

## Some ruminations about inculpable non-belief

IMRAN AIJAZ

*The University of Michigan-Dearborn, Department of Literature, Philosophy and  
The Arts, Rm. 3011, CASL Building, 4901 Evergreen Road, Dearborn, MI 48128, USA  
e-mail: iaiaz@umd.umich.edu*

**ABSTRACT:** This article presents a discussion of the concept of ‘non-belief’, focusing on a variety of difficulties it raises for the theist. After considering how the notion of ‘non-belief’ may be construed, I catalogue five major problems facing the theist who insists on maintaining the traditional notion of ‘non-belief’. Those theists who insist on maintaining this traditional notion sometimes appeal to the ‘sin defence’ in an attempt to defend their position. I critique this defence and conclude with a mention of how rejecting the traditional notion of ‘non-belief’ will lead us towards revisionary theologies.

### Introduction

Talk of ‘non-belief’, especially *inculpable* (or *reasonable* or *non-resistant*) non-belief, has recently come to the fore in contemporary Philosophy of Religion, mainly due to J. L. Schellenberg’s work on the ‘Argument from Divine Hiddenness’.<sup>1</sup> The principal aim of Schellenberg’s Hiddenness Argument is to present a case for atheism based on certain kinds of non-belief that exist in our world. In this article, I want to discuss inculpable non-belief in a broader context, while keeping the central focus on difficulties the existence of such non-belief presents for the theist. My discussion in this article will proceed as follows. I will begin by looking at the various ways in which one can understand the notion of ‘non-belief’. In doing this, I will clarify just what is meant by ‘inculpable’ non-belief. Next, I will consider an assortment of difficulties that present themselves to the theist who concedes that there is indeed inculpable non-belief in our world, difficulties that are not simply confined to the Hiddenness Argument. For the theist, as I hope to show, *a lot* turns on whether or not there is inculpable non-belief in our world. Following this, I will critically assess a particular strategy that a number of theists have deployed in an attempt rationally to resist the claim that our world contains instances of inculpable non-belief. This strategy rests on the

general idea that all putative cases of inculpable non-belief are cases where the non-belief is a result of sin and its consequences. There is, therefore, no *inculpable* non-belief in our world. I will argue that resorting to this strategy fails to help the theist who wants to deny the existence of inculpable non-belief. As far as I am aware, no other strategy has been used recently by philosophers or theologians to resist the claim that our world contains inculpable non-belief. Thus, by critiquing the ‘sin defence’, I hope to contribute to revisionary theologies where the existence of inculpable non-belief is accepted and incorporated into the theistic world-view.

### **The nature and scope of ‘non-belief’**

In his work *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*, the eighteenth-century British philosopher Samuel Clarke offers a defence of a version of The Cosmological Argument for the existence of God. What interests me in Clarke’s work for present purposes, however, is not his natural theological argument for theism, but rather the prefatory remarks that precede the presentation and defence of his theistic proof. Clarke writes:

All those who either are or pretend to be atheists, who either disbelieve the being of God or would be thought to do so or, which is all one, who deny the principal attributes of the divine nature and suppose God to be an unintelligible being which acts merely by necessity, that is, which in any tolerable propriety of speech acts not at all, but is only acted upon – all men that are atheists, I say, in this sense, must be so upon one or other of these three accounts. Either, firstly, because, being extremely ignorant and stupid, they have never duly considered any thing at all, nor made any just use of their natural reason to discover even the plainest and most obvious truths, but have spent their time in a manner of life very little superior to that of beasts. Or, secondly, because, being totally debauched and corrupted in their practice, they have by a vicious and degenerate life corrupted the principles of their nature and defaced the reason of their own minds. And instead of fairly and impartially enquiring into the rules and obligations of nature and the reasons and fitness of things, [they] have accustomed themselves only to mock and scoff at religion and, being under the power of evil habits and the slavery of unreasonable and unindulged lusts, are resolved not to harken to any reasoning which would oblige them to forsake their beloved vices. Or, thirdly, because in the way of speculative reasoning and upon the principles of philosophy, they pretend that the arguments used against the being and attributes of God seem to them, after the strictest and fullest enquiry, to be more strong and conclusive than those by which we endeavour to prove these great truths.<sup>2</sup>

This, then, is Clarke's taxonomy of all the possible causes of atheism; a person is an atheist because of (1) gross intellectual stupidity *or* (2) 'corrupted' rational faculties *or* (3) 'pretending' that the philosophical arguments against the existence and nature of God are stronger than those arguments to the contrary. Clarke leaves no doubt that his taxonomy is intended to be exhaustive. 'These seem the only causes which can be imagined of any man disbelieving the being and attributes of God', he writes. '[N]o man can be supposed to be an atheist but upon one or other of these three accounts.'<sup>3</sup> Clarke's taxonomy provides a good starting point for thinking about some of the issues that I aim to discuss in this article. I will begin with those that I believe are not controversial but are nonetheless useful for the purposes of my discussion.

First, Clarke's consideration of the possible causes of atheism is a particular instance of a common process of reflection among many theists – speculation about why there are people around them who do not share their theistic beliefs. Many theists have, at some point in their lives, wondered why it is that there are 'unbelievers', 'disbelievers', 'non-believers', or, to use the more pejorative term, 'infidels' around them.

