

'DO NOT DOUBT, GOD EXISTS!'

Herman Philipse

I. Doubts

On the Overtoom in Amsterdam, at number 135, there is an unobtrusive building that belongs to the Salvation Army. I have never seen anyone entering it, and during the daytime noisy traffic rushes past its prosaic façade. But at night, when the Overtoom is deserted and life has contracted to the inner canals of the city, our building awakes and broadcasts its hopeful message into the dark. 'Do not doubt, God exists', huge neon letters scream silently to the empty streets and to any forlorn beggar who happens to pass by.

Until recently, doubting the Christian message that God exists was considered to be sinful by the religious authorities. But times have changed. Many people now think that there are good reasons to doubt the existence of the Christian God, and, indeed, the existence of all gods, reasons connected to values other than religious ones, such as the values of intellectual integrity and of love for truth. As Professor Adriaanse explains convincingly in his collection of essays in the philosophy of religion *Vom Christentum aus*, the original Christian message of Paul and the evangelists was part of a view of the world that may have been adequate two millennia ago, but which now has been superseded by breathtaking developments in technology, in the sciences, and in Western society at large. This outdated world view is not external to the Christian message, he says, hence the religious doctrine cannot be immunised to changes in our knowledge of the world. What is more, Adriaanse claims that the idea of a God has become superfluous in modern life, and in our days has ceased to be an important factor determining the meaning or significance of human existence.¹

¹ H. J. Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus. Aufsätze und Vorträge zur Religionsphilosophie*, Kampen 1995, p. 39: "Der christliche Glaube setzt ein Weltbild voraus," until "Gott ist im modernen Leben (...) gar nicht mehr vonnöten, geschweige denn primär sinnbestimmend," and passim. I am grateful to Dr. James W. McAllister for critical comments on an earlier version of this essay.

A Christian believer might react to these passages in Adriaanse's book by saying that they are external observations on contemporary Western culture which belong to disciplines such as sociology or the anthropology of European civilisations, and that factual claims about what people need or believe in our times cannot entail any conclusion about what people should believe. He or she might object that the crucial question is not whether modern man still feels an explicit need for God, but rather the question whether God exists, loves us, and will save us if only we open our hearts to His grace. Should we not pay heed, then, to the admonition of the Salvation Army building at number 135 of the Overtoom? Adriaanse's book contains other passages, however, which cannot be rebutted by such an objection, passages that are not concerned with the *quaestio facti* of how Western civilisation has in fact developed, but with the *questio iuris* whether a belief in a god may still be legitimate given what we now know about man and the universe in general.

As Adriaanse claims, the traditional idea of Christianity that there is a God who is almighty, perfectly good, and infinitely wise, and many more tenets that were central to the Christian doctrine as originally conceived in the New Testament, have been refuted by empirical evidence. For instance, according to Mark 9,1, there were some people in the audience of Jesus who would not 'taste death' before the kingdom of God on Earth began, but this claim was falsified nineteen centuries ago. Later on, once the concept of God had been defined unambiguously by the three perfections mentioned above, all human disasters, such as the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 or the holocaust, turned into as many refutations of God's existence, for the idea that there is a supreme being that instantiates these predicates is incompatible with human disasters.² Furthermore, irrespective of the attempts by philosophers such as Leibniz, human freedom cannot be reconciled with the existence of an all-powerful and omniscient God, as Adriaanse argues against his friend Vincent Brümmer, using Anthony Kenny's book on *The God of the Philosophers* as a source of inspiration.³

It is regrettable, perhaps, that Adriaanse does not pay more attention to the destructive influences on Christianity of a great many developments in special sciences such as astronomy, biology, psychology, and history. For instance, he might have argued that the huge mass of empirical data on the admirable adaptedness of animals and plants, collected

² Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 225-227.

³ Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 221-225. Cf. Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers*, Oxford 1979.

in the eighteenth century by religious biologists and botanizing priests in order to substantiate the Argument from Design, could later be used by Darwin in support of his theory of natural selection, whereby the latter destroyed one of the main empirical grounds for assuming the existence of a wise and powerful Creator. Yet such excursions into the history of science would not have changed Adriaanse's case against theistic faith essentially, for the case is sufficiently convincing as it stands. If the hypothesis of an almighty, infinitely good, and omniscient Creator is incompatible with what we know about the world, such a Creator cannot exist, and we should give up the belief that He does, in spite of possible emotional gratifications which this belief induces in us. That is, we should give up the belief if we want to safeguard our intellectual integrity. Moreover, we should not become agnostics but rather atheists, for the case against the existence of an almighty Creator is much stronger than the case for it.

Yet, Professor Adriaanse refuses to become an avowed atheist. To the uninitiated reader of *Vom Christentum aus*, it will remain a mystery why he does not draw an atheist conclusion from his arguments, a conclusion that seems inescapable from a logical point of view.

