

BELIEVING IN GOD

Readings
on Faith
and Reason



ED. L. MILLER

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Edited by

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Preface

This reader is intended primarily for use in courses dealing at one point or another with the central topic of philosophy of religion: God, and how and why we do or do not believe in him. In addition to statements on faith and reason, one will encounter here the traditional arguments for God, the appeal to religious experience, and the problem of evil—all discussed pro and con.

Although there are innumerable thinkers from the three great Western traditions (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity) who have contributed to our topic, it was first necessary because of space constraints to limit the readings to the Christian tradition. In that space, I have included those who in my view have been the most pivotal and who together best represent the spectrum of opinion. Even so, to include a full array of relevant positions I had to trim many selections far beyond what I would have liked—a necessary evil for the sake of the whole. It seemed to me also that a combination of longer and shorter pieces might make for livelier reading and discussion. An introduction has been provided that seeks not to be critical and exhaustive but rather to survey, anticipate, summarize, and clarify the broad positions represented. In addition, I have appended a bibliographical note to provide direction for further reading and research. I can only hope that the resulting volume proves useful.

In the interest of clarity and accuracy I have made minor revisions in the translation of Clement of Alexandria. Quotations and references have been identified and explanatory comments have been added when appropriate. All editorial footnotes are enclosed in brackets. Since many of the thinkers quoted the Scriptures from memory, their quotations do not always conform exactly with the Biblical text. In the case of the Psalms, my numbering follows the King James Version. Some readers may note that in the case of both the introduction and the main content some material has been included from my earlier reader, *Classical Statements on Faith and Reason* (New York: Random House, 1970), which is now out of print.

I wish to thank Mr. Erik M. Hanson, Mr. Greg Johnson, Mr. Jon Jensen, Miss Deborah Nutter, Prof. Garry Deweese, and Prof. David Horner for their indispensable assistance in the preparation of this volume. I also wish to thank my colleagues Prof. Lee Speer and Prof. Wes Morriston for their interest and good advice.

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Contents

Preface	ix
Introduction: <i>What's the Problem?</i>	1
1 Tertullian: <i>Athens or Jerusalem?</i>	13
2 Clement of Alexandria: <i>Philosophy, the Handmaid of Theology</i>	16
3 St. Augustine: <i>Evil, the Absence of Good</i>	20
4 St. Anselm: <i>Faith Seeking Understanding</i>	24
5 St. Thomas Aquinas: <i>Faith, Analogy, and Five Proofs for God</i>	27
6 Meister Eckhart: <i>The Mystic Way</i>	39
7 John Calvin: <i>The Darkened Intellect</i>	46
8 Blaise Pascal: <i>"The Wager" and Reasons of the Heart</i>	55
9 David Hume: <i>Against God and Miracles</i>	62
10 William Paley: <i>The Watch-Analogy</i>	81
11 Søren Kierkegaard: <i>Truth Is Subjectivity</i>	86
12 John Stuart Mill: <i>Evil vs. God</i>	98
13 William James: <i>In Justification of Faith</i>	103
14 Rudolf Otto: <i>The Experience of the Numinous</i>	114

15	A. J. Ayer: <i>Theology as Meaningless</i>	123
16	Frederick Copleston and Bertrand Russell: <i>Evidence for God, Pro and Con</i>	130
17	Antony Flew, R. M. Hare, and Basil Mitchell: <i>Three Parables on Falsification</i>	144
18	Paul Tillich: <i>Faith and Symbols</i>	154
19	Norman Malcolm: <i>St. Anselm's Argument Revisited</i>	161
20	John Hick: <i>Free-will and Soul-making</i>	170
21	Richard Swinburne: <i>God, Science, and Probability</i>	182
22	Alvin Plantinga: <i>Is Belief in God "Properly Basic"?</i>	189
23	Ed. L. Miller: <i>Faith and History</i>	203
	Bibliographical Note	207



Introduction

What's the Problem?

One of the most important and persistent problems of philosophy and theology is the problem of faith and reason. And the most obvious application of this problem concerns God and issues related to God. Hence this collection of readings.

I

It may be, in fact, that the problem of faith and reason lies at the heart of all theology in that no approach can be made to God, revelation, and the like apart from some resolution of it. How we understand the problem depends, of course, on what we mean by "reason" and what we mean by "faith." The word "reason" poses no real difficulty for most of us: It signifies the logical, discursive, or inferential faculty by which we arrive at truth, or at least conclusions. It is, however, considerably more difficult to say what "faith" means.