Second, in considering why people 'disbelieve' in God, Clarke's taxonomy does not explicitly state the locus of the 'disbelieving'. There are two loci where one's 'disbelieving' in God can occur. The first is with reference to the *propositional attitude* that one has towards theistic claims, such as 'God exists', 'God is our Creator', 'God is worthy of worship', etc. To state that a person *S* disbelieves in God in this sense is to say that *S* lacks a certain propositional attitude, e.g. belief, towards a particular proposition or set of propositions. There is, however, another way in which a person might be said to 'disbelieve' in God and that is with reference to his *behaviour towards theistic claims*, such as 'God exists', 'God's commandments are to be obeyed', etc. Central to the concept of faith in all three of the major monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – is the notion of putting one's trust in God. A 'disbeliever' may be taken to mean someone who *rejects theistic faith*, that is, someone who refuses to put his trust in God and may even rebel against Him. One might hold that this second conception of 'disbelieving' is superfluous once we have the first conception, thinking perhaps that being in the state of lacking the right propositional attitude towards theistic claims yields practical rejection of theistic faith; or, conversely, that having the right propositional attitude towards theistic claims yields practical acceptance of theistic faith. But this understanding rests on the false assumption that a person will act on the truth of *p* if and only if she has the requisite propositional attitude (e.g. belief) towards its truth. To refer to just one example commonly cited in showing the falsity of this assumption, I might believe that smoking is bad for me, that I should not smoke, etc., and yet fail to act on this (by taking up, or continuing, smoking). Similarly, a person might believe that there is a God, that God's commandments are to be obeyed, etc., and yet refuse to put his trust in God

(think for a moment about the phenomenon of religious hypocrisy to see that this situation is possible). That there are two loci with reference to ‘disbelieving’ God follows as a corollary from a generally accepted distinction philosophers of religion have drawn between having the belief-*that* God exists (i.e. having a doxastic attitude towards the proposition ‘God exists’) and believing-*in* God (i.e. trusting in God).<sup>4</sup>

Third, Clarke’s discussion of ‘disbelief’ in God is limited to what William Rowe calls a ‘restricted’ version of ‘standard’ theism. Standard theism refers to ‘any view which holds that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good being who created the world’.<sup>5</sup> Within standard theism, says Rowe, one can make a distinction between ‘restricted’ and ‘expanded’ theism. He explains this distinction as follows:

Letting ‘O’ abbreviate ‘an omnipotent, omniscient, omnigood being’, standard theism is any view which holds that O exists. Within standard theism, we can distinguish between *restricted* theism and *expanded* theism. Expanded theism is the view that O exists, conjoined with certain other significant religious claims, claims about sin, redemption, a future life, a last judgment, and the like . . . Restricted theism is the view that O exists, unaccompanied by other, independent religious claims.<sup>6</sup>

It is clear from what Rowe says here that accepting expanded theism entails accepting restricted theism, since the latter is entailed by the former. This entailment does not, however, run the other way; that is, one can accept restricted theism without necessarily being led to accept expanded theism. This might be because one thinks that, although we have good reason to believe that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnigood being, there is no reason to suppose that such an ‘OmniGod’ has revealed Himself to us. Alternatively, one might accept restricted theism and yet reject a *version* of expanded theism in virtue of being committed to some *other* version of it. As Rowe notes, ‘Orthodox Christian theism is a version of expanded theism.’<sup>7</sup> So, for orthodox Muslims, acceptance of restricted theism is entailed by their acceptance of orthodox Islamic theism, which, of course, is a version of expanded theism. But to accept orthodox Islamic theism is (given the assumption that one is consistent in one’s beliefs) *eo ipso* to reject orthodox Christian theism.<sup>8</sup> Over the centuries, several thinkers within the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions have used the locution ‘disbelief in God’, or some approximation of it, to cover rejection of restricted *or* expanded theism. In Clarke’s taxonomy, disbelief in God refers to disbelief in *restricted* theism. When Aquinas discusses the ‘Gentiles’ in his *Summa contra Gentiles*, however, he takes this label to include ‘Mohammedans’, ‘pagans’, ‘Jews’, and ‘heretics’.<sup>9</sup> For Aquinas, Muslims are ‘disbelievers in God’ in the sense that they reject (orthodox Christian) *expanded* theism despite accepting restricted theism. Of course, given the primary aim of his discussion in *A Demonstration*, Clarke’s taxonomy of

disbelief in God need not extend beyond the scope of restricted theism. The point I wish to make here is just that a more robust taxonomy of 'disbelief in God' needs to cover rejection of expanded theism as well.

A fourth, non-controversial observation I will add about Clarke's taxonomy is that, for many theists, it comes across as a plausible, exhaustive classification of why people do not accept standard theism in its restricted or expanded form. According to Clarke, the cause of a person's atheism is either gross intellectual stupidity, corruption of one's rational faculties, or else one's 'pretending' that the arguments against the existence and nature of God are stronger than those to the contrary. To put it tersely, atheism is foolish and being an atheist is culpable in virtually all conceivable cases. Many theists agree with Anselm's reflections on Psalms (14:1; 53:1), when he writes: 'Why therefore did the fool say in his heart "there is no God," since it is so evident to any rational mind that you [God] above all things exist? Why indeed, except precisely because he is stupid and foolish?'<sup>10</sup> Several theists are prepared to go further and see those who do not accept their version of expanded theism in a similar light. Commenting on the average Muslim's understanding of why people do not accept Islam, Frithjof Schuon writes:

The intellectual – and thereby the rational – foundation of Islam results in the average Muslim having a curious tendency to believe that non-Muslims either know that Islam is the truth and reject it out of pure obstinacy, or else are simply ignorant of it and can be converted by elementary explanations; that anyone should be able to oppose Islam with a good conscience quite exceeds the Muslim's imagination, precisely because Islam coincides in his mind with the irresistible logic of things.<sup>11</sup>

What Schuon says here about the average Muslim clearly applies *mutatis mutandis* to how many Jews, Christians, and other theists see those who reject their versions of expanded theism.

Having addressed some non-controversial aspects of Clarke's taxonomy of disbelief in God, let me now turn to what I take to be the central problem with it. Contrary to Clarke's claim that his taxonomy specifies 'the only causes which can be imagined of any man disbelieving the being and attributes of God', we *can* easily imagine *other* causes of disbelief! Indeed, many would add that we *know* that there are other causes. Perhaps the obvious starting point is the empirical fact of rich diversity and deep disagreement in beliefs about religious matters. With respect to restricted theism, there are large groups of non-theists around the world. These groups include people who are atheists, agnostics, and those who belong to non-theistic forms of religion, such as Buddhism and Jainism. There are also those who, while accepting restricted theism, reject various forms of expanded theism. Orthodox Jews and Muslims, for instance, will not accept the expanded theism that is orthodox Christian theism. Now, within each of these

groups are individuals whose non-belief is *inculpable*; their non-belief does not appear to be the result of gross intellectual stupidity, corrupted rational faculties, etc.<sup>12</sup> The sorts of people I have in mind here include what Robert McKim calls people of ‘integrity’. He describes such individuals as ‘wise people who think carefully and judiciously, who are intelligent, clever, honest, reflective, and serious, who avoid distortion, exaggeration, and confabulation, who admit ignorance when appropriate, and who have relied on what seemed to them to be the relevant considerations in the course of acquiring their beliefs’.<sup>13</sup> Clearly, there are non-theists who are people of integrity. Some of these non-theists are sufficiently well informed about the theistic world-view, but do not accept it. Others will be uninformed, knowing little or nothing about theism, much less the sorts of philosophical arguments about the existence and nature of God that Clarke has in mind. There are also many theists who are people of integrity – Jews, Christians, and Muslims, among others. Some of these theists will be sufficiently well informed about the versions of expanded theism they reject and others will not.