II. Hints

One might hope that Adriaanse's subtle elucidations of the title of his book, and of his somewhat idiosyncratic conception of the philosophy of religion (*Religionsphilosophie*), explain why he resists the atheist conclusion, but no clear explanation is provided. The title *Vom Christentum aus* might be translated into English in three different ways, each of which corresponds to one of the three meanings in which it should be understood according to its author.⁴

A first translation, 'From a Christian Point of View', would draw attention to the peculiar historical context in which philosophy of religion as Adriaanse understands it came into being. Philosophy of religion in this special sense is conceived of as a successor discipline of natural theology which, in its turn, might be seen as a successor discipline of revealed Christian theology. Philosophers of the scientific revolution such as Descartes and Spinoza argued that the text of the Bible cannot be taken as a true revelation of a veracious and infallible Author, since at

⁴ Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 4-8.

many points it is in conflict with the results of empirical investigations. This conviction triggered the renewal of natural theology in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: if human reason is a product of Divine creation, and if God does not deceive us, the philosopher should be able to reach reliable knowledge of the Creator by using reason only, bypassing revelation.⁵ However, in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, natural theology was demolished by the very same instruments with which it had been constructed: reason and empirical research. Notoriously, in 1787 Kant drew the conclusion that natural theology had to be rejected altogether in order to make room for faith. According to Adriaanse, the philosophy of religion (*Religionsphilosophie*) that he wants to practise in his book *Vom Christentum aus* presupposes the downfall of natural theology.⁶ Its task is not to defend metaphysical assumptions about God, but to explore and to clarify religious intentions.⁷ This formula might suggest that Adriaanse's topic is the psychology of religion, but that is not the case. It seems that he wants to replace the *arguments* of natural theology by *hints* or *intimations* (*Hinweise*), hints pointing to a possible fulfilment of our religious intentions.⁸

A second translation of the title *Vom Christentum aus* might be 'Away from Christianity'. This reading expresses the fact that the downfall of natural theology leads to an emancipation from the Christian religion as such. The reason is that religious belief is impossible without specific propositional contents.⁹ But the very propositional contents that are central to the Christian tradition are intimately linked to tenets of natural theology, such as the claim that there is an almighty Creator. As a consequence, the Christian doctrine is deeply affected by the demise of natural theology, and, one might add, the former cannot survive without the latter.¹⁰ This seems to be the reason why Adriaanse says that the philosophy

⁵ Usually, the letter of Paul to the Romans (II,18-20) was used as a Biblical justification of natural theology.

⁶ Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 1: "Sie setzt das Scheitern der klassischen *theologia naturalis* voraus."

⁷ Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 2: "Ersterer hat es (...) nicht mit metaphysischen Annahmen, sondern nur noch mit religiösen Intentionen zu tun." Adriaanse is inspired here by W. Trillhaas, *Religionsphilosophie*, Berlin-New York 1972, p. 56 ff.

⁸ Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 3: "Das Metaphysische liegt nicht auf der Ebene der Beweise, sondern der Hinweise." One is reminded of texts by Martin Heidegger, such as *Identität und Differenz*, Pfullingen 1957, *Vorwort*, p. 10: "Beweisen läßt sich in diesem Bereich nichts, aber weisen manches," which is quoted by Adriaanse on p. 27.

⁹ Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 21, 238, 248, 260.

¹⁰ Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 5-6: "Aber welche Bildrede man auch wählt, das Christentum ist durch jenes Scheitern zutiefst mitbetroffen," etc.

of religion as he wants to practise it contributes to a destruction of the Christian universe, and that its perspective is not from within the Christian tradition: fundamentally, it takes the point of view of an observer.¹¹

One will wonder how Adriaanse hopes to reconcile this second reading of his title with the first, because someone who consistently maintains the external point of view of an observer will not care to provide hints that point to possible fulfilments of the religious intentions of Christian believers. Perhaps the third interpretation of the title *Vom Christentum aus* is meant to provide a solution to this problem, for it constitutes a synthesis of the first two readings. An English translation that comes near to this third interpretation would be: 'What Christianity Bequeaths Us'. Philosophy of religion as Adriaanse understands it is now said to be a 'postchristian discipline' in the following sense. On the one hand it presupposes that Christian theism is untenable, and hence that Christian faith in the traditional dogmatic sense has become illegitimate. On the other hand, Adriaanse claims that the deceased Christian religion leaves us with a heritage that we have to assume, a legacy that consists of specific semantic contents and of a characteristic 'denseness' of language.¹² "What Christianity leaves behind is a linguistic power, an imaginative influence, of which we may suspect that it is still operative even when it is no longer known, and which may become dominant again at any moment, either gradually or suddenly".¹³ It would be the task of the philosophy of religion to elucidate and explore this linguistic heritage of Christianity, and Adriaanse seems to think that such an activity may have religious fruits. For he ventures the conjecture that apart from the traditional discourse on God, which has lost its meaning in our days, there is another discourse on God which remains meaningful, a discourse expressed in the 'subtler languages' of poetry, confession, and passion, and to which scientific rationality is deaf.¹⁴ Although the philosopher of religion maintains the external perspective of an observer, the specific external perspective for which he is searching is

¹¹ Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 6: "Die Religionsphilosophie, wenigstens die kritische, hat an dieser emanzipatorischen Bewegung teil. Sie hat auf ihre Weise dazu beigetragen, das christliche Universum zu destruieren. Sie hat ihren Standort auch nicht im christlichen Glauben; sie hält sich grundsätzlich in der Beobachterperspektive."

