

# PROVING WHAT WE SEE WITH THE EYES OF LOVE a demonstration of the existence of God

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"One must admit that theology, of all writing, certainly causes the greatest pleasure."  
Jean-Luc Marion

# The Dialectical Proof for the Existence of God

## A Short Demonstration

By “demonstration” I mean what it sounds like: a performance meant to show something. I have in mind a picture of the *homo religiosus*: at the most a piece of universal anthropology, at the least a particular theological agenda. These things are hard to phrase, particularly in such a way that they will communicate beyond the choir. To do this I will work with something familiar, or if not that at least old and beautiful. I will call it a proof because that is what this sort of thing has been called before. But whether anything is actually being proven is probably more a question for the eyes of love.

This essay on the existence of God is phrased as a variation on Anselm of Canterbury's famous Ontological Proof for the existence of God. The reason for doing so is partly but not entirely aesthetic. Thinkers from Descartes to Karl Barth to Kurt Godel to Iris Murdoch have found inspiration in the movements of Anselm's proof. I come to it for many of the reasons they do, for its unique elegance and strange interface between the realms of thought, being, and spiritual faith. But I also come to it simply because they do. My demonstration depends on the way that we hear people before us and around us talking about God, so in its very form I try to take this attitude of attentiveness to heart.

I call what I do here a proof because Anselm does. But what I am interested in his proof and in mine is not so much how they *prove* the existence of God as how they *describe* the experience of that existence in a formal yet devotional way.

This takes the format of an encounter between people, or communities, or people and experience. This whole idea is very simple, but as an exercise and performance it is still worth putting in the most rigorous terms possible. Otherwise you might not think it is actually a proof.

## The Dialectical Proof

*Premise 1.* There are those who believe in God.

*Lemma 1a.* Presumably the belief in Premise 1 suggests that such people understand God in such a way that God effectively exists, in one way or another; which is to say, God has some effect on the person's “personal universe.”

*Premise 2.* The better one understands the belief, presumably the better equipped one is to converse (on a variety of human levels) with the believer. (This is a general rule though, as only a justified presumption, it need not be true in every case.)

*Lemma 2a.* It is possible to understand a lot about how the believer understands God, but one understands God differently if one (unlike the believer) does not understand this

God as effectively existing. This particular question might even be of special importance to the believer.

*Premise 3.* One wants to converse with the believer, to understand what the believer means in talking about God, whether about God in particular (implications for one's sense of perfection) or other things which in the believer's mind are connected to God.

*Conclusion 1.* In terms of that dialectic (between one and the believer, in which the believer largely, though not entirely, might dictate the terms), one's failure to believe in God's existence is phrased as a failure to understand what the believer understands.

*Conclusion 2.* In terms of the dialectic, when one understands what the believer understands to the satisfaction of the dialectic, one believes in God.

*Conclusion 3.* In terms of the dialectic, God exists.

Perhaps this appears at first to be a very weak, pedestrian attempt. We expect more from a proof for the existence of God! Compared to what others have tried to conclusively show it shows very little. That is to say, in empirical terms. As an account of experience, this way of phrasing the existence of God is a more accurate description than the theologians' proofs usually are. Hearing from others is the primary, obvious way that people learn the religious facts that they put to use in their lives. Even so, the proof for the existence of God has usually been thought of as separate from it. But the theologian Karl Barth, in his discussion of Anselm, argued vigorously for the key role of faith in Anselm's method, a faith informed first of all by hearing the Word of God in the light of the Holy Spirit. With a little translation into the language of everyday happenings, that is pretty much what I argue is primary too.

The proof is called "dialectical" because it has to do with conversation and interaction between people and experiences. The reason that it is a proof comes from the following corollary dialectic.

*Corollary:*

Say the subject still claims during the course of the engagement that she doesn't believe in God. Well, the believer has a simple answer available: You don't understand well enough yet, and you will only understand when you also experience belief. Now, there is a considerable literature by theorists of religion about whether one can understand without believing. In an academic sense of understanding, a clarity of terms, definitions, and characteristics, I think there is a good case for saying that one can. But in a more *interpersonal* context, or a political context, when one is directly engaged with the believer and needs him, such is not the case. Knowledge is constituted in belief.

