Chapter 1
Why Does Belief in God Matter?

In the early twenty-first century atheism seems to have taken on a new lease of life. Buses in London carry the slogan: "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." A recent Christmas billboard in New York read "You know it's a myth. This season, celebrate reason!". In the United States and in Britain there seems to be a concerted campaign to persuade people that atheism is the only reasonable form of belief. It is propagated by a group who call themselves the "Brights", leaving believers in God to be, presumably, the "Dims". Its best-known evangelists are Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett, though there are many others too.

This new atheist movement is not, however, based on a call for toleration of atheism as one worldview among others. It is, as one reviewer of Harris's book *The End of Faith* put it, "A radical attack on the most sacred of liberal precepts – the notion of tolerance… an eminently sensible rallying cry for a more ruthless secularisation of society." Religion is not to be tolerated. It is to be exterminated.

The last time such words were widely heard was in Soviet Russia where, as the Russian theorist Bakunin put it, "The religious are to be exterminated as social reactionaries", and where tens of thousands of priests, monks, and nuns were tortured, shot, or exiled to Siberia. Similar oppression has taken place in Communist China. It is more than a little ironic that atheist writers should criticize religion for its intolerance when they themselves, or at least some of them, have no time for toleration of views with which they disagree.

But is religion really so dangerous that it must be stamped out? Is it really so stupid that no reasonable person could believe in God? These are the questions I shall be dealing with in this book. I may have begun rather polemically, but the polemics are not mine. They are the polemics of a new and aggressive atheism. I want to proceed less polemically, by what I hope will be a dispassionate and reasonable analysis of the arguments that rage around the basic ideas of religion – ideas of God, the soul, freedom, and immortality.

I am a philosopher and theologian, so my chief interest is in the beliefs that are central to religion, in the meaning of those beliefs, and in the strength of the arguments put forward in favour or in criticism of them. Of course none of us starts from a completely neutral position on religion. I have to say that my own experience of religion has been almost wholly positive.

I was brought up in a Christian environment – I was a chorister in an Anglican church and also a member of a Methodist church in northern England. The sort of religious life I knew was what William James called "healthy-minded". It encouraged the love of music and of nature, and stressed the joy of fellowship and awareness of God as a loving and life-giving power, known in Jesus and through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. There was no stress on the literal truth of the Bible, no thought that non-Christians could not know God in their own way, and no great feeling of human unworthiness – of guilt, sin, and judgment. It was a happy and life-affirming religion. From my own early experience, then, I had no reason to think that religion is dangerous or life-denying, or that it restricts human thought in any way. I have personally known at least one form of religion that was very positive and intellectually stimulating.

However, there were problems. I was always an avid reader, and I read many books about philosophy and religion. I wondered

why there were so many different churches and so many different religions. And I realized that most of my school friends did not go to church or have any feeling for religion. Where there were so many competing faiths, and where religion seemed to be a minority pursuit anyway, I began to wonder if or how I could justify my own sort of Christian faith. As I continued reading, I came across the traditional problems with religious belief – such as the problems of omnipotence and evil, of freedom and predestination, of faith and reason. As I read authors such as Albert Schweitzer and Rudolf Bultmann, I realized that there were major problems with the worldview of the Bible and with what seemed to be Jesus' claim that the end of the world should have occurred 2,000 years ago. These problems led me to a much more agnostic position, and I stopped going to church.

I have given this little bit of autobiography because it may help to show where my own religious views are coming from. I started from a positive and fairly simple Christian faith, but that faith was put in question by problems about how one could be sure which revelation was true, or how one could cope with specific problems about Christianity. When I left university I was lucky enough to get a job as a lecturer in philosophy, in the Department of Logic and Metaphysics at the University of Glasgow. I was able, with some relief, to adopt the fashionable atheism of the day and regard my earlier religious experiences as some sort of psychological aberration or illusion.

As time went by, however, I came to think that the philosophical arguments in favour of atheism were actually rather weak, as I hope to show, and that belief in God was actually thoroughly reasonable and psychologically positive. I got ordained as a priest in the Church of England, partly to stop myself continually wavering around and changing my opinions every year, and forcing myself to make a definite and

public commitment to something that I saw as rational and good. I have never regretted it. So that is where I now stand, but I still spend a lot of my time examining the arguments surrounding religion and belief in God, and trying to make as much sense of religious belief as I can – which is, at least in my opinion, quite a lot!

