

The Moral Obligation of Belief

JERRY L. WALLS

I

The "ethics of belief" is a much discussed topic in modern and contemporary philosophy. It is fairly common to see discussion of what we *ought* to believe, are *warranted* in assuming, *should* conclude, and so on. Phrases such as these clearly indicate that morality and epistemology overlap in some very interesting ways. Indeed, epistemology and ethics converge in many cases in everyday life when we assess beliefs and judgments in terms of blame or approval.

Perhaps the most extreme example of assigning blame to beliefs is in the Christian tradition. A classic passage illustrating this is Romans 1, where Paul says that those who do not believe in God are morally culpable. But the Christian tradition goes further and requires more specific beliefs. For instance, the Athanasian Creed which expounds in detail the doctrines of the Incarnation and Trinity, begins with this sober claim: "Whoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith. Which Faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly." The idea here is that certain beliefs are essential for salvation, and that those who do not accept them are damned. Surely damnation is the ultimate form of blame for wrong belief. Moreover--and most significantly--the notion that belief is important for salvation can be supported by Christ's own words. In the Gospel of John, for example, He is reported as saying "if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins" (John 8:24).

It is not surprising that this element of Christian teaching has proven offensive to many. Some would even say that this very teaching provides a good reason not to believe Christianity. The idea that one's beliefs about Christ could be culpable strikes some as simply outrageous. Richard Robinson expresses this view pointedly:

It is most important to reject the view that it is a sin not to believe in Jesus; for the view that a belief can be sinful is very harmful and wrong. It destroys the whole ideal of

Jerry L. Walls is assistant professor of philosophy of religion at Asbury Theological Seminary. He is completing his Ph.D. at the University of Notre Dame.

knowledge and reason, and prevents man from achieving the knowledge in which much of his dignity and much of his safety lie. No belief is as such morally wrong; but it is morally wrong to form one's beliefs in view of something other than truth and probability; and Jesus demanded this moral wrong....It is terrible to think how many million people have, as a result of those passages in the gospels about having faith, done what probably each of us here did in his childhood, tried to hypnotize himself into some particular belief and to disregard whatever scraps of judgment he possessed. The fine things in Jesus' preaching have been and will be greatly harmed by this blasphemy against reason.¹

This passage well expresses the aversion which many have felt to the Christian view that it is wrong not to believe in Christ. Robinson's general point is that beliefs as such are not fit subjects for moral evaluations. No belief is itself wrong in the moral sense. What is right or wrong is how one forms beliefs. Robinson's view is that beliefs should be formed in view of truth and probability, and Christ violated this ideal in demanding belief in Himself. In his experience, to believe in Christ is to try to "hypnotize" oneself to so believe, in defiance of what he actually judges to be true. Given this picture, it is no wonder that many have recoiled from the idea that one must believe certain things in order to be saved.

Indeed, it is noteworthy that Christian thinkers, too, have backed away from the claim that beliefs about God and Christ are blameworthy. Nor should this surprise us, in light of the steady stream of attacks which have, since the Enlightenment, been levelled against Christian belief in general. In previous ages Christian thinkers were generally confident that it could be known and shown that God exists, that Christ is His Son, that Christ was raised from the dead, and so on. Given this confidence, it is easy to see why those who did not believe were considered blameworthy, for the evidence for God's existence and other Christian doctrine was thought to be clear and compelling.

Now, however, it is generally agreed that there is no compelling argument for God's existence, let alone for the deity of Christ. In this intellectual climate there is accordingly much greater reluctance to think unbelief is culpable. For if there is no substantial reason to believe in God, there hardly seems to be any warrant for thinking anyone might be held accountable for unbelief. Related to this, I suggest, is the quiet abandonment of the doctrine of hell among Christian thinkers in favor of universalism.

However, the doctrine of hell remains a thorny problem which

cannot be so easily ignored. As Peter Geach claims:

We cannot be Christians, followers of Christ, we cannot even know what it is to be a Christian, unless the Gospels give at least an approximately correct account of Christ's teaching. And if the Gospel account is even approximately correct, then it is perfectly clear that according to that teaching many men are irretrievably lost.²

And, as we have already noted, Christ has traditionally been understood as teaching that unbelief is one of the sins which leads to damnation.

