

JOHN  
BLANCHARD

DOES  
GOD  
BELIEVE IN  
ATHEISTS?



'Destined to be a classic on the subject'

Does God believe in atheists?

*Other titles by John Blanchard:*

Can we be Good Without God?

Can we Rock the Gospel?

The Complete Gathered Gold

Evolution — Fact or Fiction?

Has Science Got Rid of God?

How to Enjoy your Bible

Invitation to Live

Is Anybody Out There?

Is God Past his Sell-By Date?

Jesus — Dead or Alive?

Luke Comes Alive

The Beatitudes for Today

The Man who Made the Millennium

Meet the Real Jesus

Read Mark Learn

Right with God

Truth for Life

Ultimate Questions

What in the World is a Christian?

Whatever Happened to Hell?

Where do we Go from Here?

Where is God when Things Go Wrong?

Why Believe the Bible?

Why the Cross?

Why on Earth did Jesus Come?

This is Blanchard at his best: immensely thorough, crystal clear, devastating in his logic, compassionate at heart. No stone is left unturned: a brilliant defence of belief in God — and its implications!

**The Rev. Andrew Anderson, B.Sc., B.D.,  
International Baptist Church of Brussels**

This book is a remarkable outcome of forty years or so experience of John Blanchard as an evangelist, Bible teacher and writer. His incisive style combined with his ability to draw upon a wide range of sources have resulted in a book in which the overall flow of thought provides an immensely readable and persuasive argument for the classical, biblical, Christian faith.

**Professor J. M. V. Blanshard, M.A., FIFST,  
St Albans, Herts, England**

John Blanchard not only has the knack of answering a sceptic's questions with precision, clarity and subtle humour, he has the uncanny ability to answer questions before they arise in the sceptic's mind. This book is destined to be a classic on the subject.

**The Rev. Wade Burleson, B.Sc.,  
Southern Baptist Convention, USA**

It is highly referenced with all the relevant literature, which is accurate and up to date. It is a book which any Christian would be glad to have on their shelves, not only from its useful reference point of view but because it presents the data in a readable and interesting way.

**Professor Desmond Burrows, M.B., B.Ch., B.A.O., M.D., M.R.C.P., FRCP,  
Belfast, N. Ireland**

Anyone reading this volume will immediately see the level of study and research that has gone into its preparation. Its scope and subject matter are of the greatest importance today and it is to be hoped that it will have the impact upon people's thinking that it deserves.

**The Rev. Dr A. T. B. McGowan, B.D., STM, Ph.D.,  
Highland Theological College, Dingwall, Scotland**

As a one-time atheist myself, I commend John Blanchard's keen and discerning intellectual and spiritual critique of atheism. No self-respecting atheist should be without it.

**The Rev. Dr Nick Needham, B.D., Ph.D.,  
Highland Theological College, Dingwall, Scotland**

I read John Blanchard's chapters on scientific aspects of the subject with pleasure. They are lucidly written and thoroughly researched. He has amassed a great deal of information and presented it in a compelling way. I thoroughly recommend this work to the believer and the sceptic. The reader must react to it.

**Dr J. H. John Peet, B.Sc., M.Sc., Ph.D., C.Chem., FRSC,  
Guildford, Surrey, England**

I have the highest regard for John Blanchard. His work is concise and biblically based. It is pertinent, applicable and relevant for Christians in the twenty-first century.

**Dr Patrick Sookhdeo, Ph.D., D.D.,  
Pewsey, Hants, England**

The breadth and depth of John's reading is quite breathtaking and his grasp of modern scientific and philosophical trends stunning. This book is going to be a great help to any honest thinkers who are prepared to face the challenge which it presents. It is also an absolute gold-mine of 'quotable quotes'. Students will revel in it.

**The Rev. Derek Swann, B.A., B.D.,  
Cardiff, Wales**

A veritable *tour de force*. Not only does the author fairly and squarely face the doubts and contradictions posed

by unbelievers, but he also provides evidence that is both accessible and convincing.