*(A note on the name of God.* In logical induction, to prove that there exists at least one of some kind of thing, one needs only to prove that one thing of that kind exists. For the argument to be applied, for instance, to the Christian God or some mechanics of reincarnation, the easiest derivation is probably to simply replace the name God with whatever you would like ((within the set of all beliefs)). Similarly "the

believer” can be interchanged with all kinds of people or experience ((within the set of all relevant interlocutors)).)

The rest of this essay is more or less an impressionistic commentary on these lines.

## **Anselm’s Ontology**

The argument first put forth by Anselm of Canterbury in the 11th century suggests that the very idea of God implies the necessity that God’s being is real. Anselm was an Italian monk at a monastery in Normandy when he wrote the *Proslogion*, the work in which his famous proof appears. After this and other works spread fame ahead of him, he went on to become the archbishop of Canterbury in England.

Anselm’s initial statement of the proof takes only a few pages. He develops it further in a reply to the critique by his contemporary, a monk named Guanilo, but the main substance is contained in the *Proslogion*. First, he names God the height of perfection, “a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.” This idea of God, he goes on to observe, can exist as an idea in the human mind. Now to even consider an entity that is so perfect requires, by the rules of reason, that this entity exists, and that its existence is necessary. If we try imagining an entity that is perfect but does not exist, or whose existence is contingent rather than necessary, we reach a contradiction, because it is easy to imagine an entity more perfect than that, simply by imagining one that is necessary and exists. As a result, the perfect being that we imagine absolutely must exist.

While struggling to develop his argument, as Anselm explains in the preface to the *Proslogion*, he sought a proof that would demonstrate both the nature of God and God’s existence. Only the God whose nature is the height of all perfection can satisfy this demand for existence! It is in this respect that the dialectical account of God begins both to follow the pattern of the Ontological Argument and to diverge. In both proofs, to truly *understand* the attributes of God (in a way that is dialectically satisfying), which must certainly include existence, is to think of God as existing. But Anselm drew from a Platonic emphasis on the truth of ideas above the truth of the sensible world, which reinforced for him the validity of a proof that depends on a static concept of perfection. Framed in the subjectivist emphasis of more recent thought, the dialectical proof assumes that perfection depends on the person conceiving of it. Existence of such spiritual perfection is a consequence of the person’s conception. God’s existence can thereby be established as real to us, since glimpsing it molds our subjective perceptions and experience. Whether these two statements, mine and Anselm’s, are equivalent is not easy to determine.

Modern philosophers, from Descartes and Kant to Kurt Gödel, have transplanted Anselm’s argument to the ground of empirical reality that science has claim over. They have used it in attempts to phrase (or disprove) the reality of God’s existence in the same sentence as the existence of a ribosome or a chair. Karl Barth, reading Anselm in light of his dictum in chapter 1 of the *Proslogion* that “I believe so that I may understand,” insisted that to do so is a misappropriation. The whole sequence,

according to Barth, should be rather more circular. Belief in the reality of God necessarily precedes and instructs the whole logic of the proof. In the end, it does serve as a valid proof, but the substance of faith still pervades its reasoning. Unlike the introspective address of Descartes in his version of it, Anselm phrases his proof as a prayer to God, whose existence therefore permeates its very form. As we construct a dialectical proof, it is worth being attentive to Barth's insight. Desire for God (which Barth places alongside the preceding belief) or for the mother or the friend in this dialectic precedes understanding. One already welcomes God before understanding God because one has welcomed the believer or the experience. God's existence has a real effect from there on out. Through this relationship, as through the ideal concepts of Anselm's proof, God's existence becomes realized in substance.

## Meanings and Ends of Religious Proofs

By now it should be evident that my demonstration is not exactly a proof in any normal sense. It does not prove a fact beyond doubt or really even attempt to. Properly, the dialectical proof is much more a descriptive account of belief in God the way, in all reality, the other proofs are as well.

Most analytic philosophers today agree that the traditional proofs for the existence of God—whether derived from causal chains or the observable natural world or pure reasoning—are not ultimately reliable. Still, many maintain the reasonableness of religious faith, even if not on the grounds of an ironclad proof about God's being. It is true, few claim to have come to religious belief because of such a proof. Steven Cahn suggests that the reasons people believe in God are not addressed by such proofs, which usually say nothing about rules for living or the expectations of worship. (C.S. Lewis's argument for God on the grounds of moral law, which many people have found personally convincing, is an exception.) Instead, Cahn contends, religious belief normally rests on "self-validating experience" on the part of the believer or the shared traditions of a moral community. Resting the experience of God in the "unknown," Kierkegaard considered the proof an impossible task, for

even if I began I would never finish, and would in addition have to live constantly in suspense, lest something so terrible should suddenly happen that my bit of proof would be demolished.