Each of us will feel that the arguments in favour of our own beliefs are stronger than arguments against them. But we can seek to present our beliefs in a reasonable way, and try to give a fair presentation of the arguments against our beliefs. That seems to me the right way to proceed if we are to promote understanding in a world where there is so much disagreement.

Rational disagreement is not a unique characteristic of religion. It exists in morality, in politics, in philosophy, in literary and art criticism, and in history. In all these areas, there seem to be very basic and apparently unresolvable disputes that have persisted for centuries. It is a mark of wisdom to accept that such disputes exist, not simply to dismiss all of them as stupid or irrational. Then the most reasonable procedure is to try to state competing views very carefully, with a great degree of initial empathy, and see where there is room for learning from other views and where important lines of difference must be drawn. I fear it cannot be said that this is the procedure used by the new atheists. They usually fail to state religious beliefs carefully or sympathetically, fail to note that anything is to be learned from religions, and tend to oppose all religions in a sort of blanket ban, without noting important differences between sorts of religious belief. It does not seem to me that this is a very rational procedure, so I doubt whether this form of atheism is quite as reasonable as it claims to be.

Nevertheless, any believer in God must meet the criticism, very often made by scientifically minded atheists, that God is

an obsolete, pre-scientific attempt to explain the world that has been rendered superfluous by modern science, which explains the world very well without any appeal to God. Indeed, Richard Lewontin, an eminent Harvard scientist, has written, "We take the side of science… because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism… Moreover that commitment is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door." By materialism, he does not mean wanting money and possessions. He means the philosophical theory that nothing exists except material things, things which have location in space and time, and can be seen, smelt, or touched by many observers – who are also very complicated material things in space and time. He is claiming that scientists must be committed to this philosophical theory, that only locatable things in space-time exist. But do you think that this is true? As a matter of fact, I think almost exactly the opposite is true – that is, that modern science shows there are probably many things that do not exist in space and time. That is one of the things I will try to demonstrate.

Nevertheless, this seems to be one major reason for the resurgence of atheism. God, it is alleged, is incompatible with science. Perhaps we used to explain why people caught diseases or got killed in earthquakes by reference to the more or less arbitrary whims of a person in the sky who decided to punish them. But now we get a better explanation by referring to viruses and tectonic plates. Referring to God is a bit like referring to fairies or the luminiferous ether – it is a useless add-on that explains nothing, and just fills people's heads with nonsense.

This objection misses the point of believing in God almost completely. God is not a scientific hypothesis. Believers do not go to church or synagogue or mosque to carry out scientific experiments, or to take things to pieces to see how they work. They go to places of worship precisely to worship God.

Whatever worshipping God is, it is not any form of scientific experiment or explanation. A suggestion I would make is that communal worship is a form of mental training for seeing all experience as encounter with a personal and mind-like reality that we call God.

I need to spell this out a little, and I will do so by distinguishing between two sorts of knowledge, which I will call "objective" knowledge and "personal" knowledge. I do not mean that objective knowledge is more reliable or acceptable than personal knowledge. On the contrary, both sorts of knowledge are important. Objective knowledge is what the natural sciences seek, whereas personal knowledge is common in the humanities, in personal relationships, and in religion. The distinction between objective and personal knowing is found in many European philosophers, though sometimes they use different names. The English philosopher Peter Strawson, for example, who was one of my teachers, makes the distinction between "objective" and "reactive" knowledge. I prefer the term "personal" knowledge, which was used by the British philosophers Michael Polanyi and Richard Swinburne, because it relates particularly to knowledge of persons, their thoughts, feelings, and intentions, rather than to the impersonal objective world with which the natural sciences are largely concerned.

Objective knowledge is, as the name implies, knowledge of objects as things to be used, analysed, pulled apart and put together again, studied dispassionately, and experimented upon. So when a biologist studies strands of DNA, those strands can be pulled apart, reinserted somewhere else, and treated as suitable objects of experiment. Natural science uses objective knowledge. Scientists observe the behaviour of physical objects closely, they place them in experimental conditions, they measure properties such as mass, velocity, and temperature, they try to work out

regular patterns of behaviour (ideally, "laws of nature" that can be formulated in mathematical equations), and they repeat their experiments to check whether they have formulated the physical properties and laws correctly. It is very important to natural science that groups of experts who are skilled in experimental method and in devising new laws should be able to test their theories, so that a body of established knowledge can be built up over time.

