

The God That Is Inferred

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At the Origins of Modern Atheism, by Michael J. Buckley
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The spirit of our age is that God doesn't matter. He doesn't speak, act, provide, protect, or control. In fact, he may not even “be”. Most moderns (at least ninety-four per cent according to the polls) think probably He does exist, but it makes little difference culturally. Even the personally pious are such good children of their culture as to understand that one doesn't seriously refer to God while discussing practical matters of life such as economics, mathematics, science, business, and human behavior. A buffer zone has even been erected to compartmentalize “ethics” from these autonomous areas of life, so that embarrassing questions regarding ethical bases and epistemology, metaphysics, and other topics central to life are left “to the philosophers” or “to the intellectuals”. Religion can be tolerated occasionally if it doesn't impinge too much on our time or embarrass us. In a word, God is irrelevant in modern life—at least in the thinking of many modern people.

It was not always this way. In all of history, at least through the eighteenth century, most people saw God in all the details of their lives. He who created the heavens and the earth, and placed the sun in orbit, who called the stars by their names, and controlled the oceans, who commanded the seasons and the daily weather, this same God fed the birds of the air and the animals of forest and field. Men planted their fields but were dependent upon God to give the increase. Life was uncertain and difficult in a fallen world, but even the weakest could look to the good hand of their God to provide, guide, and comfort them.

No longer is God's hand seen in our daily lives, not even in the rising of the sun and the consistency of the ocean tides. Scientific agriculture and fertilizers produce the fruit of the fields, not God. Electronics, aerodynamics, machinery, and medicine are all inventions of autonomous man. Mother Nature may be relevant, but not God.

How did this change come about? To what cultural conditioning are we moderns so susceptible that even professing Christians accept without a whimper the supposed autonomy of the sciences and other academic disciplines, rather than insisting that they are under the Lordship of Christ and the providence of the sovereign, universal Creator

God of the Bible? Michael Buckley focuses on one major part of the explanation for these enormous changes: the relationship between theology and philosophy during the eighteenth century Enlightenment.

Buckley analyzes the philosophical world of ideas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, examining those formative concepts that were to shape the world. He begins with the unquestioning acceptance by orthodox theologians of the category of philosophy as the area where proofs for the existence of God were to be formulated. Instead of Christology or historical evidences for Biblical claims that God acts in human history, or the religious experiences of people who claimed to know God, the apologetic became philosophical and centered in an impersonal “nature” rather than in Jesus Himself.

Think back to your last discussion regarding the alleged existence of God vs. the alleged nonexistence of God. Did the discussion center around Jesus or your own personal knowledge of God or the experience of two thousand years of church history, or did it focus on philosophical proofs? Did you argue an inferred theism or did you talk about knowing God, not the “god of the philosophers”, but the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (as the devout seventeenth-century mathematician, Blaise Pascal, put it)? Buckley states the importance of the issue in his conclusion:

Without the confrontation with the person and history of Jesus neither impersonal evidence nor philosophic inference can sustain the God sacred within a Christian religious culture.

Buckley begins with an attempt to identify who or what an atheist is. The root is *god* and the prefix means *not* so an atheist then lives his life without reference to God. But which theism is the atheist negating? The gods of ancient Greece and Rome? The Roman pagans accused the early Christians of being atheists because they refused to worship the Græco-Roman pantheon. The “First Cause” of the ancient Greek philosophers? An impersonal force? Or the Deistic god of the Enlightenment?

Buckley contends that an atheist is defined by the god he denies. Therefore, the theist establishes the object under discussion. In that sense, of course, the early Christians were 'atheists' but obviously not in a Biblical sense. The point is important because atheism gained a hold in western culture (at least partially) because the “god” “proved” by Christian intellectuals of the seventeenth century was not the God of the Bible but merely an impersonal, “necessary” Ultimate Reality arrived at by logical deduction.

Charles Bradlaugh contended in the nineteenth century:

I am an Atheist, but I do not say that there is no God; and until you tell me what you mean by God I am not mad enough to say anything of the kind. So long as the word 'God' represents nothing to me, so long as it is a word that is not the correlative and expression of something clear and distinct, I am not going to tilt against what may be nothing-nowhere. Why should I? If you tell me that by God you mean “something” which created the universe, which before the act of creation was not; “something” which rules and governs it, and which nevertheless is entirely distinct and different in substance from the

universe—then I am prepared to deny that any such existence can be... I object to the God of Christianity, and absolutely deny it.