To him, the one who seeks the proof is a pitiable soul concerned with the wrong questions.

### Aesthetics of Reasoning

Anselm, however, describes the experience of finding the proof as a struggle followed by an effulgent relief that he hurried to share with others.

So it was that one day when I was quite worn out with resisting its importunacy, there came to me, in the very conflict of my thoughts, what I had despaired of finding, so that I eagerly grasped the notion which in my distraction I had been rejecting.

Judging, then, what had given me such joy to discover would afford pleasure, if it were written down, to anyone who might read it, I have written ... from the point of view of one trying to raise his mind to contemplate God and seeking to understand what he believes.

Barth, unlike many other readers of Anselm, points to the importance of this joy (even while subjugating it below *intellegere*, “understanding”) in his taxonomy of Anselm’s theology. It is the answer to desire. I can relate a little to Anselm’s joy when I remember the time, almost four years ago, when the dialectical proof came to me (strangely, in the form of a proof) after a meeting about Islamic theology with my teacher, as I walked out the door of the department building into the sun. For people, I think time has shown, proofs about God are not so much effective as they are satisfying, or better, nourishing. They weave together knowledge and the aesthetics of reasoning we have been taught. These are the particular strategies of logic and rhetoric that seem sensible to people of a certain age or disposition. They come mainly from the patterns our teachers teach us. Changes in these patterns explains the peculiarity today of Anselm’s Platonism, relying so affectionately on his abstract concepts against observable reality. While modern science makes its proofs empirically on the things it sees, classical geometry, and Anselm too, understood a proof as the manipulation of abstractions.

Those were the mechanisms that shed light for him. Nowadays people are using very different languages for trying to prove the existence of God, whether to themselves or others. Science, from which the great powers (light bulbs to nuclear weapons) in our society are derived, has become the most appealing aesthetic of reasoning lately. The intelligent design movement, pioneered in the 1990s by a handful of theologians and scientists, proposes that evidence of God can be found in the world through the normal methods of the sciences. Their biologists say that the development of life points to divine intervention, while their astrophysicists point to the incredible and unlikely “fine-tuning” that brought about a universe capable of supporting life. Popular support for the movement in the United States has continued the old fight against teaching evolution in public school science classes.

Anthony Flew, the British philosopher and longtime atheist, has been celebrated by evangelical Christians for his recent conversion to a quasi-Deist position, which was informed in part by scientific arguments. Even while there are those who claim that these proofs have been effective for them, and though I am willing to accept a role as medium that the proofs may have played, I tend toward Cahn’s emphasis for the foundations of religious belief, with a touch of Barth: emotional experience and community, informed by the words one has heard said, which for some may have included design theory.

## **The Doctrine of Satisfaction**

Any dialectic or Platonic flight of reason operates under the hanging question of satisfaction. This is what makes aesthetics of reasoning significant—they are defined

by what appears satisfying to the participants. It is true for science as much as any other realm of thinking, for theological speculation and proofs alike. We are satisfied with an explanatory narrative when its terms fit our needs. The explanations of Newtonian physics fit the needs of someone with a bouncing ball but fall somewhat short in high-speed relativistic conditions. The proof for God from the interlocking complexity and variety of life was satisfying for many until Darwinian mechanics offered more productive explanations. In his notes *On Certainty*, Ludwig Wittgenstein explores the dynamics between satisfaction, proof, and experience.

If e.g. someone says “I don’t know if there’s a hand here” he might be told “Look closer”.—This possibility of satisfying oneself is part of the language-game. Is one of its essential features.

The imperative to “look closer” is the answer to dissatisfaction as well as a summary of the scientific method. I would add to that “see the bigger picture,” since the two are counterpart shifts in the scale of interpretation. Their presence also alerts us to the eventual instability of the things we now find satisfying, since looking closer or broadening one’s view may someday undermine the explanations we have gotten used to.

