



Burkhard Müller

The concept of God — and why we don't need it

In these newly religious times, it no longer seems superfluous to rearm the atheists with arguments. When push comes to shove, atheists can only trust their reason, writes Burkhard Müller.

Some years ago I wrote a book entitled *Drawing a Line — A Critique of Christianity* [*Schlußstrich — Kritik des Christentums*], which argued that Christianity was false: not only in terms of its historical record, but fundamentally, as a very concept. I undertook to uncover this falsity as a contradiction in terms. While I do not wish to retract any of what I said at the time, I would now go beyond what I argued then in two respects.

For one thing, I no longer wish to adopt the same aggressive tone. The book was written at the beginning of the 1990s, when I was still living in Würzburg (in Bavaria), a bastion of Roman Catholicism. It is a prosperous city, powerful and conscious of the fact, which made it more than capable of provoking my ire; whereas for thirteen years now I have been living in the new East of Germany, where roughly eighty per cent of the population no longer recognize Christianity even as a rumour, where it appears as the exception, not the rule, and where one has the opportunity to reflect on the truth of the claim "this is as good as it gets".

The second point is this: it seems to me that institutionalized, dogmatic Christianity, as expressed in the words of the Holy Scriptures and — more succinctly still — in the Credo, is losing ground. This is not only at the expense of a stupid and potentially violent strain of fundamentalism, as manifested in Islam and the American religious Right, but in Europe mostly at the expense of an often rather intellectually woolly and mawkish eclecticism. I will not be dealing here with any theological system in its doctrinal sense. I want rather to sound out the religious impulse, even — and especially — in its more diffuse form, and to get to its root. That is to say, to enquire of the concept of God whether in practice it accomplishes what is expected of it.

For people do not believe in God because they have been shown the proof of his existence. All such proofs presented by philosophers and theologians through the millennia have, by their very nature, the regrettable flaw that a proof can only refer to the circumstances of existing things, whereas God, as the predecessor of all circumstances, comes *before*, so to speak, and outside the realm of the demonstrable. These proofs, then, all have the character of something tacked on, giving the impression of a thin veneer on a very hefty block of wood. Belief in God, where it does not merely arise out of an unquestioned tradition, demands a spontaneous act on the part of the believer which the believers themselves will tend to describe as an act of faith, their opponents as a purely arbitrary decision; one, nevertheless, that always stems

from a *need* of some kind. People believe in God because along with this belief goes an expectation that a particular wish will be fulfilled for them, a particular problem solved. What kinds of need are these, and how can God meet them?

First of all, of course, we ought to come to an agreement on who or what this God might actually be — not in the sense of a definition or pointed theological explanation, but simply so that we do not talk at cross purposes. I would say: the source of the world, personified. In Christianity, God is most often expressed as the Creator. His two most important specifications are contained within this idea: first, that he is separate, in substantial terms, from the world — in contrast to pantheistic ideas which see him as a kind of refined fluid that is dissipated everywhere and which, as Goethe rightly observed, represent nothing more than a polite form of atheism. Second, that despite this separation the world remains entirely focused on him. This rules out the gods of Epicurus, who inhabit the wedge-shaped spaces between the spherical worlds and do not concern themselves with anything, as it does the Theistic concept that sees God as the watchmaker who has constructed and set up the world, and thereafter left it to its own devices. It is also questionable to what extent the *deus absconditus*, the "hidden God", who has gained his popularity through the horrors of the modern age and who is supposed to gain veracity — paradoxically — precisely through his absence, might fit into this concept, or whether it would be better to put him aside, just like the god of the Theists, as a kind of pensioner of the cosmos. I propose to stick to what both classical Christianity and any dogmatically unencumbered present-day believer mean when they talk of "God".