Objective knowledge is very important. Since the seventeenth century in Europe particularly, it has transformed our understanding of the physical world and led to technological advances that could not even have been dreamed of before that. But objective knowledge has very definite limits, and those limits become evident when we think about our knowledge of ourselves and our relationships with other persons.

Not all our knowledge comes through the five senses, and is equally open to any and all competent observers. When I think, without speaking or telling anyone else what I am thinking about, I know what I am thinking, but not by using sight, hearing, touch, smell or taste. Nobody else can know what I am thinking unless I tell them, and even then they just have to believe what I say without being able to perceive my thoughts. Similarly, my dreams, my feelings, my memories, and my motives provide non-sensory knowledge to which only I have access. We call this "introspection", and to most of us it is obvious that such a thing exists.

Some philosophers have denied there is such a thing as introspection. They are materialists – people who think that everything that exists is material, is publicly observable, and has a location in space and time. Hard-line materialists claim that such things as thoughts and feelings are identical with material brain-states. Very hard-line materialists even claim that they are

nothing but brain-states. Francis Crick, one of the discoverers of the structure of DNA, famously wrote the following words: "You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve-cells and their associated molecules."

You may think that you are experiencing feelings of happiness, or interest, or boredom, as you read this, but there are no such feelings. There is nothing but a very complex array of molecules buzzing about in your brain. Nothing but molecules, physical bits of your brain. Nothing else at all. You may think you are seeing a beautiful world of coloured objects, which appear to you from a certain point of view if you look around you. But again you are wrong. There are only electro-chemical interactions between neurones in your neocortex.

I find it surprising that some of our best scientists seem to believe this. At a stroke, they wipe out of existence everything that is most obvious to most of us – perceptions, thoughts, and feelings – and replace them with something most of us have no knowledge of at all – the activity of neurones in our brains. I would think that most people would be quite prepared to believe that when our neurones behave in specific ways we have perceptions and thoughts. Many might go further and say that if our neurones did not behave in those ways we would not have any perceptions and thoughts. But is it plausible to say that none of us have any perceptions and thoughts anyway, since all we have are physical brain-states?

It seems plainly false to say that when I have given a complete physical description of some brain-state, which a competent neurosurgeon could perhaps do (though no one has come anywhere near giving a complete physical description yet, and it may turn out to be impossible), I have completely described

what I am seeing and what I am thinking. To find that out, the neurosurgeon would have to ask me what I am seeing – and my answers might turn out to be surprising. Indeed, neuroscientists have been very surprised to find that such apparently simple things as vision involve the co-operation of many separate areas of the brain. They did not expect that, and had thought that all visual perception would be located in just one central area of the cortex. But they are not. Scientists only found this out by asking their patients what they were experiencing when specific areas of the brain were stimulated. In other words, in order to verify their claims they had to appeal to introspection and they just had to believe what the patient told them. They could not appeal simply to physical facts that their colleagues could examine by means of the senses.

This topic would bear much more examination, and there are new books coming out on this subject just about every month. I have even written one myself (*More Than Matter?*). I just want to make one main point. It is a perfectly reasonable and very widely held belief that there is introspective knowledge, not through the senses and not directly accessible by others. This could be called "subjective knowledge". It is real and it is very important to us, for such personal experiences are what can make life worthwhile. If that is true, then, whatever Professor Lewontin says, materialism, which denies the reality and existence of subjective knowledge, far from being obviously true, looks to be on very shaky ground.

Subjective knowledge turns into personal knowledge when we accept that other persons exist and also have subjective knowledge. We are not the only conscious beings in the world. Some psychologists now call the belief that there are other beings with subjective knowledge a "theory of mind". When that belief arises, we realize that we cannot treat other persons simply as

objects. We need to take their thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions – things that we cannot directly observe with our senses – into account. Other persons make claims upon us. We can cause them pleasure or pain and we can frustrate or co-operate with their intentions. We praise and blame them. We treat them, mostly, as responsible for what they do and we may try to co-operate with them as far as possible. They are subjects who demand, though they do not always receive, moral respect. We treat persons very differently from how we treat inanimate objects or non-responsible animals.

If there are personal or mind-like realities in the world, they demand a special sort of attitude from us – not an experimental and dispassionate attitude that simply observes, measures, predicts, and experiments on them, but a personally involved and reactive attitude that sympathizes with them, respects their freedom, and seeks to let them, to some extent anyway, influence us by their thoughts, feelings, and intentional actions.