**The Rev. Daniel Webber,  
European Missionary Fellowship, Welwyn, Herts, England**

John Blanchard's arguments lead to the inevitable conclusion that atheism is both illogical and untenable. Anyone who remains an atheist after reading this volume does so in wilful contradiction of the overwhelming evidence for the existence of God.

**Dr A. J. Monty White, B.Sc., Ph.D., C.Chem., MRSC,  
Cardiff, Wales**

# *Does God believe in atheists?*

John Blanchard



EP Books  
Faverdale North, Darlington, DL3 0PH, England  
e-mail: [sales@epbooks.org](mailto:sales@epbooks.org)  
web: [www.epbooks.org](http://www.epbooks.org)

EP Books USA  
P. O. Box 614, Carlisle, PA 17013, USA  
e-mail: [usasales@epbooks.org](mailto:usasales@epbooks.org)  
web: [www.epbooks.us](http://www.epbooks.us)

First published March 2000  
First edition © Evangelical Press 2000 (ISBN 978 0 85234 460 6)  
Reprinted 2000, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2009

Second edition published 2011, © John Blanchard 2011.  
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

The text of the appendix was first published in 2010 under the title *Dealing with Dawkins* © John Blanchard 2010 (ISBN 978 0 85234 715 7)

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available**

ISBN-13 978 0 85234 750 8

ISBN 0 85234 750 2

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in the main text of *Does God Believe in Atheists*, and those in the appendix marked 'NIV', are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton, a division of Hodder Headline Ltd. All rights reserved.

'NIV' is a registered trademark of International Bible Society, UK trademark number 1448790.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in *Dealing with Dawkins* are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, published by HarperCollins Publishers © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Printed and bound in the UK by Charlesworth, Wakefield, West Yorkshire

# Contents

[Foreword by Sinclair Ferguson](#)

[Preface to the second edition](#)

[Introduction](#)

[1.The Greeks had words for it](#)

[2.Movers and shakers](#)

[3.Conflict and confusion](#)

[4.Impossible things before breakfast](#)

[5.The legacy](#)

[6.Every man for himself](#)

[7.Five steps to nowhere](#)

[8.Protagoras rides again](#)

[9.The dogmatists](#)

[10.The impossible option](#)

[11.Masks](#)

[12.Deviations](#)

[13.Matter matters](#)

[14.Such is life](#)

[15.Glory and rubbish?](#)

[16.Pointers](#)

[17.Status and standards](#)

[18.The book that speaks for itself](#)

[19.A God-free zone?](#)

[20.Nothing but the truth — I](#)

[21.Nothing but the truth — II](#)

[22.The case against God](#)

[23.The case against the case against God](#)

[24.The last word](#)

[Appendix — Dealing with Dawkins](#)

[1.The man and the mission](#)

[2.Science: the answer to everything?](#)

[3.Morality: rights and wrongs?](#)

[4.Religion: the root of all evil?](#)

[5.God: necessary or non-existent?](#)

[6.The Bible: the book that speaks for itself](#)

[7.Christianity: evidence and effects](#)

[8.Jesus: the man for all reasons](#)

[9.Faith: beyond the facts](#)

[Further reading](#)

[Notes](#)

[Index of names](#)

[Index of subjects](#)

[Scripture index](#)

# Foreword

by the Rev. Dr Sinclair B. Ferguson, M.A., B.D., Ph. D.

The book you are holding in your hands may well be unique and certainly is remarkable. It is very probable that you have never read anything quite like it before. *Does God Believe in Atheists?* belongs to no ordinary book category because it seems to belong to so many different categories. One does not need to be a prophet to predict that it will be frequently consulted and its material widely used.

John Blanchard is a widely respected author and communicator of the Christian faith. He is well known for his ability to talk about serious things without being lugubrious, and about deep and difficult things in a way that helps others to understand them. But even by his normal standards of excellence and clarity, this work is a *tour de force*.

*Does God Believe in Atheists?* is a one-volume encyclopaedia of information related to what the German philosopher Martin Heidegger said was the most basic question of all: why is there something and not nothing? In more commonplace terms, is there a God?

