

# God After Christendom

## Clearing the Ground

Our theme is the sovereignty of God but before we begin at the beginning, there are two preliminary points we wish to underline. Both of these figure in contemporary debates about God, expressing challenges to any easy uncritical slogans of faith and common naive belief.

First, as a matter of fact, there is no sustained argument in the Bible for the existence of God. “God” is simply “there, in the beginning” and God will be there at the end. There is no attempted argument or demonstration of the existence of God on which the whole foundation of belief might be built up, no proof of God. Of course, the Bible contains references to people’s struggles to understand the ways of God, to keep faith in God, to maintain some sense of God in worship and trust in God’s justice. It recognizes that there are enough problems for faithful people to count as evidence against God. This honest variety of human experience, good and bad, is recognized in the Psalms, for example, with the many different expressions of human response in life before God, but there is no argument to prove the existence of God that does not presume that existence beforehand. This explains why so much of the Bible comes in narrative form, telling stories of the ways God is present to the world rather than offering syllogisms to be logically dissected, discarded or defended. Certainly, the Bible text provides important material for later philosophical debates about God but it is not itself that kind of writing. It comes from faith and is written for faith. Formal intellectual “belief” in God is not the central focus of the Bible. Indeed it acknowledges that kind of belief which even the demons share (Jam. 2:19) but having faith and trust in God is more than any formal belief that there is a God.

This is deeply frustrating for those of our contemporaries who want all claims to knowledge to be provable, empirically demonstrable.<sup>1</sup> They wonder at the sense and sanity of those who will, as it were, base their whole lives upon what they cannot demonstrate and prove! After all, it is on this basic epistemological foundation that the vast and wonderful growth of science has happened and to which we are all indebted. Does it make any sense to trust, even talk about what we cannot prove and show? Of course, such proof or demonstration would have to be in keeping with the object under scrutiny and it is not impossible that some important features of our living cannot supply such conditions of evidence and proof. For example, by what conditions do we say that this picture is truly beautiful or ugly? Perhaps there are none and that such judgments are matters of personal taste. Or what about claims that some action is right or wrong? Can we settle these arguments, even engage in them, without taking the concept of moral obligation as a given in human life? Perhaps talk of God is not the only language we use about our life and that of the world that cannot be proved. Perhaps the very varied and rich way the Bible itself speaks about God, with no attempt to build a single systematic foundation, calls us to think hard about our language and its use, an issue of some significance when it comes to God and Christendom. We shall attend to this theme in a later chapter.

Second, not only is there no independent proof but we also find there is no discussion of “God” in the Bible in abstraction as it were. “God” is not spoken of in isolation, “God” as God’s own self. “God” is always God in relating within the Bible story. Thus God is pictured in the setting of the heavenly court, discussing how his purposes might be worked out (Isa. 6:1-8). God is the one who of love and love alone brings human life to being. There are stories picturing God seeking humankind in conversation and partnership (Gen. 3). The only humanity the Bible seems to know is one fundamentally related to God, the God who seeks a partnership with humankind in the divine project for all creation. The biblical word for this is “covenant”, a key word in both Old and New Testaments. Indeed the rich and thick way the Bible speaks of God gives rise to the later

development of the doctrine of God in Trinity where relating in outgoing love is the very heart of the divine life, social not solitary. So the God of the Bible is ever engaged with the history and nature of the world, with creation. It is possible to think of and define the divine as separate from the world of matter and politics as various other faith traditions do. But this is not the tradition of the Christian Scriptures. We shall see how acknowledging this relating and how it happens is a very important matter in all discussion about the form of relating called Christendom

<sup>1</sup> We have in mind here, for example, the writings of Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, sometimes called the “new atheists”.