I want to insist that this is an issue which Christian thinkers must face. Unless they are willing frankly to argue that the Christian tradition has misunderstood Christ and is mistaken in teaching that unbelief is blameworthy, and may even lead to damnation, they should offer some account of why unbelief is culpable. For the remainder of this paper I will assume the Christian tradition is correct in teaching that unbelief is morally culpable and even leads to damnation.³ I will attempt to defend and make sense of this claim. My purpose is not to argue for the existence of God or the truth of Christian doctrine. I only suggest the lines of argument which underlie the notion that unbelief is blameworthy.

II

Let us approach this problem by considering in general terms the fact that we do sometimes judge beliefs to be morally wrong. The question is, when do we judge a belief to be morally wrong? Why do we sometimes render this verdict?

Consider a few examples. In the state of Indiana there have recently been cases of parents who were found guilty in court because they neglected to get medical care for their children, who consequently died. An interesting thing about these cases is that the parents are members of a religious cult which believes that it is wrong to seek medical attention. Now it may be that what is blameworthy in these cases is not the belief that it is wrong to seek medical attention, but the action which follows from it, namely, keeping children from needed medical care. However, these cases illustrate one of the reasons why beliefs are sometimes culpable: because they are the basis for actions. Indeed, the relationship between belief and action is so intimate that the action cannot be blamed without also blaming the belief. For the action does not stand alone. It is a direct consequence of the belief.

Or take the case of a tobacco company executive who denies

that smoking is hazardous to health. We suspect that his belief is prompted by financial motives and that he has ignored or suppressed the substantial evidence that smoking is harmful to our health.

More directly culpable would be a physician who continues to use a drug for treatment which research indicates has very negative side effects. If she has heard of the research, but has not bothered to check it, we would say she is blameworthy for believing the drug harmless, especially if it turns out otherwise. We would be particularly justified in blaming her if she has ample opportunity for keeping up on the research, but spends all her free time, say, playing tennis.

It is worth stressing here that, in this case, the physician's belief is a consequence of an action, namely, neglect of the research. This contrasts with our example above of the parents whose actions were the consequence of their belief. These examples illustrate that there is a two-way street between belief and action and that beliefs may be blameworthy either because they are the *basis* of wrong actions or the *consequence* of wrong actions.

Now consider the case of a person who hears and believes vicious gossip. Let us say Quine tells Quinn that Quinton is a fraud and a liar. Suppose also that up to that point, Quinn has had good reason to believe Quinton is a good and honest man. If Quinn simply accepts Quine's word and henceforth believes that Quinton is a fraud and a liar, I think we would blame him for this belief. We would think he should have investigated the charge before accepting it. We think beliefs about the character of other persons are serious matters and should not be arrived at carelessly or casually.

Think now of a person who is informed of an alleged duty. Suppose Gray is running for public office and hears from a friend about the requirement in the law to keep an account of all campaign expenditures. Suppose further that Gray does not bother to confirm or disconfirm what is heard. He goes on in the belief that it is not important to keep such an account. Later, if Gray runs into trouble with the law for illegal campaign practices, we would think him culpable for believing it unnecessary to record his expenditures.

Finally, consider the extreme case of someone who believes there are no moral distinctions, that the whole idea of morality is superstitious or just plain silly. Most of us would judge such a belief to be not only mistaken, but also corrupt. Why is this so? Alvin Plantinga offers this explanation:

A part of what is involved in our blaming people for holding

corrupt beliefs, I think, is our supposing that the normal human condition is to reject them, just as the normal human condition is to accept *modus ponens*, say, as valid. We think a normal human being will find injustice--the sort depicted, for example, in the story the prophet Nathan told David--despicable and odious. In the face of this natural tendency or prompting, to accept the view that such behavior is perfectly proper requires something like a special act of will--a special act of *ill* will. Such a person, we think, *knows better*, chooses what in some sense he knows to be wrong.⁴

In this quote, Plantinga puts his finger on one of the main reasons why we can evaluate beliefs in moral terms: because some beliefs are chosen. Some of our beliefs are like actions in this sense, and most would agree that we are responsible for our actions.