What, then, is the fuss about? It seems obvious that there is inculpable non-belief in the world and obvious that Clarke’s taxonomy of the causes of disbelief in God is inadequate. Making such a concession, however, comes at a heavy price for the theist, especially if such a theist is an orthodox Jew, Christian or Muslim. In the next section, I will explain why this is the case.

### **Inculpable non-belief and its implications for theism**

Here, I will catalogue a number of philosophical and theological problems that arise for the theist who maintains that there is indeed inculpable non-belief in our world. The list here is not meant to be exhaustive and although the problems I mention here are distinct, the reader will note that there are some conceptual connections between them.

#### *The Argument from Divine Hiddenness*

Conceding the existence of inculpable non-belief will mean that the defender of ‘standard theism’ will need to have a plausible account of why an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being would permit its existence. Many defenders of standard theism, motivated by Anselm’s understanding of God as ‘something greater than which cannot be thought’,<sup>14</sup> subscribe to ‘Perfect Being Theology’, the core idea of which is that God is to be thought of as the greatest possible being.<sup>15</sup> A conceptual unpacking of Perfect Being Theology, according to them, entails standard theism, viz. a being that has the three main attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection. God’s moral perfection, it is typically maintained, includes *perfect* love. Now, plausibly, a God who is perfectly loving would ensure that an explicit and positively meaningful

relationship with Him is possible for all His creatures who are capable of entering into it and who have not freely shut themselves off from God. A necessary condition for such people to be in a position to enter into this sort of a relationship with God, however, is that they *believe* that God exists (perhaps along with holding other beliefs about God). Thus, one would expect that, if there is a God, no inculpable non-belief exists in our world; all putative cases of non-belief would involve people who culpably choose to reject God. Given that there *is* inculpable non-belief in the world, we have the basis of an argument for the conclusion that the God of standard theism does not exist. This ‘Argument from Divine Hiddenness’ as I have just described it owes its contemporary origin to Schellenberg, who, over the last two decades, has developed and rigorously defended it.<sup>16</sup>

### *Scriptural problems*

Even if standard theism can perhaps be defended from the challenge posed to it by the Argument from Divine Hiddenness, there are other problems to be dealt with if the theist concedes the existence of inculpable non-belief. Those Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theists who make this concession but also adhere to a straightforward reading of the Bible and Qur’ān will need to provide a plausible reconciliation of what their Scriptures say (or don’t say) with the existence of inculpable non-belief. The problem here is not merely that the Scriptures remain silent about whether inculpable non-belief exists; they contain passages that seem to *deny* that it exists. My own thoughts about inculpable non-belief first arose within an Islamic context, since my own religious background is Muslim and Islam is the religion with which I am most familiar. On a straightforward and traditional reading of the Qur’ān, one sees that, according to the Qur’ānic *Weltanschauung*, there is no such thing as inculpable non-belief. The second and longest *sūrah* (chapter) of the Qur’ān, *Al Baqarah* (The Heifer), begins with a classification of mankind, putting people into two primary categories, followed by a secondary one (vv. 1–20). The two primary categories are (1) those who have *īmān* (faith) and (2) those who deliberately and perversely reject faith – people who commit *kufṛ*. The ‘secondary’ category is *nifaq* (hypocrisy); I construe this category as ‘secondary’ because it appears to be a *sub*-category within the category of those who commit *kufṛ* (this will become clear shortly). The central concept of *īmān* – a word derived from the verb *āmana*, which means ‘to be secure’ or ‘to put trust’ in something – is to *trust* in God. Such trust seems to imply that one has beliefs about God, e.g. that there is a God, that God is to be obeyed, etc. *Kufṛ* is the exact opposite of *īmān*. Literally, the word means ‘to conceal’ or ‘to cover up’ something. In a specifically religious context, it refers to covering up or concealing religious truth. The Qur’ān uses the word *kufṛ* to signify the intentional *act* of covering up or concealing that which one *recognizes* as religious truth. Several verses make this clear where a prominent Qur’ānic motif is that the *kāfir* rejects or refuses the ‘signs’ of God

(e.g. Qur'ān 2:39; 2:99; 3:86, to mention only a few verses). *Kufr*, then, is disbelief in God where the locus of disbelief is one's *practical rejection and distrust of God*. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith writes:

*Kufr* (so-called 'infidelity'), the heinous sin, the incomprehensibly stupid and perverse obduracy, is not unbelief but 'refusal'. It is almost a spitting in God's face when He speaks out of His infinite authority and vast compassion. It is man's dramatic negative response to this spectacular divine initiative.<sup>17</sup>

Although the *kāfir* displays distrust in God, he nevertheless *knows* – and therefore *believes* – that there is a God, that God's commandments are to be obeyed, etc. The Qur'ān sees the phenomenon of *nifāq* as a particularly insidious form of *kufr*. The *munāfiq* (hypocrite) makes mischief on earth under the pretence of making peace (2:11). When among the people of faith, he claims to be one of them; when alone with the 'Satanic ones', however, the hypocrite reveals that his affirmations of faith were made only in jest (2:14). Essentially, then, having *īmān* (faith) or rejecting it (an act of *kufr*) are the only two possible stances listed in the Qur'ān that one can take in relation to God. As Toshihiko Izutsu explains,