People think they can find something in God that they feel is sadly lacking in the visible world. This urge must be very old, perhaps as old as mankind itself; for allusions to religious belief can be found even in the traces of the most ancient civilizations. People who think of themselves as atheists have to consider the following argument: you are back in the same position as animals before anything began to dawn in their heads; is this really what you call progress, and the entire history of mankind merely a confused detour, starting out from brute physical laws only to return from whence it came? It is not easy to answer this question in the affirmative.

And what are the qualities ascribed to God in order to satisfy that great human thirst? A catalogue, necessarily somewhat approximate, might run as follows: God provides the explanation for the world as it is, which would otherwise remain utterly inexplicable; God is the guarantor of good, in the heart of man as well as in the way of the world; it is God the Eternal — no less and none other — that is set in opposition to the alarming emptiness of time.

That there *is* something — and not nothing — is actually the great miracle. In comparison, all the other remarkable things, including the existence of living things and of human beings, pale into insignificance as mere modifications. The world cries out for a reason, for an explanation. Yet if one thinks about it, one will realize that this yearning must, at an absolutely fundamental level, remain insatiable: for to explain, to account for something, is to do nothing more or less than to relate two facts to each other, one as a consequence, the other as its precondition. Yet where does this precondition come from? The earth, say the Hindus, rests upon an elephant's back; that is why it does not fall into an abyss. But where is the elephant standing? Well, upon the shell of an even bigger tortoise. And the tortoise? It rests upon the coils of an immense winding serpent. And the snake? When one gets to this point, says the old wag Bertrand Russell, one is told by the devout Hindu: "Suppose we change the

subject!"

Russell can smile, because the Hindus have failed to recognize the nature of gravity, which does not, of course, simply operate downwards, but into the centre of the attracting mass, thereby enabling the globe to balance freely. But where, then, did gravity come from, and how does it exert its effect? Modern science has not come any closer at all to explaining this; indeed, it is precisely gravity that has shown itself especially resistant to all attempts at reduction. It does what it always has done: present itself to the observer as an immovable, primary fact, impossible to elucidate any further: this is as far as it goes. Or, as is said in *Faust* (Part Two, Act IV), "Der Philosoph, er weiß es nicht zu fassen,/Da liegt der Fels, man muß ihn liegen lassen" ["As wise men know, their reason it surpasses. / The rock lies evermore where it has lain"], with the bitter afterthought "Zuschanden haben wir uns schon gedacht" ("We've racked our brains, to our disgrace, in vain.")¹ And even if it did go any further — what would be the use? Every scientific model that is advanced affords nothing more than a breathing space, before we descend to the next turn of the screw in the ceaseless regression, like a ladder in a stocking that can never stop unravelling. Everything that exists wants an explanation, and every explanation turns round and presents itself as a new riddle.

At this stage it seems highly advisable to stipulate that it was God who created the world. This is how the Holy Scriptures begin. So what purpose devolves upon God? To bring the endless regression of questions to a conclusion. Yet this is only achievable through the concept and manifestation of God as the end to all questions. God is that which needs no further justification or explanation; God is what is *there*. Belief in God entails the desire to have things this way; love of God entails experiencing this as a blessed relief. But if one treats the matter not from a psychological point of view, but a logical and economic one, it will be noticed that the same outcome can be reached for considerably better value: one does not *see* God, one has to explicitly summon up the courage to believe in the invisible. That takes strength. Were we to stick with the visible and were we willing to acknowledge its intransigent majesty, allowing it to be founded upon nothing but itself, we would still have to deal with the inaccessibility of the original mystery, albeit this time with considerably less expenditure of reverence and assertive energy.

Strictly speaking, anyone who believes in God is immediately faced not with one, but three basic unexplained facts: first, God himself; then, the creative impulse that starts out from him (for why should the Almighty condescend to such small-scale handicraft?); and finally, the disparity between the perfect original creator and such a botched job. Plato sensed this problem of a perfect God having created the imperfect world and introduced the intermediate authority of his "demiurge" — the craftsman to whom God delegated the creation of the world; this is an attempt to dodge the question by creating a buck-passing, pseudo-official hierarchy. It can't work.