Over the thousands of years in which the library of human literature has been compiled, that question has been discussed, weighed and answered — often affirmatively, sometimes negatively and, in recent times, uncertainly. It is one of the extraordinary achievements of this volume that it provides an informed, coherent account of several millennia of these discussions and debates. In addition — and herein lies its genius — it does so in a manner that is both understandable and wonderfully readable.

Here is a college course on philosophy, anthropology, geology and the life sciences — yet packaged in such a way that a person of average intelligence will be able to follow, understand, enjoy and find it deeply relevant. If you are not a Christian, you will discover that these pages provide a fascinating account of the intellectual and ethical systems that, often unknown to you, have influenced the way you think as a twenty-first-century human being. If you are a Christian you will find this work to be an illuminating survey of what lies behind modern thought; and that survey will better equip you to explain the Christian faith to your own contemporaries. Whether Christian or not, you will quickly discover from John Blanchard's ability to clarify the big issues that being a Christian does not involve the sacrifice of the intellect, but rather leads to its truest and best use.

Here is a book on religion and theology. It is bulging with facts and fascinating information. The notes alone, which display John Blanchard's wide interests and reading, run into somewhere over 2,300. Yet nobody need be afraid of these pages for that reason. For John Blanchard takes great care not only to make everything clear, but also to make it enjoyable, by sharing with us all kinds of interesting information about the great thinkers and scholars in world history. Big ideas, complex thoughts, recondite

philosophies and scientific theories are all explained in a way that even a modestly educated reader can understand. When all this comes packaged with a sense of humour and a love for golf (the latter without the former would surely be a grave philosophical aberration), you know that you have a book worth reading!

Most of all, however, this is a book that will challenge you to think and help you to do so.

Even in our post-modern (or has it become post-post-modern?) world, many young men and women enter college or university in the hope that there they may still discover learning that will provide a key to the meaning of life. Surely philosophy, whether moral or natural, can guide them? Surely the wisdom of the ages, recorded in history and literature, will direct them? But, alas, there seems to be an inbuilt frustration code in every branch of human wisdom and learning. The real meaning of existence still proves to be elusive. Indeed, if we are to listen to Richard Dawkins (who features frequently in these pages), the very idea that there is meaning of the kind we seek is a non-starter.

But the deep quest of the human mind and the thirst of the human spirit underline for us that Dawkins' answer will not do. It fails at stage one, simply because it does not take account of the way reality is, including — indeed perhaps especially — the reality of our own existence. The 'Why?' question which scientists as scientists cannot answer will not allow itself to be satisfied by answers to the 'How?' question which they often can.

Enter John Blanchard. With his great apologist predecessor Saul of Tarsus, he is convinced that 'The world in its wisdom did not know God.' He recognizes that it takes a different kind of wisdom to find answers to ultimate questions. Paradoxically, the chief reason he excels as a guide to the history of human wisdom is just this: he has also been educated in another college, where divine wisdom is taught. He himself has been a diligent scholar in that school, and learned his lessons well. I think you will find him an outstanding and reliable professor in the classroom you are about to enter.

**Sinclair B. Ferguson**  
First Presbyterian Church  
Columbia, South Carolina

## *Preface to the second edition*

When this book was first published in 2000, I never dreamed that within a few months it would be voted ‘Christian Book of the Year’ at the inaugural UK Christian Book Awards; nor could I have known that the rise of ‘the New Atheism’ (a more aggressive version of the old model) would heighten the subject’s profile in such a way that the present volume would be called for.