*Īmān* . . . and *kufr* . . . – or the corresponding personal forms, *mu'min* . . . and *kāfir* . . . – are two of the most important terms in the Koran. They constitute the very center of the whole of Koranic thought . . . The Koranic system reveals a very simple structure based on a clearcut distinction between Muslims and Kāfirs. All Muslims are members of the community . . . And they stand in sharp opposition to those who . . . refuse to listen seriously to Muhammad's teaching and to believe in God. In this simple structure there is no place for confusion or ambiguity. The *ummah* (or *Muslim*) community . . . divides men neatly into two opposing sections. Man is either Muslim or Kāfir.<sup>18</sup>

Since both *īmān* and *kufr* are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive states that each presuppose the belief that there is a God, that God's commandments are to be obeyed, etc., it follows that, according to the Qur'ānic world-view, there is no non-belief about God's existence, His Commandments, etc. But this conclusion seems patently false. It seems clear that there is plenty of (inculpable) non-belief around us. The Muslim theist who wishes to maintain his belief in the Qur'ānic world-view is therefore faced with the task of providing a plausible reconciliation of what the Qur'ān says with the existence of inculpable non-belief in our world.<sup>19</sup> The Qur'ānic denial of inculpable non-belief is shared by the Judaeo-Christian scriptures. The biblical theist who wishes to point out the foolishness of atheism typically cites the following verse from Psalms: "The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good' (14:1). What such a theist may not be aware of is just how

strong a claim is being made here. For what Psalm 14:1 refers to is not intellectual atheism but rather a perverse rejection of God, much like the Qur'ānic account of *kufr*. According to the commentary on Psalm 14:1 from *The New Interpreter's Bible*:

[T]he term 'fool' . . . *nābāl* is more a moral assessment than an intellectual one. As the second half of v. 1 suggests, foolishness is not a lack of knowledge in general but *the failure to acknowledge God in trustful obedience*.<sup>20</sup>

Biblical theists who wish to point out the foolishness of atheism also frequently cite Paul's statement in Romans 1:20: 'For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.' Referring to the commentary on this passage in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, we read the following:

God's self-revelation has displayed what can be known; this revelation takes place in the created order, rendering all without excuse; humans have refused to honor God in the appropriate way . . . Paul clearly does believe that when humans look at creation they are aware, at some level, of the power and divinity of the creator.<sup>21</sup>

So, if the Jewish, Christian, or Muslim theist takes Qur'ānic and biblical doctrine seriously, it appears that he comes to the conclusion that there is no inculpable non-belief. Conversely, if such a theist does accept that there *is* inculpable non-belief, then this requires him to reconcile it somehow with scriptural teachings about the absence of inculpable non-belief.

#### *Problems with traditional soteriology*

Another problem for the theist who accepts the existence of inculpable non-belief concerns the traditional understanding of soteriology, in particular the doctrine of 'salvific exclusivism'. For most of the period of their historical existence, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have firmly maintained that only those who belong to their religion will be 'saved'. Those who are not Jews, Christians, or Muslims will be 'lost', 'damned', 'condemned to eternal torment in hell', etc. Here, let me just consider salvific exclusivism in Christianity and Islam. For much of Christian history, most Christians have maintained that there is no salvation outside the Church (*extra ecclesiam, nulla salus*). Christian claims about salvific exclusivism may be held traceable to Jesus of Nazareth himself, as some have argued. Consider John 14:6 'No one comes to the Father except through me.' This view is expressed a number of times in the New Testament, as in Acts 4:12 where we read: 'Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.' In addition to scripture, there

are several other Christian sources that advocate salvific exclusivism. The Athanasian Creed, for example, claims the following:

Whoever desires to be saved must above all things hold the Catholic faith. Unless a man keeps it in its entirety inviolate, he will assuredly perish eternally . . . This is the Catholic faith. Unless a man believes it faithfully and steadfastly, he will not be able to be saved.<sup>22</sup>

And according to Aquinas: 'There is no entering into salvation outside the Church, just as in the time of the deluge there was none outside the ark, which denotes the Church.'<sup>23</sup> Similar views regarding salvific exclusivism are found in Islam. Perhaps the clearest statement of it is the following Qur'anic passage: 'If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to Allah), never will it be accepted of him; and in the Hereafter He will be in the ranks of those who have lost (all spiritual good)' (3:85). If, however, the theist concedes that there is plenty of inculpable non-belief in the world, he is faced with the following problem. Take Islam. The reason why Jews, Christians, and other non-Muslims are supposed to be 'lost' or 'damned' is because, according to the Qur'anic world-view, they are culpable for their perverse rejection of faith – for their *kufur*. 'Fear the fire', writes the Author of the Qur'ān, 'which is prepared for those who reject Faith' (3:131). But the vast majority of Jews, Christians, and other non-Muslims do not *perversely* reject Islamic faith while somehow secretly *knowing* that Islamic doctrine is true. Rather, they simply do not believe that it is true. Their non-belief in Islamic doctrine might just be a consequence of their not being sufficiently well informed about the Islamic religion or it might well be that they do not accept Islamic belief in 'good conscience', as mentioned in the previous quote from Schuon. In either case, such non-belief seems to be inculpable. How, then, can the Muslim theist maintain that most Jews, Christians, and other non-Muslims are destined for damnation in the Fire? If a necessary condition for not being saved is that one *perversely rejects* Islamic faith, then such a condition is clearly absent in the great majority of cases where non-Muslims do not accept Islamic belief. An orthodox Muslim theist who agrees that there is inculpable non-belief in the world, spread across various religious and non-religious denominations, will need to revise his understanding of traditional Islamic soteriology. What I've said here applies *mutatis mutandis* to traditional Christian soteriology.