But it may be doubted whether our beliefs really are like actions. For most, if not all, of our actions are under our direct control. For instance, we voluntarily and directly perform such actions as turning our head or pointing our finger. But can we choose to believe things in the same direct way as we perform basic actions? The answer, I think, is generally no. With respect to most of our ordinary beliefs we are passive rather than active. Our perceptual beliefs, for instance, are not chosen. We simply believe many things as the immediate result of seeing and hearing the sights and sounds around us. Similarly, we believe many other things because they seem true to us, apart from any choice we have made.

So generally we do not directly choose our beliefs. However, this still leaves open the possibility that we may indirectly choose what we believe. For instance, if I want to believe a certain proposition, *P*, I may cultivate belief in *P* by performing certain actions. For instance, I may gather and reflect on evidence which is relevant to *P* or read books by people who believe *P*. I may consciously try to modify my other beliefs so they are compatible with *P*. Eventually, I may find myself believing *P*.

In a similar vein, consider how someone may cultivate wrong moral beliefs by making wrong choices. For instance, a person who performed a number of unjust actions may come to believe that actions which almost all of us would regard as wrong are actually right. That person may modify his or her previous moral beliefs in order to believe those actions were justified.

Of course, it may be objected that a person would already have to believe that an unjust action was acceptable in order to perform it. This points up again that there is a two-way street between belief and action, and it is not always easy to tell which direction

the traffic is moving. However, the point still stands, I think, that we do choose some of our beliefs, if not directly, then indirectly.

With these examples before us, we turn to the more specific question of how beliefs with respect to God may be blameworthy. I will deal with this question by considering two well-known accounts of religious belief in contemporary philosophy of religion, namely, those represented by Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne. My main concern is to point out the implications of each of these concerning our moral obligation to believe in God.

III

Let us begin by considering Plantinga's view that belief in God may be properly basic. In taking this view, Plantinga is following a number of Reformed theologians who have held that belief in God is not inferred or deduced from other beliefs. Rather, it is a belief which we hold spontaneously like our beliefs "in the existence of other persons, an external world, or the past."⁵

Why is this so? The Reformed theologian does not try to *argue* that God exists; however, he does *give us an account* of why we do, in fact, believe that God exists. In the first place, God has created us with a strong tendency to believe in Him. Our very nature, then, accounts for the common persistence among human beings to believe in God. John Calvin put it this way:

To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. Ever renewing its memory, he repeatedly sheds fresh drops. Since, therefore, men one and all perceive that there is a God and that he is their Maker, they are condemned by their own testimony because they have failed to honor him and to consecrate their lives to his will.⁶

This quote from Calvin also indicates the second reason Reformed theologians give for taking belief in God as basic: namely, because God is "ever renewing" our awareness of His existence through the witness of nature. The entire world around us is an ever-present reminder that God exists.

To be more specific, our inclination to believe in God when we are impressed or affected in certain ways by nature is a circumstance which justifies or grounds our belief. Plantinga explains this point by comparing what it is that justifies our ordinary perceptual beliefs. For example, if I believe I see a tree, I am justified in this belief because (to use language Plantinga borrows from Chisholm) I am "appeared to treely." Unless I have

reason to believe my perceptual equipment is misleading me, this circumstance justifies my belief that there is a tree before me. I do not deduce that there is a tree before me. I believe it directly upon being appeared to *treely*. That is why it qualifies as a basic belief.

Belief in God is basic in an analogous way. Not only are we so made that we immediately believe *I see a tree* in certain circumstances, we also naturally believe in God-given certain conditions. "More precisely, there is in us a disposition to believe propositions of the sort *this flower was created by God* or *this vast and intricate universe was created by God* when we contemplate the flower or behold the starry heavens or think about the vast reaches of the universe."⁷

Plantinga's development of the Reformed view of religious epistemology is certainly intriguing and demands careful assessment. My purpose here, however, is only to ask what implications this view has for evaluating unbelief in God as blameworthy. The above quote from Calvin spells out these implications quite clearly. As he saw it, not only is there no excuse for not believing in God, there is no excuse for not living a life of devotion to Him, since He has revealed Himself so clearly to all of us.