¹² Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 256-263.

¹³ Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 8: "Was vom Christentum ausgeht, ist eine Sprachkraft, eine 'imaginative influence', die vermutlich auch dann noch wirkt, wenn sie nicht mehr erkannt wird, und die immer wieder, ob allmählich oder plötzlich, dominant werden kann."

¹⁴ Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 9.

one that is 'maximally congruent with the inner perspective of religious life'.¹⁵

I must confess that I am somewhat puzzled by Adriaanse's three elucidations of the title of his book. They remind me of an anecdote told about the physicist Niels Bohr, who once nailed a horseshoe at the door of his country house. Bohr did not think that the horseshoe had the magical power of bringing luck to the inhabitants of the house. But to a visitor who expressed his astonishment concerning this object of outdated credulity, Bohr replied: 'They tell me that it works even if you don't believe in it'.

Similarly, Adriaanse seems to think that continuing to use the symbols and the linguistic resources of an outdated credulity, theistic Christian faith, will somehow 'work'. But why would the philosopher want to give 'hints' (*Hinweise*) to a possible fulfilment of our religious intentions, that is, to God, if he is reasonably sure that God does not exist? How can one reconcile the tenet that faith requires specific propositional contents that the believer thinks are true, with the idea that the proper form of religious discourse is the 'subtler language' of poetry to which (scientific) rationality is deaf? Finally, how is one to square this latter idea with the author's insistence that philosophy of religion is an intellectual discipline?¹⁶ Adriaanse's notion of the philosophy of religion seems to suffer from an inner tension which, in the end, will destroy this discipline as he understands it. On the one hand, the philosopher of religion should contribute to the destruction of Christianity by criticising the propositional contents of Christian faith. In order to do this, he should strictly maintain the perspective of the observer. On the other hand he should try to find hints to, or traces of, a possible fulfilment of the religious intentions of Christian believers by exploring the linguistic heritage of Christianity. It seems to me that as a philosopher of religion Adriaanse is at war with himself. His mind tells him that one should not be a Christian believer, but something else in him – let us call it his soul or heart, or perhaps a personal habit – tells him that faith should not be abandoned. Indeed, he says that people who 'abolish God' in a sense also abolish themselves.¹⁷

¹⁵ Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 181.

¹⁶ Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 184.

¹⁷ Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 306: "Wer Gott abschafft, schafft gewissermaßen auch sich selbst und seine Welt ab. Das ist eine Angelegenheit, in der man von anderen oder von sich selbst schwerlich Folgerichtigkeit verlangen kann."

Clearly, Adriaanse's elucidations of the title 'Vom Christentum aus' do not provide us with an explanation of why he did not become an avowed atheist. They rather illustrate Adriaanse's mental predicament of someone who is struggling with an inner conflict and tries to endure the mental tensions that it causes. As he says, Christians like him "are intellectually in a bad position today; they are people with an unhappy consciousness".¹⁸ Yet, he adds that this unhappy consciousness does not prevent the Christian believer from following his way.¹⁹ There are two attempts in his book to explain this mental predicament on a reflective level, but these attempts do not contribute to resolving the conflict either.

On the one hand there is a reference to religious needs. Traditional Christians held that every human being has a need for God, because man is created by God with an innate need for his or her Creator. Adriaanse rejects this dogmatic stance and substitutes for it the empirical triviality that some people have a need for religion whereas other people do not.²⁰ I suppose that he thinks of himself as someone with a religious need. But, characteristically, he does not dive deeply into psychological literature that might enlighten him about the nature of this need. Is it a need for mental shelter, a need for power over things that are beyond the scope of our empirical capacities, a need for guaranteed love, a need not to disappoint religious friends, or a need for continuity in his adult life-project that began with religious studies at the University of Leiden and with employment as a religious minister of the Remonstrant Church? Or perhaps it is a need consisting of all these and yet other component needs? Or, finally, is it a need that is altogether *sui generis*?

It is not unimportant to reflect psychologically on our subjective needs. As Descartes argues in his letters to Princess Elisabeth, we should learn to become ascetic concerning needs the fulfilment of which is beyond our powers.²¹ Descartes adds that we may succeed in becoming ascetic only by often reiterating our psychological reflections. For example, religious believers may still think, openly or in secret, that desired events that we cannot trigger by empirical means may nevertheless be

¹⁸ Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 91: "Christen sind in intellektueller Hinsicht im Augenblick nicht gut dran. Es sind Menschen mit einem unglücklichen Bewußtsein."