We can see reactive knowledge at work when a group of students study a play by Shakespeare, for example. They will try to engage with the play, enter into the mind-sets of the characters, try out different interpretations of what the author wrote, and let their feelings be changed by what they learn. Having studied a play, the students will have learned something, they will have new knowledge. But they will not have learned any new equations, or be able to predict events better, or even know simple things such as the number of words in the play. They will have learned something about imaginative visions of the world, about human possibilities and emotions, and about what it is to be a human being in this world.

Now I come to the crucial issue. Believing in God is more like gaining knowledge by participating in a Shakespeare play than it is like doing an experiment in a chemistry laboratory. It

is a matter of growing in personal knowledge, not in objective knowledge. Morality involves learning to respect persons, and the study of literature involves learning to be changed by interaction with the dramatic creation of another mind. So religion involves learning to worship – to revere and love – a personal reality that underlies the whole universe and our experience of it, and to be changed by interaction with that reality.

Of course some people may deny there is any such reality, just as they may deny that there is any such thing as consciousness, or that there are any persons over and above their physical bodies. I am not trying to prove there is a God. I am trying to point out the immense difference between thinking that God is a scientific hypothesis to explain why things happen as they do or help us to predict what is going to happen next, and worshipping God as a personal reality present in all human experience.

The scientific approach to the universe is an objective approach. We want to take bits of the physical universe and tinker with them to find out exactly how they work. Our interest is technical, connected with the mastery of nature. But a religious approach to the universe is a personal and reactive approach. We want to see the universe, or our experience of it, as a whole. We want to approach it with appropriate reverence, with awe and admiration, and gain a personal knowledge of it that will change our lives in their innermost core. That means we want to see it as more than an array of physical objects. We want to see its heart as a personal or mind-like reality that is expressed, and sometimes concealed, in and through physical objects. We want to see God, not as some extra object outside the universe, but as the subjectivity of the universe itself, as the mind and heart of being, as the ultimate conscious reality without which the physical universe would not exist.

What difference will belief in such a God make? It could transform our lives, as we build a conscious relationship with such a personal reality and find ourselves, not as accidental by-products of a purposeless mechanism, but as persons who are important parts of the purpose of this universe, who can grow in understanding and appreciation of it, and who can find through it that supreme personal reality in which it is grounded. Perhaps that purpose would be, as the confessional statement of one Christian church puts it, to "know God and enjoy him forever".

If this is so, at least one reason for atheism collapses. God never was a scientific hypothesis. To believe in God was always to respond to the universe in which we exist as the manifestation, expression, or creation of a personal, conscious, mind-like reality. Such belief was always practical and reactive, not theoretical and objective. Science cannot render belief in God obsolete, any more than it can render the appreciation of Shakespeare or belief in the value of human life obsolete. We might even say, and I actually would say, that if science threatens to do that, something has gone wrong with science.

I have begun by trying to say what sort of thing believing in God is, how different it is from scientific beliefs, and why it is important to so many people. In the next chapter I shall give a more exact definition of God, so that we know more precisely what we are talking about. Part of that definition will be that God is the creator of the universe, and perhaps the strongest argument against there being a God is the amount of suffering and evil in the world. The following two chapters will try to show how evil can exist in a world created by a good God. That explanation will emphasize the mystery and transcendence of God. But can we really relate personally to such a transcendent reality? And why should it pay any attention to us, crawling

around on the surface of this very small planet? Chapters five and six will show how the God of philosophy and science can relate to humans in more personal ways, how it can become the God of religion.

In the seventh chapter I turn from general considerations about God to consider the role of religion in human life. I explore the relationship between faith and reason, arguing that religious faith is deeply reasonable. But there are many different religions in the world. Chapter eight offers an account of why this is so, and chapter nine suggests how we can see God at work in many different religions, even though it is reasonable to live within one specific tradition of belief.

The following two chapters respond to two objections to religious faith from modern atheists – that religion is a major cause of evil, and that reliance on Scripture is immoral and irrational. I think these objections demonstrate bias and prejudice to an amazing degree, and so completely undermine any claim that this form of atheism is reasonable and based on good evidence. The final chapter considers what the future of religion is likely to be. All in all, while I try not to be too dogmatic, I will certainly be defending the rationality and importance of believing in God, and showing how religious faith has a positive part to play in shaping the future of humanity. There probably is a God and, knowing that, we can really relax and enjoy life to the full.