To spare God such embarrassments, our world has been dubbed "the best of all possible worlds", which from the very outset represents an untenable claim, as we have no possible point of comparison. Schopenhauer described it, more cogently, as the *worst* of all possible worlds, because, he argued, if it were even just a little worse, it would no longer be capable of existing. Let us consider it calmly and on its own terms, without the fruitless yearning described by Nietzsche as the behaviour of "backworldsmen" ("Hinterweltlertum"); that is to say, the desire to find out at all costs what is behind the world, as if it were a flat façade. *Then* we can be content with our

existence, just as it is. The Latin book I use to teach states "He who looks up to the stars does not deny the existence of God". But why should the stars not be enough for the observer? Their spheres are gigantic beyond all imagining; they outlast us and are silent. In that respect they resemble perfectly the thing which we generally imagine as God. They render him — as a mere duplication of their majesty — dispensable. Let us show ourselves worthy of their great silence by replying, as best we can, with a small silence of our own. They are mysterious, yes; but a compact, single mystery. As mysteries go, that is the least we must expect.

Incidentally, it is not only believers, but scientists too, who cannot stand this silence; they insist on replacing it with a Big Bang. Nothing before it, no space, no time; then everything develops in an expansive act of monumental scope. And beyond that, we are not to be permitted to ask where it came from: it is this above all that the theory of the Big Bang has in common with the old God. I have no means of verifying how good or bad the mathematics and empirical data are that are being used here; it is enough for me to see how urgent a need is gratified by the Big Bang to be convinced that we are dealing with a pure theological fantasy — one, moreover, rasher than theology itself, since it is unaware of what it is doing and does not realize that nothing is achieved by deriving the world from within the world.

God explains nothing; he explains less than nothing, since the assumption of his existence introduces more problems than if one were to assume nothing. Amazement was the act that gave birth to philosophy. Why was it, then, along with everything that followed, especially science, so keen to make that amazement disappear at all costs — as if it were its inverse duty, when it came to the crunch, to see to it that amazement was no more? I suggest leaving amazement well alone, just as it came into the world: no other emotion that accompanies the realization will turn out to be more satisfying.

Secondly, let us consider God as the foundation of good. That would make him, first of all, the guarantor of morality. He is said to have established morality through the enactment of appropriate commandments, to keep watch over their observance, and to sit in judgement at the end of time, or at the end of each individual life, on every single person according to the stipulation of the commandments (though, since humans must inevitably fall short of these rigorous demands, divine grace also plays its part). To what degree morality is an exclusive property of humans, set up expressly by God for men, I shall not discuss further here; at any rate it seems to me that very clear intimations of it can be found among the animals that live socially.

One point in particular is worthy of interest: that the possibility of moral behaviour is bound up with one's regard for the law and that there is no chance of ever doing and respecting what is right unless it is marked and sanctioned as such by the higher authority. Such a form of morality is no different from criminal law. It holds that the good do good because they love the good, and the bad because they are afraid of being punished. Only the second group fall foul of the Criminal Code — or rather, all humans are regarded as villains, as a precaution. Fair enough as far as it goes, as no injustice is done to the good. They too are reliant in the end, in terms of their lifestyle, on wrongdoers being curbed — in the cold, reasoned form of an "if X, then Y", which leaves no doubt as to the seriousness of Y.

Now it is certainly those cases dealt with by criminal law that represent the hard core of what any moral code must regulate. But this law has nothing to do

with true ethics. Ethical behaviour is its own reward; it neither hopes for reward nor fears punishment. In this sense the Holy Scriptures do not justify any ethics; someone who does what is approved and refrains from what is frowned on only because he is thinking of heaven and hell is and remains an egoistic opportunist and nothing more. An ethical code that finds authentication through law is practical, but worthless as ethics. It could be said, with only slight overstatement, that a female monkey with children of her own who adopts another monkey's child (a far from rare occurrence) is behaving more ethically than a believer who does the right thing because of God — since there is no room in her brain for the concept of a judging God. At any rate I would, however, acknowledge, in the believer's favour, that the notion of "good" is no more alien to him than it is to a monkey and that he misunderstands himself if he believes that he must attribute his natural goodness to God.