¹⁹ Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 93: "Aber wie auch immer, das unglückliche Bewußtsein verhindert den Gläubigen nicht, seinen Weg zu gehen."

²⁰ Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 28.

²¹ Descartes, 'letter to Princess Elisabeth of 4 August 1645', AT IV, p. 265-266. Cf. H. Philipse, *Zekerheid in wetenschap en leven. Een analyse van het begrip zekerheid in de ethiek van Descartes*, Delft 1986.

brought about by prayer to God. But the atheist who is convinced that gods do not exist will practise asceticism concerning this type of need: he will try to accept that what is beyond the scope of our empirical capacities is beyond our powers absolutely. In this respect, the atheist is the more humble human being.

If Adriaanse does not pursue this line of thought, it is probably because he provides himself with a second explanation of his inner struggle and of his 'unhappy consciousness', and this second explanation is a traditionally Christian one. The rational and scientific critique of Christianity is now seen as a 'thorn in the flesh' similar to the thorn that God caused in the apostle Paul's flesh to prevent him 'from being too elated by the abundance of revelations'.²² Significantly, this thorn is also called "a messenger from Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated" (2 Cor. 12, 7). Accordingly, Adriaanse claims that the ordeals inflicted on the Christian believer by science and rational thought have a wholesome effect: 'they cleanse faith'.²³ Does he think that these ordeals are punishments by God (or Satan!) for the *hubris* of rational theology? If so, his explanation would resemble Luther's account of the alleged fact that Christianity has been contaminated by Aristotelian theology (Aristotle is a plague for the sins of Christians, sent by God), and it would resemble Heidegger's account of the alleged fact that Being has concealed itself in the history of rationalist metaphysics (this is a fate sent by Being to us humans).²⁴

However, such an explanation will not decide the mental war that Adriaanse fights within his own breast. For he holds both that faith is impossible unless one accepts the proposition that God exists, and that this proposition must be rejected in the light of scientific and philosophical criticisms. Ergo: the cleansing power of science and reason is too strong for faith to survive: faith is not cleansed, but rather dissolved, by the detergent of reason. Indeed, Adriaanse's religious explanation of his mental struggle is itself undermined by reason, because it posits a God who punishes the believer by besetting him with intellectual doubts. As these doubts suggest that God does not exist, one cannot simultaneously endorse the doubts and their religious explanation.

²² Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 92-93.

²³ Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 93: "Zu dieser Gnade kann gehören, daß der Glaube auch in dem, was ihn aufreißt und quält, eine Kraft zum Guten findet. So kann der Glaube zur Erkenntnis kommen, daß die Prüfungen der Wissenschaft, außer aller anderen Wirkungen, auch eine Heilsame Wirkung haben: sie waschen den Glauben rein (...)."

²⁴ Cf. H. Philipse, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Being. A Critical Interpretation*, Princeton 1998, §11A.

III. Arguments

Fighting a war may be an heroic endeavour, even if, and perhaps especially if, the battlefield is situated within one's own breast. But if the war goes on too long, the contenders are weakened and suffering will be intolerable. Should we not come to the rescue, being old friends of Professor Adriaanse, and bring a salvation army into the battle? My army will be an atheist one, and I hope that it will force the moment to its crisis. Yet I have no illusions about its capacity to bring salvation. In being an ally to one of the parties in Adriaanse's breast, my army will inevitably oppose the other party. Hence, while being a friend, I cannot avoid being an enemy. The least that we can do is to grant the defeated troops an honourable retreat. Let me first develop the argument for atheism and then discuss the possibilities of safeguarding the Christian heritage that remain.

While a believer is always partial in religious matters because he prefers his own religion to the others – even a syncretistic religion is a specific religion that is logically incompatible with other religions –, the atheist should be epistemically impartial in that he rejects religious favouritism. His arguments should refute each and every religious existence claim, and they should hold against all different interpretations of each religion, both orthodox and liberal ones. Furthermore, atheism as such is restricted to the epistemic aspect of religions: the atheist rejects the idea that a God or that gods exist, hence he might appreciate from an aesthetic or moral point of view many different religious forms of life, taking an anthropological stance. However, this neutrality with regard to specific religions puts the atheist in a difficult argumentative position. The number of religions is large, and the set of actual and possible interpretations of each of them is perhaps an infinite one. How will the atheist be able to argue against all religious existence claims at once?

The most promising strategy is to proceed by way of dilemmas. If the atheist is able to construe a dilemma concerning all religions, which exhausts the entire field of religious possibilities because its two horns are each other's contradictories, and if the atheist is able to show that each horn gives rise to atheism, he will have won the battle. Let me briefly sketch such an argumentative strategy, which I have further developed elsewhere.²⁵ It consists of a series of dilemmas, starting with

²⁵ Cf. H. Philipse, *Atheistisch Manifest*, Amsterdam 1998², chapter 2.

the overarching dilemma that religious faith either transcends reason or falls within the province of reason.