When we take the criteria of satisfaction to be transitory, experience asserts itself as the constant, for what we experience directs these changes. Wittgenstein’s discussion points toward the dialectical “language-game” as the arbiter of satisfaction in the encounter with experience. He makes a rather chaotic picture of proof and coherence, with narrow, uncertain lines between apparent reasonableness and madness. However tenuously, he clings to the bits of knowledge that appear to be affirmed both in individual experience and the community’s language-game, like the existence of his hand and certain facts about the moon. These are the things any sane person must believe, though he never finds a thorough proof for them.

There are certain things that make my proof satisfying to me, and only to a limited extent probably can I unravel them. The elevation of the mundane (like the connection between a conversation and a spiritual proof for God) is a characteristic of some of the folk spirituality I am familiar with. It plays out a lot in films. Sociological explanations, particularly when they lead toward explanations in sociobiology (without necessarily getting there), are popular among my teachers in religious studies departments. I have already mentioned the subjectivist bias in recent thought, which I adhere to unapologetically. All this winds together with my own experience of coming to believe in God, first from not believing so, then assenting to believe, and then always re-understanding what I meant by “believe.” There are of course explanations for my explanations.

We may make and discuss proofs, which seem more or less sensible, but the reasons for accepting them, entertaining them, being entertained by them, and looking more closely into their details until finally stopping—these come from other sources, intersections between the reasons we give others, those we give ourselves, and those buried in social and emotional and spiritual lives that have not yet been untangled. The knowledge that Anselm seeks to understand, then, in the proof that satisfies him, is wrapped up in the second group of reasons as well as the content of the first. One last

fragment from Wittgenstein: “But doesn’t it come out here that knowledge is related to a decision?”

## **Proof as Genre**

The whole idea of the proof about God signifies a decision in itself, a way of approaching the question that has sometime, somehow been posed. A decision to take up a question. There is of course no need for proof to do many of the things people do about God, from becoming atheists to praying. Axioms apparently lie below our logics whether we choose to investigate them or not, and if so, they inform whatever approach we take in doing the investigation. The proofs for God have been named and categorized in such a way that segregates them in their own realm for the specialists— behind names like Ontological, Cosmological, and Teleological (now dialectical too)— certainly not without reason, since it was under segregated circumstances that they were devised. It is in reference to this that I name my proof with an aloof philosophical term. Our proofs are performances that can be pointed to by those who have no interest in the content beyond their result and the fact of their existence, saying, See, this thing has been proven.

Thus the proofs and provers of God are a kind of insular club, wrapped in special mystique, all of which I take on in phrasing an idea as a proof for the existence of God. I do so in order to suggest some bridge of continuity, particularly for the tendency in us now to relegate the proofs to the dustbin, utterly unable to understand what they might have been trying to accomplish. That is, the creation of God in the understanding, or the creation of understanding in God. In the language-game that satisfies him Anselm’s proof does what I want to do in what satisfies me: show that “whatever we believe about the Divine Being” cannot be understood except as real.

## **The Criterion of Perfection**

Simone Weil thought Anselm’s proof had been misnamed (“ontological” likely came first from Kant), and she called it “the proof by perfection.” Her name for it has the benefit of capturing the axle that makes the whole thing both possible and sublime. To Anselm, perfection has certain self-evident consequences, for instance, that existence is more perfect than nonexistence and necessity is more perfect than contingency. When he tries to imagine anybody thinking otherwise he wonders, “Why indeed, unless because he was stupid and a fool?”

## You're So Perfect You Don't Exist

The English philosopher J.N. Findlay, it turns out, managed to invert the form of Anselm's proof into a *reductio ad absurdum* against the existence of God. Iris Murdoch, who in her *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* has produced the most delightful of recent writing on the proof, accepts Findlay's argument, and finds the real existence of God unbecoming.

No existing thing could be what we have meant by God. Any existing God would be less than God. An existent God would be an idol or a demon. ... God does not and cannot exist. But what led us to conceive of him does exist and is *constantly* experienced and pictured.

(It may be something similar ((though not exactly so)) when Jean-Luc Marion talks about God as "idol" rather than "icon" in the philosophers' approach to God through the question of existing.) Instead Murdoch adopts the proof to speak about the Good rather than God, and its necessary existence.