#### *The importance of holding theistic belief*

Another problem for Jewish, Christian, and Islamic versions of expanded theism arises when we consider the *widespread distribution* of inculpable non-belief. Consider, first, the belief that God exists. According to a recent assessment of the available data by Phil Zuckerman, there are probably somewhere between 500 and 750 million non-theists in the world today.<sup>24</sup> Within this group of

non-theists, there are surely a great many whose non-belief is inculpable. Now consider expanded forms of standard theism, such as orthodox Christianity and Islam. Relative to each of these forms of expanded theism, the vast majority of the world's population are non-Christian or non-Muslim. Again, within these groups, there are surely a great many non-Christians (such as Jews and Muslims) and non-Muslims (such as Jews and Christians) whose non-belief in other forms of expanded theism is inculpable. Now, what these data on the demographics of theism suggest is that, even if theistic belief is true (in either its restricted or expanded forms), it probably does not matter a great deal to God that we have true beliefs about His existence, character, revelation, etc. If it was very important to God that we believe He exists, that humanity is reconciled with God through Christ's substitutionary atonement, that Muhammad is His final Prophet, etc., then, probably, God would have made the world in such a way that our present circumstances would better enable us to acquire and hold such beliefs. Discussing the merits of this argument falls outside the scope of this article, so I will simply refer the reader to a more extended discussion of it elsewhere.<sup>25</sup>

#### *Treatment of others*

Perhaps the most important consequence of accepting that there is indeed inculpable non-belief – a consequence that reveals the *practical* and *ethical* importance of the present discussion – concerns the treatment of others who are outside a particular religious group. Let me explain the point here with reference to Islam. In traditional Islamic theology, as given in the Qur'ān, those who commit *kufir* are seen in a very negative light, to say the least. Consider, as an example, verse 8:55: 'For the worst of beasts in the sight of Allah are those who reject Him.' But the Qur'ān does not merely describe the *kāfir*; it prescribes certain actions that the faithful should take against him. It says, for example:

Let not the believers take for friends or helpers unbelievers rather than believers: if any do that, in nothing will there be help from Allah: except by way of precaution, that ye may Guard yourselves from them. But Allah cautions you (To remember) Himself; for the final goal is to Allah (3:28)

Since there is no other category in the Qur'ān for the non-Muslim other than that of the *kāfir*, many Muslims have taken this verse to mean that one should not befriend Jews, Christians, Hindus, and other non-Muslims. An example of a more severe prescription is found in 9:29:

Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, (even if they are) of the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizya [religious tax] with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued.

If *īmān* (faith) and *kufr* (the [perverse] rejection of faith) are the only attitudes that a person can have towards God, it is easy to see how one can swiftly come to the conclusion that, according to this verse, a Muslim is obliged to fight Jews, Christians, and other non-Muslims. The verse commands Muslims to fight those who do not have faith. Now, since *kufr* is the exact antonym of *īmān* (faith), the verse here is referring to those who perversely reject the truth of Islamic belief. Since there is no category for non-Muslims in the Qur'ān other than those who commit *kufr*, one might hold that the verse refers to all non-Muslims, such as Jews, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, etc. Thus, the Egyptian Islamist Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) refers to this verse as support for his notion that Islam should command a global jihadist movement to bring all of humanity into Islam. The entire world, for Qutb, is divided into the *Dar ul-Islam* (The Abode of Islam) and the *Dar ul-Harb* (The Abode of War). Although these terms do not explicitly appear in the Qur'ān, one can easily see that the Qur'ānic division of humanity into those who have *īmān* and those who reject it through *kufr* can lend itself to supporting such a view of the world.<sup>26</sup> In rejecting the idea that the general non-Muslim population is guilty of *kufr*, these Qur'ānic prescriptions appear to become irrelevant when thinking about how Muslims should relate to non-Muslims on a global level. Again, although I have discussed Islam here, the general idea behind what I say applies *mutatis mutandis* to Christianity and other forms of theistic religion. Should, for instance, Christians form deep friendships with non-Christians? A number of Christians have maintained that they should not, basing their view on scriptural passages such as 2 Corinthians 6:14: 'Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?' And although the New Testament does not appear to contain passages that support warfare against non-Christians, *Christian history* does of course bear witness to several wars carried out by Christians. Some of these wars were partly influenced by the Christians' conception of those who did not belong to their religious tradition. For instance, in discussing the Council of Constance, Robert A. Williams writes: 'A long line of extreme papal hierocratic theorists, most notably Alanus Anglicus and those who adhered to his influential arguments denying infidel *dominium*, had asserted Rome's unilateral right to authorize conquests of pagan territories solely on the basis of nonbelief in the Christian God.'<sup>27</sup> Clearly, then, one's actions towards those who are outside of one's religious group will partly be influenced by whether one regards them as merely inculpable non-believers or perverse rejecters of faith in God.

### **The appeal to sin as a discrediting mechanism**

Recently, a number of Christian philosophers have attempted rationally to resist the claim that there is inculpable non-belief in our world by deploying a

certain kind of ‘discrediting mechanism’. The term is McKim’s, who explains it as follows:

[Discrediting mechanisms] are techniques that are used to discredit or explain away the views of others, typically by imputing a defect of some sort to those who hold them. The defects that are imputed to others are of different sorts. The familiar ones include, for instance, an inability to see beyond class interests, lack of imagination, carelessness, intellectual cowardice, intellectual conformity, wishful thinking, stubbornness, and sin.<sup>28</sup>

As McKim notes, resorting to discrediting mechanisms exhibits a general tendency to insulate systems of belief from challenges. In the case of a religious system, this typically involves providing an account of why non-believers do not accept it.<sup>29</sup> To be sure, McKim distinguishes between plausible and implausible discrediting mechanisms. In this section, I will look at a particular kind of discrediting mechanism where theists have maintained that all putative cases of inculpable non-belief are really cases of culpable, sinful resistance against God. I will argue that this sort of discrediting mechanism is not a plausible one, not even for those who are generally committed to the truth of the theistic world-view.

In his *Christian Philosophical Theology* (2004), Stephen T. Davis begins his discussion of religious belief and unbelief by puzzling over Paul’s statement in Romans 1:19, which says of unbelievers that ‘what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them’. Davis introduces what he calls ‘proposition (1)’ into the discussion. This says:

(1) God exists, and is the all-powerful, all-knowing, and loving creator of the heavens and the earth; and God is worthy of worship and obedience.