Before I start my argument, three elucidations will be useful. First, the dilemma might be applied both to large clusters of religious tenets and to individual claims to religious truth. For instance, in the Scholastic tradition some elements of Christian faith, such as the claim that there is an infinite God, were considered to be sustainable by reason, whereas others, such as the dogma of the monotheist unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, were thought to transcend reason and to be due to revelation only. It is up to the believer which religious tenet he wants to put on which horn of the dilemma. Second, the atheist is free to define the notion of reason as he pleases, provided that he uses his notion consistently. For the sake of my argument, I define 'reason' as the methods of empirical research and critical discursive thought. It is no objection to my dilemma that the term 'reason' might be defined differently, for instance as Hegelian *Vernunft* as opposed to Hegelian *Verstand*. The only legitimate objections are either that at least one of the horns does not lead to atheism ('grasping the dilemma by the horns'), or that the two horns do not exhaust the field of possible religious positions ('escaping between the horns'), or that the believer is able to launch a counter dilemma which destroys atheism ('rebuttal').

The third clarification concerns the relation of my overarching dilemma to Adriaanse's book. His philosophical position seems to be that although natural theology has been refuted, one might still discover positive possibilities for Christian faith provided that these possibilities are located "in a manner of discourse and on a level of understanding different from the level of rational discourse," that is, "in the 'subtler languages' of poetry (*Dichtung*), confession (*Zeugnis*) and passion (*Leidenschaft*), to which scientific rationality is deaf".²⁶ In terms of my overarching dilemma, this means that according to Adriaanse the prospects for religious faith within the bounds of reason are dim indeed, so that the believer has to conceive of faith as transcending the domain of reason. Let me therefore explore this latter horn of the dilemma first.

Everyone should agree that religious belief is impossible without a propositional content, for one cannot believe without believing that some proposition is true. Indeed, believing is always believing that *p*,

²⁶ Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 9: "Freilich handelt es sich um eine Rede und ein entsprechendes Verstehen, die sich nicht auf der Ebene des rationalen Diskurses abspielen (...), etc."

and believing that p is accepting as true that p (these are observations on the logical grammar of 'to believe'). The minimal content of a religious belief is the proposition that a god, or God, exist or exists, and according to my definition of religion there simply is no religion without acceptance of such a proposition.²⁷ Propositions are expressed by meaningful declarative sentences. Furthermore, declarative sentences cannot be meaningful if one of the words *used* in the sentence is meaningless.²⁸ Hence there cannot be religious belief unless the word 'god' or 'God' has been assigned a meaning.

It is not up to an atheist like me to define the proper name 'God' or the common noun 'god', except in the minimal manner that gods are supernatural entities. The atheist leaves this task to the religious believer. From the impartial point of view of the atheist, believers have an immense room for choice here, for innumerable descriptive definitions of gods have been given in the history of mankind, and believers might conjure up infinitely many new definitions. As we will see, however, the set of all possible definitions is exhaustively divided into two subsets by the dilemma that either faith transcends reason or faith is located within the province of reason. If one opts for the horn that Adriaanse seems to prefer, the horn that faith transcends reason, the descriptive definition of 'god' or 'God' which gives meaning to the religious proposition 'God exists' has to meet specific requirements, supposing at least that one wants to believe that God (or gods) exist(s). We may discover these requirements by reflecting upon the reasons why Adriaanse thinks that theistic faith has to be abandoned.

Adriaanse's reasons boil down to the argument that theism made claims that have been refuted by empirical evidence. Obviously, the theist might react to empirical refutations by modifying his conception of God. For instance, the well-known Dutch priest Antoine Bodar typically rebuts the argument that the holocaust refutes the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, and infinitely good God by saying that during 1940-1945 'God averted his eyes', thereby giving up the idea that God is omniscient. But such reactions are *ad hoc*; there is no guarantee that the

²⁷ Accordingly, I would say that an atheist Hindu or Buddhist has no religion. Yet he will accept metaphysical existence claims, such as the doctrine of metempsychosis, which the philosopher will reject for philosophical and scientific reasons.

²⁸ One should stress 'used' here, because a sentence in which a word is merely mentioned may be meaningful although the word mentioned is meaningless. For example, the sentence "The word 'sleethy' is meaningless in English" is a meaningful sentence that expresses a true proposition.

redefined existence claim will not be refuted by new empirical evidence. The point of choosing the first horn of the overarching dilemma, according to which faith transcends reason, is to exclude a priori *all possible* empirical refutations. Consequently, one has to provide a definition of 'god' or 'God' such that the claim that God (or gods) exist(s) does have no empirical implications whatsoever. In other words, the definition has to meet the postulate of empirical irrefutability (apart from the logical requirement of consistency).