It is not clear how far Plantinga wishes to follow his Reformed predecessors on this point. The implications of his view, however, surely point in the direction Calvin took. For if God has created all of us with a strong inclination to believe in Him, and we are surrounded by circumstances which renew this tendency, it is hard to see what more God could do to have us believe in Him without imposing such belief on us. Of course, it may be suggested that there are other ways of explaining why belief in God is properly basic. But it seems to me that something like the Reformed account of human nature, and of how the world of nature inclines us to believe, is required if belief in God as properly basic is to be adequately accounted for.

If belief in God as properly basic is accounted for in such terms, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that those who do not believe in God only do so by an act of will similar to that of persons who believe there are no moral distinctions. That is to say, we are pushed toward the conclusion that those who do not believe in God actually know better, but have *chosen* not to believe.

Thus, the Reformed account does far more than show that belief in God *can* be basic for those who want to believe; it shows that belief in God *is*, in fact, basic for all. In other words, the conditions which are sufficient to *justify* belief in God as basic also *demand* belief in God. Those who do not believe in God must

suppress and deny what all persons naturally believe. Unbelief, then, is an unnatural condition brought about by a sinful act of deliberate choice. Therefore, it is culpable.

But is unbelief always culpable? Are there not cases when our inclination to believe may be thwarted in such a way that we should not be blamed for unbelief? Suppose a person was inclined to believe in God and even wanted to believe. But suppose further that that person was forced to undergo systematic brainwashing by persons who did not believe in God. In this instance, the person involved might come not to believe, but it would not be because he chose not to believe. It would hardly make sense in such a case to blame the person for unbelief.

And in a similar vein, we can imagine cases where a person might have good grounds for thinking his belief in God was illusory. Suppose a person who believed in God was given a detailed psychoanalytic account of why people believe in God, and was told that his own belief could be fully explained in such terms, even though God does not exist. Suppose that upon reflection this person became convinced that the psychoanalytic account did accurately describe his belief in God. Maybe he comes to see his belief in God as nothing more than neurotic wishful thinking. He would then have some reason to believe his apparent perception of God was misleading. Would this person not be irrational to continue to believe in God? And could he be culpable for giving up an irrational belief?

The latter case is more ambiguous, for it may be the psychoanalytic account of belief in God was accepted too easily. Furthermore, even if belief could be adequately explained as wishful thinking, it does not follow that all belief in God can be accounted for in this way. And it certainly does not follow that God does not exist, just because some persons believe in God because of wishful thinking. So it may be the case that this person should give up his present belief in God, but then go on to consider whether there are other grounds for such belief. To simply abandon belief in God in this case would be much too hasty a judgment on such an important matter.

Before moving on, perhaps we should pause to stress the point that beliefs may be blameworthy because they lead to wrong actions. This is especially so if wrong beliefs are deliberately chosen, as in the Reformed view. For beliefs are a basis for action and certain beliefs require certain actions. For instance, a bus driver who is "appeared to treely" has an obligation to steer the bus so as to avoid hitting the tree. If he chooses not to believe there is a tree in front of him, he may wreck the bus and bring harm to himself and his passengers. Likewise, a person who

chooses not to believe in God may not perform the actions which belief in God requires. This, I think, is the point of Calvin's claim in the quote above, that persons who do not consecrate their lives to God are morally accountable.

IV

Now let us turn to another account of religious belief and rationality. In this section I want to consider the view that belief in God is rationally supported by evidence and arguments. This view has been recently defended by Richard Swinburne, who argued in *The Existence of God*, that, on balance, it is more probable than not that God exists. Once again, it is not my purpose here to expound this view in detail, but only to consider what implications it may have for the notion that belief in God is an intellectual obligation.

In this view, the existence of God is not so starkly obvious, as in the Reformed view. Rather, the situation is more ambiguous, but reason, if properly exercised, will lead us to conclude that God exists. That is to say, God's existence is not immediately evident, but we can quite properly infer it.

Interestingly, this view also, like the Reformed view, involves a certain view of human nature. In the first place, reason points to God's existence because reason is a gift of God.⁸ This is akin to the Reformed idea that God has made us so that we have a strong tendency to believe in Him. Here, however, it is not a direct tendency so much as a faculty which, when properly exercised, supports belief in God. Also akin to the Reformed view is the notion that the world of nature justifies belief in God. Here, however, nature does not simply trigger a disposition to believe. Rather, it is part of the total evidence which reveals God, and can be assessed by reason.