Students of intellectual history have long recognized the pivotal importance of the French Enlightenment in shaping the modern world. Modern atheism grew out of that intellectual milieu - though the Enlightenment itself was largely Deistic, the opening wedge towards atheism. By defining matter and nature as ultimate reality, the Enlightenment shut the door to God. And the Open System of God's involvement through the Christian centuries became the closed System so widely accepted in the modern world. A mechanical view of life replaced the dynamic providential belief in God's involvement in human history.

Buckley traces the emergence of modern atheism to Denis Diderot and Paul Henri d'Holback but he begins the historic debates with René Descartes and Isaac Newton. In the course of the discussion he finds it extraordinary that in the denial of the Christian God

Christianity as such, more specifically the person and teaching of Jesus or the experience of the Christian Church, did not enter the discussion. The absence of any consideration of Christology as part of the philosophical debate is so pervasive that its absence was apparently taken for granted, yet it is so stunningly curious that it raises a fundamental issue of the modes of thought: How did the issue of Christianity vs. atheism become purely philosophical?

And why was philosophy so defined as to exclude Christology? It does not exclude theism. But apparently many orthodox Christians were willing to define theism apart from Christ. If philosophy lives up to its claims of dealing with reality, truth, knowledge, and conduct, how can He who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life be ignored? To do so is to make both a philosophical and a religious judgment. One might hypothesize both alternatives: that He was or was not what both He and His followers claimed Him to be, the God/Man. But that was not done. The assumption was that He should be excluded in philosophical discussions trying to determine the existence and nature of God. Doubt existed among some as to the credibility of Christological claims. The “solution” was to decide philosophical issues *as if* Christ, as Creator of the universe, were not involved in such questions. Judgment was made by an assumption without ever properly considering the implications of such presuppositions or the logical conclusions of both positions. The irony is all the more apparent when philosophical thinking in the seventeenth century recognized the force of theistic arguments from necessity, while rejecting the most dramatic expression of theism in the person of Jesus Christ. The universal claims of philosophy should have been confronted by the comprehensiveness of a Biblical/Christological world and life view.

Descartes

Instead, Descartes tried to come to grips with the growing skepticism of the seventeenth century by seeking to suspend judgment wherever doubt existed. Because of finite man's limited capacities and his relativity in relationship to the universe, Descartes sought

absolutes on which to base human philosophies. Not content with the probable and the relative in human finiteness, Descartes sought to find absolute certitude simply by deductive logic. “If probabilities led inevitably to skepticism, was there any possibility of transcending them to obtain certitude? The question was about method, how one goes about something, a pattern of thinking...” Descartes sought “to establish the certitude of cognition and of perception by establishing the existence of God who could not deceive”. He wanted “a metaphysics of the self” which would deduce the existence of God and of the world “and thus lay the foundations for physics, mechanics, and morals”. Descartes realized the importance of the existence of God for human existence and he sought to prove his existence philosophically. “I have always been of the opinion”, wrote Descartes, that “two questions—those dealing with God and with the soul—were among the principal ones which should be demonstrated by philosophy rather than by theology.”

Descartes used the terms “self-evident” or “self-justifying” or “perfectly simple in themselves”. His idea was to reduce everything to its simplest components. Descartes recognized the imperfection of human senses and perception and thus built his system on deductive logic, assuming the validity and adequacy of human thought. What gives certitude to certain propositions? Their own self-evident intuitive justification. For example, “what has once been done, cannot be undone”: the absoluteness of every historical event once it is in the past. His most famous example is: “I think. Therefore, I am.” I, while I am thinking, exist. We cannot doubt these propositions unless we first think about them, but as we think about them, we cannot doubt their obvious truth. Mathematics can do what the other sciences cannot: it deals with absolutes and leaves no room for doubt. The theorems of Euclid are just as true today as when he wrote them. Descartes, then, sought to develop a Universal Mathematics that would be the foundation for all knowledge, including the knowledge of God. Descartes internalized apologetics. To him it was mind, not the universe that gives evidence for the existence of the Creator God. The human intellectual consciousness was the base on which Descartes sought to build his system of absolute mathematical certainty. Human doubt, however, reflected the incompleteness and limitations of finite human knowledge.