By "faith," many people have in mind a special kind of relation characterized by trust, commitment, obedience, and the like. We might call this an existential notion of faith. Here the accent falls on willing and acting. But the very existence of a *problem* of faith and reason requires that faith be understood, rather, as a *cognitive* affair (not a way of acting but a way of knowing) and standing in some relation (including conflict) with reason. Most people probably do, in fact, understand "faith" in some such way. For example, when Smith announces, "I have faith in God," one person understands Smith to mean that the evidence for God's existence is of such a nature as to fall short of the certainty that we have in many other matters. Another takes Smith to mean that belief in God is not a matter of proof or rational demonstration at all, but of private revelation. Someone else thinks that Smith is accepting the existence of God on religious authority, such as that of the Church or the Bible. Still another construes faith as a deliverance of feeling or perhaps some sort of inner experience. All of these—and many more—are possible meanings of "faith," at least inasmuch as it suggests a kind of knowing or believing. And if we reduce these to their lowest common denominator, it becomes apparent that faith refers to the nonrational, a concept by no means limited to religious or theological matters.

The problem of faith and reason, then, is one of assessing the significance and relation of the rational and nonrational contributions to our understanding of things. This is, to be sure, a fundamental problem. According to John Locke, our failure to deal adequately with the religious version of this question has been the cause of great disputes and great mistakes: "For til it be resolved how far we are to be guided by reason, and how far by faith, we shall in vain dispute, and endeavour to convince one another in matters of religion."¹ And yet many plunge immediately into discussion about the existence of God, the problem of evil, and such, without first directing themselves to the issue that underlies all such discussions, and a problem some resolution of which is, implicitly, presupposed by them.

The relation of faith to reason is, to be sure, most problematic for those who believe in some form of divine revelation. Such a person may take a "propositional" view of revelation according to which God has revealed himself in the form of statements contained in a religious text such as the Bible. Another may consider revelation as *Heilsgeschichte* ("salvation-history"), according to which God is making himself known by means of revelatory and redemptive acts throughout history. A third might identify revelation—or at least the means of revelation—or at least the means of revelation—mainly with persons, such as Moses or Jesus Christ. A fourth might emphasize the revelatory character of, say, church councils and other traditional teaching. Or, finally, a fifth may see God as revealed most definitely in a personal religious experience. For these believers in revelation, there is an undeniably important element in their understanding of the world and history essentially unlike anything given by the intellectual, discursive faculty. The supernatural or divine contribution to their understanding of the world inevitably complements or qualifies to some degree the purely natural understanding, an understanding "unaided" and uninformed by divine and gracious revelation. And thus is generated a whole series of questions and problems pertaining to the relation of faith and reason.

In the Christian tradition, as in others, there are two very different responses to this problem. One of these has been called fideism, from the Latin *fides*, "faith." In its extreme form it suggests that in the presence of revelation and supernatural knowledge, all natural reasoning and knowledge should be abandoned, at least with respect to spiritual matters. The early church father Tertullian (Chapter 1), exemplifies this sort of attitude in his bitter rejection of philosophy as the source of heresy. In his famous outburst concerning the death and resurrection of Christ, "It is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd . . . the fact

¹John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1894), II, p. 415.

is certain because it is impossible,"² Tertullian reflects a kind of mentality (present in every period in the history of Christianity) that despises any attempt to intellectualize the faith.

Very different from the fideist-type approach to faith and reason is the approach taken by—for want of a better word—rationalism. The rationalist believes that through the natural intellect one can indeed ascend even to a knowledge of theological and spiritual truths. An example of this approach may be found in Clement of Alexandria (Chapter 2). It is instructive that Clement, also a father of the early church and contemporary of Tertullian, believed, in exact opposition to him, that philosophy and the cultivation of reason were means appointed by God to spiritual enlightenment and blessing. In fact, Clement, the intellectualist, went so far as to assert that God had given pagan philosophy to the Greeks as a preparation for and anticipation of the Gospels, as he had done in giving the Law to the Hebrews.