There is another assumption about human nature operating in this view. It is that "all men want long-term well-being and deep well-being: that is, they want to be for long in a supremely worthwhile situation doing actions of great value."⁹ Such well-being, moreover, is only found through a relationship with God. To sum up then, we have a God-given desire for deep and lasting well-being. This desire can be satisfied only through knowledge of God. And the evidence around us, when properly evaluated, will lead us to belief in God.

With this background in place, let us go on to focus on the question of how unbelief may be blameworthy in this view. The first general suggestion here is that people who are uncertain of God's existence should investigate whether there is a God and what implications there might be for our lives if there is one. For, in

our society at least, we are often confronted by the claims of different religions which promise deep and eternal well-being to their adherents. Since we naturally desire such well-being, it is plausible to suppose that we should pursue the claims of religion to find out whether any of them are in fact true. Moreover, it is widely believed by "the man on the street" that there must be a God. Even if this belief is not properly basic, it is still commonly believed that God exists and that somehow He gives meaning to life. Those who believe this ought to seek to find out what they can about God and His purposes.

I am using the word "ought" here in a fairly strong sense. For "if there is a God and he has made and sustains the world and issued commands to men, men have moral obligations which they would not otherwise have."¹⁰ Such commands might pertain to how to use our lives, how to treat other people, how to treat the natural order, and so on. We should want to discover whether there are such commands, whether we have disobeyed them, whether we can obtain forgiveness, and so forth.

Among man's duties is the duty to find out what his duties are. He must therefore find out whether the world is his to use as he pleases, or whether it belongs to someone else; whether he is indebted to anyone for his existence, to whom he owes acknowledgement and service. The duty to pursue religious inquiry is a particular case of the duty to check that we owe nothing to any man.¹¹

So then, the general starting point here is the possibility that there may be a God, that we may owe Him something by way of obedience and worship, and that our ultimate well-being may depend on knowledge of Him.

It is because these issues are so important that we are responsible for having true beliefs about them. The more that is at stake in something, the more important it is that we have true beliefs about it. Given the importance of the issues which are at stake in religion, it is incumbent upon us to seek the truth of the matter with diligence and honesty.

It is not, however, easy to define exact standards for adequate investigation. Consider the question of God's very existence. The arguments surrounding this issue have been rather sophisticated for some time. In our day, some of these have become so technical that untrained persons could not possibly evaluate them. Is it then necessary, if one is to investigate with integrity the question of God's existence, that one must first undergo considerable philosophical training?

Surely not. The evidence regarding God's existence must be such that a basic grasp of it can be had by untutored minds as well as philosophers. Sophisticated arguments, we may suppose, only spell out in greater detail what can be recognized by anyone at a more intuitive level. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that all persons may have an intelligent belief concerning God's existence.

However, religious inquiry cannot stop here. For if one comes to believe there is a God, he should go on to find out more about what God is like. What are His purposes? What is His will for man? Has God revealed himself in specific ways? To ask questions such as these is to ask which, if any, specific religious creed is true. And to ask this question is to raise again the practicality of serious religious inquiry. For it would be virtually impossible to make an exhaustive investigation of all religious claims. Besides the major world religions, there are countless cults and sects. The task of serious religious investigation may thus seem impossible.

However, our investigator may plausibly assume that if there is a God, the truth about Him is to be found in some religion which has had substantial success in winning adherents throughout the world. For the truth about something so essential to all men should commend itself to a broad range of persons and not just an isolated few.¹²

It is because we should seek more detailed knowledge of God that beliefs about Christ are important. For the Christian claim is that God's highest act of self-revelation was given through His Son, who became incarnate in Christ. If Christ is God's Son, our worship is due Him. Moreover, His teaching is essential for knowing God's will which leads to our eternal well-being. Thus, to fail to believe that Christ is God's Son may result in failure to properly worship and obey God, and ultimately lead to a loss of eternal well-being.