Rene Descartes's system of Universal Mathematics sought to reduce all concepts to their absolutely simplest components or state. From these simple natures a chain of deductive implications would move to ever more complete concepts and comprehensive knowledge. It was like a ladder moving in either direction: analysis to simplicity and synthesis to complexity. Descartes designated simplest natures "absolute" and the more complex as “relative”. Dependency was a mark of the relative, independence a mark of the absolute.

With formal proofs and arguing that nothing can come from nothing, Descartes sought to establish the infinity, eternity, self-existence, and perfection of God. Further,

the perfect one cannot deceive, either in himself or in what He establishes.
God, then is intrinsically and necessarily veracious - and His truth allows one to trust the apperceptive powers and instincts which God has given to the human person and to believe in the world to which they bear testimony...
God's creative truth guarantees the possibility of authentic knowledge and the actuality of an existing world. To deny either of these would be to deny the

perfection of God, to believe in a power that was malignant.

Buckley further states: "This is a revolutionary moment in Western philosophy. It is not the sensible universe that is the evidence for God, but the nature of God that is the warrant for the sensible universe. One is deducing the universe as a relative reality from the truth of the absolute."

Newton

Descartes deduced that mathematics was the basis of the universe and physics its means. Another seventeenth century Christian, Isaac Newton, sought to discover the "natural laws" of God's creation, which he called "Universal Mechanics". Though Newton's name is associated with the concept of a mechanical, autonomous and self-sufficient universe, he himself thought it absurd to rule out the providence of God in such a fashion. His Desitic followers, however, thought God was necessary to bring the universe into existence, but that the universe itself operated by divinely-appointed, inexorable natural laws of cause and effect.

Newton grappled with the problems of Absolute Space and Absolute Time as anchors for perceived space and perceived time. In the process he sought to unify "the critical question of dynamics, of astronomy, and of theology." Eternal time is obviously not subject to man's observation, but space created even more problems. Why and how did space exist? Is space infinite and if so, is it like God, eternal, uncreated, infinite, indivisible, and immutable? Newton saw in this a theological problem: "Either space is God, since it shares the predicates which are classically reserved to God or there is something other than God that possesses these divine attributes." To characterize space as possessing "divine attributes" is obviously farfetched and later in the book, Buckley points out that space exists and is infinite because God is omnipresent. Space is not created. It exists *because* God is.

Newton believed in divine providence. He concluded that God placed the planets at different distances from the sun according to the proportions of their densities.

"Granted such a geometrically precise relationship" [in the universe], is there another force which must be introduced in order that the system itself not be absurd? ... If the meaning of gravity, its impact and the extent of its presence, is revealed in the system which it controls, is it adequate to account for this system?

Could nature, Newton's associate Samuel Clarke asked "have arisen from mere mechanical principles of matter and motion, of necessity and fate?"

Both Descartes and Newton ran into the same problem because of their methodology. If one deals only with absolute mathematics and builds an absolute system by deduction, that system is discussable only in terms of human logic and never by direct observation, i.e. by empirical science. "A philosophy that makes matter all-pervasive and projects a universe whose system is the inevitable result of matter and the laws of motion ...sections

off theological inquiry from any evidence in the world studied by the sciences.”

Newton asked,

How did elemental units coalesce to make up the huge, light-giving sun, and those other elements come together to form the many opaque planets? This composition and division of primordial matter “I do not think explicable by mere natural causes”, he wrote, “but I am forced to ascribe it to ye course and contrivance of a voluntary Agent.” Further, one must account for the fact that these masses were placed at such locations that the Sun could give system to the others by its massive gravity, and light and heat because of its composition.

If we move the consideration further, from the objections and their distances to the kinematics of motion and the dynamics of their velocity, the evidence for a creator increases proportionally. The comets descend into the area of the planets and move among them in vastly different ways; some move in the same manner as the planets, some cross their planes, while the solar system is undamaged by these eccentric visitors. The primary planets and their moons move in the same way and in the same plane without any considerable variation, a phenomenon so exact in its multiple proportions that “no natural cause” can reasonably explain it.

Take the degree of velocity of each of the planets and comets. If the planets had been as swift as the comets, they would have described not concentric orbits around the sun but such eccentric ones that a life-supporting system would have been impossible. Were all the planets as swift as Mercury or as slow as Saturn; or were their velocities much different from what they are now; or had their velocities remained what they are now and their distances from the sun changed; or had their velocities and distances been what they are now and their masses significantly different, with proportional changes in their mutual gravitational attractions in any of these cases, the present system could not exist.