The postulate of empirical irrefutability implies another postulate, which I call the postulate of factual emptiness. Although there are events that according to current science cannot be investigated by empirical research, such as the events of which special relativity theory says that they are outside our 'light cone', one cannot exclude a priori that these events will ever be open to empirical investigation of a more indirect kind. Moreover, the idea that there are facts or events that are a priori outside the empirical domain presupposes that there may be true synthetic a priori propositions, a presupposition that is now generally rejected by philosophers. Consequently, there can be no facts of which one might guarantee a priori that they are not open to empirical investigation, hence the postulate of empirical irrefutability implies the postulate of factual emptiness. Accordingly, the believer who claims that faith transcends reason has to give a descriptive definition of 'God' or 'god' such that the proposition 'God exists' is devoid of factual content. This postulate of factual emptiness has been endorsed by religious philosophers such as the early Wittgenstein and the later Heidegger. Defining the world as the totality of facts, Wittgenstein claimed that 'God does not reveal himself *in* the world' (*Tractatus*, 6.432), and Heidegger held that *Sein* radically transcends the world of *Seiendes*.

But clearly, the postulate of factual emptiness destroys the possibility of defining 'God' altogether, because a descriptive definition of 'X' such that 'X exists' is devoid of factual content is impossible: a fact is precisely what obtains if a descriptive statement is true.²⁹ We now see the devastating implications of the first horn of our overarching dilemma, the horn according to which faith transcends reason. If faith transcends reason, we cannot give meaning to the word 'god' or 'God'. Consequently, the propositional content 'God exists' is meaningless, and the claims that God exists (faith), that we do not know whether God exists (agnosticism),

²⁹ Mathematics works with what I would call constructive definitions; hence the non-factual existence claims of mathematics pose no objection here.

and that God does not exist (traditional atheism) are also meaningless. I call this implication 'semantical atheism', for if one cannot give meaning to the thesis that God exists, religious belief is impossible.

We must conclude that the first horn of the dilemma is self-refuting. If the very idea that faith transcends reason implies, by a chain of arguments, that faith is impossible if it transcends reason, faith cannot transcend reason. I said that my overarching dilemma divides the set of all possible definitions of 'god' into two subsets. Clearly one of these subsets equals the null class, for no definition of 'god' can satisfy the requirement of factual emptiness. As a consequence, the would-be believer who claims, with Professor Adriaanse, that faith transcends reason, is landed in a second dilemma. Either he continues using the word 'God' without having given meaning to it, which, I suspect, is the case of many popular religious authors such as Levinas, or, if he has provided a descriptive definition of 'god' or 'God', this definition has descriptive content. In the latter case, his claim that God exists has factual implications. Hence it is in principle refutable by empirical research or discursive argument and the believer has not succeeded in transcending reason. This brings me to the second horn of the overarching dilemma, the horn that faith is located within the province of reason.

The believer who locates his faith within the province of reason is confronted by a great number of dilemmas that destroy his position, for now his faith is answerable to reason. It will suffice here to point out three interconnected dilemmas from which the believer cannot escape. If faith is located within the domain of reason, one should raise the question as to what explains the fact that the believer has faith. This question triggers a first dilemma: either one gives a religious explanation or one gives a secular explanation. Assuming that each of these explanations points to a cluster of causes of faith that is sufficient to explain the presence of faith, the religious and the secular explanation exclude each other because of Occam's razor. Even a believer such as Professor Adriaanse who rejects natural theology because reason cannot bring us before God, might locate his faith within the province of reason if (a) he provides us with a religious explanation of his faith and (b) he is prepared to bring his religious explanation into competition with secular explanations and to adjudicate between these competing explanations by using accepted criteria of theory choice.

For instance, he might explain the fact that he has faith (if he has it) by saying that God's grace bestowed faith upon him, and that this grace is a sufficient condition for faith. Such is the traditional Christian explanation

given by Paul, Luther, and many others. Clearly this explanation not only explains the presence of faith but also justifies it: if God caused faith in us, God must exist, and the belief that He exists is true. For this reason we might call religious explanations of faith self-justifying. The question is, however, whether such a religious explanation is acceptable according to the usual criteria of theory choice. Should one not prefer a secular explanation? Secular explanations all belong to the class to which Freud's theory of projection belongs. They typically start from the assumption that the belief that God or gods exist(s) is not true and try to explain the fact that the believer has the illusion that God or gods exist(s) by pointing to psychological mechanisms. Clearly, then, the religious and the secular explanations are mutually incompatible, because they contradict each other.