These are extreme examples, but it is nevertheless the case that most thinkers included in the present volume incline toward one or the other of these poles. Therefore it is helpful to distinguish the fideist from the rationalist position: the one affirming the primacy of faith, and the other the primacy of reason. (Warning: Such categorizing often involves oversimplification. The actual positions of the thinkers mentioned below is usually more nuanced than can be spelled out here.) Søren Kierkegaard and John Calvin represent variations on the fideist theme. For Kierkegaard (Chapter 11), the highest order of truth and reality is not disclosed through reason, nor is truth a matter of objective certainties or intellectual assents. It is rather through the "passion of inwardness," or existential appropriation, that God is known. The reformer John Calvin (Chapter 7), in his preoccupation with human "total depravity," believed that the effects of original sin extended to the natural intellect, rendering it blind, at least with respect to the most important spiritual matters—our only recourse is to Scripture.

St. Thomas Aquinas (Chapter 5), on the other hand, displays a rationalist inclination when he asserts that the natural intellect should attempt to grasp divine truth in a philosophical way. The human intellect, darkened by the fall but not blinded, continues to share to some degree in the Divine Light. Contemplation is, indeed, the uniquely human activity or ideal, and should be exercised and enjoyed. His "Five Ways" of proving the existence of God certainly attest to his confidence in the theological employment of reason. Similarly, St. Anselm's famous Ontological Argument for God (Chapter 4) is part of a prayer that petitions God for an intellectual understanding of what is already accepted by faith. He

²Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ*, 5, tr. Peter Holmes, *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, XV (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1884).

thus reflects the Augustinian idea of faith in search of understanding: "... understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore do not seek to understand in order to believe, but believe that thou mayest understand."³ But this does not prevent him from proffering rational demonstrations of, for example, the Holy Trinity! For such thinkers, then, our knowledge even of divine things is enhanced, if not conditioned, by natural reason and reflection.

But some thinkers have sought to be dominated by neither of these poles, aiming at a synthesis or balance of the rational and nonrational factors. Pascal (Chapter 8) expresses this ideal: "If we submit everything to reason, our religion will have no mysterious and supernatural element. If we offend the principles of reason, our religion will be absurd and ridiculous."⁴ Yet this has been a difficult balance to achieve. Most thinkers characteristically display one orientation or the other, and thus the fideist-rationalist distinction continues to be generally helpful as an indication of a thinker's inclination, if not emphasis.

There is yet another distinction that may help to draw into focus many of the positions represented in this volume. It has already been suggested that the Christian thinker, for example, holds to some form of nonrational knowledge; but what, more exactly, might this mean? First, it might mean a *pre-rational* assent to truth. Such an assent is made, according to St. Thomas (Chapter 5), when one accepts a doctrine, such as that of God's existence, purely on divine authority, even though its truth may for the moment lie beyond one's intellectual grasp—it is believed before it is understood. Another version of prerational belief is argued by Alvin Plantinga (Chapter 22) and a whole host of contemporary "Reformed epistemologists." The claim against "evidentialism" is that belief in God is as "properly basic" as many other beliefs we embrace apart from rational evidence (in the narrow sense of propositional, inferential argument), and that here, too, the believer is within his or her "epistemic rights." The case is strengthened, it is thought, by an appeal to Calvin, who taught that a prerational inclination to theistic belief is naturally implanted in everyone. Second, nonrational knowledge might mean a *supra-rational* apprehension of truth. The mystic, such as Eckhart (Chapter 6), exemplifies this position when he or she claims to have been opened to a "knowledge" that lies beyond knowledge, or someone, such as Otto (Chapter 14), who extols the superiority of the nonrational over the rational as the core of authentic religion. Here it is not a matter of believing without rational evidence; it is a matter of transcending the rational and grasping truth in a superior way. The third concept is that

³St. Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, XXIX, 6, tr. John Gibb and James Innes, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, VII (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1888).

⁴Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, no. 273, in *Pensées and the Provincial Letters*, tr. W. F. Trotter and Thomas M'Crie (New York: Modern Library, 1941).

of the irrational. In this context the expression refers to the position that holds the intellect to be wholly and always inappropriate to theological truth. Certainly in some ways this may be recognized in Tertullian (Chapter 1) or Kierkegaard (Chapter 11), though even more extreme examples could be imagined. We might, then, construe prerational, suprarational, and irrational as species of the nonrational. Each of these bears on the way the word "faith" has been used traditionally.

My own contribution, "Faith and History" (Chapter 23), strikes out in a somewhat different direction, but one that must be attended to if the most important dimensions of our topic are to be represented. The relevance, contribution, and risk of historical judgments in relation to faith constitutes one of the thorniest problems of recent theology, and the concluding brief selection suggests what the central issues are as well as a resolution.