Davis then puzzles over Paul’s statement as follows:

But in what sense is this truth about God (as well as other things, of course) ‘plain’ to non-believers? There certainly appear to be sincere atheists, agnostics, and members of non-theistic religions who do not know proposition (1) at all. They don’t even *believe* it. It would be odd, maybe even insulting, if I were to say to one of my atheist colleagues at the Claremont Colleges, ‘The existence of God is plain to you; indeed, you *know* that God exists.’ . . . What can Paul possibly have meant?<sup>30</sup>

Despite conceding that Paul’s claim ‘seems plainly false’,<sup>31</sup> Davis nevertheless attempts to defend its truth. He starts by making a distinction between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ senses of knowing some proposition *p*. If a person strongly knows that *p*, then he also believes that *p*. If, however, a person only weakly knows that *p*, then this does not entail believing (or consciously believing) that *p*.<sup>32</sup> With this

distinction in hand, Davis asks whether the following three claims can be true of some person A and claim *p*:

(2) A knows *p* (in the weak sense);

(3) A does not know *p* (in the strong sense);

and

(4) A ought to know *p* (in the strong sense), that is, A is culpable for not knowing *p* (in the strong sense)?<sup>33</sup>

He answers in the affirmative, citing a real-life example of a mother who knew weakly that her son's behaviour was malicious, but did not consciously believe this; she did not therefore know in the strong sense that her son's behaviour was malicious. The mother's stubborn unwillingness to face up to the truth about her son made her culpable for her 'disbelief'.<sup>34</sup> According to Davis, all those who fail to know God in the strong sense are in a similar sort of situation. The truth of the matter is:

(1) God exists, and is the all-powerful, all-knowing, and loving creator of the heavens and the earth; and God is worthy of worship and obedience.

(5) Everybody knows (in the weak sense) that (1) is true;

and

(6) Those who do not know (1) in the strong sense are culpable for their ignorance.<sup>35</sup>

The culpability mentioned in (6) holds because unbelievers refuse to admit the truth of (1). Why? Because of spiritual defects that include pride and self-centredness.<sup>36</sup> Davis then sums up his views, in response to the questions that motivated much of his discussion on religious belief and unbelief, as follows:

We began with two questions: Why do some people not accept the Christian message? and What did Paul mean when he said of unbelievers, 'What can be known about God is plain to them'? My answer to the first question is spiritual blindness. Sin has the pandemic effect of hardening the heart against the truth. People do not want to hear that they must live godly lives, that they have a moral defect called pride that has epistemological consequences, that they cannot save themselves, that they need to repent, that salvation is to be found only in Jesus Christ. If the heart is not right, both the mind and the eyes will be affected. People will not know what they should know. They will not see what ought to be plain . . . My answer to the second question is that the truth about God . . . is indeed 'plain' to those who are not blinded by sin, those who have been graciously illuminated by the Holy Spirit.<sup>37</sup>

All non-believers are therefore culpable, on Davis's view, for failing to acknowledge the truth about God that they know in the weak sense. Now, Davis's understanding of knowing something in the 'weak' sense is not particularly helpful, since it is not clear how to make sense of the idea of a person *knowing* something while not *believing* it. Moreover, Davis does not give us any reason to regard his cases of 'weakly knowing' something to be cases where we could just as well say that a person *does* know something in the 'strong' sense, but is refusing to *acknowledge* it. For instance, in his case of the mother and son, why not say that the mother knew, in the strong sense, that her son's behaviour was malicious, but she had trouble with acknowledging this? Davis' notion of 'weakly knowing' something appears, then, to be unnecessary at best and inchoate at worst. In any case, the salient point in Davis's analysis, I think, is his appeal to sin as an explanation of non-belief. Here, he is not alone. A similar and much stronger view is defended by William Lane Craig in his *Reasonable Faith* (2008). In a passage that has been frequently quoted and discussed, Craig writes:

[W]hen a person refuses to come to Christ, it is never just because of lack of evidence or because of intellectual difficulties: at root, he refuses to come because he willingly ignores and rejects the drawing of God's Spirit on his heart. No one in the final analysis really fails to become a Christian because of lack of arguments; he fails to become a Christian because he loves darkness rather than light and wants nothing to do with God.<sup>38</sup>

Alluding to Paul's statement in Romans 1:20, which we have seen before, Craig writes: 'The Bible says all men are without excuse. Even those who are given no good reason to believe and many persuasive reasons to disbelieve have no excuse, because the ultimate reason they do not believe is that they have deliberately rejected God's Holy Spirit.'<sup>39</sup>

In their attempts to maintain that inculpable non-belief does not exist, both Davis and Craig are influenced by Alvin Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology (RE).<sup>40</sup> The most recent account of Plantinga's RE is in his *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000). In brief, Plantinga's central aim in this work is to present a model that shows how it is possible for (Christian) theistic belief to be 'warranted', to amount to knowledge. 'Warrant' is that property which, when added to true belief, yields knowledge. Plantinga's understanding of warrant is based on his particular understanding and defence of epistemological externalism – 'proper functionalism':

Put in a nutshell . . . a belief has warrant for a person *S* only if that belief is produced in *S* by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for *S*'s kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth.<sup>41</sup>

Inspired by Aquinas and Calvin, Plantinga (2000) presents two models – the A/C model and extended A/C model – to show how it is possible for (Christian) theistic belief to be warranted. At the heart of the A/C model is the view that all humans possess a *sensus divinitatis* – a cognitive faculty that, when functioning properly, produces in us beliefs about God that are warranted and basic. Central to the extended A/C model is the idea that Christian belief is produced by a cognitive process called the internal ‘instigation’ or ‘testimony’ of the Holy Spirit. When this cognitive process functions properly, it produces specific Christian beliefs that are also warranted and basic. A key corollary here is that, given Plantinga’s A/C and extended A/C models, a person can know that the full panoply of Christian belief is true, even if she is unable to show that it is true by way of evidence and argument. But what about those who do not hold theistic or Christian belief? Plantinga devotes a whole chapter in (Plantinga (2000), ch. 7) to a discussion of sin, which, according to him, is the central reason why non-belief exists. Essentially, the picture that Plantinga presents is that human beings were created in God’s image and equipped with a *sensus divinitatis*. Because of original sin, we are alienated from God and the consequences are both affective and cognitive; we have evil in our hearts and our *sensus divinitatis* has been damaged, distorting our knowledge of God. In His Grace, God has provided a remedy to restore and repair our relationship with Him through Scripture (the Bible) and the work of the Holy Spirit, which involves the production of faith in us; and faith includes firm and certain knowledge about God and Christ. ‘Were it not for sin and its effects,’ writes Plantinga, ‘God’s presence and glory would be as obvious and uncontroversial to us all as the presence of other minds, physical objects, and the past.’<sup>42</sup>