A second dilemma shows that according to accepted criteria of theory choice, one should always prefer an explanation of the secular type to religious explanations of the presence of faith in believers. This dilemma starts from the fact that there is a plurality of religions and that the religious contents of these religions contradict each other at many points. For example, monotheistic faith contradicts polytheistic beliefs. The dilemma arises for the believer who wants to provide a religious and self-justifying explanation of his own faith. Either this believer provides a religious and self-justifying explanation for his own faith only, explaining the faith of other religions by a theory of projection. But this is an illegitimate move. It is a case of *special pleading*, unless the believer is able to argue convincingly that his own faith is true and the beliefs of competing religions are false, which is impossible. Or the believer chooses to explain the faith of all religions by means of a religious explanation. However, this second horn triggers a third dilemma: which religious explanation should he prefer?

Either the believer tries to explain the faith of all religions by supposing that the self-justifying explanation of *his own* faith also explains the faith of *other* religions even though these other religions may contradict his own. This is the theory of the Catholic Church, which claims that Catholic faith is absolutely true and is caused by the Catholic God in Catholic believers. The Catholic God would also have caused (or at least 'permitted') Hindu beliefs in Hindu believers and polytheist Germanic beliefs in the Germans of the Edda epoch. Why would the veracious Catholic God do such a weird thing? Why would He cause religious beliefs in non-Catholics, beliefs that must be false to the extent that they are incompatible with the absolute truth of Catholicism? The Catholic

solution to this embarrassing problem is that the Christian truth is hidden in all other religions, and that believers of these other religions are on the way to Catholicism even though they are not quite ready to receive Christian grace. This clearly is an *ad hoc* solution which shipwrecks the attempt to explain all religions by the self-justifying explanation of one's own faith.³⁰

Should one then try to explain each faith by supposing that the self-justifying explanation of each religion is true? That is, should one suppose that the Catholic faith is to be explained by claiming that the Catholic God caused this faith in Catholics, and that the Hindu faith is to be explained by supposing that each of the innumerable many Hindu gods caused faith in him- or herself in Hindu believers? This possibility is ruled out by the fact that these explanations contradict each other: according to Christian faith, there is only one God. We must conclude that the attempt to explain faith by religious explanations runs into insuperable difficulties. Only a secular explanation is able to account for *all* occurrences of religious faith. Irrespective of their individual scientific credentials, then, secular explanations must be preferred, because they are a priori more empirically adequate than their religious rivals. And because secular explanations of religion start from the assumption that each religious faith is false, those who want to advance in the 'science of religion' (*Godsdienstwetenschap*) must be professional atheists.

I conclude that the overarching dilemma destroys all possibilities for faith. If faith transcends reason, semantical atheism is the result. If faith is located within the province of reason, we must all become traditional atheists. I suppose that the battle in Professor Adriaanse's breast has now been won by the atheist party, unless he is able to refute my arguments. This leads me to a final and overwhelming question: is there still hope for the believer? How are we to allow an honourable retreat to the religious party that was fighting so bravely in Adriaanse's soul? Are there still means of salvation (*Heilmittel*) left?

IV. *Heilmittel*

In his book *Vom Christentum aus*, Adriaanse discusses a number of means of salvation, but I am convinced by the critical part of his

³⁰ Cf. John Paul II, *Varcare la soglia della speranza*, Milano 1994, question 12. According to the Second Vatican Council, there are *semina Verbi* in all other religions, and Pope John Paul sees the other religions of the world as a 'preparation' for Christian faith.

discussion only. According to Adriaanse, a first *Heilmittel* is exemplified by the work of Vincent Brümmer, who maintains the imperturbable equanimity of an optimist rational theologian and thinks that all intellectual problems that beset the Christian believer may be resolved by further philosophico-theological research. As Adriaanse shows, however, Brümmer's own views do not solve these problems, and in agreement with Adriaanse I think that they cannot be solved at all, as my dilemmas purport to demonstrate.³¹

A second means of salvation might be Levinas's attempt to think God, or rather Infinity, 'beyond being' and without ontology. Whereas Adriaanse is rather sceptical about this attempt, he nevertheless gives it the benefit of the doubt.³² But this is too charitable, for Levinas's position is confronted by the following dilemma. Either Levinas means by an 'Infinity beyond ontological totality' that he does not want to make theological existence claims. In this case, he has ceased to be a religious believer, and his means of salvation for the believer are a placebo. Or Levinas has some restricted conception of ontology and totality, such as the Husserlian conception that all Being is constituted by Consciousness, and he is prepared to make the existence claim that Infinity exists outside of or beyond restricted Being or totality. Now he is a believing theologian indeed, but he gets entangled in the series of dilemmas that I developed above. Furthermore, Levinas's idea that an Infinite Other must be stipulated in order to understand the human phenomenon of ethical responsibility for 'widows and orphans' is nothing but a new version of the traditional dogma that without God there would be no human morality. This dogma has been refuted by biological research concerning the genetic and evolutionary explanation of moral tendencies in animals and man.

Two other means of salvation have been discussed by Adriaanse. One is the thesis of his friend Theo De Boer that the downfall of natural theology is an excellent opportunity for Christians to reject the 'god of the philosophers' and to return to 'the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob'.³³ De Boer's remedy is a concoction containing two main philosophical

³¹ Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, chapter 13, especially §vi.

³² Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 233-234; cf. p. 298-300, and passim. Cf. E. Levinas, *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*, Den Haag 1961, and E. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Den Haag 1974.

³³ Th. de Boer, *De God van de filosofen en de God van Pascal. Op het grensgebied van filosofie en theologie*, 's-Gravenhage 1989. Discussed by Adriaanse in *Vom Christentum aus*, chapters 15 and 16.

ingredients: Heideggerian philosophy of Being and Levinas's notion of Infinity beyond Being. De Boer derives from Heidegger (or Luther) the idea that a true God may appear to us only after the downfall of Western onto-theological metaphysics, but with Levinas he rejects Heideggerian *Seyn* as a possible candidate for such a true God. Instead, we would have to return to the 'more ancient wisdom' of the Old Testament and we would have to prefer revelation to natural theology. However, if we accept this remedy we fall from the frying pan into the fire. Philosophical criticisms of the claim that revelation may be a source of knowledge or of reliable 'experience' are even more devastating than the philosophical critiques of natural theology. As is well known, Mohammed received the special revelation that God allowed him to marry an unlimited number of women.³⁴ I suppose that De Boer will not accept the validity of this revelation. What reasons could he have to accept any other 'revelations'?³⁵

Finally, I come to the *Heilmittel* that Adriaanse himself endorses. His idea seems to be that there is a legacy of theistic Christianity that we might accept, a legacy which consists in a peculiar 'denseness' of language that we find in religious discourse.³⁶ The idea is vague, and Adriaanse develops it in a dialectics which is too subtle for my limited mind. Whenever we play with traditional religious discourse, ironically or seriously, and while singing or praying follow the 'traces' that this language contains, "the movement of intentional transcendence may break out at any moment", he says.³⁷ On the one hand, Adriaanse suggests that the Christian should abandon the claim that what he believes is objectively true and yet should go on praying and singing and telling the traditional stories. But on the other hand he speculates that 'in the devotedness (*Treue*) to the *dictum*, the *res* is itself given'.³⁸

This text is ambiguous between two very different interpretations, which are mutually incompatible. Either Adriaanse means by 'res' the ultimate target of religious intentional transcendence, that is, God

³⁴ *Kor'an*, 33,49. Cf. Helmuth von Glasenapp, *Die fünf Weltreligionen*, München 1996, p. 373.

³⁵ For more subtle and patient criticisms of De Boer's remedy, see Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, chapters 15 and 16.

³⁶ The idea is developed in Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, chapter 14: 'Nach dem Theismus'.

³⁷ Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 259: "Dank dieser Spuren kann die Bewegung der intentionalen Transzendenz jeden Augenblick losbrechen."

³⁸ Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 261: "daß in der Treue zum *dictum* die *res* selbst gegeben ist." Cf. p. 256: "daß, wenn das *dictum* sich belebt, die *res* selbst da ist."

Himself.³⁹ What he then claims is that God might reveal Himself to us if only we go on using religious discourse and if only we abandon all claims to religious truth. In other words, God would perhaps reveal Himself to us on condition that we practise the philosophical humility of giving up theological claims to truth and go on kneeling and singing. But this speculation is, paradoxically, a theological claim to truth itself: it is a religious prediction or belief, modelled on Paul, Luther, or Pascal, which is open to the very criticisms to which Adriaanse subjects all such claims.

Or the text should be interpreted differently. By saying that "in the devotedness to the *dictum*, the *res* itself is given", Adriaanse might mean that the *only* substance (*res*) which is left for religion after the downfall of natural theology is a play with religious language without any claims to religious truth, present or future. In other words: there is no god; there are only tales about God and gods. If this is what Adriaanse wants to say, I agree wholeheartedly. He and I might cooperate in a world-wide programme stimulating the *mythologisation of religions*. All believers should give up their claims to religious truth, which cause so much intolerance, misery, and war. They should each regard their own religion as a set of myths, epistemically on a par with all other religions, because if taken as containing claims to truths, all religions are false. Going on to tell myths might have many uses. It might be morally inspiring, although we have to be selective here, for Christ said to people who did not believe his teachings such things as: "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?". It might also lead us to a greater acceptance of life, because religions contain expressions of deep longings of the human heart. And it might stimulate cultural integration in a multicultural society, on condition that we mix myths of different religions. University departments of theology may now be redefined as departments for studying the great myths of humanity, and they could be integrated into departments of comparative literature. Perhaps Adriaanse's religious friends will think that this *Rettungsmittel* does not really save religion. I trust that Professor Adriaanse will agree with me that it might save many other things, things that are more important.

³⁹ Cf. Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus*, p. 259, quoting Trillhaas: "'Gott', bzw. 'das Göttliche' meint in der Religion immer ein letztes Ziel intentionaler Überschreitung."