fourth and final condition that has to be satisfied I may be brief, since each individual reader should judge for her- or himself to what extent it obtains. This condition is that, given one's overall aims, capacities, and the limited time of one's life, engaging in the philosophy of religion is preferable to doing other things at that moment, such as earning money, playing football, or going to the movies. In our complex culture, there is a fine-grained division of labour, which has progressed very far in the intellectual domain. We rely on the authority of experts in many areas of knowledge, and we have good reasons for doing so if we can trust that the methods used in those areas are reliable. It is precisely because we cannot have this type of trust in the area of revealed religion that believers need to engage in natural theology.

But even here there is a division of intellectual labour. Objectively speaking, natural theology has an epistemological priority over revealed theology in the context of justification. But this does not imply that, subjectively speaking, it is rational for all believers and unbelievers to engage in the philosophy of religion to the same extent. Some specialists devote their entire life to this discipline, whereas non-specialists may read one book only. Since the first three conditions are satisfied at least to some extent, it seems to be rational for every educated person to spend some time on the philosophy of religion. Perhaps the reader will draw some inspiration from the following passage quoted from the works of René Descartes.

In the opening of his first *Metaphysical Meditation*, Descartes wrote:

Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I

wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last. But the task looked an enormous one, and I began to wait until I should reach a mature enough age to ensure that no subsequent time of life would be more suitable for tackling such inquiries. This led me to put the project off for so long that I would now be to blame if by pondering over it any further I wasted the time still left for carrying it out. So today I have expressly rid my mind of all worries and arranged for myself a clear stretch of free time. I am here quite alone, and at last I will devote myself sincerely and without reservation to the general demolition of my opinions.<sup>29</sup>

Descartes' project was a Herculean one, and contemporary philosophers of science agree that it was misconceived. If we want establish something in the sciences that is stable and likely to last, there is no good reason whatsoever to start by demolishing everything completely and start again from the foundations. This is because absolutely secure foundations of the kind Descartes was looking for do not exist, and because there is a division of labour in the sciences. But in the far more limited domain of religion, it is a good advice to suspend judgement provisionally once in the course of one's life, in order to inquire to what extent the beliefs one always held can survive critical scrutiny.

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<sup>29</sup> Descartes, AT IX, p. 17. Quoted from Cottingham et al. (1988), p. 17.