Newton observed:

To make this system therefore with all its motions, required a Cause which understood and compared together 1) the quantities of matter in ye several bodies of ye Sun and Planets and 2) ye gravitating powers resulting from thence, 3) the several distances of the primary Planets from ye Sun and Secondary ones from Saturn, Jupiter and ye earth, and 4) ye velocities with which these Planets could revolve at those distances about those quantities of matter in ye central bodies. And to compare and adjust all these things together in so great a variety of bodies argues that cause to be not blind and fortuitous, but very well skilled in Mechanics and Geometry...

Gravity may put ye planets into motion but without ye divine power it could never put them into such a Circulating motion as they have about ye Sun, and therefore for this as well as other reasons I am compelled to ascribe ye frame of this Systeme to an intelligent Agent.

The compound movement of the earth in its orbit originates in the balancing of gravity with a transverse motion which will be conserved by inertia. The mathematical adjustment of those two forces indicates the presence of a calculating intelligence.

But this annual movement about the sun is only one of the three motions of the earth. There is also the diurnal movement on its axis, which yields night and day, and the precession of the equinoxes. The diurnal movements of the planets are not caused by gravity. The earth rotates on its axis such that the surface velocity at the equator is about a thousand miles per hour. If, e.g. it turned at one hundred miles per hour, day and night would each be ten times as long. The hot sun would annihilate vegetation, and in the long nights any surviving living thing would freeze. Conserved by inertial force, these movements “required a divine power to impress them”. The inclination of the axis of the earth may be urged

as a contrivance for winter and summer and for making the earth habitable towards ye poles, and that ye diurnal rotations of ye Sun and Planets as they could hardly arise from any cause purely mechanical, so by being determined all the same way with the annual and menstrual motions they seem to make up that harmony of ye systeme which was the effect of choice rather than of chance.

The axis of the earth is tilted at an angle of 23.5 degrees to the plane of its motion around the sun. Not only does this ensure the rhythm of the seasons, but were it not so tilted vapors from the ocean would move north and south, piling up into continents of ice. Everything within the structure of the system of the world is a function of everything else: masses, gravitational attractions, distances, and velocities. Each of these can be broken down further into its component units. In the presence of these units and in their combination, a mathematical exactitude was discovered which drove Universal Mechanics to *a cause that was not mechanical*.

The universe is a system of systems... What then is the force that gave it origin and structure, a force that must be both intelligent and powerful?

It is dominion. It is dominion which makes God to be God...

Buckley's statement needs sharpening up a bit. Dominion is a characteristic or attribute of God, but God was still God before He created and therefore had something to have dominion over. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that God had authority, power to create, and the resulting dominion from all eternity past.

Because of its implication of force and power, Buckley believes that

dominion constitutes the crucial attribute for Universal Mechanics. Dominion holds a position in Newtonian theological inference similar to the infinite or perfect in Descartes: dominion is that out of which all of the divine attributes will be inferred and by which their intelligibility will be governed. In fact, even here Newton makes his disagreement with Descartes sharp: “The

supreme God is a being eternal, infinite, absolutely perfect; but a being even a perfect one, without dominion is not the Lord God (*Dominus Deus*).”

Just as force is known and designated by the change it can author and in this way is a relative word, so God is known and designated by the rule He exercises. The Newtonian view of God is obviously too limited and requires a necessity outside of God Himself. That is not the God of Scripture.

Buckley astutely observes that

God is not eternity or infinity, but eternal and infinite. By existing eternally, He constitutes the absolute duration that is real time. By being everywhere, He constitutes the infinite extension that is absolute space.

What then is eternal space? It is an effect of the divine existence. It issues not from his choice, but from His existence everywhere. Space is an effect that emanates or issues from the divine omnipresence, one which is neither independent of God nor simply a creature produced by the divine choice, but being qua being. No being exists or can exist which is not related to space in some way. “God is everywhere, created minds are somewhere, and body is in the space it occupies; and whatever is neither everywhere nor anywhere does not exist. And hence it follows that space is an effect arising from the first existence of being, because when any being is postulated, space is postulated.” It is not that God acts to create space and time. He is—and that constitutes space and time.

“In Him all things live and move and have their being.” Just as gravity cannot be traced to the inner structure of matter, nor the cause of its laws determined with certitude, so also the divine dominion cannot be reduced to a grasp of the divine nature itself. It is enough that gravity does exist and that it acts in this way. It is enough that God does exist, a God whose dominion reveals His living presence always and everywhere.