What is most rhetorically satisfying about Murdoch's treatment (I think) is that, unlike the normal dogmatic trend since Anselm, she offers the proof at the end of her treatise rather than the beginning, as a resounding climax rather than a groundwork upon which everything else can be built. This seems to me truer to the dialectic spirit of the proof. But for this discussion, it is significant to establish that for her, even as she upholds the validity of Anselm's proof, she contends against him that higher perfection is precisely *not* in existing—approximately a difference of satisfaction. Perfection, such as people grasp at it, is a matter of contention. Still, Murdoch and Anselm do agree that perfection exists, and sufficiently so that Go(o)d can be proven through it.

## Imperfection

On the other hand, what perfection happens to constitute is enough of a dubious question that we should be concerned. Enough divergent accounts are out there of what different people assume the God at the height of all perfection must be like (not the least of which is Murdoch's) that we might run into difficulty relying on perfection as a cause for existence. How far can the concept be stretched?

The dialectic proof, on the other hand, ostensibly has no such criteria. Conceptions of perfection can be conveyed by it, though so can imperfections. Vile superstitions (so-labeled) and fears of all kinds work just about as well as pristine philosophies, and a comprehensive political persuasion just about as well as an opinion on removing oily stains. The opinions don't have to be right. When Gaunilo tried to show that the ontological proof could be used to prove the existence of a mythical island, Anselm refuted him, reserving the proof for God's *ultimate* perfection alone. The dialectical proof would happily take on Gaunilo's island. As a result when we talk about this proof, or especially if we use it, we need to be attentive to what it is we are trying to prove.

## **Overload Objections**

The answer to this, I suppose, is the same as the original problem that strikes at human satisfaction: listening to experience. There are things we learn by the dialectical method that are plainly nonsensical or thoroughly inconvenient, so these should be disproved in our dialectics. The systematic method of modern science does a good job making quick work out of lots of old proofs, supplanting them afterward with dialectical proofs of its own. On the whole, so far as we can tell, a lot of these changes seem very sensible. Many dialectics have embraced them.

## **Caveat on the Retreat of Religion**

People have sometimes observed this event as the retreat of religion, and indeed religion has been much less influential in informing explanations of the natural world and even conversations about the nature of human life. This may feel disturbing, particularly with Anselm's proof for the existence of God in hand, that people are becoming less interested in the edifices they created in the past through which to worship their creator. Recalling Premise 2 of the dialectical proof, we lose the languages of our ancestors in the process, and with them the insights they found (which may be useful) about how to live enriching lives.

The collapse is not quite as total as some people say. Religion has withdrawn its influence in some circles, like natural philosophy, and though we are getting quite good at understanding the world, the unknown that Kierkegaard wrote about is not really withdrawing. It still permeates the choices and horizons of people's lives. It is real, and a spiritual proof makes an important reality. Religious belief and dialectics inform many of today's great political upheavals. The secularization thesis of the 1960s, which predicted the progressive decline of public religion, has been either revised or dismissed by most observers. The decades since then have shown that the languages of old and new religious traditions are incredibly relevant in world politics and culture, even as they evolve into yet unseen forms.

## **The Existential Condition of the Spiritual**

There is no portable definition for the spiritual, since any such definition fits inside a sensitive dialectic rather than spanning them all. Early scholars of religion like Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade tried to create one, but passing time has helped us see more clearly the dialectical assumptions that inevitably limited their vision. Personally I associate the spiritual with the unknown (following Kierkegaard), creatures known in the imagination, lines of causality, a language of human authority, and the location of the individual in community. There has been valuable work locating the sources human spirituality in psychology, sociology, neurobiology, and genetics.

Even mundane explanations can have spiritual value because they relate to the same experience of living. When scientists and others, for instance, find evidence of

biological causes for religious belief, believers should be attentive, not afraid. The dialectical proof is phrased, rather than in terms of Barth's Word and Spirit, in terms of the empirical people and experiences that participate in them. It has an interface into scientific thinking that way. But this should not exclude the Word and Spirit, or keep us from even using them. It might lead to new ideas about what they mean.