At any rate, investigators should gather what evidence and information they can by reading, talking with adherents of different religions, and so on. They should pursue the available evidence and reflect on it until they reach a settled conviction about which, if any, religious creed is true. Perhaps the key to what is to count as sufficient investigation of religion is to be determined by comparing the standards a person applies to other matters. For:

Although a man may think that he has devoted enough time to such investigation, even by his own standards he may not have done. He may have devoted far less time to it than the importance which he believed the matter to warrant by his

normal standards of how much time you ought to devote to investigating things.¹³

For instance, suppose a person painstakingly and thoroughly researches all the options available before investing money. Furthermore, he makes it a point to keep up with financial news by regularly reading business reports, market analyses, and so on. Suppose further that this person's religious beliefs are based on investigation which is superficial and perfunctory compared to the research on financial affairs. In this case, I think the person involved could be held culpable for carelessness in forming wrong beliefs on a matter of supreme importance. And carelessness on such a matter is not easily excused.

Of course, this raises questions about cases of persons who investigate religious matters carelessly, but who happen to come to right beliefs anyway. And, on the other hand, there may be cases of persons who are diligent in religious inquiry but who arrive at erroneous beliefs. Perhaps in their investigation, they came across only weak presentations of Christianity, but impressively argued apologies for some other religion. In this case, it is hard to see how a person could be faulted for not believing in Christ. Indeed, perhaps in a situation like this it would be logically impossible for a person honestly to believe in Christ, at least without further research and reflection. Such a person should not, as Robinson put it, "hypnotize" himself to believe, against his better judgment.

Certainly honesty is crucial to genuine religious inquiry. And honesty requires us to be led in the direction the evidence points. To refuse to be led by the evidence is blameworthy, especially if one is wrongly motivated. For instance, a person may be inclined by the evidence to believe in Christianity, but may refuse to do so because he or she is unwilling to face up to the moral demands of the Christian faith. As Swinburne comments:

Men have no doubt down the centuries cultivated unbelief or allowed themselves to slide into atheism on various bad non-rational grounds--e.g. in order to be able to commit other sins without a bad conscience. But this is surely one kind of unbelief which the Christian religion has stigmatized as a great sin.¹⁴

Now then, let us summarize the argument of this section. I have been sketching the grounds for holding that unbelief is culpable given the assumption that the overall evidence shows not only that it is probable that God exists, but that the more specific Christian creed is true. The general idea here is that it is our duty to engage

in religious inquiry because it is at least initially plausible that God exists and we may have obligations to Him. Our ultimate well-being may depend on having true beliefs about God. To engage in religious inquiry is not, however, to assume from the outset that any religion is true.

Culpability may stem from two things: either failure to investigate religious claims seriously or dishonesty in weighing the evidence. If it is indeed true that the evidence supports not only the existence of God, but also the Christian creed, then honest investigation should lead most people to believe the Christian faith. This assumes, of course, that the relevant evidence is accessible to the investigator and that the collected evidence is representative. That is, the evidence must accurately portray the religions in question, and the amount of rational support they in fact enjoy.

Given these assumptions, belief in Christianity would be the natural outcome of investigation. Not to believe in God, or to believe in some other religion would have to be a choice made in spite of good reason to believe otherwise. There is thus another point of contact with the Reformed view: seeing unbelief as a choice. The difference, of course, is that in the Reformed view unbelief must fly in the face of an immediate, strong, natural tendency to believe. In this view, the tendency to believe is not so immediately strong, but results from investigation and reflection on the evidence.

The move to blameworthiness is thus more tenuous and open to objection at a number of points. The very first step may be contested in that it may be doubtful whether we have a duty to find out what obligations we may have to God if we are unsure whether God even exists. Thus, one may simply opt out of religious inquiry from the outset. If this decision is to be judged culpable, it seems that it must be insisted that the initial obligation to seek out our duties is fairly evident or intuitive.

Moreover, if it is to be claimed that unbelief is universally culpable, then it must be maintained that there is evidence universally available. Obviously, however, all the relevant evidence is not evenly distributed. There are, for instance, numerous places where Christianity has not spread. In such places, it is hard to see how anyone could be held accountable for not believing in Christ.

This difficulty may be met by the suggestion that God only holds us accountable for whatever evidence or information is in fact available to us. This is not a modern expedient for an embarrassing problem, but a reasonable response which has been proposed by Christians of earlier generations. For instance, John Wesley held that failure to believe in Christ is only blameworthy among those to whom the gospel has been preached. He urged that

we should leave the fate of others up to God, who can be trusted to judge such men "according to the light they have."¹⁵

If there is at least some "light" available to all persons in all places and circumstances, then all may be required to have at least a rudimentary belief in God. Fortunately, we can follow Wesley's counsel and leave it in God's hands to determine how much belief is required. But if it is true that some evidence is available to all, then it is fairly clear that unbelief may be a choice which is universally culpable.