It has often been said that the most important questions anyone could ever ask are: ‘Who am I?’, ‘Why am I here?’ and ‘Where am I going?’ As they deal with the issues of a person’s identity, meaning and destiny, they are obviously of great significance, but even these are secondary when put alongside one which is both fundamental and inescapable: ‘*Does God exist?*’

This is *the* question, and every debate about human life and death, and about the universe in which humanity lives and dies, ultimately revolves around it. Several years ago, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* published a set of fifty-four volumes marshalling the writings of many eminent thinkers in the Western world on the most important ideas that have been studied and investigated over the centuries. The subjects covered included law, science, philosophy, history and theology; the longest essay of all was on the subject of God. Addressing the question as to why this should be the case, co-editor Mortimer Adler wrote, ‘More consequences for thought and action follow from the affirmation or denial of God than from answering any other question.’<sup>1</sup> The outstanding Latvian philosopher Isaiah Berlin, who died in 1997, elaborated the point in his book *Concepts and Categories*:

The world of a man who believes that God created him for a specific purpose, that he has an immortal soul, that there is an afterlife in which his sins will be visited upon him, is radically different from the world of a man who believes in none of these things; and the reasons for action, the moral codes, the political beliefs, the tastes, the personal relationships of the former will deeply and systematically differ from those of the latter. Men’s views of one another will differ profoundly as a very consequence of their general conception of the world: the notions of cause and purpose, good and evil, freedom and slavery, things and persons, rights, duties, laws, justice, truth, falsehood, to take some central ideas completely at random, depend entirely upon the general framework within which they form, as it were, nodal points.<sup>2</sup>

If Adler and Berlin are right, looking into the subject addressed in this book is hardly a trivial pursuit. Those who disagree over the question of God’s existence are not merely crossing paper swords over some interesting but ultimately irrelevant point of science, philosophy or theology. They are disagreeing over the greatest issue of all. The contemporary British philosopher C. Stephen Evans hits the nail on the head when he says that believing in God is not like believing in the Loch Ness Monster: ‘The

Loch Ness monster is merely “one more thing”... God, however, is not merely “one more thing”. The person who believes in God and the person who does not believe in God do not merely disagree about God. *They disagree about the very character of the universe.*<sup>3</sup>

As this also involves the fundamental basis of all human life and behaviour, it is hardly surprising that no issue provokes more controversy. The question of God’s existence has raged for centuries — and ‘raged’ is the right word to use, with millions of people persecuted, punished, tortured, maimed or killed for their convictions on the matter — while theologians, philosophers, psychologists, psychiatrists, scientists and sociologists galore have fought tooth and nail over the question.

Yet this is an issue which not only profoundly affects all the other questions that humanity asks about its existence and environment; it is one in which both sides cannot be right. Either God exists, or he does not exist.<sup>4</sup> There is no point in looking for compromise, a kind of halfway house in which both sides can live in agreement. To say that God *is* and at the same time *is not* is a crass violation of the law of contradiction. The truth must lie on one side or the other.

This is the background against which this book is written — though it is not the one I had in mind. I originally set out to produce a brief, straightforward analysis of the historical, logical and existential problems facing those who believe that God does *not* exist, but I soon found myself drawn into taking a much broader approach. The further I went, the more I realized that atheists (and agnostics, for that matter) face a huge raft of questions to which, in what were then nearly forty years of writing, broadcasting and public speaking all around the world, I had never heard convincing answers. Bringing these questions together and asking them in their proper context soon spilled over into something much larger than the book I first had in mind: what follows is the result.

Prefaces to quite slender volumes have been known to include thanks to all kinds of people, including numerous friends and family members, and have sometimes seemed to fall only just short of complimenting the family pet for remaining silent while the master of the house was at work. In this case, failing to thank those who have made significant contributions to the present book would be worse than churlish.

Firstly, I owe a huge debt to a team of men who have read through all or part of the manuscript and have made numerous corrections and suggestions. It is humbling to realize how many flaws would have slipped through without their kind and careful work, and I am particularly grateful to the following: Rev. Andrew Anderson, Rev. Peter Anderson, Professor Edgar Andrews, Dr John Baigent, Professor John Blanshard, Ron Blows, Professor Desmond Burrows, Derek Cleave, Rev. Ian Densham, Rev. Noel Due, Professor Julian Evans, Dr. Niall Fraser, David Fryett, John Garvie, Rev. Graham Hind, Dr Andrew McGowan, Jonathan Morgan, Rev. George Murray, Rev. Philip Miller, Dr Nick Needham, Dr John Peet, Alan Radcliffe-Smith, Rev. Tony Seagar, Dr Patrick Sookhedo, Rev. Derek Swann, Michael Taylor, Rev. Daniel Webber, Dr Monty White and Rev. Alistair Wilson.