How plausible, then, is the appeal to sin in an attempt to explain the apparent existence of inculpable non-belief in the world? Let me begin my answer to this question with a criticism levelled against the ‘sin defence’ by Terence Penelhum:

To show that belief in God is a universal endowment and its apparent absence is the result of its sinful suppression, it is necessary to show both that the welter of polytheistic religious beliefs and practices in the world are in fact perversions of a prior awareness of one God and that the developments that have made so many people disinclined to believe in God today are the result of sin or unwillingness to admit one’s faults and not merely the result of rational inclination to rest content with scientific explanations. Although there are theological reasons to interpret the phenomena in this way, the evidence is clearly not in favour of this interpretation in the majority of cases. Certainly the onus of proof for such an uncharitable and counterintuitive judgment lies squarely with those who make it.<sup>43</sup>

I am in general agreement with Penelhum’s criticism here. There is, however, an important dialectical point that needs to be borne in mind before I proceed further

with my own assessment of the appeal to sin as a discrediting mechanism. In maintaining that instances of non-belief are due to sin, Davis, Craig, and Plantinga are speaking *from the perspective of the committed Christian theist*. They make no attempt to proffer a rationally compelling argument – based on premises that would be accepted by Christians and non-Christians alike – for the conclusion that inculpable non-belief does not exist. There is, therefore, no (initial) ‘onus of proof’ that they need to discharge; no attempt is being made rationally to persuade a wider audience of people (one which includes non-Christians) that inculpable non-belief does not exist. Nevertheless, a dialectical burden *can* be put on the Christian theist once a challenge has been issued. Based on the remarks in the above quote from Penelhum, and on what I have discussed in this article so far, the challenge can simply be stated as follows: *The claim that all cases of non-belief are a result of sinful resistance to God seems false, even from the perspective of the committed Christian theist*. In the remainder of this section, I will develop this challenge further.

Perhaps the biggest problem with the claim that *all* cases of non-belief are due to sin is that, based on our experience (by referring to ‘our’ I am including Christians and non-Christians), such a claim seems patently false. Davis, Craig, and Plantinga keep their discussion of sinful non-belief on an *abstract* level, not really pointing to *concrete* cases where they think it occurs. Davis does mention a few cases where, in his opinion, people’s disbelief in God was culpable. Suppose this is true. What, we can ask, about *all the other cases* of non-belief? Are there not sincere and humble non-theists who do not believe that God exists (e.g. the fourteenth Dalai Lama)? Indeed, are there not non-theists who *wish* they could believe that God exists, but do not because of a perceived lack of evidence? According to Craig, *all* those who are non-Christians fail to become Christian because they love darkness rather than light and want nothing to do with God. Now this claim seems clearly false. How would Craig account for devout Jews and Muslims, for instance, who think that the real purpose of their lives consists of devout service and submission to God? In asking such questions and considering real-life examples, we are, I think, led to a decisive refutation of the claim that all cases of non-belief are due to sinful resistance of God. At the heart of the ‘sin defence’ used by Davis, Craig, and Plantinga is the idea that people fail to acknowledge God because of an *affective* disorder. Here is how Plantinga explains the problem:

Our affections are skewed, directed to the wrong objects; we love and hate the wrong things. Instead of seeking first the kingdom of God, I am inclined to seek first my own personal glorification and aggrandizement, bending all my efforts toward making myself look good. Instead of loving God above all and my neighbor as myself, I am inclined to love myself above all and, indeed, to hate God and my neighbor. Much of this hatred and hostility

springs from pride, that aboriginal sin, and from consequent attempts at self-aggrandizement . . . And God himself, the source of my very being, can also be a threat. In my prideful desire for autonomy and self-sufficiency I can come to resent the presence of someone upon whom I depend for my every breath and by comparison with whom I am small potatoes indeed. I can therefore come to hate him too. I want to be autonomous, beholden to no one. Perhaps this is the deepest root of the condition of sin.<sup>44</sup>

What we have here, then, is a basic description of *moral failings* that are traceable to *self-centredness*. But if this is the heart of the problem, do Davis, Craig, and Plantinga think that somehow *only the community of Christian theists* has crossed the necessary moral threshold after which truths about Christianity become basically evident? If they do, then a ‘Hickian’ objection can be levelled at this point. One of the key premises in John Hick’s well-known pluralist hypothesis is that the ‘great world faiths’ are, so far as we can tell, on a par in their spiritual and moral value. Each appears to be equally effective in moving people from self-centredness to reality-centredness. The key criterion which we use to judge religious practices, maintains Hick, is a *moral* one.<sup>45</sup> Why, then, do we not see mass conversions to Christianity among Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and members of other non-Christian communities when so many among them *have* transformed themselves from self-centredness – eschewing themselves of pride, selfishness, greed, lust, etc. – to reality-centredness?<sup>46</sup>

I do not see any plausible response to this ‘Hickian’ objection. It might be argued that no one who was *truly* making a transformation from self-centredness to reality-centredness would be a non-Christian, such as a Jew, Muslim, etc., and that such a transformation occurs in Christianity only. But this then sounds like a self-sealing fallacy. Alternatively, one might try to defend Davis, Craig, and Plantinga by arguing that we can’t *really* know about the moral status of others or that the criteria for judging the moral lives of others are very complex and applying them is very difficult. But this point then backfires on those who appeal to sin as a discrediting mechanism! If one can’t be sure about the moral status of Muslims, say, then how can reasonably maintain that they are sinfully resisting God or Christ because of pride, selfishness, etc.? But couldn’t the Christian theist just maintain that in his ordinary dealings with non-Christians he sees them as more or less morally and spiritually on a par with Christians, while believing, during his religious moods, that they are not? This is *possible*, but not a very reasonable position to hold, for at least two reasons. First, it seems to involve a kind of (self?) deception, behaving towards others as though they are similar to you in the moral life while not believing this to be the case. Second, it involves *compartmentalizing* different areas of one’s life, which is generally not regarded as consonant with a religious or theistic world-view that is realist (there is only *one* reality). Many theists do not see compartmentalizing as a viable option when faced with a

challenge to their theistic interpretation of the world. Rather, they will engage in a process of reflective equilibrium in order to make sure that their religious beliefs cohere with, say, their scientific beliefs (consider, as a case in point, how many Christian theists have reconciled their beliefs about the Genesis creation narrative with their beliefs about our evolutionary origins).