God in the sense of the dominion or the force from which the world issues is obvious for Newton and inescapable as the rational consequences of a system of the world. The crucial inference is that this dominion is intelligent as well as powerful, i.e., that He is personal. The mathematical coordination within the system of the world, the structure of unity with such enormous diversity, is the best warrant for this conclusion. It is the evidence that this God is personal.

Does this leave Newton with the distant God, who constructed the watch but now leaves it to run on its own? God constitutes the space and time in which all takes place by his omnipresence. He is in no sense distant; His presence makes possible the existence and movement of all things.

Second, the system of the world is not of itself an eternal system. Newton conceived of something like a gradual enervation of motion: There are active principle such as gravity, magnetism, electricity, and fermentation (heat-producing reactions) which continue to reinvigorate the system, but even with these the system would eventually need re-

formation, a mechanical indication of the presence of a continual providence so that “Nothing is done without His continued government, for a God without providence would be mere blind fate or nature.” Atrophy is built into the universe.

Re-formation warranted belief in a continuous providence, just as formation gave evidence of an all-powerful understanding and choice. Neither was magic, but both manifested the finite dominion of the one who “rules over all things, not as the world soul, but as the Lord of all things”.

Robert Boyle stands out as one of many who sought to demonstrate that both science and religion focus on the same object: the existence and actions of God. Discussions of physical science and natural theology were major focuses of his life. Boyle established a foundation to provide for a regular series of public lectures “to prove the truth of the Christian religion against infidels”.

Samuel Clarke sought to do just that in his *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*, published in 1705. He used the “thesis method” of propositions still in use in English universities. The continued thread or argument took him to his Proposition 12, “That the Supreme Cause and Author of all things, must of Necessity be a being of Infinite Goodness, Justice and Truth, and all other Moral Perfections such as become the Supreme Governor and Judge of the World.” To see intelligence and design in finite human beings but not in the Creator of the universe would be to make the effect greater than the cause. Intelligence cannot exist without personality and personality presupposes freedom. And from the power of choice comes the existence of evil when wrong choices are made.

The existence of evil often centered in debates between theists and atheists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Atheists typically characterized evil as “Natural Evil” and theists emphasized “Moral Evil”. Clark argued that the very existence of evil demonstrated the existence of the free moral choice which in turn presupposed intelligence and personality. Clarke wrote that atheists “desire it should be thought that in the Fabrick of the World, God has left Himself wholly without Witness; and that all the Arguments of Nature, are on the side of Atheism and Irreligion”. The opposite is the case, said Clarke: the “Notices” of God are finally “everything within us, and everything without us”.

Enlightenment Atheism

In a sense Denis Diderot, 1713-1784, is the first of the atheistic branch of the Enlightenment. Diderot not only offered matter as an alternative to God, but thought of matter as creative and dynamic, rather than inert. Matter, in Diderot and his followers, is made the creative source and ceaseless cause of all things. Matter later became the cornerstone of both Positivism and Marxist materialism. Creative nature in its supposed eternity became the producer of all change and all design.

Naturalism conceived of a self-contained, closed system of the universe, “Nature is but an immense chain of causes and effects, which unceasingly flow from each other.” So

thought Paul Henri d'Holback, who promoted philosophic atheism in the salons of mid-eighteenth century France and in his *The System of Nature: or, Laws of the Moral and Physical World*, in which he wrote:

Let us content ourselves with saying that matter has always existed; it moves by virtue of its essence; that all the phenomena of Nature is ascribable to the diversified motion of the variety of matter she contains, and which is continually regenerating out of her own ashes.

One should place his faith in an assumed eternal and self-renewing matter as an explanation of the universe and its form. D'Holbach's sweeping theorizing included an explanation of evil as simply responding to "needs". "Needs force us to think, to wish, and to act... The good reveals itself only as a cessation of evil."

D'Holbach selected his adversaries and sought to destroy their arguments, particularly those founded on "the false principle that matter is not self-existent." D'Holbach not only failed to prove his theorizing, he concerned himself only with philosophical theories pertaining to natural theology or natural philosophy.