In addition to these, my special thanks are due to John Canales for his great help in the writing of chapter 13 and to Dr Andrew Blanchard for similar assistance in the writing of chapter 14. Without their expert input, I would have been sunk without trace.

I owe a special debt to some sixty friends who made this writing project a particular focus for their prayers and to hundreds of other Christians who upheld me throughout my research and writing. In the United States, Trey Lee and David Henderson ‘hung in there’ (as Americans would say) throughout the project, and their constant encouragement meant a great deal to me.

For many years Evangelical Press (now EP Books) has published almost all of my books and I am grateful to the entire EP team for their part in handling my work. I would like to pay a special tribute to EP’s indefatigable editor, Anne Williamson, who has once again brought her meticulous skills to bear on my manuscript. Her work is necessarily behind the scenes, but her significant contribution to the present book deserves to be expressed openly.

It has been said that a good book does not need a foreword and that a bad book does not deserve one. Be that as it may, Dr Sinclair Ferguson has honoured me by his generous commendation, which I greatly appreciate.

Finally, I must once again express my thanks to Joy Harling, who was my secretary while the original manuscript was being written. How she coped with my constant revisions (and dreadful scrawl) I will never know. This particular project involved her in an immense amount of work, which she undertook cheerfully, swiftly and with great efficiency.

My sincere hope is that what follows will be of help to many who are genuinely seeking for truth, and a great encouragement to those who have found it.

**John Blanchard**

Banstead

Surrey

May 2011

# Introduction

As we begin to uncover the problems faced by atheists and agnostics, we need to bear in mind that theists can hardly be said to have everything their own way. Speaking at a conference of religious leaders in 1945, the universally respected scholar and author C. S. Lewis told his audience, ‘It is very difficult to produce arguments at the popular level for the existence of God’<sup>1</sup> — and this in spite of the fact that he had by then been a totally convinced believer for almost fourteen years. The contemporary philosopher Os Guinness goes even further and says, ‘God’s existence not only *cannot* be proved, it *should* not be attempted.’<sup>2</sup>

In his recent book *Explaining Your Faith*, theologian Alister McGrath fine-tunes the point and writes, ‘God’s existence can neither be conclusively proved nor disproved.’<sup>3</sup> This seems fair comment, but it depends for its validity on the meaning he attaches to the word ‘conclusively’. It is true only if he means that it is impossible to persuade everybody. Yet to say this is to say nothing; after all, the Flat Earth Society is still in business! George Mavrodes makes the point well: ‘We are, of course, especially interested in whether there is any argument that will prove God’s existence to everyone. Such an argument has apparently not yet been invented... The invention of such an argument would, of course, be a wonderful thing, just as would be the development of a drug that would cure all diseases. But there is not much reason to believe that either of these is possible.’<sup>4</sup>

Facing any issue in which diametrically opposed views seem to have both strengths and weaknesses, we need to examine the data with an open mind (or at least a readiness to listen to what both sides are saying) and then come to conclusions based either on what becomes satisfying evidence or, failing such evidence, reasonable probability. In other words, when we can get no clear answer to the question, ‘What does this *prove*?’ we should ask, ‘Where does it *point*?’

## God and Gallup

*Proposition 1:* Only a minority of people are atheists.

*Proposition 2:* Most people are atheists.

*Proposition 3:* Nobody is an atheist.

This might seem a decidedly unpromising start, yet a case can be made in favour of each one of these propositions. As we shall soon see, everything hinges on the meanings given to the key words involved.

There may never have been a period in history when opinion polls have been as widely used as at present. From politics to economics, morality to aesthetics, and sports to the arts, random sampling is assumed to give a significant indication of what people as a whole are thinking. Not surprisingly, religion has had a great deal of

attention from the clipboard crews and, as far as the existence or non-existence of God is concerned, the results seem to point in the same general direction and to support Proposition 1.