It is through the concept of perfection that the properly spiritual can be isolated out from the dialectic. Through its connection with perfection the spiritual takes precedence in people's lives and ideals. It tells the story of what people think is really most importantly going on in the world (i.e. Paul Tillich's "ultimate concern"). As a result, it implicitly carries a form of Anselm's proof—perfection implies its own necessity, its own existence. The spiritual constant in human beings implies the felt reality of spiritual things. Whether or not it takes the form of traditional religion, or reflect the findings of science, it exists. There is no retreating from it, though it might reconfigure.

## **Dialectical Method**

The dialectical proof fits into a broader method for thinking about theological questions, which is to say, communicating about the spiritual. It rests mainly on social, psychological, and linguistic logics, but should do whatever is possible to interface other areas of scientific, traditionally theological, and artistic thinking that might be productive as well. "Productive," of course, can be defined as one likes. (Personally I am interested in work that develops freer, more compassionate understanding between peoples and a clearer sense of the human condition.)

## **Community and Pedagogy**

Since the work of Emile Durkheim at the beginning of the twentieth century, locating conversations about religion in terms of human societies has proven productive and satisfying. To him, all religion has its source in groupings of people: "the idea of society is the soul of religion." A large part of his work's appeal, I suspect, is its affinity with both traditional theology and scientific research. The power of the community he describes in no small way can inform traditional concepts like the church as body of Christ or the people of Israel or the Muslim ummah. Research in sociobiology continues to demonstrate, moreover, the evolutionary necessity of certain kinds of group behavior that what we call religion may be an outgrowth of. A dialectical method is definitely post-Durkheimian, recognizing with him both that "the unanimous feeling of believers down the ages cannot be mere illusion" and that among the most useful ways to talk about this feeling should be to recognize ourselves as members of a community taking part in a conversation.

"Pedagogy" should serve as a vital term because it describes, on a smaller level, the relationships that the community consists in. People teach one another and suggest

things to one another. The content of the conversation is shared and passed down to children. Different hierarchical and nonhierarchical models of pedagogy are manifested in different kinds of communities. Even when a community decides to push toward one extreme or another, both terms should be retained in order that the conversation can be attentive to nonhierarchical dialectical commerce in authoritarian societies as well as hidden hierarchies in apparent states of anarchy.

Alvin Plantinga's *God and Other Minds* suggests in the form of proofs a connection between the reasonableness of believing in God and the practice of believing in the existence of other people around us. It may help inform the mechanics of pedagogy. The hermeneutic philosophers, like Gadamer and Habermas also offer important tools for taking account of the dialectical process.

A passionate reading of Durkheim can and should remind: be attentive to the power of each other and the love that is or could be between us! The proof for the existence of God is very much wound up in that.

## **Authority and Change**

Slovoj Zizek reminds us of Hegel's three "modes of religion": (1) the religion of the people, expressed in their life and customs, needing "no special reflexive act of faith," (2) positive religion, to be accepted as it is imposed by authority, and (3) the "religion of Reason," a critical endeavor of the Enlightenment project. In the dialectical method there is no great distinction between these. All are products of whatever arrangements of pedagogy and authority surround them. (3) is a subset of (1) (which happens to be elevated by Hegel's personal sympathy). (1) and (2) reflect different arrangements of pedagogy—consequences of political habits. Modern religion in the United States, for instance, with its variety of dogmatic forms combined with traditional and legal freedom of conscience, demonstrates the porousness of the categories. God is proved by pedagogy and community whichever way you cut it. Nevertheless, the felt difference on the ground for people can be very great. The location of authority is one of the great variables of dialectical method. It affects what people are used to choosing about their beliefs.

In any one context, a number of authority models may be viable. As I am not the first to observe, a kind of evolutionary process occurs among religious movements. Those that appeal to people in a particular circumstance survive and those that do not do not survive. This sort of thinking plays an important role in a dialectical method. There is an extent to which we can try to mold the forms we take on, but only to a very limited extent. Just like in ecological evolution, there are so many variables always at work that they cannot all be taken account of. One's actions will likely have unintended consequences. Thomas Jefferson believed that ensuring freedom of conscience in the United States would bring about the end of dogmatic religion, but in the modern world, these constitutional protections have proven actually to strengthen it. A dialectical method exposes the helplessness of people to control their own beliefs, which in turn, contributes meaning to the dialectic proof for the existence and spiritual necessity of God.

Theology describes the difficult process of weeding through it all, figuring out what it really is we aspire to as living things.