Having come this far, I fear that it is impossible to avoid the old subject of theodicy. To complete the picture I have to discuss it, even though I cannot hope to say anything new in this area that has been covered so comprehensively by others. Albert Camus expressed the problem in the pithy sentence "Either God is good, and therefore not all-powerful; or else he is all-powerful, in which case he is not good." Older religions, for instance Judaism, can be content with an ambivalent God who has room in his nature for darkness and even evil — think of the Angel of Death sent by Jehovah over Egypt to strangle all first-born. This, at any rate, is not the God that Christianity takes for granted; its God is Love. Here, the difficulty presents itself that there is manifestly so much hate in the world. How could God allow Auschwitz to happen? To this there can be no answer that acquits God, in his capacity as God. There should, of course, be no attempt to talk one's way out of this with reference to the "Lord in his mysterious wisdom"; everything about this "mysterious wisdom" may indeed be obscure, if indeed it is God's — but the glaring fact remains that a God who has allowed such things to happen to his children cannot have loved them.

It would be better, for us and for him, if he did not exist, and if everything had just happened, as if all mankind's suffering were just a careless accident. For if one seeks to connect such events with a preordained global order, one *increases* the physical pain — which is what it is, and which ultimately wears off, one way or another — making it something uncontrollable and metaphysical into the bargain. One remains stunned, one's focus hopelessly drawn back to these events. The tribulations of the world will always remain a heavy burden — but it would be so much lighter if we could simply understand the world as chaos, instead of seeking to find sense in it.

At the same time, the hate and malice of history is still by no means the worst thing one is confronted with in the putative heavenly kingdom. For these things can always be understood, if need be, as degeneracy, as surplus, as the exception — as the sad, but not inevitable result of the metaphysical freedom unleashed on man by God — which also entails the possibility of choosing the wrong thing. Whether a creator who has made his creatures such that they can even forfeit their wellbeing is not in truth playing a cruel game with them, is not a question that will be examined more closely here — worthwhile though the discussion would be.

Instead I wish to draw attention to how the world was set up before ethics and before mankind. All animal life supports itself exclusively by means of the continual destruction of other life. That a different model can also flourish is

shown by plants, which quite literally live on light and air alone. Why would God have designed us and the million or so other animal species in such a way that, in order to exist for longer than even a few days, we need to kill plants at the very least and often enough other animals? The mere word "food chain" provokes a shudder, expressing as it does the notion of eating and being eaten, right up through each link of the chain, as the very system of the world — from single-celled organisms through worms to songbirds and ultimately to what ends up on our tables as our Sunday roast. Every animal, says Nietzsche, is the walking grave of thousands of others.

The living world is an infernal miracle. Hyenas start consuming their steaks while their prey is still trying to flee them. The female praying mantis bites off its male partner's head during the act of copulation and begins to devour it. Many ichneumon flies will paralyse a caterpillar by means of a well-aimed sting in a ganglion and lay their egg, thus preparing the way for their larva to gradually consume the immobile yet still living body (thus kept fresh the whole while) from within. What is more, if it is unlucky it will fall victim to another kind of ichneumon fly in the process, which in turn lays its own egg in the larva, with the result that, like a Russian doll, three creatures are contained within one another: the original caterpillar, followed by fly larva A, followed by fly larva B. Finally, having matured into a full-blown imago, B hatches out of the victim's double skin, leaves its own skin behind and begins the cycle anew. This extraordinary phenomenon is known as hyperparasitism. This, as I have observed, is not sadistic excess, but a vitally necessary rule of life for entire genera and species. Is this God's world?