Any discussion of faith and reason must eventually concern itself with the closely related problem of religious language. Thus many of the selections suggest differing views on this subject. One of the most powerful attempts to explain the nature of "God-talk" and how it is possible is St. Thomas' conception of religious language as analogical (Chapter 5). Here it is claimed that since our knowledge is derived ultimately from sense experience (St. Thomas was a "classical empiricist") and since the imprint of God the creator is necessarily reflected in a natural world, there must be some resemblance—an analogy—between our concepts as they apply to the created order and as they apply to the uncreated. Thus an epistemological bridge is established that makes it possible to speak, however imperfectly, of God, his attributes, and so on.

Such a view lies, of course, at the opposite extreme from those who question whether God-talk is even meaningful, and here we mean literally or cognitively meaningful, whether such claims are even true or false. A. J. Ayer (Chapter 15), more effectively than anyone else, argued on the empirical criterion of meaning (the Verification Principle) that such talk (as well as *all* metaphysical talk) is indeed meaningless—literal nonsense. The discussion between Antony Flew, R. M. Hare, and Basil Mitchell (Chapter 17), which took shape in the wake of the verifiability debate, explores further the cognitive significance of religious claims, though turning not on the question of *verifiability* but of *falsifiability*. Flew's challenge, answered in different ways by Hare and Mitchell, is: Inasmuch as theological claims, say, "God loves us," are uttered under any circumstances whatsoever, they are compatible with every imaginable situation and thus could never, even in theory, be tested or falsified—and therefore might as well never be uttered.

For Paul Tillich (Chapter 18), all of this represents a too-brittle and otherwise misguided view of religious language. He stresses that it is not objective language related to factual reality but only subjective language

related to the existing human subject that can, by means of its myths and symbols, bear the burden of the *really* important truths, those of an existential and religious nature, those that have to do with ultimate concern.

Until now we have been considering the problem of faith and reason as a theological one. But it may also be represented as a philosophical problem, an issue of more general interest and philosophical import, because whether or not a person believes in God (much less in divine revelation), he or she is still faced with the original difficulty of *evaluating the nonrational elements inevitably present in knowledge*. Many nontheological thinkers believe that the substance of philosophical positions is not wholly a proper object of rational demonstration. And thus for them, too, the task becomes one of determining the nature, extent, and relevance of the nonrational. For though they may have no special concern with divine authority and religious experience, they may yet have a problem reconciling rational or scientific reasoning with intuition, feeling, and creative insight, and the like. We see, then, that the theological-religious problem of faith and reason is just one version of the larger epistemological problem concerning the nature of knowledge. On the other hand, in our own Judeo-Christian tradition with its interest in divine revelation and religious experience, it is understandable how the theological version of the problem has reigned as most important.

II

As stated at the very start, and again in the previous lines, the problem of faith and reason has its most obvious application to believing in God and issues related to his existence, nature, and activity. A good number of the readings therefore widen the topic beyond the narrow epistemological concern in order to include actual applications.

Clearly, a great many thinkers who accept divine revelation have thought it appropriate, nonetheless, to propound arguments for God's existence. In varying forms, four traditional arguments for God appear in the readings below. The Ontological Argument, first propounded by St. Anselm (Chapter 4), is, for all of its power to perplex, the best example of a purely *a priori* proof for God, that is, a proof that is entirely independent of any input from the five senses. The movement is from the sheer idea of God as "that than which no greater can be conceived" to his objective reality: You can't even think of God without accepting that he exists, because existence must be an attribute of that than which no greater can be conceived! The Ontological Argument has always been controversial, though recently the debate was intensified thanks largely to Norman Malcolm's 1962 article, "Anselm's Ontological Arguments" (Chapter 19). Here, Malcolm argues that Anselm's first form of the argument construes existence as a predicate or defining property of God,

and he agrees with Immanuel Kant's rejection of this construal, and thus rejection of the argument. Malcolm sees, however, a second, and importantly different, version of the argument in St. Anselm, one in which not existence but *necessary* existence is construed as a divine predicate—it's the difference between saying that God is so great that he exists, and saying that God is so great that he cannot not-exist. The latter, says Malcolm, is a legitimate construction, and he formulates his own version of this form of the Ontological Argument. The Moral Argument, too, as represented by Fr. Copleston (Chapter 16), is an *a priori* reasoning inasmuch as it makes no appeal to sense experience but rather to moral experience. Here the move is to God as a necessary foundation for authentic and absolute moral principles or moral law. Apart from such a foundation all morality would sink into a slough of relativism. Of course, that prospect does not bother Russell (Chapter 16), who emphatically embraces a form of moral relativism, thus denying the Moral Argument precisely what it requires as a premise.

