TEN MINUTES FOR THE PROPOSITION 'GOD IS'

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Author's Preface

The following speech was written in September of 2022 for a debate jointly hosted by the Union Debating Society and St Mary's College Society. Interestingly, the proposition turned out not to be the one agreed upon by the participants. 'This house believes God exists' was somehow changed to the proposition 'This house believes in God.' Not only did this work to our favor (we still lost) but, conceptually speaking, the changed proposition was more appropriate to my arguments. When, in Aikman's, the idea for a debate was conceived, the aim was at once to try to do something basically different from the norm. This is how.

The question about God is seen here not a metaphysical question about the existence of a being. It is a question about our future. The future, understood theologically is exactly what is ultimate; it gives meaning to and uncovers itself as the determining ground of all that went before. I would like to refer my readers to Wolfhart Pannenberg for whom God is the power of the future. He develops this identity further in denying the present existence of God, 'in a limited but important sense.' By referencing the dying words of Jesus, I mean to draw in this idea from Pannenberg, i.e., I mean to affirm the present debatability of God as a genuine, 'ontologically dense' feature of creation. Doubt is a valid, prayerful way of being related to God. (Indeed, here one enters intimate fellowship with Jesus.)

Obviously, this changes the terms of debate about God entirely. Instead of affirming the existence of God, the aim here is to affirm the faithful longing for God's sovereignty over creation (a reality which is in this fallen world invisible), as not only something rational, but as a lack which unifies suffering humanity in a world divided along the lines of what people claim to possess (be this their race, nation, or even their faith). Lastly, it can be noted here that in affirming the present debatability and incompleteness of the ground of all that exists, of truth itself, faith becomes more atheist than most atheisms today which, often by scientistic faith, affirm the completeness and ontological wholeness of what presently exists.

The Speech

'Who?' is *the* religious question. It is a question about the other man and his claim, about the other being, the other authority. It is a question about love for one's neighbour."

I want to orient my entire argument with this quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer because it captures exactly the fundamental theme, it captures what is at stake with the question of God's

existence.

Let's begin by clarifying what is implied in the question 'Who?' "'Who?' is *the* religious question". (He refers to 'Who are you?', the question addressed to Jesus.') That is as opposed to 'What?'; 'What is there?' 'What do the scriptures mean?' It is also opposed to the question 'How?' 'How was the universe created?' and so on. These are fascinating questions, but as *you* ask yourselves, 'does God exist?', you must admit that deep down, this is not what is of gravest concern. The decision for or against God is an existential decision *before* it is worked out in theories of 'How?' or 'What?'.

The question 'Who?' points to an order of knowledge which is prior to the epistemic or theoretical curiosities implied in the other modes of questioning. In other words, an order of knowledge which is ethical and interpersonal.

If we take as an example an interpersonal encounter, you may enjoy the theoretical game of questioning whether the other person *really* exists; that is the old skeptical problem (which, of course, has no theoretical solution). But in the end, you must *acknowledge* the fullness of the other person and the claim that they have on you. This *acknowledgement* of the other person is a way of knowing that they exist.[1] Even if, epistemically, I cannot see into the other mind and prove it exists, I am bound to acknowledge them. If I do not, I undermine my own being in the world and ultimately my own identity. Behind theoretical curiosities are ethical modes of questioning which are more fundamental for our existence.

Shakespeare's *Othello* is perfect here because the whole tragedy turns on Othello confusing these two modes of questioning: ethical and epistemic.[2]

Othello is deceived into thinking Desdemona is cheating on him. All Desdemona can do is beg to be trusted when she says, 'I love you,' beg that her claim, her word be acknowledged. Othello, however, confuses this sort of relation with an epistemic one, and he tragically responds with: 'you love me? Prove it. Give me the evidence.' It is a hysterical, impossible demand.

The history of these debates has more or less committed this Othellian error. 'God exists? Prove it.' Crucially, when Othello makes his demand, he undermines exactly what is meant to be proven; he destroys the loving relation which is grounded on faithfulness and trust. In just the same way, atheists and theists alike risk deploying modes of questioning which obscure what is being questioned after. 'How do I know God exists?' is just as valid a question as 'How do I know that you love me?'

These questions are meaningful and good as expressions of profound insecurity and

[1] All credit goes here to Stanley Cavell's 'Knowing and Acknowledging', and in particular, Judith Wolfe's discussion of the essay in her *Heidegger's Eschatology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
[2] This argument references a lecture by J. M. Bernstein in which he also discusses Cavell's essay. https://www.bernsteintapes.com/lectures/Hegel/18SelfConsciousnessB.mp3.

loneliness; the persistent temptation to ask these questions betrays our separation from God and protests His silence. ('Why have you forsaken me?') Or 'how do I know you love me?' expresses the opacity of the other person which makes us anxious; an unavoidable feature of our social lives.

So, in this limited sense, 'How do I know God exists?' is a valid question. But if the question comes instead from the standpoint of theoretical curiosity, that is, if it genuinely expects a satisfying answer or a list of reasons, it is invalid. It obscures what is being questioned after.

'Does God exist?' 'How can I know?' This may be a way of asking 'Do I have a future? Do we have a future? Or is this it?'

We should note that the secular world continues to grapple with exactly this theological anxiety; 'Do we have a future?' is an extremely pressing political question right now. Will something new happen, or will right wing populism dominate? We are locked in a history without any events; everything changes but nothing happens. Do we have a future? Or is this it? This question bears on us every time ecological crisis manifests itself.

What this shows is that theological ways of thinking and asking *persist* even or especially where theology is disavowed. There are countless other examples; my old professor, the late Christoph Schwöbel, was always eager to remind his students that our speech about the *market* is distinctly theological; we say 'it is volatile' or 'it is upset'; this mystifies the market's dependence on human decisions and poses it as something with a *will* of its own.

In a word, what I have been trying to communicate this is that *theology is an intractable problematic.* This is shown whenever you are compelled to *acknowledge* the other person; here you are *dependent* on them, just like Othello depends on the word given to him. His refusal of this word was in the end his self-destruction. Dependence, the notion that as humans we have our center always *outside ourselves*, this is what theology is all about.

Nonetheless, humans make attempts at self-possession or self-groundedness; they refuse their dependence on the other person and the vulnerability which this implies. This history of modern capitalism is the history of man's striving for self-possession, striving to locate the ground of his existence *in himself.*[3] But what this history shows is that such striving always ends in some perverse theological relation; we depend on the market, it gives us our desires. In advertisements we read what 'the Other' wants from us. Consumer society is a system of *orienting knowledge*; it is a means of securing our place in the world. Again, do we have a future? Or is this it?

Now I will attempt a summary of my entire argument. When we say 'God exists', we grapple

[3] And the psychoanalytic resonances are very strong here: if theology structures human life according to a 'lost object' (God), then the secular society of commodity production is *fetishistic.* The fetish object, the commodity, obscures our own lack and erects the 'phantasy' of wholeness, completion, possession.

with having our center outside ourselves. The proposition is not a theory about the universe which cancels our anxiety by securing for us a stable place in the cosmos. The proposition 'God exists' is a way of reconciling ourselves to a fundamental insecurity; we are always in the place of Othello. We must either depend on a word given to us, even in the absence of any external guarantee, or else we refuse this word and destroy ourselves.