We like to conjure up old visions of Paradise whereby in the redeemed world the lion will lie down next to the lamb. That may be an ideal from the lamb's point of view, but in such a world the lion would have to perish, since unlike the lamb he cannot digest the green diet that is all that is available in Paradise. In order to refrain from eating lambs he would be obliged to cease being a lion. Lions are, at the most fundamental level, not capable of redemption. Are humans? Our anatomical endowments, our omnivorous set of teeth, would suggest otherwise — even before we begin to define ourselves as ethical and historical beings, with the peculiar and highly imaginative horrors which that entails.

Thus the concept of God proves to be one unfit to satisfy both the need for a foundation of the world and the need for a foundation of good. In both cases we are better off without God. The same cannot be said of the third, and strongest, need, out of which the idea of God was born: renouncing this is not possible without great pain. God — God the Eternal — is conceived of as the one and only bulwark against that absolute void, the nihilism of time. The fact that he is considered to be eternal does not have to mean that he is simply without beginning and end, immortal like the gods of antiquity and unborn besides; but rather that he, along with everything to which he grants this grace, is a concept above and beyond time in general.

We become aware of the terror of time without having any particular philosophical inclination, but inescapably as a result of our own mortality. All experience teaches us that man lives for a time before falling victim to a sudden misfortune or to a long-drawn-out ageing process, whereupon his deceased body decays, ultimately leaving behind no trace. What on earth was the point of his living at all? As Goethe's Mephistopheles says with such diabolical clarity:

"Past" — 'tis a stupid word.
 Past — why?
 Past and pure Naught, sheer Uniformity!
 Of what avails perpetual Creation
 if later swept off to annihilation?
 "So it is past!" You see what that must mean?
 It is the same as had it never been... (Faust, Part Two, Act V) ²

This explanation is as close as he comes to admitting to being the adversary of God that he is. If there is no God, he is right. The nihilism inherent in time goes far beyond the empirical fact of the universal mortality of all human beings; human life is, as Jean Améry put it, the project that is always futile, the building of a house that is promptly torn down at its own completion ceremony.

If this startles us, as it is bound to, then the door is opened to an even worse realization. Space holds no riddles for us, or at least none that might ever go beyond the mysterious nature of the world; it is equal in extent and matter to what it contains. But what does time have a comparable relationship with? Nothing at all. It too holds sway over its material; yet it casts its evil spell of dissolution over everything that enters it. Even the most apparently definite things, such as our internally consistent self, enter an atomizer and are transformed into the vague mist of memory and the even vaguer mist of our plans. Philosophy talks of time as an *a priori* category, while classical physics sees the equivalent series of numbers at work (and as for what modern physics makes of it, it is best not to even ask here).

All of which has little to do with time as we experience it. As far as we are concerned it appears rather as a chimera, as a monster formulated out of the three entirely different bodies of past, present and future. The past no longer exists — it appears to lie plainly before us, albeit untouchably distant; the future does not *yet* exist — it hovers in the air, an insubstantial haze. Both, each in its own way ungoverned by what is supposed to define it, are unreal precisely because of this. But the present forms only an infinitesimally short space of *linear* time; no sooner does it come into existence than it has vanished again, a mere turning-point between both the other nullities. Here, too, the basic certification of existence cannot really be assigned. It is only in time that we exist — and yet, precisely through its nature, we do not exist. Maybe it would be best if, like animals, we were simply to forget, in order at least to perpetuate our present. But even that won't work. One cannot resolve to forget, for memory is at work even in the act of intention.

Time slips away from us, flows towards us, happens to us, runs away. But where might the many drops of this rivulet end up? After all, they must be somewhere! Time that would be real even as the past: this is where God comes into play as the great well of history. To see him as such is to depict him as even more majestic than he would be were he the mere creator of the world and repository of all good: for in this sense a power is attributed to him which we cannot even begin to imagine.