V

As we noted at the outset, the line of argument we have been considering is offensive to many. To think that anyone's beliefs could be blameworthy even to the point of leading to damnation may seem to bespeak a certainty, nay a dogmatism, which is not only unwarranted but despicable as well. Kant expressed this sentiment in a rather pointed, but delightful passage:

The very man who has the temerity to say: He who does not believe in this or that historical doctrine as a sacred truth, that man is *damned*, ought to be able to say also: If what I am now telling you is not true, *let me be damned*! Were there anyone who could make such a dreadful declaration, I should advise the conduct toward him suggested by the Persian proverb concerning a *hadji*: If a man has been in Mecca once (as a pilgrim), move out of the house in which he is living, if he has been there twice, leave the street on which he is to be found; but if he has been there three times, forsake the city or even the lands which he inhabits!¹⁶

Certainly the notion that religious beliefs may be blameworthy has bred fanaticism, persecution, crusades and even wars. Kant is right to point out that zeal for religious beliefs can be dangerous.

But what about Kant's assertion that no one should claim anyone is damned for unbelief unless he is willing himself to be damned if it turns out he is wrong? Again, I think Kant's point is well taken if he means to remind us that judging the fate of others is not a human prerogative. But beyond this, is it wrong to believe that other persons may be damned because of their beliefs? Ironically, Kant turns the table by suggesting that those who believe that the beliefs of others are damnable, may themselves hold a damnable belief!

But let us come back: is it wrong to believe others may be damned because of their belief? In considering this question, it is important to keep in mind that this belief is part of a larger web

of beliefs, namely, the traditional beliefs of Christian theism. More exactly, this belief follows from the beliefs that Christ is the Son of God, that His teachings are authoritative, and that He taught that unbelief is a sin which leads to damnation. If there is nothing wrong in believing Christian theism in general, it will be hard to show that it is wrong to believe this particular aspect of Christian teaching.

I have also tried to emphasize in the discussion above that one's beliefs are not isolated from one's behavior. Rather, they are the basis for actions, values, attitudes, and so on. In short, they are an integral aspect of a total way of life. Perhaps it is important to understand something of this in order to rightly hold that beliefs are blameworthy.

It is also important to grasp the connection between blameworthiness and the ground of belief. In the accounts we examined above, belief in God was grounded in such a way that unbelief was a culpable choice. As we noted at the beginning, those who think there is no positive reason to believe in God have tended to abandon the claim that unbelief is blameworthy. I think this is appropriate. Those who think the evidence is neutral, and who do not think belief in God is properly basic, have no basis for holding that unbelief is culpable. Even many Christian thinkers grant that atheists can give perfectly rational explanations of everything which requires explanation. If the evidence is thus neutral, those who want to believe in God may have the *right* to believe, but it is hard to see how anyone could have an *obligation* to believe. But, on the other hand, those who think that belief in God is properly basic or who think the evidence positively supports belief in God can hardly avoid the implication that unbelief is culpable.

NOTES

1. Richard Robinson, *An Atheist's Values* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 151.
2. Peter Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 123.
3. By damnation, I simply mean a state of unhappiness which results from being eternally separated from the love and presence of God.
4. Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God" in *Faith and Rationality*, eds. Alvin

Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 36.

5. Ibid., p. 66.

6. Cited by Plantinga, *ibid.*, p. 65.

7. Ibid., p. 80. Plantinga mentions other conditions which may "trigger" the disposition to believe in God, such as having a sense of God's disapproval or forgiveness.

8. As John Courtney Murray put it: "How odd of God it would have been had he made man reasonable so that, by being reasonable, man would become godless" (*The Problem of God* [New Haven, Yale University Press, 1964], p. 76).

9. Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 77.

10. Ibid., p. 79.

11. Ibid., p. 80.

12. Swinburne suggests something like this (*ibid.*, p. 196).

13. Ibid., p. 70.

14. Ibid., p. 102.

15. John Wesley, *Works* (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1979; reprint of the 1872 Edition), 7:48.

16. Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York, Harper and Row, 1960), p. 178.