A worldwide poll taken in 1991 put the global figure for atheists at just 4.4%, and although a category labelled ‘other non-religious’ produced a further 16.4%, this still left nearly 80% professing some kind of belief in some kind of god.<sup>5</sup> These figures tie in fairly accurately with those quoted in *Operation World*, which puts the ‘non-religious/atheist’ total at 970 million, some 20% of the world’s population.<sup>6</sup>

In 1991, the prestigious Barna Report, an annual survey of values and religious views in the United States, found that 74% of adults interviewed agreed ‘strongly’ or ‘somewhat’ with a statement affirming the existence of ‘only one true God’.<sup>7</sup> In 1986, average figures in a study of religious activity and belief in ten countries in Western Europe suggested that 75% believed in God, with only 11% believing in ‘no god at all’ and 16% registering as ‘don’t know’.<sup>8</sup>

In a Marplan Survey taken in the United Kingdom in 1979, around 82% expressed a religious belief of some kind, while 73% specifically said they believed in God.<sup>9</sup> A Gallup Poll undertaken in Great Britain in 1986 as part of a European Value Systems Study revealed that 76% of those interviewed believed in God,<sup>10</sup> while *Britain Twenty Years On*, a survey taken a year later, gave the figure as 70%,<sup>11</sup> the same as that quoted in 1994 by the presenter of a radio programme in the *Believing in Britain* series.<sup>12</sup> In a 1989 review of social attitudes in Britain, 34% claimed to have ‘no religion’, a 3% increase on the 1983 figure.<sup>13</sup> At the end of 1999, a British survey conducted by Opinion Research Business suggested that 38% were ‘not religious’.<sup>14</sup>

White lies...

Taken at their face value, these statistics seem to put atheists in a relatively insignificant minority, but the fact is that the numbers conceal at least as much as they reveal.

To make the most obvious point first, the surveys beg the all-important question as to what the pollsters had in mind when they used the word ‘God’. Did they mean a personal being, or an impersonal life force; a conscious deity, or cosmic dust; a living entity totally ‘outside’ the universe, or some kind of universal energy woven into its fabric? The difference a clear definition would make to the statistics can easily be illustrated. In the Western European survey, 75% of those polled said they believed in God, but when just one qualification was added — as to whether they believed in ‘a personal God’ — the figure dropped dramatically to just 32%.<sup>15</sup> This simple example brings to mind the old saying that there are three kinds of lies — white lies, black lies and statistics. What is certain is that statistics cannot always be taken at face value; we shall need to dig deeper if we are to get beyond the figures to the facts.

It is already obvious that the place to begin digging is in the field of definitions. The eighteenth-century French philosopher François-Marie Arouet, who wrote under the pen-name of Voltaire, is quoted as saying, ‘If any man will reason with me, let us first define our terms.’ To talk about ‘theism’ and ‘atheism’ is to engage in a dialogue of the deaf until we determine what we mean when we use these words and, as the meaning

of the second depends directly on that of the first, we must begin with ‘theism’. This is not as simple as it seems. One dictionary defines theism as ‘belief in existence of gods or a god’,<sup>16</sup> but as the same dictionary’s primary definition of ‘god’ is ‘superhuman being worshipped as having power over nature and human fortunes’<sup>17</sup> it is immediately obvious that ‘theism’ is much too vague a term for us to use in this book. It allows too much scope for wriggling.

Nor is the problem solved by giving ‘god’ a capital ‘G’, because, as the British pop singer George Harrison put it in the 1960s, ‘When you say the word “God” people are going to curl up and cringe — they all interpret it in a different way.’<sup>18</sup> The American scholar David Elton Trueblood took the same line: ‘Nothing is easier than to use the word “God” and mean almost nothing by it. It is easy to be right if we are sufficiently vague... in what we say.’<sup>19</sup> The influential British theologian John Robinson said much the same thing: ‘The word “God” is so slippery and the reality so intangible that many today are questioning whether they have reference to anything that can usefully or meaningfully be talked about at all.’<sup>20</sup>

This is precisely the kind of problem we face, and vague answers will not help. When responding to particularly difficult questions on BBC Radio’s *Brains Trust* some years ago, Professor C. E. M. Joad would often begin, ‘It all depends what you mean by...’ We need to get that issue settled before we go any further.