It is easiest if this eternal God manifests himself as a judging God — for in this capacity he must represent eternal memory. The idea that there is a judgement "at the end of time" is not only supposed to validate the idea of "the good" but, almost more than that, to provide some assurance that not a single hour of the past has truly been annihilated: it has all remained faithfully stockpiled. Resurrection of the dead, the Last Judgement, eternal life: this is

how the otherwise perfectly meaningless succession of generations brought about by birth and death acquires its meaning. For this way in which humanity serves in shifts means that an incomparably greater number of souls can be blessed with salvation than if Adam and Eve along with their children had simply never had to die. Thus history, otherwise nothing but a wild army of racing clouds, gains the backdrop of a heaven which captures its transient figures like a photograph.

One of Baron Münchhausen's tall tales goes like this. He was travelling by stagecoach one bitter winter's day when the driver sounded the horn to play his songs — but there was not a sound to be heard from the frozen horn. The coach driver tried again and again before eventually giving up, dejected. At last they reached the nearest postal station and went in to warm up, hanging the posthorn on a nail near the stove. And as it became warm, all of a sudden the horn began to play all the songs that had earlier been frozen and had refused to sound — now they filled the heated room all on their own. We should probably think along the lines of this parable when the frost of time thaws at eternity, all the sweeter for never having been lost, and yet, now quite different.

It would be wonderful if this were the case, instead of our half falling into an abyss of nothingness while still alive, and in death vanishing completely. In contrast to the two other points, it has to be said here that God, if he existed, would indeed satisfy this last need. But what pledge would we have that this is the case? We should be on our guard against letting the strength of our own desire induce us to infer a corresponding truth. We have not been shown even the smallest sign that this restitution and resurrection, so fervently longed for as they are, will ever really take place. A handful of such cases (if, in fact, amazingly few in total) reported in the New Testament scarcely constitutes irrefutable proof in the eyes of the unprejudiced. Moreover, the suspicion has found its way into the text itself that it was ultimately the disciples who stole the body of Christ. It would be so nice. It would be nice, too, for a man dying of thirst to be able to summon an oasis into existence by the force of his thirst; but unfortunately, whether the oasis exists or not is entirely independent of his thirst. The utmost that thirst is capable of producing on its own is a mirage. It is as such, as a delusion, that God hovers on the horizon of human history.

Unlike believers of all persuasions, atheists are scarcely accustomed to manifest their beliefs in organized or vigorous fashion. There are several reasons for this. For one thing, after the heroic early days, they felt less threatened and disturbed in their views by the continued survival of religions than the religions conversely felt threatened by atheism. After all, everyone has to find his own salvation. For a long time thereafter, in Europe at least, time seemed to work in atheism's favour. Rather than waste time in futile battles of words with unreasonable people, one could simply wait for their position to crumble and decay of its own accord, following historical gravity as it were.

But this golden age is now coming to an end, perhaps; and in future it may once again be the atheists who are expected to account to society for their point of view — that is to say, if discussions are still taking place and not replaced by a range of sanctions. At all events, it now no longer seems to me unnecessary to re-equip atheism so that it does not stand completely naked in the face of a growing new culture of religion. For one thing should be clear: if it comes to a real battle, it will be the atheists who have to manage without help from on high. They have no God, no holy texts; they are promised nothing that would make it worth venturing into the fray with the blindness of a true

believer — they must rely on their arguments, and their arguments alone. Granted, the believer has to stand up for his beliefs with more energy than his adversary, deploying his whole person; but in doing so, he has the benefit of his strength of will. Those who do not believe in something may seem to have it easier than those who do; conversely, those who do *not* want something have to work far harder than those who do. Atheists — be on your guard!

¹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust. Parts One and Two*, translated by George Madison Priest, New York, 1932.

² Ibid.

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