## **“Experience”**

A number of times already I have used this term “experience” to talk about dialectical influences other than personalities. It is a vague way to talk, but in a sense, keeping it like that is justified. The encounters we have as individuals are informed always by what we have learned from others, or heard. Durkheim called them “collective forces in individualized forms.” Having an experience of God all alone on a mountaintop, for instance, draws together in the mind and heart the concepts about God that have been learned from people. It might give them life, but it depends on them. One has every right to insist that the experience is nonverbal or independent of all social context, but as soon as one attempts to communicate it to others, to insist anything, it is necessary to recognize the influence of community.

There are many people who participate in religious forms extensively and do so mostly alone. They develop terms for understanding their experiences that are not at all grounded on social terms, like the value of solitude in the literature of anchoritic monasticism. Furthermore, there are more scientific explanations of religious experience that focus entirely on individual psychology. These are no less intrinsically true than social accounts and explanations. Nevertheless, as we endeavor to build a productive *conversation* about God, that is a discussion among people, and even for people with themselves, being able to connect our terms to social realities should be a necessary reminder of the importance of the conversation at hand.

## **The Necessity of God**

When we describe the proof for the existence of God in terms of what we learn from each other, and especially when one sees the proofs that other dialectical traditions have as well, Anselm’s proof for the necessity of God feels less stable. Others don’t feel the necessity for our God. Some make it very clear that they do not believe in God at all, while others do not seem to understand what we mean by God. We ourselves might not.

There are reasons in human psychology and the history of our evolution for why we tend to picture God and spirits in certain ways, more or less anthropomorphized and reflective of our social imagination. Dialectical religion puts words and habits on these predispositions. God is necessary within the dialectic, but outside, this apparently is not the case.

## Ethnographic Theology

On the ground, what does a dialectical method look like? It depends on what a person is trying to do. For a theologian who is trying to develop truer pictures of the love of God, Ada María Isasi-Díaz might be a good example. She was born in Cuba, exiled in the United States early on in life, and trained in Catholic theology. Dr. Isasi-Díaz calls the work that she does *mujerista* theology—theology from the lived experience and aspirations of Latin American women. It is meant to work for their liberation, and consequently, hers. Because Latin American women are so vastly underrepresented in theological literature, she has to go to the source. She begins by participating in and observing Hispanic church communities. She holds retreats and focus groups with Latinas to bring out the data of their experience. Then in her academic writing and teaching she works to distill all of this into a communicable text, in large part

to challenge theological understandings, church teachings, and religious practices that oppress Latina women, that are not life-giving, and, therefore, cannot be theologically correct.

She recognizes the existence and importance of the communities around her, and the value with sharing with them as well, but knows well that the proofs she finds are only authoritative in a limited sense:

it is not a theology exclusively *for* Latinas but a theology *from* the perspective of Latinas ... that should be taken into consideration by all liberation theologies.

Throughout she depends on reflection on her own experience, Catholic tradition, and the Word of God.

Every theology is an ethnographic theology, since it emerges from the revelation of experience and the aspirations of the particular community that created it. Each proves the existence of its God by perfection. Some have been more commonly heard than others. They have had their picture of God broadcasted. Often they do so not out of malevolence but because the dialectical process is not apparent to them. When we notice the limitedness of our own dialectic and see outside to that of others, we realize that the situation is shared and we approach the sharing differently.

## Faith (an Example)

I will finish this section by briefly entering a discussion about a religious concept with the dialectical method in hand: the comparative category of faith.

In *Two Types of Faith*, Martin Buber argues that Judaism and Christianity rest, in their initial formulation at least, on two distinct forms of believing. The first, which he associates with Judaism, is the trust one has in someone and in the community, without having sufficient reason to say that the trust is founded. This is the shape of Israel's trust in God. Buber's second form he attributes to the Pauline letters—a faith that believes something in particular is true, like a theological narrative about the meaning of Jesus. This kind demands individual conversion. The development of his argument

consists in the distinct needs that each type of faith has had in history and has in its encounter with the modern age.