## Defining deity

Charles Dodgson, a professor of mathematics at Oxford University from 1855–1881, used his famous *nom de plume* Lewis Carroll in writing a number of children’s stories that have charmed generations of readers ever since. In *Alice Through the Looking Glass* one of his best-known characters gets involved in verbal gymnastics:

‘When *I* use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be the master — that’s all.’<sup>21</sup>

That kind of delightful dottiness is fine for children’s fiction, but it will hardly do when we are discussing the most important question human beings could ever ask. It may therefore be helpful if at this point I seek to establish a bench-mark by setting out what I mean when I use the word ‘God’ from here on. Put in a nutshell, I mean ‘a unique, personal, plural, spiritual, eternally self-existent, transcendent, immanent, omniscient, immutable, holy, loving Being, the Creator and Ruler of the entire universe and the Judge of all mankind’. Let me elaborate a little.

- By ‘*unique*’ I mean that there is only one God and that all other objects or ideas given that name are figments of misled imagination.

- By '*personal*' I mean that God is not a 'thing' or 'power', influence or energy, but that he lives, thinks, feels and acts.
- By '*plural*' I mean that there are distinguishable persons within a single Godhead.
- By '*spiritual*' I mean that God has no physical attributes or dimensions, that he does not have a body, or any characteristics that can be defined in terms of size or shape.
- By '*eternally self-existent*' I mean that he has always had the power of being within himself and has neither beginning nor end.
- By '*transcendent*' I mean that God is over and above all things, outside of time and space, completely distinct from the universe, and not to be confused with it in any way.
- By '*immanent*' I mean that, while remaining separate from it in being and essence, he permeates the entire universe.
- By '*omniscient*' I mean that he knows everything, including the past, the present and the future.
- By '*immutable*' I mean that he is unchangeable in every aspect of his being.
- By '*holy*' I mean that he is utterly without blemish or deficiency in his being, essence or actions.
- By '*loving*' I mean that he cares for all of creation and that in a very special way he demonstrates his love to humanity and communicates this to individuals.
- By '*Creator*' I mean that by his own choice and power he brought into being all reality other than himself.
- By '*Ruler*' I mean that he is in sole and sovereign control of everything that exists or happens, and that nothing can prevent him doing as he pleases.
- By '*Judge of all mankind*' I mean that he alone determines the eternal destiny of every member of the human race.

Four things need to be said about this conception of God.

Firstly, it is not a shot in the dark, or a random collection of ideas, but reflects what has been consistently accepted by millions of people over thousands of years and is now held by the largest religious grouping the world has ever known. This does not necessarily say anything in its favour, but does at least give it some kind of perspective.

Secondly, as we shall see much later in this book, it is no more than an outline, just sufficient to prevent the word 'God' from being so slippery that nobody can get hold of it.

Thirdly, although it gives a clear indication of what I will mean when I use the word 'God' in the course of this book, it is not necessarily what is always meant by the authors and speakers I will be quoting; this will be obvious in most cases.

Fourthly, as we shall see in later chapters, fine-tuning the definition of God in this way will obviously produce more atheists than would settling for deity as being no more than a vague, supernatural principle or power.

The other side

Accepting that theism is belief in the existence of God, what is atheism? Again, the answer is far from straightforward. A simple dictionary definition, based on the Greek words *a* (without) and *theos* (God) is ‘disbelief in the existence of God or gods’,<sup>22</sup> but the history and use of the word are much more complex.