It seems to me, then, that the sort of strategy used by Davis, Craig, and Plantinga is not one that a Christian theist (or any other theist) can reasonably use to reject the existence of inculpable non-belief in our world.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, I have looked at the various ways in which one can understand the notion of 'disbelief' in God, with a particular focus on inculpable non-belief. It seems clear that there is plenty of inculpable non-belief in the world. For the theist, as I have explained, a lot turns on whether or not there is such non-belief. The theist who believes or concedes that inculpable non-belief does indeed exist, especially if he is situated within orthodox Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, is faced with a number of philosophical and theological problems. Perhaps the most important of these problems concerns the theist's relationship with non-believers, since here the concern has a significant practical and ethical aspect to it. Motivation for thinking about these problems will not surface, however, if one denies that inculpable non-belief exists in our world. In contemporary philosophy of religion, the main strategy deployed by certain theists in order to defend such a denial is the 'sin defence', which I have explained and critiqued. In doing so, I hope to have shown that theists cannot reasonably dismiss all cases of non-belief as occurring because of sinful resistance; and, that the existence of inculpable non-belief must be taken seriously. Many theists do, in fact, implicitly accept that there is plenty of inculpable non-belief relative to both restricted and expanded theism. In a recent article, Hick comments as follows on the attitude many Christians in Birmingham have towards those of other faiths:

[A] great many Christians . . . don't think that their Muslim or Sikh or Jewish or Hindu or Buddhist or Baha'i neighbour has a lower status than themselves in relation to the ultimate divine reality. They don't think that the souls of these people are in jeopardy. Many of us have friends of other faiths whom we greatly admire. We simply don't believe that they are religiously disadvantaged, even though our official theologies imply that they must be.<sup>47</sup>

The theist who takes inculpable non-belief seriously, then, is led to critiquing these 'official theologies' while thinking further about revisionary ones. Thinking about what such revisionary theologies might fully consist of, though, is outside the scope of the present article.<sup>48</sup>

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## Notes

1. See the section entitled 'Inculpable non-belief and its implications for theism' for further discussion.
2. Clarke (1998), 3.
3. *Ibid.*, 3–4.
4. For further discussion, see Helm (2000), 103–111.
5. Rowe (1990), 161.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. What I mean to say here, more specifically, is that accepting the full, conjunctive proposition that forms the propositional content of expanded Islamic theism means that one will reject the full, conjunctive proposition that forms the propositional content of expanded Christian theism. This does not mean, of course, that there will not be any propositional content shared by Islamic and Christian expanded theism. The point made here is perfectly consistent with maintaining that Muslims and Christians agree a good deal on the propositional content of expanded theism, whether Islamic or Christian.
9. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 1.1; 2.3.
10. Anselm, *Proslogion*, ch. 3.
11. Schuon (1961), 64, n. 1.

12. It is important to note here just what my claim is. In saying that there are people *whose non-belief is inculpable*, I am not, of course, suggesting that these people are not culpable for their *other* actions. A helpful analogy to consider is when people talk of 'innocent' civilians or passers-by involved in some sort of accident or tragedy. Such a label is not intended to suggest that these civilians or passers-by are innocent of *any* wrongdoing in their lives. One must take care, then, not to equivocate on the meaning of 'inculpable' when discussing non-belief.
13. McKim (2001), 129.
14. Anselm, *Proslogion*, ch. 2.
15. Morris (2002), 35.
16. For a recent summary of the debate surrounding his argument, see Schellenberg (2010).
17. Cantwell Smith (1981), 123.
18. Izutsu (1965), 7–8.
19. Here I have provided only a very brief sketch of a much longer philosophical discussion of this topic I carried out in Aijaz (2008).
20. The *New Interpreter's Bible* (1994–2002), IV, 729. Italics mine.
21. *Ibid.*, X, 432. Many other commentaries on this passage seem to concur with this interpretation. In Fuller et al. (1969), we read the following: 'That through created beings man by means of his intellectual faculties can and ought to come to know God as Creator is common biblical doctrine, Ps. 8:3, Is 42:5, 45:18, Wis 13:1, 5; 14:22' (*ibid.*, 1107). The interesting point to note here is that Paul's statement in Roman's 1:20 is reflective of 'common biblical doctrine'. Another commentary says a similar thing:
 

The godless and wicked 'suppress the truth'; they distort the knowledge of the one true God. This knowledge God himself has made available to anyone who will consider the wonders of the created Universe (cf. Job 40:1–42:6; Ps. 19; Isa. 40:12–31). There his 'eternal power and deity' are clearly reflected. (Black & Rowley (2001), 942)
22. See 'Athanasian Creed', in Leith (1982), 705–706.
23. *Summa Theologica*, III, 73, 3.
24. Zuckerman (2007), 61.
25. See McKim (2001), ch. 6, esp. pp. 112–116.
26. See Qutb (2000).
27. Williams (1992), 62.
28. McKim (2001), 136.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*, 9.
31. *Ibid.*, 10.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*, 11.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*, 12.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*, 21–22.
38. *Ibid.*, 47.
39. *Ibid.*, 50.
40. See Davis's explicit acknowledgement in Davis (2004), 22, n. 13; Craig's discussion and general endorsement of Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology can be found in Craig (2008), 39–43.
41. Plantinga (2000), 156.
42. *Ibid.*, 214.
43. Penelhum (1995), 105.
44. Plantinga (2000), 208.
45. See Hick (2007).
46. Attempts to rank the Christian community as morally superior to communities of other faiths or other non-religious communities will be fraught with difficulties. For some of these difficulties, see Hick (1985).
47. Hick (2006).
48. I am grateful to the editor of this journal and an anonymous referee for comments on an earlier version of this article.