Linguistically, there is already reason to question the totality of the distinction. Giorgio Agamben, following David Flusser, points out the essential equivalency of the Greek words Buber relies on, *emmuah* and *pistis*. But Agamben then goes further to identify the performative value of the Pauline declaration of faith. He hears Paul's word in the presence of Paul's faithful community. Buber's second kind of faith may be Paul's content, but his form remains, like all faith, in the first. Rather than two types divided as horizontally separate from one another, he implies that they are vertically distinct yet connected. One set of terms and rules fits within the other.

The dialectical method follows Agamben's recognition about Paul's faith, identifying the factual circumstances he participates in and locating his own terms within that. Doing so makes possible a translation based on what is shared, the assembling of a relation toward communication rather than a dichotomy, in Buber's case between Christianity and Judaism.

## God in Other Minds

Diversity of beliefs among peoples is more apparent and pressing now than ever before. It is a theological problem. Christian theology, with competing traditions of universalism and tribalism, is especially troubled by the appearance and proof of God in the minds of others.

The dialectic discovery that there is God in other minds is an incredibly significant one. It leads, better than anything, to the sensibleness that God has reality outside of minds at all.

## Disagreement

A lot of different kinds of theologies exist and they each form a particular dialectic. Some, like Vedanta and Baha'i, collect all the theologies together that they can and make of all of it a more complete theology, though dialectically, that is probably not really what they are doing. Working in the dialectical method, again and again one is forced to recognize the common condition of dialectics we all inhabit. Maybe this will lead to a proof for a larger God who is easier to share, but not necessarily so.

The fact that we disagree is an expected thing in the dialectic method. There are sociobiological reasons why people take belief to divisive extremes, and we have little choice but to live with what creation has given us. There are times that we will need to agree with the neighbors and there are times we will need to disagree in order to ensure the group's survival. Our behavior and beliefs will accordingly mirror these. A dialectically responsible theology should be attentive to the ways in which God changes behavior toward our borders. It must be willing to find a place for everything from ardent fundamentalism to the most vapid liberalism, otherwise it would be neither honest,

correct, or complete. But with these forces respected, it must take seriously its job as theology, its duty to the perfection that we believe must transcend them.

## Limits and Necessity of Pedagogy

Iris Murdoch warns against the dialectic approach (even to Anselm specifically!) for the deadening it might do to the vitality of religion.

In the quest for the meaning of the Ontological Proof the *Lebensformen*, or “language-game,” contextual argument is, in my view, a wrong turning. It ushers in the “soft” idea, already at large in both theology and ethics, that there is something called “religious language” which is “expressive” not “descriptive.” ... Religion is thereby put in a corner, as one possible mode of proceeding.

But I find that she is unnecessarily suspicious of it. A “contextual argument” taken to its actual conclusion comes to the opposite of what she suggests. Religion as such is the whole corner that we inhabit, or one inescapable wall or floor or ceiling of it, none other than *the* one possible mode of proceeding. Dialectical religion is the way of saying, “I am in this corner, yet I know that there are others.” What she calls expressive may be more or less what I call “spiritual.” But in that special case, because of the quality of perfection and its effect on us, the expressive *is* descriptive. This language-game, if we will call it that, proves its own absolute necessity and there is nothing “soft” about it. The language-game is absolute. A saint who has never heard of God cannot be a saint.

Pedagogy is our access to and refusal of each other, binding limits even as it makes relation possible. The dialectic is a description of this condition. Within it we draw our conclusions from what we have been taught by everything.

## How Far Our Proofs Take Us

Anselm wrote that, after his proof, only a fool could not believe in God. Yet his first critic, Guanilo, responded “in behalf of the fool.” They both refer to Psalm 14, which sings, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” The fool is everywhere in the world, all around us, and it is astonishing the way the fool behaves and believes.

There are other things that compel us to satisfaction in proofs. These are theologically pertinent, like the need for community, the love for each other, and our devotion to our teachers. These and other forces, both somewhat understood and utterly chaotic in combination, sum up roughly back into Spirit, which is how Barth explains the mystery of belief. It helps to have both languages at hand, venturing toward merging them into one.

A proof takes us as far as we can go, the fullness of what we can take on in this world as truth. That is no thing to be stood back from. There is nothing to do but the best we know how. The madness of other minds, their distance and our need for them, reminds us (if we have heard the good news to begin with) that truth is faith, and no less foolish, as is all love.

## **Apology for Tourism**

For my own part, I prefer to abandon tribalism and learn the God of the people I encounter.

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