In ancient Greece the word ‘atheist’ was used to describe three groups of people: those who were impious or godless; those who were without supernatural help; and those who did not accept the prevalent Greek idea of deity. The earliest Christians were often called atheists by their contemporaries because they refused to accept the existence of the popular pagan deities of their time, and one religious group has sometimes accused another of atheism even when both claimed to believe in a supernatural Being of whom at least part of our outline of who and what God is would be true.

Yet even these examples do not exhaust the uses of ‘atheism’. Swami Vivekananda, an Indian who was instrumental in bringing Hinduism to the West, once said, ‘Just as certain world religions say that people who do not believe in a personal God outside themselves are atheists, we say that a person who does not believe in himself is an atheist. Not believing in the splendour of one’s own soul is what we call an atheist.’<sup>23</sup>

It would simplify things if we could settle for the general idea that atheism is the rejection of theism, but the difficulty of pinning down the meaning of theism makes the issue a lot more complicated than that. As long as our concept of God is sufficiently vague, our first proposition — that only a minority of people are atheists — is already proved. However, if we define God in the way I have suggested, our second proposition, which says that most people in the world are atheists, comes into play. It will take us twelve chapters to discover whether this is the case. We will then prepare the way for our third proposition, and follow it by examining some of its implications.

I should add one technical point. In recent years, authors have had to wrestle with the issue of inclusive language, and I have been caught up willy-nilly in the struggle. Rather than getting into the tortuous syntax which can sometimes be involved, I have often opted for the use of ‘man’, ‘him’, ‘he’, and ‘his’ when maleness is not necessarily implied, but in every case the meaning will be obvious. The same applies to ‘mankind’.

# 1.

## *The Greeks had words for it*

The theory has often been put forward that religion evolved slowly over many millennia, beginning with very primitive ideas and gradually developing into today's concepts. Wrapped up in this theory, and an important element in the thinking of many atheists, is the idea that monotheism (belief in one God) is a comparatively recent refinement. In the nineteenth century, two anthropologists, Sir Edward Tyler and Sir James Frazer, popularized the notion that the first stage in the evolution of religion was animism (which involved the worship of spirits believed to inhabit natural phenomena), followed later by pantheism (the idea that everything is divine), polytheism (belief in a multitude of distinct and separate deities) and eventually by monotheism.<sup>1</sup>

However, recent studies in anthropology have turned this scenario on its head and show, for example, that the hundreds of contemporary tribal religions (including many which are animistic) are not primitive in the sense of being original. Writing from long experience in India, and after extended studies of ancient religions, the modern scholar Robert Brow states, 'The tribes have a memory of a "High God", who is no longer worshipped because he is not feared. Instead of offering sacrifice to him, they concern themselves with the pressing problems of how to appease the vicious spirits of the jungle.'<sup>2</sup> Other research suggests that tribes 'are not animistic because they have continued unchanged since the dawn of history' and that 'The evidence indicates degeneration from a true knowledge of God.'<sup>3</sup> After working among primitive tribes for many years, one modern expert says, 'The animism of today gives us the impression of a religion that carries the marks of a *fall*,'<sup>4</sup> while another bluntly refers to 'the now discredited evolutionary school of religion' as being 'recognized as inadmissible'.<sup>5</sup>

The evidence of modern archaeology is that religion has not evolved 'upwards', but degenerated from monotheism to pantheism and polytheism, then from these to animism and atheism, a finding confirmed by the Scottish academic Andrew Lang in *The Making of Religion*: 'Of the existence of a belief in the Supreme Being among primitive tribes there is as good evidence as we possess for any fact in the ethnographic region.'<sup>6</sup> In *History of Sanskrit Literature*, the Oriental expert Max Muller, recognized as the founder of the science of the history of religions, came to the conclusion: 'There is a monotheism that precedes the polytheism of the Veda; and even in the invocations of the innumerable gods, the remembrance of a God, one and infinite, breaks through the mist of idolatrous phraseology like the blue sky that is hidden by passing clouds.'<sup>7</sup> In *The Religion of Ancient Egypt*, Sir Flinders Petrie, universally acknowledged as one of the world's leading Egyptologists, claimed, 'Wherever we can trace back polytheism to its earliest stages, we find that it results