The other two arguments are *a posteriori*, involving, as they do, reasoning based on information provided by the senses. Surely the most influential formulation of the Cosmological Argument, or First-Cause Argument, is that of St. Thomas Aquinas in his "Five Ways" (Chapter 5) and the argument finds a forceful contemporary expression in Richard Swinburne (Chapter 21). Whether St. Thomas intended five proofs or five variations on one proof, they all hold in common (a) an appeal to the cosmos or some aspect of the cosmos, (b) the principle of causality, which asserts that for everything that comes into being there must be a cause, (c) the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes, and, it should be especially noted, (d) the assumption (for the sake of the argument) that the universe had no temporal beginning—it has always existed. The first three of St. Thomas' arguments are recognized by all as versions of the Cosmological Argument. The Second Way may, in fact, represent most simply the reasoning that the existence of the physical universe necessitates a first—in the sense of ultimate or highest—cause. Even if the universe has always existed, the existence of the universe at any moment stands in need of an ultimate explanation.

St. Thomas' Fifth Way is an expression of what is called the Teleological Argument, or Design Argument. The evidence for God in this case is the apparent design, order, or purposefulness of the universe, which, it is claimed, requires an ultimate mind as its cause—the principles of causality and ultimacy again. Probably the most famous, and certainly the most colorful, version of the Teleological Argument is that of William Paley (Chapter 10) who, in his "Watch Analogy," claims that the universe, and especially the contrivance of the human body with all its intricacy and order, can be no less the direct product of a divine mind than a watch is the direct product of a watchmaker. This reasoning was well

and good until it appeared to be wholly vitiated by Charles Darwin's theory of the gradual evolution of organisms over a vast period of time. No matter, says Swinburne (Chapter 21), who has proposed a Teleological Argument that heeds the relevant scientific data—including evolution—and turns it in the directions of theism. According to Swinburne, indeed, evolutionary development itself is a striking evidence for a “fine-tuned” universe suggesting divine handiwork.

Of all the ~~attacks~~ leveled against these *a posteriori*, or causal, arguments for God, the most devastating are propounded by David Hume (Chapter 9). The blast is contained in his classic *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. The criticisms are strewn throughout, but a sort of concentration of his most telling points occurs in Part II. Here, among other things, Hume exposes without pity the futility of any attempt to gain knowledge of God on the basis of supposed analogies between what occurs in our experience and God's relation to the world. We have seen that crucial to the Cosmological and Teleological Arguments is the principle of causality, and Hume is especially hard on this point. We have no justification from our experience for attributing to God a causal relation to the world, and even our experience of causality amounts only to a psychological connection we make between things and the things they come after. Similar points are made by Bertrand Russell (Chapter 16) against Fr. Copleston, including the notorious charge that the “argument from contingency” commits the fallacy of composition: It mistakenly concludes that since everything in the universe has a cause, the universe itself has a cause. Of course one will want to pay attention to the ways in which Copleston parries Russell's criticisms—and vice versa. All of this leaves aside, of course, Ayer's rejection of any such arguments (Chapter 15) on the grounds that they involve claims that turn out to be not genuine propositions at all—a conclusion that follows, of course, only if one buys Ayer's radically empirical criterion of meaningfulness.

Very different is the approach that construes God's existence not as a conclusion in an argument or an inference from some evidence, but as the deliverance of an immediate, personal encounter. Two examples are provided in the readings. Meister Eckhart (Chapter 6) gives eloquent expression to a form of classical mysticism, according to which the soul is enabled, through arduous discipline, to turn aside first from every external and then internal distraction, and to achieve a state of “silence” in which the soul becomes filled with the divine Word. This is of course a metaphor or picture of mystical “union” with God, though it is important to note that in the Christian tradition no amount of mystical effort can overcome the essential difference between created being (as with the soul) and uncreated being (God). What is intended is a union of will, not a union of being. It was precisely because Eckhart was seen to be ambiguous on this point that he was censured. Another example of knowl-

edge of God through religious experience (and, it would seem, more accessible to most of us) is the experience of the "numinous" described by Rudolf Otto (Chapter 14) . . . well, insofar as it *can* be described. As with mysticism, Otto says that this experience can't really be objectified intellectually, and, as with mysticism, that's what's so good about it. This non-rational but unmistakable feeling or sense of the divine presence (*numen*, in Latin) touches most people at some time or another, and when it does it leaves an enfeebled speculation or intellectualism far behind.