It remained for Immanuel Kant, 1724-1804, to shift the search for evidence for theism from metaphysical to epistemological grounds. Instead of focusing on the existence of things as foundational, Kant shifted attention to the processes of human thought. Duty, as commanded by the human conscience, should be man's highest good. If God exists, why should the righteous suffer and injustices occur in human lives? Kant turned that argument against itself: since the good suffer,

the intrinsic validity of the ethical commitment demands that there be a God who will rectify this intrinsic disorder; otherwise, not only does the existence of God become questionable, but human ethical life itself becomes absurd. A human being would be commanded by duty to do or seek the impossible... God becomes a condition for the possibility of the human ethical life.

In Kant "holiness" no longer designates a relationship with God, but the "complete fitness of the will to the moral law." And the moral law is left hanging in space as an abstraction rather than rooted in the being of God, as in the Bible.

Buckley's Assessment

The arguments concerning the existence of God in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries persistently ignored the experience of a living relationship to God through Jesus Christ. That was compartmentalized as "personal piety" and thus was not part of the intellectual discussion, which was assumed to be simply philosophical in nature. It is one of the great ironies of history that so many hours and pages were expended with abstractions and the historical reality of the existence of Jesus and the existential realities of human experiences directly with God were ignored as intellectuals theorized in abstract terms. Where was the appeal to history? The unspoken ground rules declared it inadmissible. "It is not without some sense of wonder", Buckley observes,

“that the theologians bracketed religion in order to defend religion.”

Buckley also points out the sharp contrast between the Christian God and the “impersonal content that was counted as his primary evidence.” (!)

The contradiction lay also between European religious culture whose God was warranted and defined through Jesus Christ and the reaching of the theologians to a providential *numen* or a great architect as if sixteen hundred years of religious history had never occurred. The Christian culture of Europe within which these theological apologetics were launched [spoke of] a God whose tangible religious atmosphere could be found in the village churches and local monasteries as well as with the crucifix on the walls of taverns and the great celebrations which punctuated the year, a God whose interventions were the stuff of prayer and mysticism, ritual and rural superstition. This transcendence was woven into the texture of the culture and Christ defined the meaning and the truth about God. Daily patterns of speech bespoke this permeating influence, and the success or failure of life was judged by it.

Ignoring this culture and history that was all about them, the philosophers “abstracted God from Christ as either definition or manifestation. The Christian God was to be justified without Christ... Christianity, in order to defend its God, transmuted itself into theism.” (!)

There was a contradiction within the content of the theists: impersonal nature was made the primary warrant for the profoundly personal Christian God... Both Descartes and Newton demonstrated a God *known only by inference*. One neither experienced anything of God nor discerned within oneself a pervasive orientation that could tell as theological evidence. One was informed about God *from the outside*... While religion presupposes personal engagement as the permeating and fundamental relationship with God, philosophic inference introduces a third term or warrant other than this involvement, namely the evidence through which one is informed about God and from which God is deduced. In one way or another, religion involved God as a living presence; philosophic inference demonstrates that there is a God as “a friend behind the phenomena... Descartes and Newton omit any experiential transcendental or religious orientation and the personal involvements that issue from either; they sustain an *inferential form of knowledge* as original and essential.

“Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this God”, wrote Martin Heidegger; “before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this God.”

A self-enclosed physics emerged as autonomous; God was no longer needed and the world became intrinsically secular. Belief in God remained to be sure, no longer “the God defined by and disclosed in Christ and religious

experience”, but “the god disclosed in impersonal nature”.

God is demonstrated by inference, an implication of what is directly known; God is never the object of orientation or experience, let alone intuition, nor does God achieve personal witness in the world.

It is only the “necessary being” who emerges within a philosophical system. “Impersonal nature eventually moved through its theological denials to reassert itself as dynamic within the predicates once reserved for God: 'eternal' and 'infinite'. A major reason western culture relegated God to a pious corner of its life is that "neither impersonal evidence nor philosophical inference can sustain the God sacred within a Christian religious culture.” Christianity is anemic without “the confrontation with the person and history of Jesus” and “**Jesus belongs to the definition of God.**”

Buckley's fitting conclusion to his book consists of a quotation from Blaise Pascal, the great seventeenth century mathematician:

All of those **who seek God apart from Christ**, and who go no further than nature, either find no light to satisfy them or come to devise a means of knowing and serving God without a mediator, thus falling into either atheism or deism, two things almost equally abhorrent to Christianity.

One would expect a professor of systematic theology at the University of Notre Dame to emphasize the Catholic intellectual world in his writings and certainly Professor Buckley does that. One might have thought, however, that he would also consider the contributions to cultural and intellectual history made by the Protestant Reformation in the preceding century and which bore much fruit in the centuries under discussion in his book. The Puritans of the seventeenth century are totally ignored by Buckley and so are their great contemporaries in Scotland and in Holland. One can hardly dismiss John Calvin in such a context with a single sentence, and especially this one!:

In an effort to avoid a developing fideism(!), associated either with Montaigne or with Calvin, and to lay a common basis for rational discussion, any appeal to the witness of a person - which is fundamental to Christianity—became inadmissible. *The* (!) theologians followed the Thomistic lead ...and consigned Christology ... to a more remote phase of theology. It is not without some sense of wonder that one records that the theologians bracketed religion in order to defend religion.

Reformed theologians did no such thing! Christ was Lord of all, including the intellect. The Reformation did not compartmentalize life. The Reformers sought to bring into captivity *every thought* to the obedience of Christ. They were under no illusions as to the noetic effects of the Fall. Written in the sixteenth century, John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion was one of the most influential books in northern and western Europe in the seventeenth century and had deep cultural effects. It is a tragic distortion for Buckley to ignore it.

The two hundred pages of Calvin's Book One, "The Knowledge of God the Creator", deals with many of the issues discussed by the seventeenth century philosophers. Calvin's starting point, of course, was quite different. He began with God, who alone is eternal and self-existent. To start with Nature or Man was to build on an inadequate foundation because they are both finite, and nature is impersonal. God alone is both infinite and personal. Starting with God, Calvin quickly moved to the doctrine of revelation in scripture as authoritative. This is not fideism any more than placing one's faith, one's intellectual confidence in one's own autonomous reasoning or in man's collective "Reason" is fideism. One simply has a different object of faith. For Calvin it was confidence in the infinite personal God of Scripture as his Final Reference Point, by which he made sense of the universe and of life. Calvin wrote:

God daily discloses Himself in the whole workmanship of the universe... This skillful ordering of the universe is for us a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God, who is otherwise invisible... "What men need to know concerning God has been disclosed to them ... for one and all gaze upon his invisible nature, known from the creation of the world, even his eternal power and divinity." (Romans 1:19-20)

... Yet they set God aside, the while using "nature" which for them is the artificer of all things, as a cloak. They see such exquisite workmanship in their individual members, ... but they substitute nature for God...

Manifold indeed is the nimbleness of the soul with which it surveys heavens and earth, joins past to future, retains in memory something heard long before, nay, pictures to itself whatever it pleases. Manifold also is the skill with which it devises things incredible, and which is the mother of so many marvelous devices. These are unfailing signs of divinity in man... What ought we to say here except that the signs of immortality which have been implanted in man cannot be effaced? ... "Shall we, indeed distinguish between right and wrong by that judgment

which has been imparted to us, yet will there be no judge in heaven? ... Shall we think ourselves the inventors of so many arts and useful things that God may be defrauded of His praise even though experience sufficiently teaches that what we have has been unequally distributed among us from another source?

... As if the universe, which was founded as a spectacle of God's glory, were its own creator! ...He from whom all things drew their origin must be eternal and have [life in Himself].

... And what might not happen to others when the leading minds, whose task it is to light the pathway for the rest, wander and stumble! ...Should we not forsake those who invite us to a knowledge of things certain and then bid us believe things uncertain? ... We ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reason, judgments, or conjectures...for the highest proof of Scripture derives from the fact that God in person speaks in it (and attests to that by His Spirit), so that Scripture is self-authenticated...

God's governance is so extended to all His works, (not) within the stream of nature...as though He allowed all things by a free course to be borne along according to a universal law of nature... [Some] concede to God some kind of blind and ambiguous motion, while taking from Him the chief thing: that He directs everything by His incomprehensible wisdom and disposes it to His own end. And so in name only, not in fact, it makes God the Ruler of the universe because it deprives Him of His control... God watches over the order of nature set by Himself...as if nature obeyed God's eternal command, and what God has once determined flows on by itself.

Nevertheless, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* is an excellent book and deserves careful attention, not only from Christians, but also from philosophers and students of intellectual history. Western Civilization took a wrong turn at the Enlightenment in compartmentalizing life and seeking to build society on the basis of a supposed human autonomy. Those interested in Reformation and building once again on a Reformation base, should read this book carefully.