Explicit criticisms of such claims are found in the contribution of Ayer and Russell. We have seen already that Ayer (Chapter 15) dismisses all metaphysical, and, therefore, theological claims as cognitively meaningless, and it comes thus as no surprise that he deals likewise with mystical deliverances that are alleged to transcend understanding. This, says Ayer, can only mean that they are unintelligible nonsense, impossible to translate into any meaningful propositions about God. All that the mystic gives us is information about the state of the mystic's own mind. For Russell (Chapter 16), the issue is not over the meaningfulness of, say, the mystic's claims, but their veridicalness, or correspondence with some objective truth or reality. The problem is, for Russell, twofold. First, the utter privacy of religious experience renders it incapable of any outside collective scrutiny, and, second, it is not only noble and high-minded individuals who lay claim to such experiences but also deluded individuals and weirdos.

Without doubt the severest of all problems for theistic belief is the problem of evil: How is the awful reality of evil, in the form of both innocent suffering and moral perversity, to be reconciled with the reality of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God? One of the most scathing statements of this problem is provided by John Stuart Mill (Chapter 12) who, incidentally, was driven frankly to deny the divine omnipotence: God would *like* to do something about the evil in the world but is *unable*. St. Augustine (Chapter 3) is not so pessimistic, and his privation theory of evil is probably the most important of all the attempts to resolve the issue. Reflecting a Platonic theory of reality, Augustine claims that evil, both in nature and in human wills, is not a substance or being (= goodness) but the absence of being. And God is responsible for what is, not what is not. In the case of moral evil, Augustine and many others have argued that human beings are responsible by virtue of their misuse of free-will. This Free-Will Defense, as it is called, is given a forceful and modern-day expression by John Hick (Chapter 20). Hick argues, against Antony Flew and J. L. Mackie, that an authentic relation of love, trust, and obedience with respect to God requires the genuine possibility of free disobedience and such. He also argues, regarding natural evil, and influenced by the church father Irenaeus, for the emotionally and

morally uplifting and ennobling values that result from the experience of suffering, to say nothing of eternal life and universal salvation.

It may be, of course, that the evidence for and against believing in God balances out and one finds it impossible to judge the issue on intellectual grounds. This is precisely where William James' contribution (Chapter 13) comes into play. According to James, if we can't make up our minds on the basis of rational evidence, and if the issue is a "genuine" option—~~living, momentous, and forced~~—then we have no alternative but to decide on the basis of what's in it for us. Pascal's "Wager" argument (Chapter 8) is more pointed: We should believe no matter *what* the evidence is, if we stand possibly to avoid an eternal loss and to gain an eternal happiness. Such reasoning (and especially Pascal's) has always been sharply criticized for its focus on self-interest. On the other hand, it is not clear to all why in the matter of one's eternal destiny one should be less self-interested than in other matters!

III

So what's the problem?

In this introductory essay, I have suggested (what may not be obvious to all) that the nature and relation of faith and reason is, in a way, the root problem of all theology. I have also suggested (what should be obvious to all) that considerations of evidence for or against God and things related to God (an intrinsically interesting topic itself) is the arena in which the problem of faith and reason receives its most apparent—and for many, its most important—application. In fact, however, a great number of more specific problems have been paraded by:

- What is the nature and role of religious authority?
- What is the nature and contribution of divine revelation?
- What is the relevance of sense-experience for knowledge of God?
- What is the cognitive status of religious or theological claims?
- What is the existential significance of religious claims?
- What is the nature of evil?
- How is evil to be reconciled to God?
- How does sin affect our knowledge of God?
- What is the cognitive status and relevance of the nonrational?
- Is reason, at least at some level, the arbiter of all religious claims?
- Is belief in God a properly basic belief?
- What is the relation of myth and symbol to cognition?
- Is there such a thing as utterly "blind" faith?
- What is the difference between reasons and grounds for belief?